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O:JA&L's 2023 SERIALS

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# THE DEPLORABLE



MICK MCGRATH

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HOT BUTTON PRESS *Contemporary Issues*

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Mick McGrath

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Mick McGrath

*O:JA&L's 2023 Serials*

# THE DEPLORABLE

MICK MCGRATH

*Installment 4*



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CHAPTER TWELVE  
WOKE GONE WRONG

It was an *al fresco* rally, at the base of McClung Tower. *En plein air*.

I stood and watched for a minute, standing at the edge of the crowd. A young woman with purple hair was making a stump speech. Everyone had formed a ring around her. They stood there, training their smartphones at the young woman, no doubt recording videos they would later upload to social media, reaching millions. They all wore WANA tees.

“Hello,” the young woman said, loud enough for everyone to hear. She cleared her throat. “I am an Afro-Indigenous nonbinary organizer here at the University of Tennessee advocating for the abolition of not just the militarized police state but also the United States as we know it.”

Everyone clapped. And hooted.

“When the colonizers came here,” the young lady continued, with a little more self-possession now, “they saw my people as children.”

She looked up from her sheet of paper, at the crowd.

“*Children!*” she exploded. “Children who had yet to grow up. Who had yet to leave Mother Nature’s side.”

A young man was standing directly to her right, translating her words into sign language. He wore a black t-shirt that said, “KILL CAUCASIANS!” in white lettering.



The young woman told us about atrocities committed against the Native Americans in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

“In 1779, General John Sullivan and his men burned down Iroquois villages. White men under General Sullivan’s command destroyed 160,000 bushels of corn. They girdled thousands of fruit trees.”

She stopped for a moment, looking at the crowd, letting that sink in. Then she continued.

“In 1813, General Andrew Jackson forcibly removes the Muscogee from Oklahoma, killing eight-hundred people in the process. In 1828, Jackson, now president, calls for the forced removal of ‘The Five Civilized Tribes’ – the Cherokee, the Creek, the Choctaw, the Chickasaw, and the Seminole. In 1838, troops invade the Cherokee Nation and force-march them to Oklahoma. About half of the Cherokee die from this. Later, this becomes known as ‘The Trail of Tears.’”

She went on and on – forced removals in Illinois and Florida, the Sand Creek Massacre, where white troops in Colorado killed two-hundred Cheyenne, women and children and even infants, scalping them, and even going as far as putting their trophy scalps on display in a Denver theater.

The young lady was emotional. And, of course, who could blame her?

(In all fairness, the Cheyenne *had* attacked whites, too. And, incidentally, American Indians owned slaves before Europeans even landed on these shores. But never mind that.)

The girl was emotional. Her voice was shaking. In fact, she could barely get through the rest of her speech. The kids hooted and snapped their fingers, giving her support.

“They enacted a genocide against us,” the young woman cried. “Against the people here. Killing us with physical weapons like guns and fists, mental weapons like boarding schools and Christianity, biological weapons like smallpox. They swindled land from us and used it to start public universities.”

She was referring, of course, to land-grab universities. Of course, it was true that the federal government had taken land from indigenous peoples and used it to start public universities in the mid Nineteenth Century, but it was also true that only 300 engineers were in the American workforce in 1862 and that 38,000 had entered the workforce by the early Twentieth Century. The

university – it gave us our engineers, the people who designed our bridges, our buildings. The university gave us our scientists, our weapons manufacturers.

“They even turned us against each other,” the young woman continued. “Exposure to the technologically superior race left some indigenous enervated, disillusioned with their own customs – their own medicine men, for instance.” The young woman stopped for a moment, then said, “*But I argue the colonizer is inferior! The colonizer!*”

Now the crowd started cheering, angrily. Everything was getting so terrifyingly out of hand. Someone had apparently crop dusted the campus with a chemical that made everyone hyperaggressive, deliriously woke.

“*Not the colonized but the colonizer!*” the young woman raged. “*Inferior, I say!*”

Again, the crowd cheered.

“*Inferior!*” the woman fulminated. “Inferior insofar as he is less sympathetic to the suffering of his fellow man. Inferior as he is inhumane. And if he is inhumane, he must be less intelligent. And if he is less intelligent, then I ask you: What experience can he really be deprived of?” A gasp from the audience. What was she implying? A moment of silence. And then: “*I say we kill the motherfuckers!*”

The crowd went nuts. Everything was getting out of hand. Everything was getting so dizzyingly out of hand.

“*Eradicate the rich, white, heterosexual male! Eradicate the rich, white, heterosexual male!*”

They were all cheering and roaring and laughing in dopaminergic anticipation.

“*Kill the motherfuckers!*” the young woman kept saying, to the audience’s approval. “*Line ‘em up and Mozambique ‘em one by one! Two to the chest, one to the head!*”

The crowd cheered and stomped, so hard geologists recorded seismic activity.

That day, in the middle of class, we took our usual fifteen-minute break, and I confronted Kip in the gender-neutral bathroom. I told Kip how I'd stood outside his carriage house that night listening to their conversation. Tyson was there with us, in the gender-neutral bathroom, standing against the urinal, looking back at us over his shoulder, no doubt wondering what we were talking about. Before I could reveal too much, Kip grabbed my forearm, pulled me out of the bathroom, and into a vacant classroom across the hall. This was a traditional classroom, with a whiteboard – not the War Room with a big round table at the center. Here, the teacher stood at a standing desk, and the students sat in desks arranged in columns.

Now Kip and I were standing in the otherwise empty classroom. I told Kip I knew everything. Kip *knew* WANA. He knew them *personally*. And so he had an obligation. To go to the police. Kip knew their *names*, their faces. With Kip's help, the police could easily locate the boy and the girl, and then the police could extract information out of them. *Who left a pig's head on the police chief's doorstep? Who wrote that message on the noise barrier? FOR GOD'S SAKE, WHO'S DOING THIS? WE KNOW IT'S WANA, BUT WHO? LIKE, WHO SPECIFICALLY? WHAT ARE THEIR NAMES?*

I used an accusatory tone with Kip. Kip could stop this. Everything that was happening in Knoxville. All the wacktivism going on around us. Kip had a responsibility to go to the police and tell them everything. He had a *responsibility*. To help the police.

Kip didn't like being confronted.

"So you were just standing there, Brock? Right outside my fucking carriage house? Listening in like the fucking Stasi? You were just...*lurking*...outside my fucking apartment?"

He was holding a plastic bottle of water. He took a sip.

"That's the creepiest thing I've ever heard, Brock. That's the creepiest thing I've ever heard."

He was screwing the cap onto the threaded opening of the water bottle. He had a hard time doing it because his hand was shaking in uncontrollable rage.

"You're the creepiest creep that ever creeped, Brock. The creepiest creep that ever creeped. Anyway, didn't Professor Gordon tell you to stay away from me, Brock? Didn't he tell you to stay away from all of us?"

“You took my Andrew Wyeth book,” I shrugged. “I was just there to get my property back.”

“You were there to get a book?”

“Not just any book,” I lied. “It was a *gift*. From my father.”

Kip and I were just standing there, in the vacant classroom. Kip stood by the window looking out at the campus below. I stood by the door.

“Why didn’t you knock on my door, Brock? I would have gotten the book for you.”

“I was just about to,” I explained, folding my arms at my chest. “But then I heard a girl say the word *bomb*. I froze.”

Kip turned scarlet. He sighed.

“Where’d you meet these assholes, anyhow?” I said.

“That’s none of your business, Brock.”

“What are their names?”

“*That* is none of your business, Brock.”

“They’re completely insane,” I said, angrily. “Those kids are insane, Kip. They’re gonna get you in trouble.”

Kip sighed again.

“Look, Brock,” he said, slowly. “These kids are only larping, okay? You got it all wrong. Are you familiar with larping? Live Action Role Playing?”

“WANA left a decapitated pig’s head on the police chief’s doorstep,” I reminded him. “I’d hardly call that larping.”

“But it is larping, Brock. They’re just dumb kids playing revolutionaries. Do you understand?”

“They wrote ‘WE ARE NOT ASKING’ everywhere,” I said. “On the sides of buildings downtown. On the fourteen-foot noise barrier coming into

Knoxville. These kids are scaring away dollars, scaring away business – last I checked, no one wants to live in a town that is covered in graffiti, Kip.”

Kip sighed, remorsefully. He knew I was right.

“But they *are* larping, Brock.”

“They wrote ‘WANA’ all over the police chief’s house,” I said. “All over the police chief’s driveway.”

“Would you please keep your voice down?” Kip said, anxiously, keeping an eye on the door, worried someone might barge in and hear our conversation.

“They wrote ‘OINK! OINK!’ on the police chief’s house,” I continued. “They wrote ‘ACAB’ and ‘DEATH TO AMERIKKKA.’”

“I get it, Brock.”

“That’s vandalism, Kip.”

Kip laughed at me.

“You’re such a boy scout, Brock. You’re such a fucking bootlicker.”

“Thousands of dollars in property damage, Kip. Don’t you think you should go to the police?”

“Look, when you were a kid, didn’t you ever egg someone’s house?”

But Kip *was* concerned, I could tell. He, too, was concerned about WANA. What would happen if we continued to indulge them? If we continued telling them they’re right? If we encouraged them? Or just tacitly endorsed their behavior?

“Kip, they’re out there covering the town in spray paint,” I said. “The whole fucking town.”

I was angry, grinding my teeth. I felt strangely protective of Knoxville. It was a nice town. Full of good-natured traditional people who said, “Good morning, young man” when I was out and about downtown.

“The Tomato Head is covered in spray paint, Kip. Thick black spray paint.”

“*Okay!*” Kip snapped, irritably. “I get it, Brock. I hear you, alright? Look, Brock, I don’t disagree with you, okay? I don’t disagree with you.” Then he shrugged and said, “But...like...on a scale of one to ten, where would you put that? Paint on buildings.” He rolled his eyes, dismissively. “Where would you put all of that, Brock?”

“Vandalizing the police chief’s house?” I said.

“Brock.”

“Kip, does it ever dawn on you the police chief might have children? Imagine how scared they must have been, seeing pig’s blood all over their house. Same with Officer Rysman. How scary it must be, knowing everyone hates their dad. And why *do* people hate this guy, anyway?”

“The guy wrote ‘YOU’RE FUCKED’ on his patrol rifle, Brock.”

“Okay, so he’s a bit of a hard ass,” I said.

“A bit of a hard ass?”

“Okay, so maybe he’s a lunatic,” I said. “Still, what did Officer Rysman *do*? Rogers was brandishing a knife.”

“How do you know Rysman has children, anyway?”

“That’s not the point,” I said. “Surely, the guy has a wife. Surely, he has someone. People who worry about him.”

“Look, Brock, they’re just dumb kids,” Kip said again. “They’re just dumb kids, okay? Just dumb kids playing revolutionaries, you know?”

“How old are they?” I said. “The kids I heard in your apartment that night? Twenty-one? Twenty-two?”

I had to be careful, here. I was not a fan of public shaming. I thought people did stupid things – racist things, violent things – not because they were evil or vile but because they were troubled. *There but for the grace of God go I*. But now, here I was, snarling and punitive, just like the Woko Haram.

