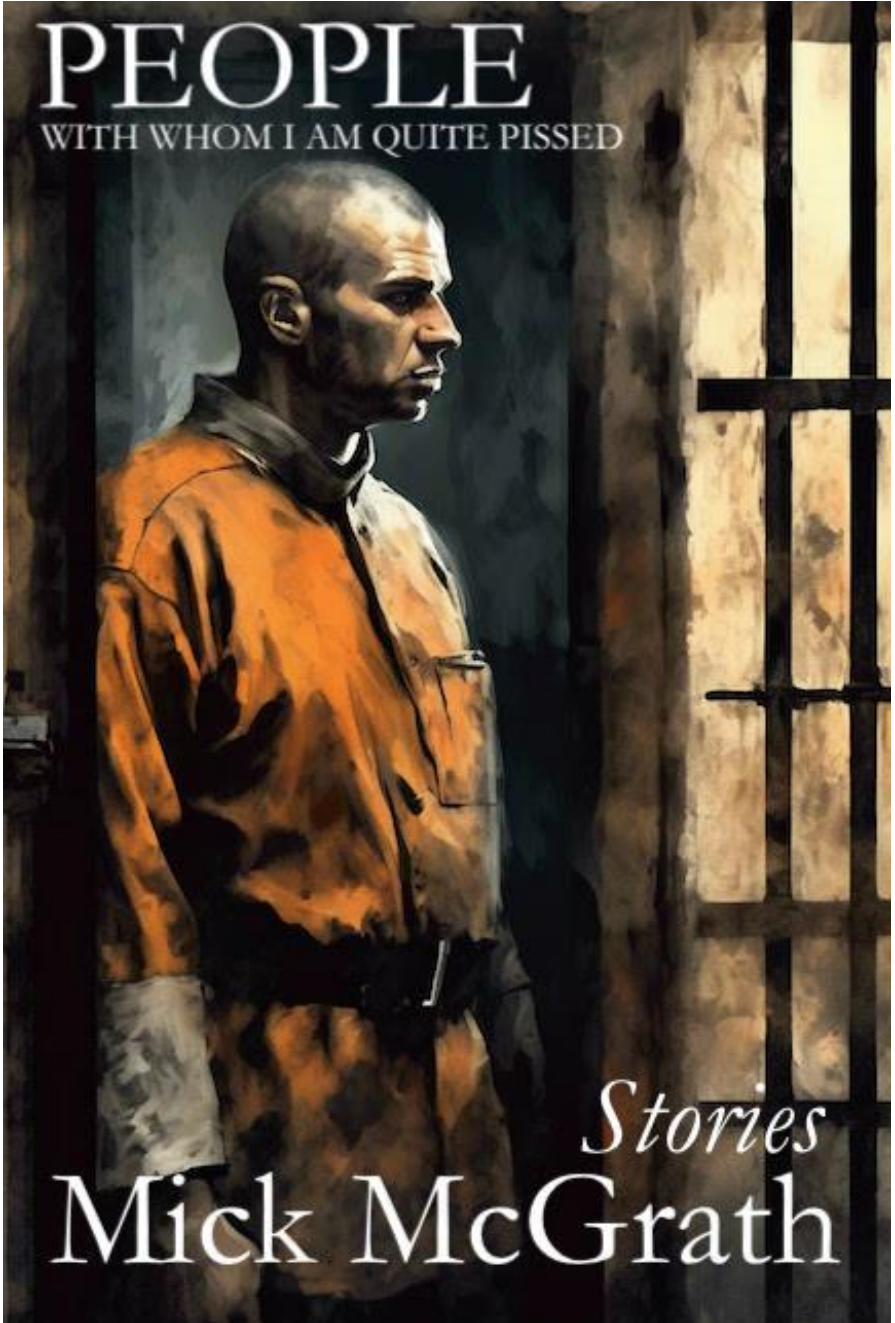

THE 2025 O:JA&L CHAPBOOK SERIES
A Writer's Portfolio



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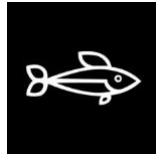


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PEOPLE

With Whom I Am Quite Pissed

Stories

MICK MCGRATH

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THE FUTURE IS MAO!

Everyone had been talking about The Future Is Mao!, the highly publicized fashion show right here in L.A. This was the debut of the new ready-to-wear collection from the brilliant young designer, Astyages.

Paul and I were there. At The Future Is Mao! Paul Brand, the famous actor. He and I were dating at the time. We were living together. This is where we first encountered the Mao Fit.

Paul said he loved the Mao Fit. Meanwhile, I thought it was fugly. But of course, I'm in the minority on this one. The Mao Fit is everywhere now, all over Los Angeles. The Mao Fit is *de rigueur*. The Mao Fit is *comme il faut*.

We were sitting together in the front row, watching as the first model charged down the runway with total sangfroid.

"Brilliant," Paul wooed, practically drooling. "C'est fantastique!"

Paul doesn't speak French. He knows a few words and phrases, but that's it. And the words he does know are cognates.

The first model arrived at the top of the runway. Everyone took pictures as the model posed briefly and U-turned. She wore the standard Mao Fit – grey jacket, grey trousers.

"Gee," I said, "you don't think it's a little...I don't know...austere, Paul?"

"C'est depouille, Dorian."

The second model wore the standard Mao Fit, too – grey jacket, grey trousers. The trousers were baggy, the kind of thing Katherine Hepburn used to wear.

The third model wore the standard Mao Fit, too. So did the fourth. And the

fifth. And the sixth. Paul and I just sat there, watching. So far, all the models were identical, like products on a conveyer belt, like cans of tomato soup.

The seventh model wore the Mao Fit, too, except her jacket was cropped short like a matador's bolero and everyone could see her tight stomach, her cute belly button. The bolero was darker than the other jackets, more charcoal than grey.

"The color of rat fur," I moaned, watching the show.

Paul turned in his seat and looked at me.

"Excuse me?" he said.

"That bolero," I said. "It's the color of rat fur, darker than the other jackets."

"Don't you like it, Dorian?"

I sighed tiredly and said, "If I want to see ratty wool jackets, I'll go to Skid Row, Paul."

Paul looked back at the runway. He sighed.

"Yes, these models do look like ragamuffins," he conceded.

"Tatterdemalions."

"Yeah," I said. "And the women are all au naturale. No Max Factor for them, Paul."

Paul looked at me again.

"Max Factor?" he said. "You know, a lot of beauty products have asbestos in them, Dorian. You can get mesothelioma."

"No tanning beds for them, either," I said.

"They have a natural beauty to them, Dorian. Like Carmen Kass."

"They look like Puritans, Paul. All covered up. Except for the one with the bolero, of course. They leave everything to the imagination. And they look like the goddamn Manson family with their shaved heads."

Paul looked at me again.

“But surely you see what Astyages is going for. Don’t you, Dorian? You do see what he’s trying to do. Right?”

“Put us all to sleep?” I said.

Paul looked back at the catwalk.

“Oh, that jacket,” he moaned, squinting, shaking his head in total astonishment. “Oh, that grey jacket. Those grey trousers. Chef’s kiss, Dorian. C’est formidable.”

“You gonna jack it to that jacket, Paul?”

“The Mao Fit is cheap, Dorian. Made of cheap rag wool. Grey and sort of dreary. Indeed, ugly.”