“They’re *larping*,” Kip said, emphatically. “That night, at my apartment, they’d had a few too many drinks, and they were angry about systemic racism, and they were letting off steam. Okay?”

“Kip.”

“They enjoy having a cause.” He took a quick sip of water, quickly unscrewing the bottlecap from the threaded opening. “See those kids downstairs, Brock? Those kids rallying just outside McClung?”

I smirked.

“You mean the ones calling for the genocide of white people?”

“You don’t take *them* seriously, do you?”

“*But, as far as I know, they’re not leaving a pig’s head on the police chief’s doorstep!*” I shot back. “Eradicate the rich, white, heterosexual male? Those are just words, Kip.”

“Look, some of them just enjoy having a struggle, a plight,” Kip said. “Know what I mean, Brock?”

He was squinting at me, like someone trying to read an eye chart.

“Do you know what I mean by that? It’s all very romantic, you know? The hippy subculture, Black Lives Matter... It’s romantic.”

“Kip, go to the police.”

“Why don’t *you*?” Kip laughed, at the obviousness of it. “Why don’t *you* go to the police, Brock? You were standing right outside my apartment, right? You were standing outside my apartment like a fucking creep. You know just as much as I do.”

He threw his hands up.

“You know their *names*, Kip. Their faces. You can help the police find them better than I ever could. Hell, once the police know their names, they can just look them up in the campus directory or whatever.”

Kip rolled his eyes, yet again.

“Brock, they’re *larping*, alright? How many times do I have to say it? I know what they did is bad, but let’s not ruin their lives over it.”

“Kip.”

“Look, Brock, WANA will stop now. They got it out of their system. They’ve made their point. They’ll stop.” And then Kip got exasperated and said, “*Get off my back, Brock!*”

“This is how it starts,” I said.

“Oh, for God’s sake,” Kip groaned.

“First, it’s spray paint, protest art... The next thing you know they’re robbing a Brinks truck.”

“Oh, God,” Kip ridiculed, rolling his eyes, smirking. “You’re so dramatic, Brock. You’re so fucking dramatic. *Melodramatic*, actually.”

He laughed, mockingly.

“Look, Brock, I have to go back to class now. Class is starting back up again.”

He shouldered past me, heading for the door. But I could tell he was anguished about this. At the very least conflicted. Kip didn’t like this anymore than I did. He wanted peace. Sure, he wanted reform, social justice all that, but he also wanted peace.

A thirty-something, Kip was too mature for all of this. Too adult. He *knew* this wasn’t the answer. He didn’t like all of this, I could tell. I could tell he didn’t like all of this. He didn’t like where this was going.

“Workshop’s about to start, Brock. We’re about to workshop my nonfiction piece. Everything’s okay, Brock. Really.” He had his hand on the doorknob. “I mean, God, WANA are just protesting the murder of yet *another* young black male. Let’s not lose sight of that, Brock. Yet another black male is dead at the hands of the police.”

He was getting emotional.

“A twenty-five-year-old black man is dead, Brock. I’m sorry there’s spray paint everywhere, but a twenty-five-year-old black boy was gunned down by Knoxville police.”



“He was armed,” I said, tersely. “He was swinging a knife at a police officer. What would you have done?”

“These kids are just sharing their anger,” Kip said, ignoring me. “Peacefully making their voices heard. You know?”

“Peacefully making their voices heard?” I said, outraged. “*A decapitated pig’s head on a police chief’s doorstep?*”

He walked out. I followed him.

We returned to the War Room.

Kip had written an essay about his experiences with 5-MeO-DMT. It was called “5-Methoxy-N, N-Dimethyltryptamine.” I thought the title needed work.

It was toad venom. Yes, Kip – the snappy dresser, the super prepster, the Alex P. Keaton – had smoked toad venom recently. What was happening to Kip? His ideology hadn’t changed. *But psychedelics? WANA?* For God’s sake, what was happening to him?

In his essay, Kip explained how you rub a small piece of glass against the Sonoran Desert toad, which secretes this stuff naturally. Having rubbed the toad onto the piece of glass, you’re left with this residue, and after the residue hardens, you scrape it off, as though it’s paint, and there you have it – your drug. Or, in some cases, you give the toad a light squeeze, and the reptile pops, like a zit, spraying venom onto the piece of glass, and then the toad venom hardens, and then you smoke it.

I’d smoked toad venom *myself* once. In high school. (Kip and I could compare notes, if only he would be my friend again – not that we’d ever been friends, really.)

Kip said toad venom made him feel like he was “aswim in love.” It was a warm blanket, he said. He’d never felt so *loved*, or so he said in his essay. “It was as if God were petting me,” he wrote.

Incidentally, *my* trip had been *quite* different. In high school, I did toad venom and saw my body engulfed in flames on a pyre. It was a past life. I saw visions of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden.

In his essay, Kip had a subheading called “Deliverables.” Kip’s essay felt a bit like a message from the front. Toad venom, he was here to tell us, was nothing to be afraid of. In fact, it was here to help.

Kip said the experience had imbued him with enormous gratitude. He was grateful for everything now. For his life, whatever it was. What a wonderful thing it was, just to be alive.

Predictably, the essay got political. Why were our leaders keeping this stuff from us? *It was none of their fucking business! It was none of their business, what we did to our bodies!*

Kip suggested giving 5-MeO-DMT to world leaders like Donald Trump, so they’d be more empathic. He said 5-MeO-DMT should be one of the constitutional requirements to become president – you had to be a natural-born citizen, you had to be at least thirty-five years old, and you had to trip your dick or pussy off on toad venom.

Toward the end of his essay, Kip suggested giving 5-MeO-DMT to terminal cancer patients. He said it had helped him to accept death, so maybe it could help cancer patients, too.

(Kip had defensive wounds all over his hands – under siege, he hadn’t accepted shit.)

Kip had made a brilliant artwork. I did not *love* his first nonfiction piece, the one about Johann Johannsson, but I thought “5-Methoxy-N, N-Dimethyltryptamine” was terrific, the title notwithstanding.

Kip was in the zone – like De Niro in the ‘70s, Tom Hanks in the ‘90s. Everyone was digging his essays.

I thought about *Aylum*. It was such a sublime masterpiece, radically advanced. Kip Masterson was doing the best work of his life.

A few days later, WANA were at it again, this time throwing landscaping bricks and Molotov cocktails through the police precinct windows, setting the building afire, turning it black. Incidentally, you can see the whole thing on YouTube.

In the YouTube video, they open the door to the precinct and launch Molotov Cocktails inside. You can see the security cam footage – the exterior as well as the interior.

In the footage, they throw the crude incendiary devices into the building, and the Molotov Cocktail explodes, and hot angry flames shoot up everywhere. The flames reproduce. In an attosecond, half the building is overtaken.

Once again, WANA signed their work, spray-painting “WE ARE NOT ASKING” on the nearby sidewalk.

Now they’d done it. Now they’d really done it. Everything up to this point – the noise barrier, the pig’s head – had been sort of, dare I say, *cute*, the work of silly idealists, tantrumming brats. The noise barrier could be sandblasted. The police chief’s siding could be painted over, though his children, assuming he had any, had no doubt been traumatized.

But this. This was different. They’d set fire to public property, nearly killing cops in the process. The last person to set fire to a police precinct had gotten four years in a federal prison. He’d been ordered to pay twenty-million dollars in restitution.

The following day, WANA spray-painted more businesses – more downtown office buildings, more storefront windows. Downtown Wine & Spirits got hit. Nor was Suttree’s spared.

The day after that, they spray-painted blue mailboxes, red stop signs, parked cars... The whole town was black now, drenched in thick black spray paint.

The FBI and the Knoxville police were offering fifteen-thousand dollars for information leading to an arrest. In turn, WANA spray-painted death threats to the sides of buildings – “*DEATH TO INFORMANTS! DEATH TO NARCS! TALK TO THE FBI AT YOUR OWN PERIL!*”

On Twitter, the Volunteers applauded WANA. “Finally, someone’s doing something,” said one netizen, in a video that went viral. “I’m sick of talk. Let’s see some fucking action for once. We gotta burn to learn, comrades. We gotta burn to learn.”

Some of them even went several steps further, promising to “beat the shit out of counterrevolutionaries, anyone who *dares* to fuck with WANA, anyone who *dares* to give information to the authorities.”

They uploaded videos to social media. In the videos, they wore black balaclavas and stared directly into the camera like Jihadi John. They held table legs with nails sticking out of them. They held baseball bats. “Any fucking *bootlicker* who gives information to the *fucking pigs* will *fucking regret it*,” they warned, furiously grinding their teeth, spitting into the camera.

They were master propagandists, whether they realized it or not. Effective propaganda, they seemed to understand intrinsically, will shame and humiliate. “If you don’t support WANA, you’re a fucking racist,” they said. “If you don’t support WANA, you’re a fucking loser and you should take a bath with a toaster.”

In one video, a young man with a black balaclava stared directly into the camera and said, “If you don’t support WANA, you’re fucking dadcore. You’re fucking dadcore, bruh.”

Some of them looked directly into the camera and said, “What have *you* done to help Rudy Rogers? What have *you* done to help Rudy’s family receive justice?”

They were shaming and humiliating, shaming and humiliating...

WANA encouraged students to report “counterrevolutionaries,” anyone who *dared* to say anything even the least bit racist. They’d created a surveillance state. Students had a responsibility – yes, a *responsibility* – to report counterrevolutionaries. “*Qui tacet, consentire videtur.*” And so there were struggle sessions all over campus. Outdoor public tribunals.

One student wrote about “The Ferguson Effect” on Facebook. Big mistake. Because the next day WANA members surrounded the kid on The Hill, right outside Ayers Hall, chanting, “*Shame! Shame! Shame!*” for about half an hour until the kid broke down in tears, apologizing repeatedly, begging for forgiveness.

Another kid dared to mention Wilhelm von Humboldt. The kids surrounded *him*, too – this time near The Rock. They held placards calling the boy a racist. Kids wearing WANA tees threw d-batteries at the counterrevolutionary’s head. All the while, they taunted him, making fun of his sweater vest, his Sperry loafers. It was all so fucking white, they said. “What’s your favorite food, asshole? New England Clam Chowder? Liver *pate*?”

I bumped into Kip one night right outside the Lawson McGhee Public Library. He was cutting a dash in a Barbour jacket, the kind with the tartan lining. Incidentally, Kip couldn't help but cut a dash, since everything in his wardrobe was so divine. He was always superbly dressed. Tonight, he was wearing a beautiful Aran Crafts turtleneck, heavy Irish wool. *He looked great!* Except he looked tired, as if he hadn't slept in days.

"What's up?" I called, seeing him there, in the darkness.

"Hear about the police station?" Kip said, drawing nearer, emerging from the darkness.

He was *oif shpilkes*, a hunted animal.

"This is all getting out of hand," he said, struggling to catch his breath.

"*No shit!*" I exclaimed. "*I tried to tell you, asshole!*"

"I mean, Jesus," Kip said, "this is getting *scary*."

He seemed frightened, jumpy. He had shortness of breath.

"Gee, Kip, I thought they were only larping."