“Like brutalist architecture,” I said.

“Not colorful or vibrant or dazzling, Dorian. None of that.” Paul looked at me yet again. “You do recognize what Astyages is trying to do, then. Don’t you, Dorian? Surely you see what he’s up to.”

I started playing Tetris on my phone. Paul gasped in mind-bending horror and told me I was being disrespectful and to put away my phone immediately lest someone see me. I huffed and put away my phone.

I looked around. Who would see me, anyway?

Giles Bensimon was in attendance. So was Brandon Maxwell. And Philip Treacy, the famous milliner. He was here, too. And another milliner, Eric Javits, famous for designing the hat Melania wore at the inauguration.

They were all here for the Mao Fit.

paul et moi

Paul and I had been dating for a year or so. We’d been living together in his L.A. condo for about nine months.

I should have seen it coming: About three months after *The Future Is Mao!*, Paul would excommunicate me, kicking me out of his condo.

But for a while there, we got along great. Paul and I would run lines together. We'd talk about craft. We would discuss my upcoming auditions.

I'd only been in a few small movies: an action movie called *Force Multiplier*, a romantic comedy called *Girl, You're Too Good for Him*, a horror film called *Stabathon 2*.

Stabathon 2 is porn adjacent, an erotic thriller. It's not exactly *The Iceman Cometh*.

My parents, whom I haven't seen in years, are disappointed in me. For God's sake, what is Dorian doing out there in California? they likely ask each other, sitting in their rocking chairs, in their Northern Michigan cottage.

I had, to be fair, scored an audition for the prestige film, *Jamal Had Nothing to Do with It*, but I'd argued with the director, the great Maximilien Shaw, about the overall message of the movie. I couldn't bite my tongue – people say I'm self-destructive.

"Listen," I'd told Mr. Shaw, during my audition. "You've written a script here called *Jamal Had Nothing to Do with It*. Interesting choice for the character's name, by the way. Anyway, the script is about a black man falsely accused of murder, and while the falsely accused black man isn't unheard of here in America, anyone who knows the statistics knows that just isn't the typical story when a black male appears before a judge. I mean, come on. When are we going to stop lathering the black man's ass and start...like...holding young black males accountable? We're artists, Mr. Shaw. And, as artists, we should be asking uncomfortable questions, should we not? If cinema isn't exploring multiple perspectives, uncomfortable questions, I'm afraid it isn't art at all, Mr. Shaw. It may be fine art, but it isn't art at all. In other words, it has no utilitarian value, Mr. Shaw. No function. Therefore, it is fine art – not art at all, if you know what I mean. Or am I getting the two mixed up? Art and fine art? Anyway, in my opinion, this script needs a complete rewrite, Mr. Shaw. At the very least, it should be more nuanced, complicated."

Needless to say, I didn't get the part. The great Maximilien Shaw even called me a racist – a story for my grandchildren, no doubt, not that I intend to have grandchildren, or even children for that matter.

I didn't dare tell Paul what had happened at the audition – suffice it to say Paul would not approve. When he heard I didn't get the part, Paul just assumed one of the classic reasons – I wasn't right for it, or perhaps I'd blown my audition, stammering my way through my lines. Maximilien Shaw is

a perfectionist, after all – it isn't easy to land a role in one of his movies, even if the role is a tertiary character.

"Ah, come on," Paul said, when I got back to his condo that day, after the audition. "Rejection is a part of it, Dorian." He threw his arm around me as soon as I stepped across the threshold into his foyer. "Hell, I've been rejected a million times, porkchop. A million times, mon petit sausage. When I was in my twenties, I heard the word no every day. Rejection is a part of it, sweetie. Rejection is the road. It's heartbreaking to be rejected, certainly, but you have to learn that, my little porkchop, mon petite sausage."

Paul is forty years old, fifteen years my senior. I sometimes joked with Paul that I was his catamite. Paul didn't like that.

Paul had taken me under his wing. He was giving me "an education," showing me obscure Bunuel films. We talked endlessly about craft.

"Learn to do nothing," Paul told me, one day.

"Nothing, Paul?"

"Bad actors think they have to do something. Learn to do nothing. Subtlety, Dorian. Subtlety's the key. Less is more. You know?"

I looked at him, searchingly.

"Okay," Paul started. "Let's say you're doing a scene, right? And your screen mate tells you your mother has just died. Bad actors think they have to fall to their knees and weep. Learn to do nothing, Dorian. A lot of actors think they have to earn their money. Learn to do nothing. Literally nothing."

Paul was my docent, leading me through the history of cinema. We played a game of "Around the World," watching Eisenstein, Truffaut, Ozu, Kurosawa, De Sica, Visconti, Bergman... Paul showed me bizarre Bunuel films like *l'Age d'Or* and *Exterminating Angel*.

One night, we watched Eisenstein's *Battleship Potemkin*. Paul was excited, even though he'd seen it a million times. He said *Battleship Potemkin* is considered the finest propaganda film ever made.

"Welp, it's all propaganda these days, isn't it, Paul?"

“Excuse me?”

I was sitting right next to him, on his beautiful chesterfield, in his L.A. condo. The truth is I’d had a bit too much Beaujolais.

“All propaganda, Dorian?”

“That’s right,” I said, doubling down. “It’s all propaganda these days.”

“Oh? Tell me more, darling. Do tell me more.”

I was eating popcorn. I was speaking with my mouth full. Paul is always telling not to speak with my mouth full.

“Well, darling, what happens to a society, darling, when the taboo is ubiquitously excised from art?” I said.

“Taboo?” Paul said. “Ah, but you see, it’s a business, porkchop. A business. To make more money, we gotta make films that’ll get past the Chinese censors. Sorry.”

“Fucking Francoism,” I muttered, shaking my head resentfully.

“Excuse me?” Paul said again.

“Nothing,” I said. “Let’s just watch the movie.”

“No really,” Paul insisted.

“Well, what about ESG?” I said. “A different kind of ESG? One where we’re all concerned about democracy? I mean, what happens to a democracy when there’s no concern for diversity?”

“No concern for diversity?” Paul scoffed. “Here in Hollywood? Surely you jest, Dorian. Surely you jest.”

“Ideological diversity,” I clarified. “What happens to a society when there’s no healthy opposition, Paul? When uncomfortable questions are excised from art because they might offend people?”

Paul thought for a moment.

“Uncomfortable questions?” he said. “Like what, my cuddly muffin? What’d

you ever have in mind, Honey Bunches of Oats?”

“What about the search for truth?” I continued. “Humanity’s ongoing disinterested search for truth.”

Paul cleared his throat.

“Okay, but what are these uncomfortable questions?” he pressed. “What’d you have in mind, Dorian? Give us a few examples.”

“Forget it, Paul. I don’t dare.”

I took a sip of my Beaujolais.

Paul looked at me curiously, cocking his head like a dog. Then the Odessa Staircase sequence began, and Paul gasped, saying, “My favorite part, Dorian! Oh, you simply must watch this!”

He snatched the clicker from the coffee table and turned up the volume.

We got quite drunk that night, watching Battleship Potemkin, and the next day, Paul didn’t remember our conversation.

A couple of years ago, Paul played the brawny John Wayne type in a western called Appaloosas Over Yonder. His next film was Blue Wall of Silence.