Kip sighed, frustratedly.

"Okay, Brock. Maybe you got one thing right."

"People ought to listen to me, Kip."

"Fuck, Brock. It's as if the Earth has been ejected from its orbit and is hurtling through infinity in an apocalyptic *hell*."

He talked fast, like someone on coke. He was shaking his head in disbelief. He kept looking around, as though he were afraid someone were following him.

"A rogue planet," he said. "A vagabond planet."

We were standing right outside the library. On the library, it said, "*KILL THEM ALL! GIVE THE EARTH BACK TO THE ANIMALS!*" in gigantic spray-painted letters.

I was kind of drunk. I'd been drinking alone in my apartment and was on my way to get more alcohol from Downtown Wine & Spirits. I'm not proud of it.

Yes, WANA had spray-painted Downtown Wine & Spirits, too. "*FUCK THE POLICE!*" it said, diagonally, across the broad storefront window, in thick black spray paint.

"These kids are really goin' for it," Kip said. "They're goin' all *Battleship Potemkin*. I happen to think we need *reform*, not revolution. I mean, Jesus Christ, I just think we need *change*, that's all. We don't need all of *this*." He threw his hands up. "This isn't the way, ya know? Like, this isn't the answer."

Kids were protesting a couple of blocks east. They had not finished – they were still protesting the murder of Rudy Rogers. We could hear them in the distance.

"I've just come from the protests," Kip told me. "Some of them are protesting peacefully, but some of them are chanting *crazy* shit. Stuff like '*Death to America!*' Do you hear them, Brock? Do you hear them?"

"*Of course I hear them!*" I said, snapping at him, as if he'd said something *supremely* unintelligent, which he had.

Kip and I were standing on a quieter street, right outside the public library, where there tended to be less foot traffic.

"I swear I'm being followed," Kip said. "Fuck, I never shoulda got involved with these kids. I never shoulda befriended these assholes."

"Look on the bright side," I shrugged. "At least now you have something to write about."

Kip looked at me, searchingly.

"You're embedded," I explained. "With junior terrorists. If only WANA would blow up the New York Stock Exchange or something."

I laughed at my own sick joke.

"If they blew up the New York Stock Exchange, you could parlay that into a nonfiction book," I joked. "Literary journalism. You could call it *Woke Gone*

*Wrong: My Year with WANA, the Radical Youth Organization behind the New York Stock Exchange Bombing.*

“Jesus, Brock.” Kip was shaking his head, disgustedly. “You know, you always were such a fucking creep.”

“Oh, come on,” I said.

“Always saying creepy things like that. You always were such a creep, Brock.”

I rolled my eyes. I shrugged.

“You know, Kip, the moment you stop being able to make fun of yourself, you’ve started down the road to totalitarianism.”

“Fuck, Brock. I don’t know what to do.”

“That’s LUCA,” I said. “The Last Universal Common Ancestor. Before it started multiplying. It’s the very beginning. The moment you stop being able to make fun of yourself, you’ve started a countdown.”

“I’m afraid for my *life*,” Kip said, worriedly, looking around in the darkness. “I’m honestly afraid these kids might hurt me.”

“Oh, for God’s sake,” I said. “I don’t think they’d go *that* far.”

“Brock.”

“I wouldn’t worry about *that*.”

“Brock, I’ve been receiving death threats. Poison-pen letters. ‘We’ve already gotten rid of several like you. We’re not afraid to kill again.’ Let me tell you something, Brock: Those kids you heard in my apartment that night. *They* set fire to the police precinct. It was *them*, Brock.”

“I’m not surprised.”

“You know, the last guy who set fire to a police precinct got four years in a federal prison and twenty-million dollars in restitution charges. Tell me, Brock: Wouldn’t you kill your own *mother* to avoid four years in a federal prison?”

“What are you saying, Kip?”

“Why wouldn’t they kill me?” Kip said. “I’m a witness.”

“Kip, go to the FBI,” I said. “Hell, you could get the reward! They’re offering fifteen-thousand dollars.”

“Someone’s following me, Brock. I swear someone’s following me.”

“Kip.”

“I gotta go, Brock. I swear someone’s following me.”

I was in my apartment when I received the news. Jonathan, of all people, sent me a link to a news article, saying in a hysterical text message, “*HOLY SHIT, BROCK! ISN’T THIS ONE OF YOUR COHORTS???*” When Jonathan first read the news article, the name “Kip Masterson” had stayed with him. It had popped out at him, or so I imagined. It had nagged at him. It had niggled. Where had he heard that name before? Where had he first heard that name? Finally, it came to him – hadn’t his little brother, Brock, told him about a man named Kip Masterson the previous summer? A man named Kip Masterson, who wore a diaper to see a Gaspar Noe film? Who insisted men wear jackets and wingtips? Who frowned upon t-shirts? Who *demand*ed people recognize Gaspar Noe as the great contemporary *auteur*? I was reeling from that night at The Tomato Head, where Kip had hectored me for my love of Renny Harlin films – not that I *actually* liked Renny Harlin films – so, naturally, I’d told my brother everything, all about Kip Masterson, my eccentric cohort. Still, Jonathan had two daughters, a full-time job, and sure enough, over the previous six months or so, he’d forgotten the name Kip Masterson. But now here it was again, niggling at him. Now here it was, in the news. That name. That unusual name. “*HOLY FUCK, BROCK, ISN’T THIS ONE OF YOUR COHORTS? ISN’T THIS ONE OF YOUR COHORTS IN THE CW PROGRAM?*”

They hadn’t just murdered Kip. They’d stabbed him twenty-seven times all over his body and cut his throat. They’d tortured him.

I didn’t feel the least bit bad about it. In some parts of India, people wipe their asses with their hands, but if you dared to say, “The West is the best,” Kip and his fellow Torquemadas would *demand* your employment be terminated and you be “stoned in the town center,” that you be pinioned to a



stake and executed via anti-aircraft gun. I certainly wouldn't have anything good to say at Kip's funeral – not that I would *go* to Kip's funeral or anything.

I was *glad* Kip had been murdered, that his throat had been cut. I just call 'em how I see 'em, Kip! I just call 'em how I see 'em. I hate to speak ill of the dead, dear reader, but Kip deserved it. That was my knee-jerk reaction, anyway. I'm not proud of it, but that *was* my knee-jerk reaction. *And who could blame me?* The guy was a fucking asshole. In fact, I was even glad Kip had been stabbed a hundred times. That he'd suffered. If you live by the sword, you die by the sword, and hadn't Kip lived by the sword, in a sense? Hadn't he *demande*d I be academically dismissed for no reason? Hadn't Kip tried to kill *me*, in a way? Hadn't he tried to destroy me? *For God's sake, my cohorts had tried to expel me!* I'd put a year of my fucking life into this thing. I'd put a year of my fucking *life* into this program. *A year of my fucking life!* And the woketards, Kip among them, had tried to *expel* me. Simply because I disagreed with them politically.

I still had Kip's novel – three-hundred pages of it, anyway. I thought about stealing it. Yes, now that Kip had died, maybe I could “inherit” his novel. Kip would leave it to me. That would be his way of apologizing. For everything he'd done to me. I deserved this.

Incidentally, in the second part of *Asylum*, Willabrandt, the matriarch, is diagnosed with brain cancer and dies, ignorant of the sexual abuse going on in the mansion. Brian and Carrol are left with Meshullah. Meshullah legally adopts them.

Meshullah rapes Carrol again. Then Carrol takes her revenge, shooting Meshullah with an AR-15, something she finds in Meshullah's office one day, killing him.

There's a trial. Carrol goes to juvie. Brian, meanwhile, is orphaned.

A schoolmate of Brian's, Dorian Welles, convinces his wealthy parents to adopt Brian, and suddenly Brian has a new set of benefactors. He continues to attend Hillcrest, funded by patricians Mr. and Mrs. Welles, and then, at Hillcrest, Brian and Iman start dating, and then the book gets *happier*, not so Dickensian, because Brian is in *love* with Iman Farhadi, and Iman loves him right back, though Brian's new life is marred by Carroll's frequent and increasingly desperate letters from juvie, missives describing her life there,

how terrifying it is, how intimidating the other girls are, how “street” they are, how “hood,” asking Brian to “please do something,” whatever he can to “get [her] out of this place,” asking Brian to “please work on it,” and in one scene Brian approaches the *in loco parentis* Welles couple and asks them gently if they’ll help with the appeal process, saying with all their money they could easily afford the attorneys, saying they could easily go for the Menendez thing, “the Abuse Excuse,” and Mr. and Mrs. Welles become *incensed*, snapping at Brian in one scene, calling him an ungrateful little shit, a dirty urchin. “After everything we’ve done for you? After everything we’ve done for you, Brian? Now we have to help your sister, also?”

I *loved* where the book was going, the direction it was taking, the whole *Oliver Twist* model. Now that Kip was dead, I considered stealing *Asylum* and claiming it as my own. *Why not?*

But, then, it didn’t take me long to realize it, that there were other people like me, people who’d gotten an early look at *Asylum*. Surely, someone had read this thing. One or two or three people. Kip’s mother, perhaps. Surely, he’d sent it to *someone*. Surely, I wasn’t the only one. Kip had been writing fiction for years. He’d gotten in his ten-thousand hours. He’d been writing fiction for more than a decade, and he understood the importance of having a reader. Surely, he’d consulted someone before writing three-hundred pages. Kip would never allow himself to write unchecked for that long – though actually, it hadn’t taken him very long in the first place.

I wondered if Kip had discussed the novel with Professor Gordon, wondered if he’d knocked on Professor Gordon’s door one day and handed Professor Gordon a check, rent and utilities, prompting Professor Gordon to invite Kip inside, and maybe they’d sat together, in Professor Gordon’s living room, drinking Jameson, or Bushmills, or Whitmeyer’s, and maybe they’d had a few lowballs together, a few laughs, and maybe at around Drink Three Professor Gordon had asked Kip what he’d been working on, what he’d been writing, and maybe that right there had been just what Kip had hoped for, for Professor Gordon to broach the subject, crack that window, and maybe Kip had synopsised the whole book for him, telling Professor Gordon everything, all about *Asylum*. Yes, certainly Professor Gordon knew all about *Asylum*, about Hillcrest Academy, about Brian and Carrol and Iman and Meshullah and Willabrandt and Dorian Welles, the character constellation, *dramatis personae*. I could *not*, therefore, steal this book. I could *not* steal this novel. After its publication, people like Professor Gordon would come forward. They’d back Kip up. *Kip’s faithful! Kip’s disciples! His acolytes!* They’d gang up on me like termites. They’d bring me down. It’d be a huge scandal in the book world. An *expose* would appear in *Poets & Writers*. The story would make

national newspapers. It'd be a *cause celebre*. Everyone would read about me. I'd go down as a hoaxer, like Janet Cooke, author of "Jimmy's World," the 1981 *WaPo* story about an eight-year-old heroin addict, a story that turned out to be bullshit, completely fabricated. Or Stephen Glass, the young reporter who'd fabricated stories and published them as nonfiction in *The New Republic*. Stephen Glass, the "make-up artist." Though of course *my* transgression would be worse than his. Much more egregious. Much more flagrant. The scandal would follow me for the rest of my life. And then, years from now, lying in a moldy bathtub in a New Mexico motel room, I'd throw a bunch of pills down my throat and chase them with cheap tequila, committing suicide, like Rob Pilatus, one of the founding members of Milli Vanilli, a pair of lip-syncing frauds exposed in the 1990s.

Even if I decided to steal the novel, how in God's name was I going to write the rest of it? For God's sake, Kip had come from another planet. He was a 5D entity, doing things I could only *dream* of doing.

If I took the reins, the novel would go south after three-hundred pages. The prose, I mean. Sadly, I had none of Kip's acumen, none of his phrasemaking. I had to admit it to myself. I had to face the truth: Kip was a better writer than I was.

If they contacted me at all, agents would say, "You know, Brock, I thought the first half was fantastic. *Absolutely fantastic!* But I was disappointed in the second half. The book really fell apart after the first...oh...three-hundred pages or so. Maybe it just needs more time, Brock. A little more time in the oven, perhaps? Query me again, once you've rewritten the second half."

Of course, I knew the boy and the girl had murdered Kip. I knew immediately what had happened. The boy held him down while the girl stabbed him repeatedly all over his body, getting out all that chimp rage, like King Kong ripping off the dinosaur's mandible. Kip had fought back, but it was two against one. *Two against one!* When Kip screamed for help, they frantically cut his throat, silencing him forever, or so I imagined.

I was sitting at my desk, in my apartment. I checked my email. I suppose I was kind of rattled, but really, I felt nothing. I suppose it hadn't sunk in yet. It still hasn't, four years later. *My God, does that make me a monster???*

Professor Gordon had sent out a mass email canceling that week's class. I was glad to have the time off. I didn't care about Kip. I didn't feel the least bit bad

about the whole thing. Kip had asked for it. He'd really asked for it, as far as I was concerned. For years now, Kip and people like him had been stitching the social justice movement together in their lab, and now it had blown up in their faces. Kip *deserved* this. I was suddenly very angry at everything he'd done to me, all the indelible comments he'd made. I felt tremendous anger, suddenly. I wanted to fuck him in the ass and stab him to death. I wanted to slice his face open and spray his face with bug repellent. I wanted to take him out to a clearing in the woods, douse him with gasoline, and set him on fire – then watch him run around screaming in unimaginable pain.

That night, in bed, I lay awake, staring at the black sky through my window, thinking about death. “The way of all flesh,” wrote Larkin. “The anesthetic from which none come ‘round.’”

At one point, I looked at my phone, the bright light striking me in the face, *stabbing me!*, and I saw that it was 4:00 in the morning. Soon the Sun would come up. But, for now, the sky was black. I thought about blackness forever. (*How do the Finns do it?*) I thought about lying in a box for eternity. I thought about Kip. Where was Kip now? What happens when we die? Maybe when you die, you just lie there, listening to old episodes of *The Howard Stern Show*. You hear every single broadcast. From 1986 to about 2011, when the show got lame. Thousands of episodes. And when it's finished, you start all over again. The Howard Stern archives on a loop. And maybe you just do that for eternity. That wouldn't be so bad. Maybe it's different for each person. Maybe, if you're Kip, you watch Gaspar Noe films for eternity.

**T**hat morning, I walked to Downtown Wine & Spirits and picked up some more wine. I hadn't slept at all.

There was spray paint all over the downtown buildings – in fact, walking downtown, one could get a nice high from the paint fumes.

But I for one wanted to get *drunk*. Not high. (I wanted *sleep*. Not greater consciousness.)

I'd been to Downtown Wine & Spirits a million times, and the oenophiles, if that's what they're called, knew my name. It was 11:00 in the morning, and they'd just opened for business. Usually, there were two or three oenophiles, guys in their twenties, UT seniors working part-time jobs, all of them hanging out behind the counter, doing the dozens, greeting me when I came through the door, saying, “Sup, Brock? How'd that Cote du Rhone work out?” But

today there was only one man. A single oenophile behind the counter. I recognized him immediately, of course. He'd taught me a few things about gamay grapes – how the Burgundy region looks down snootily on the *Beaujolais* region, even though *Beaujolais* is *in* Burgundy! He was boyish, with his backward cap, his Eno Moebius Roedelius t-shirt. He wore black nerd glasses, which I *loathed*.

As soon as I walked through the door, the boy *mauled* me, asking if I'd heard about Kip Masterson. *OMG, had I heard about Kip Masterson? Had I heard the news? Had I heard about Kip Masterson?* It was early, and we had the whole store to ourselves.

I told him I'd *known* Kip Masterson, that Kip Masterson had been one of my cohorts in the creative writing program at UT, that Kip Masterson had been a *friend*.

"*Shut the front door!*" the boy jumped, grabbing his chest, standing behind the counter. "Gee, Brock."

He was taken aback, tongue tied. For a moment, he just stood there scratching his head through his canvas hat.

"Sorry for your loss," he said, perfunctorily.

"A couple days ago, I bought some *Beaujolais*," I started.

"You must be devastated, Brock. Fuck, you must be horrified."

"I thought the *Beaujolais* had a little too much character," I said. "Can you recommend something else? Something lighter?"

"You must be a *wreck*, Brock. A total wreck."

"Hmmm. Perhaps I'll just take one of these boxes," I said, contemplatively.

I hadn't slept – I'd been up all night thinking about *au-dela*. The plan, then, was to go back to my apartment and drink until I passed out. I didn't need expensive wine for that.

I picked up two boxes of wine (clearly, I was overdoing it) and brought them up to the counter. The boy quickly scanned the barcodes.

I reached into the front flap of my *Fjallraven* backpack, where I often kept my wallet. I could tell the boy wanted to ask about the murder. I could see his wheels spinning.

“Hey, Brock. Can I ask you something?”

“How much do I owe you?”

“*Please*, Brock. I gotta ask. I mean, since you *knew* Kip Masterson. Since you knew him *personally* and all.”

“I have no idea who did this,” I lied – though to be fair I did not *know* for a fact that the boy and the girl had murdered Kip and I still don’t. “I have no idea who murdered Kip Masterson. I have no idea.”

“But surely you’ve given it some thought by now,” the boy said.

“By now?” I said. “I just found out a few hours ago, man. I’m rattled.”

“Come on,” the boy begged. “You *must* know something, Brock. Surely, you know something.”

I scratched my head – my scalp was maddeningly itchy these days. I rolled my eyes.

“Look at your window,” I said, caving in, giving the boy a colossal clue.

The oenophile looked at the storefront window. “*FUCK THE POLICE!*” was written there in thick black spray paint at a forty-five-degree angle.

“*Them?*” the boy said. “Are you saying *WANA* did this?”

“How much do I owe you?”

“But Kip Masterson wasn’t a *cop*,” the boy said.

“For the plonk?” I said. “How much do I owe you for the plonk?”

“Kip Masterson was an *ally*. I read that in the *Knoxville Sentinel*. According to the *Knoxville Sentinel*, Kip Masterson was a foot soldier for the social justice movement. *He was gay!*”

The machine in front of me said, “WAITING FOR CASHIER.” I tapped two or three times on one of the boxes of wine and said, “How much?”

“He was on our side,” the boy said, getting angry. “Kip Masterson was on *our* side.”

“Ugh, listen,” I said. “The people who murdered Kip Masterson are the same people who set the police precinct on fire. They’re *wanted*. And Kip knew their names.”

The boy thought for a moment.

“Are you saying he knew too much?”

I rolled my eyes again.

“You’re a real Pinkerton,” I said.

I looked down at the counter – now the machine was telling me to swipe my credit card.

“So you’re telling me this is WANA,” the boy said.

“Yes,” I said, distractedly, swiping my Discover card.

Now the boy looked at the storefront window again.

“No,” he said, shaking his head. “No, it can’t be.” He looked at me again. “No, I don’t think so, Brock. It doesn’t add up. It doesn’t check out.” He was indignant. “WANA wants social justice, antiracism. They want the same things *Kip Masterson* wanted.”

“Whatever you say,” I said.

“Why would they want to hurt *Kip Masterson* of all people? Why would they want to hurt *Kip Masterson*?”

“I just told you,” I said, through clenched teeth. “Kip had information that would have damned them. He would have testified in court.”

“But *several* people torched the police precinct,” the boy said. “It was a *riot*.”

“Yes, but *these* individuals were the ringleaders,” I said. “*They* threw the Molotov Cocktails. And Kip knew it. I’m telling you it was them.”

“But presumably *lots* of people know who they are,” the boy said. “No doubt *lots* of people saw them throwing the Molotov Cocktails that night. Are these individuals going to kill *everyone*, Brock? Everyone who was there that night? Will they eliminate every single eyewitness?”

“Punish one to deter a hundred,” I said, quoting Mao.

I could tell the boy was getting irritated.

“Gee, Brock. Whose side are *you* on?”

I rolled my eyes yet again. I laughed at him – it was such a *cliché*.

“Look, can I just have my *wine*?” I said. “I came here to buy some wine.”

“WANA are heroes,” the boy said. “WANA is doing important work, fighting for diversity in STEM and so forth.”

“Diversity in STEM, eh?” I said, loading the heavy boxes of wine into my *Fjalraven* backpack.

“Sure,” the boy said. “Why not?”

I sighed.

“Dude, there are IQ differences between the races,” I said. “That’s why there are fewer black physicians, for instance. There are differences in cognitive ability.”

The boy looked at me in horror.

“There’s no such thing as systemic racism,” I told him. “There’s an intelligence gap between blacks and whites. Hence, there’s an achievement gap.”

The boy was horrified. Absolutely horrified.

“And, no, these IQ tests are not biased,” I said. “Don’t even go there. Ever hear of the Porteus Maze test? The Culture Fair Intelligence Test? The



Raven's Progressive Matrices Test? Blacks do worse on those, too. Ever hear of the Minnesota Transracial Adoption Study?"

The boy was shaking his head. He was welling up.

"How can you say these things, Brock?" he whispered. "That's monstrous."

"Oh, please," I said.

"That's hideous," the boy said. "*How*, Brock. How can you say black people aren't as smart as white people? How can you say that?"

"These are averages, overlapping distributions," I said. "Anyway, how can we *not* say it?" I gestured to the window. "The only thing worse than thinking about it is refusing to think about it?"

When I got back to my apartment, I immediately started drinking. I sat at my desk, making my way through the first box of wine. I was *exhausted*, and I vowed to get some sleep, even I had to "trank" myself.

I'd developed an especially painful hemorrhoid, the cause of which was no doubt my drinking. The hemorrhoid was almost debilitating. (It felt like a claymore had exploded in my asshole.)

Still, I didn't care – I'd recently become a dipsomaniac, drinking endlessly, come what may.

The hemorrhoid was painful, though. I even found myself running a bath, something I *never* did, and sitting in the hot steaming water for an hour or so, listening to my neighbors fuck.