I’m sure you’ve heard of Blue Wall of Silence. It got a lot of attention when it came out a couple of years ago. The New Yorker said Paul was “profoundly disturbing in Blue Wall of Silence.” A “Viking berserker,” they called him. His character, they said, is “a blood-soaked predator,” a “depraved killer,” a racist cop hellbent on killing as many black boys as possible under the pretense of maintaining law and order. Art Forum said Paul was “spellbinding.” Cahier du Cinema said, “You can’t take your eyes off Paul Brand in Blue Wall of Silence.”

Paul was rather sexy in the film. With his mustache. And his aviator sunglasses. And his blue uniform. Vile, to be sure. But sexy.

Still, I thought reviews of the film were wack. Blue Wall of Silence may be an important film, but it isn’t cinematically compelling. There’s nothing special about Blue Wall of Silence. Nothing special about the cinematography, for instance. Or the non-diegetic music. Or the production design. And for

God's sake, the film is absurd, with its depiction of cops killing black boys left and right, as if a genocide is happening right here in America – by the end of the film, Paul's body count is on par with that of Genghis Khan, Timur Lenk.

I do not, I assure you, hate the film. I wouldn't use the word hate. I just don't think Blue Wall of Silence deserves the praise it got. Christ, a great film should have cinematography, mise-en-scene, the whole package. Not just an important political statement. Not just ideology. It should have aesthetics, too. It should have "gold lame," if you know what I mean.

At the premiere of the film, moviegoers gave Blue Wall of Silence a standing ovation – before the fucking thing even began.

Paul doesn't like to talk about it, but the truth is he's as rich as Croesus. About a year ago, he struck gold. He'd been hired to star in the new science-fiction film, Space Catastrophe, but during pre-production the director changed his mind about Paul, telling Paul he wasn't right for the part after all. This was a serious injustice. A serious injustice! Paul had already blocked off a chunk of time to do Space Catastrophe, and he'd even turned down other projects, projects he would have loved to star in.

Paul's agent demanded a million dollars from the director, and thanks to "Play or Pay" (a clause in Paul's contract), he got it. My beautiful Adonis, Paul Brand, received one-million dollars to do nothing. Meanwhile, Space Catastrophe failed miserably at the box office.

Paul received one-million dollars to do nothing. A million bucks! To do nothing! I couldn't get past it. A million bucks to do nothing! Hollywood can be a real bonanza.

Except it hasn't been a bonanza at all, actually. Au contraire, it's been a real slog for Paul. It really has. Never mind that he was born to industry parents. Never mind that he had every advantage growing up. It's been a real climb for Paul, a slow funicular ascent.

In his twenties and thirties, he did commercial after commercial, embarrassing music videos... He had a recurring role on the angsty teen drama, Feeling Low at Franklin High. He's appeared in politically correct sitcoms like Doin' the Dozens. And yes, he's gone on a billion auditions. In his early days, he heard the word no all the time. Then, finally, along came Appaloosas, which got the attention of Blue Wall of Silence director Francois Lavigne. The

brilliant Francois Lavigne, who at the time was best known for films like Strong Female Protagonist Clawing Her Way to the Top in a Male-Dominated Society. Finally, the ball started rolling for Paul. Now Paul is the Saturn V.

Paul Brand has achieved escape velocity.

the mao fit is in this year

I can't believe you don't like these Mao Fits," Paul said, almost resentfully, sitting next to me at The Future Is Mao!

"Oh, please," I said. "These Mao Fits are the color of cement, Paul. The color of mortar."

Paul looked at me disgustedly, as if I'd just clubbed a baby seal.

"And they're not exactly 'King of Cling,'" I went on, looking at the runway. "These Mao Fits are so big and boxy. They're not exactly Alaia, Paul."

"Maybe you just don't have any taste, Dorian. Maybe that's the problem."

"The color of cigar ash," I continued, gum cracking.

Paul looked at me like he wanted to slit my throat.

"Could you be persuaded to stop chewing gum, Dorian?" he said, grinding his teeth. "This is only the most highly anticipated fashion show of the year."

Paul was always doing this to me. He was always telling me to stop chewing with my mouth open, to stop wiping my nose with the back of my hand...

For a few minutes, Paul and I just sat there. We did not speak.

The models kept coming, one after the other – a bunch of Zen monks with their shaved heads.

Presumably, Astyages was backstage, hurriedly dressing his models, perfecting their look, then throwing them down the runway as though they were bowling balls. All the models were nearly identical.

There were, to be clear, a few male models, too. Men in Mao Fits – grey jacket, grey trousers. With shaved heads. Indistinguishable from the women, except for their lantern jaws.

It was then that Paul leaned into me, as if to share a secret, and said, “Say, Dorian, d’you hear about that guy? Ozymandias Lee or whatever? Hear what he did?”

Like Paul, Ozymandias Lee had been a struggling actor. He’d worked his whole life and was just now beginning to make some noise at forty-five, co-starring in the hit sitcom Boners.

“Hear what happened to him, Dorian?”

I sighed.

“Another public beheading, Paul?”

“Ozymandias said Blue Wall of Silence is shit.”

“The gall, Paul.”

“The audacity, Dorian. Ozymandias Lee said police brutality’s been blown out of proportion. He said the real problem’s black-on-black crime. He said studios would make films about black-on-black crime if they really cared about ‘black lives.’”

Amen, I felt like saying, but of course I didn’t dare.

“You believe that, Dorian? You fuckin’ believe that?”

I thought about all the black children, some as young as two months old, who were being killed in drive-by shootings.

“This Ozymandias character. He’s got some nerve,” Paul continued, shaking his head, grinding his teeth again. “Some fucking nerve, Dorian.”

“The balls, Paul.”

“Really, Dorian. Ozymandias said the biggest threat to young black men is other black men. You believe that, Dorian? You fuckin’ believe that?”

Paul was still grinding his teeth.

“You know, Dorian, it’s one thing for black citizens to kill other black citizens, but when a cop kills a black citizen, that’s like getting bullied by the teacher, if you know what I mean. Anyway, Ozymandias Lee has been fired, not surprisingly. His character on Boners! will be played by another actor.”

“Shame,” I said, looking at the catwalk.

“In fact, ABC issued a press release just this morning, saying Mr. Lee’s Tweet was insensitive and he is no longer employed by the company.”

“I couldn’t agree more, Paul. Couldn’t agree more. That’s as it should be.”

I continued to look at the catwalk – grey jacket and trousers, grey jacket and trousers.

“Mr. Lee was fired toute de suite, and I say good riddance,” Paul said, grinding his teeth again. “Fucking racist. Fucking racist piece of shit. I mean, that is so insensitive, Dorian. Like, so insensitive to the black community.”

“Agreed, Paul.”

“Piece of shit,” Paul said. “I hope he gets fucked in the ass with a machete.”

“Excuse me, Paul?”

“I’d like to fuck him in the ass and stab him to death,” Paul said. “Stab him ‘til my hand cramps up. You know?”

“Gee, Paul.”

And then I saw something quite unusual. Yes, yes, something quite unusual indeed. One of the models... She wore army fatigues, a red beret, combat boots.

“OMG!” Paul gasped, at once forgetting the crimes of Ozymandias Lee.

The model carried the GE Mini Gun, a fearsome anti-personnel weapon from the Vietnam era, six barrels bound together in a tight cylinder.

“Holy shit!” Paul exclaimed, staring at the woman. “OMG, that is so fucking brilliant, Dorian. OMG, that is so fucking brilliant.”

The gun looked like something you’d mount to the side of a helicopter, like

something you'd set up in the back of an '84 Isuzu. And yet, somehow the model was able to carry it in her right hand. In the other hand, she held a canister of chain-ammo against her waist.

Everyone was clapping.

"C'est fantastique," Paul said, getting teary eyed, grabbing his chest. "Ugh, c'est formidable."

The model arrived at the top of the catwalk, posed briefly, and U-turned.

The lights came on, and all the models quickly returned to the runway to be recognized. The fash-pack clapped loudly.

After the models had all gone backstage again, the mysterious Astyages emerged. Everyone stood up and started clapping. They clapped much harder this time. They clapped passionately, with some even moved to tears.

Astyages was very young, even younger than me, about twenty-one or twenty-two if I had to guess. With a shaved head. And tattoos all over his metacarpals, all over his arms and neck.

Astyages looked like an urchin. He had acne. And destroyed denim. And an ill-fitting grey t-shirt. Believe it or not, he looked kind of slovenly.

To look at Astyages, you wouldn't think he had any sartorial sense. Yet here we were, giving him a standing ovation. For his sartorial sense.

"Yes!" Paul exclaimed, jumping to his feet. "Right on, Astyages! Right on!"

Astyages stood on the catwalk. Paul was standing there, looking up at the catwalk worshipfully. They all were. Giles Bensimon was. Brandon Maxwell was. Philip Treacy was. Astyages was the new Wagner – incidentally, when Richard Wagner died in 1883, devotees like Gustav Mahler ran through the streets of Vienna crying, "The master has died! The master has died!"

Everyone continued clapping. Then I gasped, because I noticed then that the brilliant young rap artist, Lil' IQ, was in attendance. I was a huge fan of Lil' IQ. I hadn't noticed him until now.

I saw Lil' IQ standing there, on the other side of the catwalk. He too was standing up, clapping hard. So was I, of course. I assure you I was.

The fash pack were all whistling and hooting. "Bravo!" they shouted.

“Bravissimo!” Meanwhile, Astyages stood there, on the catwalk, bowing. “Bravo!” the people continued. “Bravo!”

Astyages bowed repeatedly. He smiled. He got a little teary-eyed. I wondered if Pavarotti, with all his curtain calls, had ever been so lovingly ovated.

The young designer enjoyed a fifteen-minute standing ovation. It felt longer than that, but the newspapers would later say it was a fifteen-minute standing ovation. People have since dubbed this “The Ever Applause.” I’m sure you’re familiar.

In the days after the fashion show, social media sleuths combed videos of “The Ever Applause,” scouring for people who did not clap. A few “non-clappers” were identified and promptly fired – as, of course, they should be.

And yet, the truth is the Mao Fit is hideous. Objectively hideous. You don’t dare say it at a cocktail party – not unless you want to see all your dreams, everything you’ve worked so hard for, come crashing down all around you – and you certainly don’t say it at an audition, but the Mao Fit is hideous, to be sure. No one will say it out loud, of course, but everyone knows the Mao Fit is hideous. I’m convinced of it – everyone thinks the Mao Fit is hideous. They won’t say it out loud, of course, but everyone knows the Mao Fit is hideous.

The Mao Fit is grey, and austere, and frightening. The Mao Fit is terrifying. The Mao Fit is fugly. Strange to see it making a comeback.

And it is, I assure you, making a comeback. The Mao Fit is everywhere now. It’s all over Los Angeles.

The Mao Fit is dernier cri. Everyone is rocking the Mao Fit these days. All the Angelenos. The angels.

RULE & INNOVATION

A few weeks ago, my neighbor Alec and I cleaned his apartment. We folded all the laundry that had been lying in a heap on his bedroom floor. We made his bed. We cleaned Alec's oven. We cleaned his toilet, too. And his fridge. We did the dishes. Then we used Brasso on the kitchen sink, polishing the steel. We tidied Alec's living room.

"Here's a radical idea," I said. "When you're done with something, put it away."

Alec's apartment looks better now. Before I came along, it looked like the Colyer Brothers' Brownstone. I exaggerate, of course, but the apartment does look better.

After cleaning, we went to the store and bought a houseplant. We bought some flowers and put them in a vase on Alec's glass coffee table. Alec resisted the flowers at first, saying, "They're for fags," but I told him flowers can affect one's mood.

We bought some lemons and put them in a salad bowl on the kitchen counter.

"There," I said, proudly, standing akimbo in Alec's apartment, beholding the good work I'd done. "Now you can work."

Alec rolled his eyes at me.

"And God saw that it was good," he said.

Alec and I go to the gym twice a week these days. We sit in the sauna for fifteen minutes at a time, doing our Box Breathing. Research says long-time sauna users are less likely to get cancer.

We're doing the carnivore diet.

Alec is thirty-eight and a freshman at the University of Tennessee. I can tell he's embarrassed by his age. I tell him it's better late than never.

Alec asks me how many degrees I have. I tell him I have two master's degrees, one of which is a terminal degree, an MFA from the University of Tennessee, Knoxville. And I'm flattered when Alec says, "Dang! Two master's degrees?"

"I've also published a novel, albeit with a small press," I tell him.

Alec is a first-generation college student. He needs help. I tell him to do two or three hours of schoolwork every single day, even on Saturdays and Sundays, instead of neglecting his schoolwork for three or four days in a row and letting it pile up. "Tiny & Daily," I tell him. "Tiny & Daily." Alec says two hours a day is a lot.

I tell Alec to get a calendar – a digital calendar, one that enables him to color code everything, not that you can't do that with an old-school calendar.

I tell him to make a to-do list. "A to-do list, as simple as it is, will change your life."

I tell Alec to use the Pomodoro Technique. "Do twenty-five minutes of studying, and then take a five-minute break," I tell him. "Rinse, lather, repeat."

I tell Alec to use the Leitner System. I tell him to add little pictures to his flashcards, too. "Research says students are more likely to recall information during a test if they've looked at pictures while studying," I say. "They call that the Picture Superiority Principle. You should try it, Alec."

I tell Alec to use the Test-Preparation Ritual. "In the minutes preceding the exam, make a list of your fears. What are you afraid of, Alec? Get it all down."

Alec is afraid of disappointing his late mother. He's failed College Algebra twice now, and I'm worried about him. I may not be able to help him with College Algebra, but I can help him to develop an effective study regimen, one that will be conducive to his success.

In fact, that's what I do for a living – while I've spent most of my career teaching English Composition, for nearly three years now, I've been working at South College here in Knoxville, teaching a student success course called

College Management that prepares incoming students, many of whom are non-traditional, as they embark on their educational journeys.

Alec isn't one of these manana assholes who have no concept of delayed gratification, people for whom things like sacrifice and self-regulation and planning for unfelt needs have no meaning. Alec wants to be accomplished, not a failure like so many people he knew back in East L.A. Alec is asking more of himself. I admire that.

I tell Alec I'm going to start getting on his case. I tell him he needs a good kick in the ass, not more mollycoddling. I tell him I'm putting him through a kind of bootcamp. "Are you familiar with the Latin phrase *in loco parentis*?" I ask him. "Sorry, Alec, but your parents didn't do right by you. They let you down."