Sitting at my desk, I checked my email. The chancellor had sent out a mass email, expressing her condolences to the Masterson family, telling the student body to be safe, reminding everyone never to walk home alone. I took a drink of wine. *For fuck's sake*, I thought, *if there's anyone who needs to watch her back, it's the chancellor herself!* I imagined WANA attacking her in a parking structure one night, knocking her out with chloroform, then maneuvering her body into the trunk of an old Cadillac, then taking her to a condemned building where they'd prop her up in a chair and pull out her fingernails one by one with a pair of pliers, demanding she do more to help the underprivileged. Perhaps the boy and the girl would give the chancellor toad venom, standing around

watching as she “blasted off,” achieving escape velocity, suborbital spaceflight...

If I wanted to, I could go to the police and tell them everything I’d witnessed in Kip’s apartment, how the boy and the girl had made loose plans of kidnapping the chancellor. Or I could stay mum.

I settled on the latter, at least for now. If WANA wanted to silence me, I would remain silent. I would give them what they wanted. The University of Tennessee *deserved* this. As far as I was concerned, UT had laid the groundwork, the rhetorical preparation for revolution. Now the revolution was here.

I checked the *Knoxville Sentinel* every day, hoping the authorities had found these individuals. If they didn’t arrest someone soon, I knew I would have to come forward. I would have to go to the authorities and tell them everything I knew. It would be irresponsible to stay quiet. Unforgivable, really. *If I didn’t go to the authorities, someone else might be killed!*

I checked the *Knoxville Sentinel* every day. The headlines read, “Still No Suspects in the Kip Masterson Case” and “Murder of Kip Masterson Leaves Authorities Scratching Their Heads.”

*WHAT THE FUCK WAS SO DIFFICULT?* Hadn’t *someone* come forward with information about the boy and the girl? Hadn’t the boy’s or the girl’s loved ones come forward? Hadn’t their moms and dads dropped the dime on them, saying things like, “It kills me to say this, but I think this might be the work of Billy” or “I think my daughter, Margaret, might be involved in the Masterson case.” Couldn’t they locate the boy and the girl and...like...give them sodium pentothal or something? Couldn’t the authorities bring them “downtown” and interrogate them for days until they couldn’t take it anymore and confessed to the murder? Hadn’t the boy and the girl left a few drops of their own blood in Kip’s apartment? Hadn’t the bloodstain analysts, the injury biomechanics, the blood-splatter geometers (whatever) found drops of their blood at the crime scene? Hadn’t the boy and the girl...like...nicked themselves during the stabathon? *Hadn’t Kip fought back?* I had a hard time believing they hadn’t at least *nicked* themselves in the *melee*, all that stabbing and cutting and slashing and hacking. And if the assailants *had* left their own blood there, in Kip’s apartment, the authorities could simply give the boy and the girl buccal swabs and match their DNA against the blood they found at the crime scene. *It was Locard’s Exchange Principle!* Hair and fibers and

dactylograms could be explained innocently, but what was their *blood* doing in Kip's apartment? *What the fuck was their blood doing there???* And, while I'm at it, what was *Kip's* blood doing in *their* homes? What was the victim's blood doing in their cars? What was the victim's blood doing on their clothes, on their Air Jordans? Certainly, the authorities would find droplets of Kip's blood on their clothes and shoes, but first the authorities would have to *find* these two. *For God's sake, couldn't the authorities find these two?* If only the authorities could *find* them. No doubt we'd find incriminating evidence in their domiciles, probable cause to arrest them. *But, for Christ's sake, we needed to find them first! First, we needed to find them!*

Kip's parents came up from South Carolina and retrieved their son's body, totaled though it was. I began to realize how little I'd *known* Kip. What was Kip's favorite band? What was his favorite rap artist? Where was he from in South Carolina? What did his parents do for a living?

We'd only hung out a few times. Just a few drinking sessions, really. And it had *rarely* been just the two of us – Drusilla and Reine had almost *always* tagged along. But, still, I was shocked at how little I'd actually *known* Kip. Who *was* Kip Masterson?

Of course, there were many things I didn't like about Kip. For one thing, he insisted on having wooden hangers. The man *bated* wire hangers.

*But no!* Now was not the time for all that. No, now was not the time for all that. Certainly not. My anger toward Kip was subsiding, and I felt guilty even *thinking* about that stuff now. *We mustn't think of that stuff now*, I told myself. *We mustn't think of that stuff now.*

I tried to focus on the *good* things for now. The *good* things about Kip Masterson – the man was a brilliant writer, for one thing, and that night, in his carriage house, he'd *tried* to set the boy and girl straight. Yes, to his credit, he'd *tried* to do the right thing. He'd tried to get through to them. He'd tried to reach them.

The murder of Kip Masterson shook me. It was sinking in, finally. Yes, yes, it was starting to sink in.

A hopeless insomniac, I found myself “thinking big” in the days subsequent to the murder. I wasn't taking any other classes at the time. I had nothing

much to do, except work on my fiction, and drink, and I would take long walks through the strife-torn campus, beset with “big thoughts” about my life and my career. Kip had died broke and alone and humiliated, no doubt due to his writing, at least in part. I began to think about *my* writing – my embarrassing novel, *Decapitating DiCaprio (TKA)*. I thought about death. And dying. I thought about that Larkin poem. “No sight, no sound / No touch or taste or smell, nothing to think with / emptiness forever.” What was I *doing* with my life? What was I doing in Knoxville? What was UT selling me? For God’s sake, a degree in creative writing was like a degree in typewriter repair. What was I *doing* down here? Professor Gordon had invited me down here with the implicit promise that I too could be a published author, but now that Kip had died, the alarm bells were going off, and I could see that it was time to wake up. Kip was a cautionary tale. His death was a warning. The World was speaking to me. Something was trying to make contact. *Life is short*, it was telling me. *Don’t waste it, Brock. Don’t waste your life trying to be an author.*

It was *silly* to aspire to such a thing, anyway. It required years and years and years of hard work, and sacrifice, and utter solitude. *Years and years and years of your life! The only life you had, as far as Stephen Hawking was concerned, and he was a goddamn genius!* And, for God’s sake, who would even *care* if you won the National Book Award? Who would even *care*? *FOR CHRIST’S SAKE, NO ONE WAS GOING TO BLOW YOU FOR WINNING THE NATIONAL BOOK AWARD!* No one was going to feed you grapes or carry you around on a fucking divan.

To be fair, UT had not “sold” me anything. As a matter of fact, UT was paying *me*, not the other way around. Still, I’d picked up and moved three states away, quitting my job at the community college in Michigan, and in the end, UT was giving me dogshit. The degree in creative writing. *It was dogshit!* It was a car that wouldn’t run. It was a faulty product. It was a lemon. It would take me nowhere.

And, while I’m at it, the undergrads were being taken for a ride, too, were they not? *For fuck’s sake, what the fuck is UT teaching these kids?* I thought, ragefully. *“Debunking Race”? “(In)Justice in America”? “The Problem of Whiteness”?* These courses could ruin their lives. *AND, INDEED, TWO VOLUNTEERS HAD JUST KILLED A MAN! CONVINCED RACISM IS EVERYWHERE, THEY’D FUCKING KILLED A MAN! THEY’D FUCKING KILLED HIM! THIS WAS SOMEONE’S SON, SOMEONE’S LITTLE BOY. TRUE, KIP COULD BE A PAIN IN THE ASS, BUT HE WAS SOMEONE’S SON, AND THEY’D STABBED HIM TWENTY-SEVEN TIMES ALL OVER HIS BODY! THEY’D STABBED HIM TWENTY-SEVEN TIMES IN THEIR SILLY CRUSADE AGAINST*

*SYSTEMIC RACISM, WHICH WAS HARDLY TRUTH BROUGHT  
DOWN FROM THE MOUNTAINSIDE!*

Now the community was terrified, staying awake at night, constantly checking their deadbolts, *leaping* out of bed when they heard a dog bark, peering anxiously through their blinds... It was as if two jaguars had escaped the nearest zoo and were living in Knoxville, eluding Wildlife Removal, terrorizing the community, like the Tsavo Man Eaters. Frightened fatigued students requested extensions from their professors, saying the murder of Kip Masterson, removed though it was, was messing with their heads. They couldn't stop thinking about it. They could *not* stop thinking about it. They couldn't sleep. It was a town of insomniacs, or so I imagined. We were up all night, obsessively checking social media, praying for updates, but not just any update – we prayed the murderer had been detained, taken into custody, so we could get on with our lives. Of course, in a few weeks, everything *would* be back to normal. The junior terrorists, as I'd started calling them, would go into hiding. They'd lie low. They'd gotten it out of their system now. As gruesome as it was, everyone would forget about the murder.

I contacted the FBI, and the next day a pair of agents came to my apartment. I told them what I'd witnessed that night outside Kip's carriage house. I told them about the cloak-and-daggers meeting between Kip and two members of the radical youth organization We Are Not Asking. I told them these kids were Volunteers, as evidenced by the classes they mentioned. Oh, and one of them even had said he'd taken Professor Gordon's First-Year Composition Class!

The FBI agents asked me a million questions. After a few minutes, though, they began to realize that I was aggressively anti-woke. They appeared dubious. I didn't blame them. To be fair, how *could* they trust anything I had to say? For all they knew, I was making this up to discredit the social justice movement. And I *was*, I readily admit, steadfastly *against* the social justice movement. The movement had gotten out of hand.

Anyway, the agents promised to look into it. I told them the girl had read *The Anarchist's Cookbook*. Maybe they go could to the library, then, and get a record of every student who'd ever checked out that book.

"That'll be a lengthy list," said one of the FBI agents, smirking.

“Oh?” I said, standing with the two men in my tight living room, my arms crossed at my chest.

“This is a college town,” the man explained. “Lots of radicals around here.”

We had taken a week off to grieve, but after a week it was back to work, business as usual. What else could we do? It was weird just carrying on without Kip, but what could we do? Life *does* go on, doesn't it? Were we supposed to cancel the remainder of the semester because Kip had been murdered? *Of course not! People had worked their asses off on their nonfiction pieces and expected to have them workshopped!* Goodrin was one of them. She'd written a memoir called “The Wastoid” about her four years as a high school psychonaut. “The Wastoid” was very similar to Kip's piece, “5-Methoxy-N N-Dimethyltryptamine.” Except “The Wastoid” was *full* of drugs, *brimming* with drugs, a *pharmacopeia* of drugs, all *kinds* of drugs, drugs and drugs and more drugs. Young Goodrin, it turns out, was like Hunter S. Thompson. She'd tried to kill herself with drugs. She'd committed slow-motion suicide. As a teenager, she'd gone down a self-destructive path, eating mushrooms on her way to the bus stop at 7:00 in the morning, taking acid and ecstasy and other drugs, *exotic* drugs, *obscure* drugs, drugs I'd never even heard of, though I myself had once done toad venom, as well as tetrodotoxin, the pufferfish chemical...

Of course, I didn't *need* to read “The Wastoid,” since I'd been instructed not to contribute to in-class discussions anyway, but I was intrigued by the title, so I waded into it, and then I was hooked – totally on board, along for the ride.