It's difficult for him to admit this, but Alec nods slowly in agreement.

"Look, we're going to get you through College Algebra," I say. "By the way, Alec, did you do your two hours of math today?"

He doesn't respond.

"Alec!" I snap, folding my arms at my chest. "You can't come out and play tonight, Alec." I smile, letting him know I'm only kidding, that I'm not his dad. "I want three hours of math out of you. Three hours of College Algebra. Minimum!"

I tell him there are no days off. There are no days off ever, I tell him. We've got to "improve the time." We've got to work hard every single day, period, no asterisk.

Sometimes Alec gets frustrated and tells me to fuck off. Alec has a low frustration tolerance.

He knows I'm right, though. He knows he needs to do a little bit of schoolwork every single day. And when I say "a little bit," I mean two hours minimum. "Tiny & Daily," I say again, inculcating him. "Tiny & Daily, Alec."

I talk with Alec about goal setting. "Create three or four goals for yourself that you will reach one year from now," I tell him. "Create intermediate goals. You know...like...sub-goals, for a lack of better words, that you'll reach in six months. Keep a journal tracking your progress. Announce your goals on

Facebook. Take this seriously! Research says goal setting can be very good for young people. Not that you're all that young – I mean, you're almost forty, Alec."

I tell Alec again to use the Test-Preparation Ritual. "In the minutes preceding the exam, make a list of your fears," I say. "I know it sounds silly, but it just so happens the most prestigious scientific journal in the world, *Science*, published an article about this. Please try it."

I tell Alec to take care of himself. I tell him that taking care of oneself physically and mentally will be conducive to one's success, academic and otherwise. "Health & Wealth," I tell him. "Avoid high fructose corn syrup, anything with ingredients you can't pronounce. When you go grocery shopping, shop along the perimeter of the store, avoiding the aisles in the center. Health & Wealth."

Alec and I are drinking only once a week these days. There will be no more drinking during the week. There will be no more pot, either. There will be no more pornography. And certainly there will be no more mushrooms.

We live on the top floor of a three-story building in downtown Knoxville. Alec lives in Apt. 11. I live in Apt. 9.

We have a balcony entrance overlooking the Tennessee River. A couple nights a week, Alec and I grill. Alec has a charcoal grill, and we unfold our collapsible chairs and just sit there, on the balcony, babysitting the chicken.

One time, Alec was struggling to open a bottle of Malbec. I went inside and got my wine opener. "Here, use mine," I said, but Alec wouldn't take it. Sitting in his chair, on the balcony, he continued to struggle with his wine opener. "Ugh, get rid of that thing, why don't you?" But Alec told me the wine opener belonged to his mother, who died after a lifetime of alcoholism.

Alec throws his corn husks over the railing onto our neighbors' lawn downstairs. I tell him not to do that, saying, "Let's have a little more respect for our neighbors, shall we?"

I tell Alec to chew with his mouth closed, to stop wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

Alec is always leaving things in my apartment – drinking glasses, coffee mugs, pot. I tell him I don't want that stuff in my apartment. I tell him I try to

keep my apartment orderly. I tell him I don't approve of the pot.

Alec calls me a robot.

Meanwhile, I'm always leaving books in Alec's apartment – *The 7 Habits of Highly Successful People*, *An Owner's Manual for the Brain, Mindset...* One time, I went over to Alec's apartment and saw that he'd thrown my books in the trash. "I was cleaning my apartment," Alec defended himself. "Just like you told me." I read him the riot act for a good ten minutes.

I tell Alec to work on his study space. "Outer order, inner calm," I say. "We need order, Alec. What are some things we can do, whether it's getting a calendar or making a to-do list, to achieve greater order in our lives? Chaos is not your friend, Alec. Chaos is not your friend."

I tell Alec not to underestimate the power one's study space can have on one's ability to think with greater clarity. I tell him about famous studies like Rat Park. "Environments matter, Alec. Environments do matter."

Alec grew up in gangland. He grew up in poverty, squalor. As a young man, he was surrounded by crack heads and prostitutes and hypermasculine gang members, animals who'd take your life if you so much as looked at them the wrong way.

Now Alec lives in Knoxville. He's surrounded by lush green parks, exquisite architecture, healthy radiant people.

Everyone here is smart. The University of Tennessee kids are impressive – they're very well-mannered and respectful and smart. I should know – I taught First-Year Composition at UT for about four years before moving on to South College.

Some mornings, I stand on the balcony with a cup of coffee and watch the UT rowing team on the Tennessee River. One of our neighbors is an opera singer.

Alec has gotten kicked out of every bar in downtown Knoxville. He says he's "violent as fuck." He says he'll fight "any fool," no matter their size. "I don't give a fuck," he says, his Pacers cap turned backwards. "I don't give a fuuuuuck." And he's not bullshitting. I've seen him fight.

I've seen Alec get into verbal altercations, too. Once, a bartender cut him off,

and Alec got mad and told her her vagina smells like shit. “You need a Tide pod for your vagina!” he yelled. “You need a Tide pod for your fucking cunt!”

To be fair, Alec returned to the bar the next day and apologized, hat in hand. He also needed his credit card back.

The bartender forgave him. Alec is tall and handsome, and he gets away with murder.

Alec once drunkenly asked a female bartender if she had “a hairy pussy.” He asked her if she had pink nipples, a pink butthole. I told him to stop, but he wouldn’t. He asked the black bartender if her nipples looked like refrigerator magnets. He asked her if she and the other bartender, the blonde, would make out topless.

Alec gets into physical altercations, too. He says he’ll fight anyone. He’d rather die than be dishonored.

“But Alec,” I say. “You could kill someone.”

Alec tells me to clean my pussy.

“I’m not kidding. You could fucking kill someone, Alec. You punch someone, and they could fall and hit their head on a pool table or something. College Algebra will be the least of your problems then, dude.”

Alec laughs, mockingly.

Would you listen to yourself?” I say. “You’re going to clock someone in the face and maybe knock their teeth out because they said something you don’t like?”

“Fuck yeah,” Alec says, without missing a beat.

“That is so unbecoming of the academic,” I tell him. “That is unbecoming of the academic, Alec, since academics value multiple perspectives.”

Alec tells me he’s a wolf and I am a little lamb. I tell him that’s such a cliché. Alec revises, saying he’s a chimp and I am the bonobos.

I shake my head at him. I roll my eyes.

“Welp,” I say, throwing my hands up, hopelessly, “enjoy the prison food,

Alec.”

And I can see his wheels spinning – Alec knows I’m right. I can tell I’m getting through to him.

“By the way, Alec, does it ever dawn on you they could sue you, too? Say goodbye to all that money you got from your mom’s life insurance policy. Fun while it lasted, eh? And I’m sure your mother would love to hear this – that you squandered the money she left you. She wanted you to have that, Alec! That was her peace of mind. At least my son, my little boy, will have some money, she thought, in her final moments – I mean, presumably, anyway.”

Alec gets choked up a little. He knows I’m right.

Alec and I have gotten close. He tells me he loves me. He says he appreciates my help, the way I’ve sort of thrown an arm around him in recent months, putting him through my little bootcamp.

And I’m happy to report he’s doing well in College Algebra. In fact, it looks like he’s going to pass this time.

But when Alec gets drunk, he turns on me. He gets abusive, calling me a “little bitch” and “a pussy” and a “faggot” and an “incel.”

“Yeah,” I say. “I’m an incel, and you’re an imbecile. The Incel & the Imbecile. How do ya like that?”

Alec threatens to kick my ass. He threatens to defenestrate me, to throw me over the railing of our shared balcony.

Apartment 11 is a revolving door. Alec did have a girlfriend for a while there, but he cheated on her, and now, not surprisingly, she doesn’t come around anymore. She dropped him like a hot potato, and who could blame her? I read Alec the riot act, telling him he’s an asshole for doing that. She was a sweet girl. She didn’t deserve that. Hell, I’d love to have a girl like that.

But Alec didn’t give a shit. And to be fair, he’s not wrong when he says that men are designed by evolution to want to fuck everything on two legs.

Alec is teaching me how to get girls. He tells me to stop jerking off. He tells

me to stop watching porn. He says it's bad for me.

And I'm sure he's right. In fact, I believe there's research about the deleterious effects of pornography on men – something about pair bonding or whatever?

The truth is I can't go two days without it. I'm not proud of it, but at the same time, I'm not...like...deeply ashamed of it, either – it's not like it's unnatural to want to watch two people having sex.

Alec tells me again and again to stop watching pornography. He says, "Girls like guys who are fulla cum."

He puts major emphasis on the word cum. Girls like guys, he tells me, who "got a sack full of jizz." Girls like "alpha chimps, like me."

Alec tells me not to kid myself. Girls like hypermasculinity, lions lustily roaming the veldt looking for pussy.

It's not the most flattering thing to admit, but the truth is I've been alone for years now. I'm no virgin, but I've been alone for years and years and years and years and years. Meanwhile, all the girls love Alec.

And I'd be lying if I said I'm not jealous. Alec is happier than I am, especially now that he's doing better in school.

Alec tells me to work on my look. He tells me to use the Jawzrsize or whatever. He says I have no jawline. He tells me to lose weight. He tells me to get a better haircut, better clothes... I tell Alec that banks look at your spending habits when deciding to give you a mortgage. I tell Alec to be conservative with his money. We're both in our thirties, I remind him. Our late thirties. We're getting older, and we need to think about the future, i.e. retirement and so forth.

Meanwhile, Alec doesn't even have his degree yet.

Women do find Alec attractive, though. And it should come as no surprise. Alec is tall, Lincolnesque. I, meanwhile, have this awful little chimp body.

Alec has a nice white smile, even though he doesn't floss. He wears his hat backward, and he looks kind of boyish.

I floss after every meal, but still my teeth are kind of yellow. Genes have

more to do with this shit than people realize.

I tell Alec to think about artificial lighting. “When you get up in the morning, it’s important to expose yourself to artificial lighting,” I say. “Artificial lighting releases epinephrine in the body, making you alert, giving you more energy.”

Alec asks me what I mean by epinephrine.

I tell Alec he needs energy, so he can be more productive throughout the day. “Consider elevating your laptop, too,” I say. “Research says we’re more alert when the object of our attention is slightly above eyelevel.”

I tell him to think about binaural beats. “No, binaural beats are not unscientific,” I say. “In fact, Stanford neuroscientist Andrew Huberman recommends listening to 40 HZ binaural beats. He says it’ll help you to achieve greater focus while studying. Give it a try, Alec. For God’s sake, what have you got to lose?”

It’s great that Alec gets girls, but I tell him he needs to settle down and have children. I tell him he needs to find a nice young woman and date her for a couple of years before getting married and having kids. I tell him there’s nothing wrong with the May-December relationship. Just as long as she’s a good girl, someone he can be sure he’ll spend the rest of his life with. I tell him divorce is shameful. Because it kind of is. I tell him divorce is horrible, since it hurts children. I tell Alec that sometimes divorce is necessary but he and his wife should do their best to stay together, so their kids will be well-adjusted, so they too can attract a mate and have kids.

Alec tells me he doesn’t want kids, let alone grandkids, and I am reminded of Elon’s term “Civilizational Suicide.”

I tell Alec he needs to have kids.

Alec tells me again he doesn’t want kids.

I tell him that life longs for itself. And that we need to have children.

Alec and I have agreed to start checking on people – people who have cancer, people with sick kids. We’re going to start saying, “Hey there. Thought about you all weekend. How’d that interview go?” and “Hey. How

was your hike along the Appalachian Trail? I'd love to hear about it when you get a chance."

We're going to put ourselves aside and start thinking about other people for a change. We're going to tell people, "Enough about me. What about you?" We're going to say, "Boy, you were really on my mind this weekend. Everything okay?" We're going to reach out to people who are grieving and say things like, "You know, it's a shame things like this must happen to the most wonderful people." We're going to send people cards, flowers. We're going to send our condolences. We're going to send people gifts on their birthdays. We're going to like people's Facebook posts. We are going to be spectators in other people's lives. We are going to be second fiddle, supporting actors... We're going to be there for people. We're going to show up for them.

Alec says I need to work on my social skills. He says the next time he has girls over to the apartment, don't talk about illegitimacy rates in the United States, for God's sake. And in the first place, don't use the term "illegitimacy rates" to describe kids born out of wedlock. For God's sake, Girls don't like that! He recommends talking about dogs, the UT Vols, the hit TV show *Euphoria*.

Alec says the cute girls he invites over to his apartment (all of whom are on Only Fans) don't like me. He says they talk shit about me when I'm not around. "Who does your neighbor think he is, anyway?" they say. "Like, does he think he's God or something? Who is he to tell you anything, Alec? You do you."

I am, according to these dolts, basking in Alec's reflected glory – if it weren't for Alec, I wouldn't talk to women at all.

One night, standing on the balcony right outside my apartment, Alec called me a loser.

"Damn, dude, women hate you," he said, laughing. "You should hear the shit they say about you when you're not around, bruh. Women hate you, dude." He was leaning over the railing, looking at the Tennessee River below. "When you talk with women, their vaginas pucker. Dude, you're gonna have to find a woman at the burn unit." Then he got really hostile and said, "You're such a fuckin' loser, dude. You're a fuckin' loser, bruh."

I don't claim to be tough, but I'm not a doormat, either. I refuse to be Alec's

punching bag.

“Excuse me?” I said, looking him up and down. “Who the fuck are you? Hey, asshole, I have two master’s degrees, one of which is a terminal degree from the University of Tennessee. I’ve been teaching at the college and university level for thirteen years now. Last year, I published my novel, albeit with a small press. Do you know how hard it is to write a novel? Writing a novel is like climbing Everest, bro. And guess what: Writing the novel is the easy part! Publishing the fucking thing is infinitely harder. Anyway, what the fuck have you done with your life, you fucking piece of shit?”

“Dude,” Alec said, “the closest you could ever come to getting pussy is smelling my boxers.”

“And what about my teaching?” I continued. “Teaching is hard work. I mean, I know it’s a false equivalency, but teaching is not totally dissimilar to serving in the military, you disrespectful piece of shit. And it’s thankless – I mean, clearly.”

Alec rolled his eyes. He laughed, mockingly.

“I teach students to write with clarity,” I said.

Again, Alec laughed.