In “The Wastoid,” Young Goodrin goes to History class, where she and her schoolmates are learning about the Spanish Inquisition; then English class, where she and her classmates are studying *Frankenstein*; then Drama, where she and her classmates are studying *The Crucible* (I began to notice a trend here); then Astronomy, where she and her classmates are learning about Shoemaker-Levy 9. *And the whole time she's tripping her tits off on sbrooms! The whole time, Goodrin's totally brainfucked on psychedelics!*

In one scene, Goodrin does fentanyl-laced crack cocaine. In another scene, she even does ‘brown-brown,’ amphetamine mixed with gunpowder, the stuff they give to child soldiers in the DRC, making them hyperaggressive, turbocharged. Yes, I did begin to wonder if some of this was bullshit. I began to wonder if Goodrin was embellishing in her nonfiction piece. *And I suppose*

*you could do that in nonfiction!* You could play around with the truth a little. The truth didn't matter.

Incidentally, Goodrin's essay reminded me of my *own* high school experience – I, too, had done shrooms, sitting at the back of my English class, where we were studying *Beowulf*.

Anyway, I thought "The Wastoid" was *excellent*, Goodrin's finest piece, her *Sgt. Pepper's*. *Bravissimo, Goodrin! Bravissimo!*

"I thought it was great," Tyson said, and then he cleared his throat. "The piece has plenty of movement." Of course, he was sitting at the big, round, workshop table, in the War Room. We all were. "Young Goodrin goes from class, to class, to class, to class, to class. And she doesn't linger on any one class for too long. You know, I really think that *movement* is the thing that keeps the reader's attention." He looked around the War Room, for support. "*Movement*, ya know? I mean, think about *Catcher in the Rye*, the definitive coming-of-age novel – Holden Caulfield goes from place to place to place."

"Yeah, I agree," Professor Gordon said. And then he looked around the War Room and said, "Anyone else?"

"I love the escapism theme," Reine said. "Young Goodrin is a science-fiction fan. She reads books about space exploration. She does psychedelics. She's constantly trying to escape, be it through literature, be it through drugs."

"Yeah, I think that's a good catch," Professor Gordon said, looking at Reine, nodding. "That's a really good observation, Reine. Young Goodrin is clearly trying to escape her hellish environment, her highly dysfunctional family."

"Yeah," Reine said. "She goes in and out."

"Goes in and out?" Tyson said, looking at Reine.

"Goes into herself, goes out of herself," Reine explained, awkwardly, looking back at Tyson. "Retreats into herself. Goes out of the planet, you know?"

"Contracts and expands kinda," Professor Gordon said, looking at Tyson. "Like lungs, if you will. Recoils into herself. Explodes off the landing pad."

"I just *adore* the juxtaposition of space exploration and astral traveling," Reine said. "I *just love that!* Traveling to outer space. Traveling inside oneself."

Outward and inward.” Then she looked at Goodrin and said, “Kudos, Goodrin.”

“*Oh, thank you!*” Goodrin said, excitedly, getting choked up a little – *a la* Sally Fields at the Academy Awards. “*Oh, thank you so much! Oh, thank you!*”

I kept looking at Kip’s empty chair. His absence was so conspicuous. It was as if a mountain had been removed from our vista.

Everyone spoke softly, quietly. Usually, my cohorts were excited, laughing, cracking jokes. Today everyone was on downers.

“I do wonder, though,” Reine began, and then she too cleared her throat, “how you managed to sell drugs without getting caught, Goodrin.”

“Typical,” Drusilla said, shaking her head resentfully. “White people sell drugs at the same rate as African Americans, yet white people don’t go to jail nearly as often.”

“Well, to be fair, I wasn’t selling drugs on the streets,” Goodrin explained, looking across the table, at Drusilla.

“Excuse me?” Reine said.

“I was making these transactions in people’s homes,” Goodrin said, turning to Reine. “I was making these transactions in night clubs, for instance.”

“Um, African Americans don’t sell drugs on the streets anymore,” Reine said, rolling her eyes, visibly peeved. “That’s totally an ‘80s and ‘90s thing, Goodrin.”

“Yeah,” Goodrin said, “but if we’re talking about the history of mass incarceration, the Open-Air Drug Market might explain the racial disparity.”

The truth is I was drunk. I’d drunk several glasses of wine before coming to workshop. I’d even poured some wine into an opaque NPR water bottle so I could drink during class and no one would be the wiser. Now I’d gotten good and sauced. It was a good thing class was ending soon.

Yet another controversy had erupted on campus: An English instructor, Professor Lambert, had tweeted, “It’s easier for a gay man to come out as gay



than it is for a Trump supporter to officially come out as a Trump supporter.”

Professor Lambert was asking for it. Now my surviving cohorts were talking about Professor Lambert in the War Room. Class had ended, and they were just standing around the big, round, workshop table, discussing the controversy.

“Can you believe it?” Reine said, grinding her teeth, looking at Drusilla. “Can you *believe* he hasn’t been fired yet? If Professor Lambert isn’t fired by the end of the day, there’ll be riots. I’m tellin’ ya, if Professor Lambert isn’t fired by the end of Saturday, there are *going* to be riots. There are going to be fucking riots, comrade. And there *should* be riots. There really should be. We gotta burn to learn, comrade. We gotta burn to fucking learn, man.”

“Ugh, as if being a Trump supporter is as difficult as being gay,” Drusilla said, shaking her head, rolling her eyes enormously.

“As far as I’m concerned, Trump supporters aren’t even *people*,” Reine said. “Even if it’s true that Trump supporters are ostracized in some segments of American life, there’s no *injury*, since Trump supporters don’t have feelings. They’re not real people.”

“Didn’t twenty percent of Trump supporters say the slaves shouldn’t have been freed?” Drusilla said.

I cleared my throat.

“Actually, no,” I said.

Drusilla and Reine ignored me.

Reine asked Drusilla if she was going to the protests on Saturday.

“*Fuck ya I’m going to the protests on Saturday!*” Drusilla roared. “*You bet your life I’m going to the protests on Saturday! Professor Lambert must be fired!*”

“Excuse me,” Goodrin said, “but do you guys think the Professor Lambert scandal is really so eyepopping?”

“*What?*” Drusilla said, jerking her head, looking at Goodrin.

“*WTF, Goodrin!*” Reine said. “My *brother* is gay. My brother is gay, Goodrin.” And then she grabbed her chest and said, “I’m bi-sexual, ya know? My brother has taken shit his whole *life*, Goodrin. Do you know how difficult it is to be gay in this country, even now in 2018? Do you know how *uncomfortable* gay people are, even in their own homes?”

“I understand,” Goodrin said. “Look, I do think Professor Lambert’s comments were ill-considered.” She stopped for a moment. “But, still, maybe his comments were not totally unreasonable. I mean, Professor Lambert is just saying, however ham-handedly, that Trump supporters *are* ostracized. And he’s not wrong. Look at all the assaults happening all over the country. People with MAGA hats are being physically assaulted. Nothing serious or anything, but they *are* being punched, and hit.”

“Yeah, because Donald Trump’s a fucking racist,” Drusilla said, bitterly. “Anyone who supports him must be a racist, too.”

“Trump called neo-Nazis ‘very fine people,’” Reine said, looking at Goodrin from across the workshop table.

“Actually, he didn’t do that,” Goodrin said. “Trump was referring to a subset of people who agreed with the white nationalists and neo-Nazis only insofar as they too think it’s wrong to tear down Confederate monuments. Mr. Trump *condemned* the neo-Nazis and white nationalists in Charlottesville. He condemned them in no uncertain terms.”

“Goodrin, do you even know all the details?” Tyson chimed in. “All the details about Professor Lambert? There’s more, Goodrin. There’s more to the story than just that.”

“The Professor Lambert story *is* more complicated,” Professor Gordon told Goodrin.

“Turns out Professor Lambert tweeted some racist shit back in 2011,” Tyson said, looking at Goodrin. “They found his old tweets.”

“Professor Lambert retweeted a video of an Asian man fighting a black man on a New York City subway in 2011 and captioned it ‘Godzilla vs. Kong,’” Drusilla explained, looking at Goodrin.

I had to suppress laughter.

“Yes, that’s pretty bad,” Goodrin conceded. “Not cool.” She put her hands up, surrendering. “You’ll get no argument from me there, comrades. You’ll get no argument from me there.”

“He’s a fucking racist, Goodrin,” Reine said. “Professor Lambert is a fucking racist.”

Goodrin sighed.

“Yes, I know all about his 2011 tweets,” she said. “I read all about Professor Lambert, okay? I know everything there is to know.”

“*So why the fuck are you defending him?*” Drusilla screeched.

“*He’s a racist!*” Reine yelled. “*Admit right now that Professor Lambert is a racist, Goodrin!*”

There was a moment of silence.

“Or what?” I said, drunkenly.

Reine turned and looked at me. She was tongue tied – it was the first time I’d spoken in months.

“Or I’ll report her to We Are Not Asking,” Reine said, finally. “Their anonymous tip line, Brock.” She turned back to Goodrin. “You’ll be struggled against, Goodrin. Do you want that? Are you ready for that?”

I rolled my eyes.

“Excuse me,” I said. “Professor Lambert wasn’t a teacher when he made those tweets back in 2011.”

“*Shut the fuck up, Brock!*” Drusilla screamed. “*No one’s talking to you, asshole!*”

“*Brock, why are you even talking right now?*” Reine screamed.

“Professor Lambert was a younger man,” I continued. “In his thirties. And it was a different time back then.”

“2011?” Drusilla said, looking at me, smiling. “2011 was a different time, Brock?”

“Jesus Christ, Brock, that was only seven years ago,” Reine said.

“Yes,” I said, looking at Drusilla. “2011 *was* a different time. A different time indeed. Anyway, I think Professor Lambert was just trying to be irreverent, and shocking, and outrageous, and controversial, and sort of punk rock, if you know what I mean. For God’s sake, he was just trying to be provocative. I don’t think he actually hates anyone. And isn’t that what matters at the end of the day? His intent? Like, I don’t think he actually thinks anyone’s inferior to anyone. You want to punish him for being a racist, except for one thing – he’s *not* one. For all you know, you’re punishing an innocent man. Look, call me crazy, but I think some people, men especially, just say racist things sometimes because they’re trying to be extremely edgy, and I think they think it’s...like...cool or something. Like, it’s punk rock. Because racism is so taboo, you know? Professor Lambert should just apologize for his younger self, and we should all just move on. Leave the guy alone, ya know? *Forgiveness*, ya know? Charity? Pardon? He was just trying to be edgy. Anyway, I suspect Goodrin feels the same way?”

I looked at Goodrin, my co-religionist.

“Yeah. Like, I just think this whole thing has gone berserk,” Goodrin said.

“Well that *is* plenty edgy, Brock,” Tyson said. “Godzilla vs. Kong? That’s plenty edgy alright.”

“Sure, it’s a ridiculous thing to say,” I said, looking at Tyson. “I don’t want to minimize it. It’s a ridiculous thing to say. It’s racist.”

“*Fuck that!*” Reine said. “Professor Lambert is not fit to be a professor, Brock. Calling an Asian man Godzilla? Calling a black man King Kong?”

“It was seven years ago,” I said.

“He’s supposed to be a role model,” Drusilla said.

“Let’s be magnanimous and forgiving,” I said. “Not snarling and punitive.”