“I teach students to participate in public discourse.” And then, quite pretentiously, I quoted the American Association of Colleges and Universities. “I teach students to comprehensively explore ‘issues, ideas, artifacts, and events before accepting or formulating an opinion or conclusion.’ I teach students critical thinking skills, so they’ll participate responsibly in our democracy, making informed decisions in the voting booths. That’s noble work, Alec. And you... You have the effrontery to call me a loser? Anyway, what the fuck do you do for a living, Alec?”

“Hey, man,” Alec said, threateningly, standing up straight and tall now, no longer leaning over the railing.

“What the fuck have you done with your life, except smoke pot and chase pussy, you piece of shit?”

And that’s when Alec hit me.

When I came to, I was on the concrete of the balcony, and Alec was standing

over me, screaming, “You got knocked the fuck out, bitch!”

“Huh?” I said, softly.

“Don’t you ever disrespect me, bitch! Don’t you ever disrespect me in your life, bitch! Don’t you know who I am? DON’T YOU KNOW WHO I AM???”

I was totally dazed.

“You got knocked the fuck out!” Alec said again, standing over me. “Now what, bitch? Now what the fuck you gotta say, pussy? Now what you gotta say, faggot?”

“Gee, Alec, guess you can take the man out of East LA, but you can’t...”

“That’s right, bitch! I’m gangsta, nigga! I’ll fuckin’ kill you, nigga!”

Slowly, I climbed to my feet.

When I got to my feet, Alec got right in my face and said, “What, bitch? What you gonna do, bitch? I’ll knock you out again, faggot.”

I put my hands up and said, “Okay, Alec. Okay. I don’t want any trouble, alright?”

I went into my apartment and locked the door.

“Boy, you better stay in there,” I heard Alec say, his voice muffled, and then he went back into Apartment 11.

I went into my bathroom and assessed the damage – my nose was bleeding, and there was blood all over my shirt.

I considered calling the police, but Alec would just deny it, and without any eyewitnesses, I wouldn’t be able to prove shit, or at least that was my thinking at the time. In retrospect, I realize the police might have noticed scrapes on Alec’s knuckles. They might have noticed blood on his shirt. They might have interviewed the neighbors, asking if they heard anything – or better yet, if they saw anything.

Except even if the neighbors had seen something, they would have lied for Alec. They would have protected him. After all, everyone loves Alec.

Alec is doing something right. Between the two of us, Alec will be the one to survive. And when I say “survive,” I mean hand down his genetic information, leave a genetic legacy.

Alec will find a companion and have children. Then he’ll probably get divorced, ruining his kids’ lives, but the point is Alec will go on.

Meanwhile, loneliness, which they say is bad for one’s physical health, will kill me. Just give it a few years.

In a few years, I’ll die from loneliness, and Alec will go on. Alec wins! Alec the Victorious! King Alec, the Triumphant! King Alec, the Resplendent!

Alec carries the day! Alec prevails! Alec reigns! It seems everyone is into Alec these days. Seems like everyone is into Alec.

THE HOUSE

The woman down the street claimed to see the Virgin Mary on her rooftop, so my neighbor Morgan and I went to check it out. It was June of 2020, and COVID was everywhere, and we were supposed to be social distancing, but Morgan and I, like our neighbors, were curious, and we were unemployed, and we were bored, and we were both wearing COVID masks, and we promised each other we'd stand six feet away from the other "spectators," and yes, there were plenty of other "spectators" standing on the woman's lawn.

Morgan and I live in matching shotgun shacks here on Callaway Street, which is in Mechanicsville, an historic Knoxville district. Mechanicsville is poor and crime ridden. In fact, there'd been two drive-by shootings that summer, the summer of 2020, though neither had been fatal.

I'm a writer, and I wondered if I could scrape together a story about the Virgin Mary sighting and sell it to a magazine like Harper's. I'd done this kind of thing before, believe it or not. No, I'd never sold anything to Harper's. But I had been published in places like National Review. Anyway, I didn't care about the sighting itself – I knew it was horseshit. I wanted to see the people, all the Jesus freaks who bought into this nonsense. That was the real story.

Walking along Callaway Street, we saw our neighbors in the distance.

"Damn," I said, walking with Morgan along the sidewalk. "Can you believe how many people there are? And in the middle of a pandemic, no less?"

Morgan shrugged and said, "We're doing it, too, Tom. I mean, we're not social distancing, either."

"Yeah, but I'm writing an article about this. My article will be a message from the front. It's very important and necessary."

"Ugh, you're such a snob," Morgan said, rolling her eyes.

“How am I a snob?” I said, defensively.

“Because,” Morgan said. “I can tell you think you’re better than these people, don’t you?”

“I’m covering an event,” I said, adjusting my COVID mask. “This is like a Star Trek convention. Or Comic-Con. All the somnambulists who buy into this sort of thing.”

“Somnambulists?” Morgan said.

“It’s a human-interest story,” I said. “At least I think that’s what that’s called.”

“You really think it’s so kooky?” Morgan said, adjusting her COVID mask.

Now I was rolling my eyes.

“Morgan, are you on bath salts?” I said. “The Virgin Mary on someone’s rooftop?”

We were getting closer to “the miracle house.” It was late at night.

“Look, Morgan!” I gasped, walking along Callaway, pointing to the vast swarm of people in the distance. “They’re not even wearing masks. See them down there? They’re not even wearing masks!”

By the time we got to the house, the crowd had grown. Maybe half the street, dozens of people, were standing on this woman’s lawn, claiming to see the Virgin Mary on her roof. “I see her!” they exclaimed. “I see her!” They’d unfolded collapsible tables near the front porch. The tables were covered with flowers, and pocket bibles, and lit candles. The candles looked very pretty in the darkness.

The people stood there, looking up worshipfully, oooing and aaahing, like spectators watching a magic trick, or Cirque du Soleil, or an eclipse. They trained their phones at the rooftop. They seemed almost hypnotized by it.

They stood there, praying. And blessing themselves. And even sobbing, in some cases. I heard one man cry out, “Tell us what you want from us! Why are you here? What does this mean?”

The miracle house was a yellow Victorian with an expansive front porch with

a squat charcoal grill. Two rows of tall boxwood hedges flanked the property.

“Well,” I said, folding my arms, standing with Morgan at the edge of the property near a row of boxwood hedges, “do you see anything?” I laughed. “OMG, how is this possible, Morgan? How is this possible?” I was looking up at the rooftop, where there was a small widow’s walk.

“You know, Tom, there have been a ton of Marian apparitions over the centuries.”

“A ton?” I said.

“Well, maybe not a ton,” Morgan said. “Anyway, I guess this is just one more.”

“Wasn’t there one in Portugal?” I said. “A big one?”

“Our Lady of Fatima,” Morgan said. “In 1917, the Virgin Mary appeared before three Portuguese schoolchildren in Fatima and told them there was going to be a second world war.”

“Is it possible these people are on mescaline?” I said, scratching my head, looking at our neighbors on the lawn. “Like, maybe they’re tripping their dicks off on acid or something?”

“Tripping their dicks off?” Morgan said, disapprovingly.

“Is it possible they’re all on psilocybin mushrooms or something? Like, maybe they’re all one big mushroom cult.”

We were still standing by the boxwood hedges at the edge of the lawn. We had moved off the sidewalk, so as not to obstruct the steady flow of traffic – people coming from all over the neighborhood to see the Virgin Mary.