“*Let’s?*” Reine said. “*Let’s?* You’re not one of us, Brock.”

“You’re a rich, white, heterosexual male,” Drusilla said. “You’re a rich, white, heterosexual male, Brock. You haven’t suffered the way we have.”

“You’re not ALAANA,” Reine said. “You’re not African American, Latinx, Asian, Arab, or Native American. You’re not BIPOC.”

“You’re not 2SLGBTQIA+,” Drusilla said.

“Brock, didn’t I tell you to stop speaking during workshop?” Professor Gordon said. “Why are you even speaking right now, Brock?”

“Hey, Brock, I’ve been meaning to ask you,” Reine said, folding her arms. “Where were *you* the night Kip was murdered, anyhow?”

“Excuse me?” I said. “Are you suggesting...”

“Your reputation isn’t exactly sterling, Brock. Your position on Rape Culture? Your position on sexual violence?”

“Oh, please,” I said, rolling my eyes again. “Don’t *even*, Reine. You know damn well who murdered Kip. We all do.”

For a moment, the War Room was quiet.

I took a sip of wine from my NPR water bottle. I’d gotten good and sauced, and I could say whatever the fuck I wanted.

And, so, it was then that I told my cohorts everything, how I’d gone to Kip’s apartment one night and stumbled upon this cloak-and-daggers meeting, as crazy as it sounds, between Kip and members of the radical youth organization We Are Not Asking. I told them how the three of them had gotten into a heated exchange.

“Are you saying Kip made them mad so they killed him?” Tyson said.

“No,” I said, “though, come to think of it, maybe that *was* an admixture.”

“Bullshit,” Drusilla said.

“That’s a lie,” Reine said. “You’re lying, Brock.”

Professor Gordon sighed.

“Well,” he said, “Kip lived on my property, don’t forget. And I never saw any WANA members on my property, Brock. Not once. And they’re easy to spot, with their green mohawks and so forth.”

“I’m telling you,” I said, looking at Professor Gordon. “Kip was totally involved with WANA. He was totally involved. *For God’s sake, Kip was folded in with a terrorist cell!*”

“*WANA are not terrorists!*” Reine screamed.

“We knew Kip well,” Drusilla said. “He *wasn’t* involved with WANA, you asshole. We would have known it if he was.”

“They *are* terrorists,” I insisted, looking at Reine, grinding my teeth hard. “They are terrorists, Reine. Domestic terrorists.”

“Brock, didn’t I tell you to stay away from Kip?” Professor Gordon said, raising his voice a tad. “Didn’t I tell you to stay away from the other writers? Why did you disobey me, Brock?”

“Kip knew them,” I told Professor Gordon. “Kip knew them personally. Kip had information that would have been invaluable to the police. Kip had information that would have damned them. WANA are out there spray painting everything, burning down police precincts...”

“They didn’t ‘burn down’ the police precinct,” Reine interrupted, using air quotes. “I mean, they didn’t...like...burn it to the ground.”

She rolled her eyes, hugely, behind her black nerd glasses.

“They’re wanted,” I said, looking at Reine. “And Kip knew who they were. He knew their faces, their names. The two people who burned down the police precinct.”

“Are you suggesting Kip knew too much?” Tyson said, curiously.

“Kip had to be eliminated,” I explained, looking at Tyson. “Do you know the last guy who set fire to a police precinct was sentenced to four years in a federal prison? *Four years!* He was ordered to pay twenty-million dollars in restitution. These kids are in deep shit. Isn’t it possible, then, that they were stressed to the point of sleep-deprivation, madness even, and one night these radicals, mere survival machines, went to Kip’s apartment and stabbed the

fuck out of him, afraid for their lives? Wouldn't you kill your own *mother* to avoid four years in a federal prison?"

Professor Gordon squinted at me.

"Brock, are you...?" He broke off. "Are you by chance drunk, Brock?"

"Isn't it possible WANA had to eliminate Kip so he wouldn't give information to the authorities?" I said. "Isn't that possible? *Is that conceivable?*"

"But the authorities said the murder wasn't premeditated," Tyson said. "The assailants used Kip's Ginsu knives, meaning they didn't bring their own murder weapon to Kip's apartment that night."

"Okay," I said, taking that in. "And maybe it *wasn't* premeditated. Maybe they just went over to Kip's carriage house that night to scare him, smack some sense into him."

"What's in that water bottle?" Professor Gordon said.

"But maybe things got out of hand," I continued, looking at Tyson. "Anyway, WANA murdered Kip. I know they did."

(To be fair, I did not *know* that WANA had murdered Kip. In fact, I still don't. Anything's possible. Yes, anything can happen. Indeed, if I had a billion dollars, I would not put all my chips in the center. I would not put all my chips on black. No, I would not bet *all* my chips that WANA murdered Kip.)

"*You don't have all the answers, Brock!*" Drusilla screamed. "*You don't have all the answers, asshole!*"

"This is them," I said, confidently. "Your beloved WANA."

"*Die in a fucking grease fire, Brock!*" Drusilla exploded. "*Die in a meth lab explosion, you fucking racist piece of shit! WANA are heroes, Brock! Finally, someone's doing something about police brutality!*"

She was getting emotional. I could hear it in her voice.

"*Brock, why don't you do us all a favor and jump into a fucking volcano?*" Reine screamed, crossing her arms.

“*The next time you’re driving down the highway, please do the world a favor and drive right into a fucking oil tanker?*” Drusilla screamed.

“I hope you get kidney stones,” Reine said.

“*I hope you get monkeypox!*” Drusilla fulminated. “*I hope you go on a cruise and fall overboard and you’re never seen or heard from again!*”

“Gee, I’m sure Kip’s parents would love to read this in the paper,” Tyson said. “That their dead son was hanging out with terrorists.”

Drusilla turned to Tyson and said, “*They’re not terrorists, comrade?*”

“What the fuck is *your* problem?” Reine said, looking at Tyson threateningly.

“Yeah, well, I guess I don’t care if Kip’s parents know the truth” I said. “It’s the truth, Tyson. It’s just the truth.”

“Live not by lies,” Goodrin squeaked.

Then Drusilla turned to Goodrin and said, “*Shut the fuck up, cunt! You don’t know what the fuck you’re talking about, either!*”

“Go jerk off to *Star Trek*,” Reine said, still folding her arms, looking at Goodrin.

“Go write more *genre* fiction,” Drusilla said to Goodrin.

Goodrin started crying. Professor Gordon started crying, too – his tenant, a nice young man, a brilliant young author, had been brutally murdered.

Everything was getting so terribly out of hand. Kip had said it best – it was as if the Earth had been ejected from its orbit and was hurtling through infinity in an apocalyptic hell.

Reine looked at Drusilla and said, “You know, comrade, I think it’s time to report Brock once and for all. I think it’s time we report him. Brock *and* Goodrin.”

“Why not?” Drusilla said. “They’re clearly counterrevolutionaries.”

“Clearly they are counterrevolutionaries,” Reine said.



Reine looked at me from across the table. She smiled, devilishly.

“Brock is a counterrevolutionary and must be struggled against,” Reine said, looking at Tyson and Professor Gordon, trying to recruit them.

It was then that I packed up my things and left, holding my NPR water bottle. I didn’t care if they believed my story or not.

Transparent things. They’d been bullied as kids, and now they were trying to realize their utopia. But what they didn’t realize – and still don’t – is that utopias are always hells.

## EPILOGUE

### PROFOUND LONELINESS

That's about all there is. *What else is there?* During workshop, Professor Gordon talked about craft – perspective, characterization, conflict, etcetera and so forth. He would talk about endings. He'd talk about resolution and closure. But, of course, these chapters in our lives (not unlike the murder of Kip Masterson) often go unresolved, with no decisive confrontations, no definitive endings. Conflicts simply dissipate. Everyone moves on, unofficially declaring a *modus vivendi*.

Upon graduation, Drusilla and Reine moved to New York (no *cliché* there), where together they started a magazine called, hilariously, *Healthy Opposition*. It's going quite well!

Tyson moved away, too, though I forget where. According to his Facebook posts, he now teaches a student success course called College Management and enjoys recommending his favorite pens to his students so they can make effective flashcards (i.e. flashcards with little pictures or diagrams on them, little pictures and diagrams that in one way or another complement whatever part of the anatomy is being described on the flashcard). I forget the name of the institution Tyson works for, but the point is he's doing fine.

Goodrin struggled for a brief bit there but finally found work as a technical writer.

*They're all doing well is the point!* Meanwhile, I'm still here in Knoxville, alone and unemployed. Every job I apply for says I need a "diversity statement,"

something I don't have and refuse to fake. I emailed the search chair at the University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point, asking her what they have in mind when they say "diversity statement," and she responded, telling me we must work together to dismantle systems of oppression.

I hate to sound self-pitying, but I am utterly alone, utterly utterly alone. I called my brother Jonathan, asking if I could live with him for a while, swallowing my pride, telling him I'm lonely, difficult though it was to admit. He said he sympathized with me but three more neighborhood bobbysockers had been molested recently and the perpetrators had all been uncles, so the West Havenites wouldn't exactly be choked up with my sudden arrival in Elysium, not right now anyway. "It's a bad time," Jonathan said, gently. "Let's let things die down a bit. Maybe in a few months." Then he Venmoed me some money. He gives me money every month now.

I drink every day. I have gout – not in my toes but in my *fingers*. I have bad bad hemorrhoids. Last I checked, that's not exactly an aphrodisiac.

In 2019, I was doing well, drinking only one day a week, losing weight, looking good again in my J-Crew shirts. *If I could just get back to that!* But then the pandy came along. Life has been especially hard since then. *Tres difficile*.

No, I didn't get COVID. Nor do I know anyone who died during the pandemic. Still, life *has* been especially difficult for me these past two or three years. My depression, for one thing, is worsening. In fact, sometimes it's unbearable – so unbearable that I sometimes think I understand why some depressives will drill holes into their heads with electric drills, or jump in front of subway trains, or put their heads in ovens, *a la* Sylvia Plath, getting off the planet any way they can, as quickly as possible, by any means available to them in the moment. One's depression can be so unbearable they can't go another *hour*.

The truth is I've *always* struggled with depression. My depression used to come and go, but now I feel depressed every second of the day.

Going to the gym does help. And there's a gym just a couple of blocks from my apartment, right here in downtown Knoxville. And the man who owns the gym, Dano, charges only thirty-five dollars a month.

Walking helps, too. Incidentally, I don't want to take Lexapro or anything like that. I prefer non-pharmacological intervention strategies. And, anyway, they

say Beethoven, Darwin, and Einstein were all habitual walkers. *There must be something to walking, then!*

I have never been so isolated. Days go by without me saying a word to anyone. I mean, sooner or later, I will talk with a barista, or a bar tender, or the oenophile at Downtown Wine & Spirits (the boy with the *Eno Moebius Roedelius* t-shirt has moved on), but it's not uncommon for me to go two or three days without uttering a *syllable*, even to myself.

I cannot remember the last time a woman so much as *touched* me. Alas, I am the male Emily Bronte – of course, Bronte wrote one of the greatest love stories of all time, and I wrote *Decapitating DiCaprio*, but *mutatis mutandis*, I am the male Emily Bronte.

They say I'm not alone. They say presently there's an epidemic of loneliness. *An epidemic!* And it should come as no surprise. MeToo and COVID ushered in an epoch of "non-touching."

The woman who cuts my hair, Amanda... *She* touches me every ten days or so, when I go in for a cut. Clearly, however, that's not what I have in mind. Clearly, that's not what I mean when I say "touch."

Incidentally, I do love the way Amanda gets close to me. And it's so soothing when she washes my hair. One time, I told her how happy I was with her work – the skin fade she'd given me, the hard part. I told her how important her work is, and I meant it – she makes men like me feel better about themselves, more confident. When I said that, Amanda *gasped*. Then she got emotional. She hugged me. She wrapped her arms around me, and briefly I felt her breasts through her white cotton t-shirt. That was a red-letter day for me.

They say we *need* to be touched, need it the way we need water, that if we don't get it, we die. I read that somewhere.

I'm like that guy in *Nighthawks*, the Edward Hopper masterpiece – two or three nights a week, I go to The Tomato Head and just sit there alone at the bar, *praying* someone will talk to me, praying someone will say hello. It's gotten to the point where I consider it a good day if someone so much as smiles at me.

Lately, I've been thinking about death. What if I get cancer at forty-two and die like Chadwick Boseman or something? Forty-two is just around the corner for me. *What if I get cancer and die?* They say it's rare to get cancer at my age, but it does happen. *What if I get cancer and die? What if I only have a few years left?* They say lonely people are much more likely to experience an early death. They say it's bad for your physical health. They say being lonely is like smoking a pack of cigarettes a day. Every day, I look through the window, at the Henley Street Bridge just outside my apartment. *Will the bridge do the trick? Certainly, if I do it in the winter, the water will get me. Certainly, the water will get me, won't it?*

At least I've managed to write these pages. *I can't believe I've written these pages!* It's been a good thing for me, these pages, getting it all down. And I've been honest about everything. *(By all means, contact Drusilla and Reine. By all means, get their side of the story!)* Writing about Wokeistas has been a healthy thing for me. *Thank God for these pages!* It's been good for my depression. I've been productive for a change. Heretofore, I had a hard time bringing myself to do much of *anything* – to exercise, to clean my apartment, to put on some decent clothes, to do my laundry, to clean the dishes in the sink, to feed myself... I can work up the energy to get some whiskey or wine at Downtown Wine & Spirits, but heretofore I had a hard time bringing myself to do much of anything. They say depressives will abandon hygiene.

I've been completely enervated lately, sapped of all my energy, my *joie de vivre*, my will to live. How did I get here? How did I get to the bottom of this well?

I've heard A.A. works for only five or ten percent of people, but never mind the low success rate. I simply *must* get myself to a meeting. *I must. It is this or death, Brock! It is this or death! The way of all flesh! The anesthetic from which none come 'round!*

They have ground me under their hoof. *The wokesters have ground me under their fucking hoof, sympathetic reader!* A couple of years ago, I managed to publish a short story called "*Acta Astronautica*." In the story, astronauts, taikonauts, and cosmonauts work together to build a moon base near *Mons Malapert*, a mountain at the South Pole of the Moon. The moon base is a simple tubular module. An inflatable spherical habitat explodes out of the module, creating a lunar "igloo," which the humans cover with lunar regolith, thereby protecting themselves from radiation. The crew extracts water from the moon, which they electrolyze, turning it into oxygen and hydrogen – oxygen for their

habitat, hydrogen for rocket fuel. The plan is to turn the moon base into a steppingstone, a lily pad, a pitstop, a way station... That's the fifty-thousand-foot view, anyway. To become a multi-planetary species. Colonists on their way to Mars will descend to the lunar surface, refuel, then blast off again, this time using the Low Gravity Assist (LGA). Trump's idea of the moon base – not that it was his idea, really – would spur economic growth, the next great economic leap forward for mankind, on par with the agricultural and industrial revolution. Anyway, the editor told me he liked the story very much. *He said it was riveting!*

When “*Acta Astronautica*” was published, I promoted it on Facebook. Big mistake. Because then Drusilla and Reine got their acolytes to *deluge* the editor with angry (no doubt psychotic) emails calling me a racist and a misogynist, forcing the editor to take down the story and even apologize to his readers in an obsequious “Letter from the Editor” that he published on the magazine’s homepage.

*I SURRENDER, DRUSILLA! I SURRENDER, REINE! I WANT TO APOLOGIZE FOR THE COMMENTS I MADE IN MCCLUNG TOWER – THE ACCUSATIONS I MADE AGAINST WE ARE NOT ASKING, WHOSE ACTIONS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE IN 2018 WERE NOTHING SHORT OF HEROIC! MY COMMENTS WERE ILL CONSIDERED, DRUSILLA! THEY WERE INSENSITIVE, REINE! THEY WERE HURTFUL, COMRADES! I REALIZE NOW (TOO LATE) HOW WRONG I’VE BEEN! I’VE LEARNED MY LESSON, COMRADES. I’VE LEARNED MY LESSON! IN THE FUTURE, I WILL THINK BEFORE I SPEAK! I WILL CHECK MY PRIVILEGE! I WILL CHECK MY PRIVILEGE BEFORE MAKING STATEMENTS THAT CONTRADICT THE SOCIAL JUSTICE MOVEMENT! I WILL LISTEN, COMRADES! YES, YES, I WILL LISTEN, INSTEAD OF JUST WANTING TO HEAR MYSELF TALK!*

Drusilla and Reine, will you please have mercy on me? Will you throw an arm around your old cohort? Will you take me back? I fought you. I resisted you. I thought I knew better. Can you ever forgive me, comrades? I swear I see the light now. I swear I see the light. I really do see the light, comrades. Black lives matter, comrades. Yes, yes, black lives really do matter. *Death to Amerikkka, comrades! BLACK LIVES FUCKING MATTER!!!*

I want to decapitate Drusilla and skewer her head on a bedpost so she can “watch” while I violate Reine repeatedly.

Of course, I don't have the money to decorate my apartment. No money for art, though I'd love to throw a Lissitzky on the wall. And it's not like I can buy a condo or anything. Still, there are things I can do. I can do little things to make my apartment nicer, which will improve my mood, if only temporarily.

I bought a houseplant, for one thing. And, periodically, I buy some flowers. Every time I go to the grocery store, I buy lemons. Then I put the lemons in a large salad bowl and put it on my low glass coffee table in the living room, which makes the room feel brighter somehow. I bought a scented candle for sixteen dollars. And some incense, too. My apartment is only two rooms, but I found a shoji screen at the thrift store and set it up near my front door, creating a foyer, sort of. There are little things I can do. I bought new drip pans for the stovetop. I bought some Brasso and polished up my kitchen sink, the faucet. I make my bed every day now. I try to conceal all the power adapters instead of just leaving them in a pile of "linguini" on the floor.

I'm installing updates, comrades. Installing updates.

An entire life alone. Think of it. *A whole life alone!*

My neighbor has moved out, and I no longer have to listen to him fuck his girlfriend. My new neighbor is an opera singer. All day long, I hear her. She belts out the *Nessun Dorma*. All day long I hear her the *Nessun Dorma*.

I thought the riots would scare away dollars, but downtown they're building an apartment complex, a cluster of six twelve-story buildings – our own little Hudson Yards.

They broke ground a few years ago, not long after the Rudy Rogers incident, the ensuing chaos. In fact, the buildings have nearly topped out now. The project is just about finished.

The buildings are Miesian. Lots of glass and steel, like the *Seagram Building* in New York.

The buildings are ugly, in my view, not like classical architecture, which I *adore*. From a distance, you might say the buildings look like Stonehenge. Granted, they're not brutalist structures – not slabs or steles or anything like that – but still, from a distance, you might say the buildings resemble Stonehenge.

Twelve stories isn't very tall, but for Knoxville, these apartment buildings might as well be hyperscrapers.

The hyperscrapers do look like Stonehenge – minus the entablature, of course.

The cluster of hyperscrapers – they *do* look like Stonehenge.

They really do look like Stonehenge. The hyperscrapers look like Stonehenge. The hyperscrapers really do look like Stonehenge.

They really do look like Stonehenge.



## *END: The Deplorable* by Mick McGrath

### **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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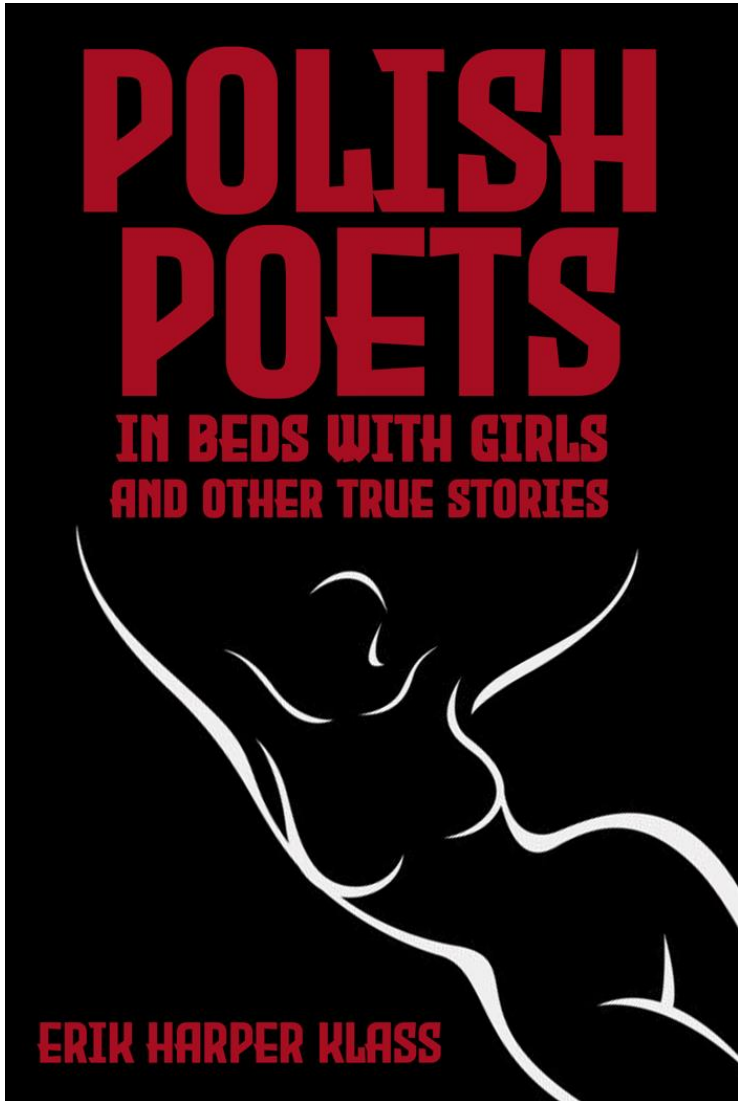
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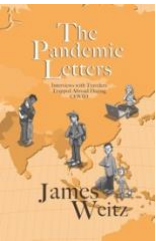
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