“Hey, Tom, have you ever heard of Saint Bernadette?” Morgan said. “Saint Bernadette of Lourdes? She saw the Virgin Mary on more than one occasion.”

“Maybe it’s like Yanni and Laurel,” I said. “They hear Yanni, we hear Laurel.”

A woman in the crowd started crying hysterically. People were rubbing her back, comfortingly.

“For God’s sake, they’re touching each other,” I said. “They’re touching each other, Morgan. And none of them are wearing masks.”

“They see the Virgin Mary,” Morgan shrugged. “Who needs a COVID mask when you think the Virgin Mary is here for you in your time of need?”

“No doubt this will be a superspreader event.”

“They’re outdoors,” Morgan said.

“They’re standing there, cheek by jowl,” I said.

“You know, this whole COVID thing,” Morgan said.

“And they keep coming,” I interrupted, watching the caravan of newcomers.

“Wait a minute,” Morgan said. “Wait just a minute. Didn’t Constantine and his army see a floating cross in the sky at the Battle of Milvian Bridge in 312 A.D.? Constantine and his army... They all saw the same thing, no? Like, they saw it together. Were they lying, Tom? Were they lying? Did they get together in their secret hideaway, their lair, and cook up this massive lie? Did they hash out all the details, rehearse?”

“Perhaps,” I said, trying to keep an open mind. “Anything’s possible, Morgan.”

A very tall black man at the center of the crowd was yelling, “Behold the Virgin Mary, mother of the very true deity!” I approached this man and interviewed him for my unwritten article, asking him what he thought he was seeing up there on the yellow Victorian. The man was quite tall. And he was very slender, like one of those Giacometti sculptures.

“It’s...like...a deeper darker shape against the darkness,” he said. “It’s hard to see, but she’s there. I can see her. She’s there.”

I was recording the interview with my iPhone. I adjusted my COVID mask.

“Uh huh. And she’s...just...standing there?” I asked the man.

“Yeah,” the man said, pointing her out to me. “On the chimney. Near the widow’s walk. Do you see?”

“Oh? She’s standing on the chimney, eh?” I said, holding my iPhone up to the man’s chin.

(I’ve been told I can be very smarmy. It’s something I’m working on.)

“You’re not even looking,” the man said to me. “She’s floating a few feet from the surface.”

“Floating?” I said. “Floating above the chimney?”

“Yeah,” the man said, squinting at the rooftop. “She’s standing on the chimney but sort of...you know...hovering...like...a few inches above the chimney.”

“So she’s levitating?” I said.

“Well, yes,” the man said.

I thought about Simeon the Stylite, who supposedly climbed a pillar in the fourth century AD and lived there, atop the pillar, until his death thirty-seven years later.

“Uh huh,” I said. “And is she standing there...like...akimbo? Or what?”

“Akimbo?” the man said, looking down at me.

“Akimbo. Like, with her hands on her hips.”

I did a quick demonstration for the man, then brought the iPhone back up to his chin.

“Oh no, not like that,” the man said, turning back to the rooftop. “She has her hands together. Like she’s praying. Like she’s praying for us.”

The man’s voice was hoarse, no doubt from all the yelling he’d done.

“Wow,” I said. “And she’s just staring at us?”

“Yes,” the man said. “She’s...just...staring at us.”

“Creepy,” I said. “Like, in a judgmental way?”

“Goodness, no!” the man exclaimed, looking at me. “She’s smiling warmly.”

The man was crying now. He looked back at the rooftop. “She’s letting us know that everything’s going to be okay.” He wiped the tears from his eye. “She’s here for us. It’s beautiful.”

“Uh huh,” I said. “And have you ever been institutionalized?”

“Excuse me?” the man said, looking down at me again, shooting daggers this time.

“Never mind,” I said, quickly. “I’m only teasing you, friend. Anyway, what do you think this means?”

“Means?” the man said.

“Well, yeah,” I said. “Why is she here? For God’s sake, why is the Virgin Mary standing on this woman’s rooftop? What does this mean, in your opinion?”

“I told you,” the man said. “I mean, look around: Advancement of viral infections, civil unrest... It’s no surprise she’s here. You know, Chinese virologists are constantly going into the wild and bringing new viruses back to civilization. Did you know that? And didn’t Joshua Lederberg say the biggest threat to humanity is the virus? Bigger, even, than the threat of nuclear war? And on the subject of nuclear war, they say it’s imminent. Imagine it, friend: Five billion people dead in seventy minutes. Imagine the blast wave. People miles from ground zero being sucked up into the mushroom stem. For God’s sake, the horror of it. And it could happen any time now. Like, it could happen right now, as we’re standing here on this woman’s lawn. Anyway, the Virgin Mary is here for us, friend. She’s here for us in our time of need.”

All the houses on Callaway are a soft yellow. There’s refuse strewn across some of the lawns – abandoned toys, car tires full of rainwater, rusted baby carriages, free weights... In some cases, the lawns are overgrown and wild.

I turned my attention to a young black female standing on the lawn. I asked her what she thought all of this meant.

“Mary is telling us to get our shit together,” the young woman said, looking up at the rooftop. “For one thing, we need to end slavery. Feel me?”

I held my iPhone close to her face. The woman was wearing enormous earrings, flat silver pieces in the shape of the African continent.

“End slavery?” I said.

“The prison industrial complex,” the woman explained, hyper focused on the rooftop, as though the Marian apparition might end at any moment. “The penalties for crack, which disproportionately affects black people... Three strikes and you’re out, you know? At least that’s the way it was until recently. It was a way of enslaving us. We still on the plantation, man.”

I looked back at Morgan, sort of checking on her. She was still standing by the boxwood hedges, away from the crowd.

Morgan was documenting all of this with her iPhone – not the Virgin Mary but the people. Holding her iPhone in her outstretched hand, Morgan was oscillating, getting a panoramic view of the crowd.

“We need to abolish the police,” the black woman said, her hands on her hips, her eyes glued to the rooftop. “The police are a bunch of racists. You know, when black people resist arrest, cops club them or tase them. Meanwhile, when white people resist arrest, cops just restrain them.”

“I see.”

“Did you know that in the 1960s a lot of clan members became cops?” the woman said, looking at me. “Did you know that, white boy? Anyway, we don’t need cops. What we need are enriched non-criminogenic environments. The safest communities aren’t the ones with a greater police presence; they’re the ones with more resources.”

“Okay,” I said. “Okay, thank you for your time.”

I interviewed a few more people. Then Morgan and I agreed there was nothing more to see. We walked home.

On the way home, Morgan got very intense and serious and said, “Do you think it’s possible, Tom? Like, do you think maybe it’s possible?”

“Is bathos the word for this?” I said. “Bathos. Is that the right word?”

“Seriously, Tom. Do you think it’s possible?”

I sighed.

“On a scale of zero to ten, zero meaning no likelihood whatsoever and ten meaning absolute metaphysical certitude?”

“Answer my question, Tom.”

I rolled my eyes.

“No, Morgan. It’s not possible. These people are delusional.”

“You know, a lot of brilliant people believe in God,” Morgan said.

“Not Mother Teresa,” I said. “Some say she was a closeted atheist. That she had doubts.”

“Are you familiar with Our Lady of Guadalupe?” Morgan said.

“Another Marian apparition?” I said.

“In 1531, in present-day Mexico, the Virgin Mary appeared before a peasant named Juan Diego,” Morgan said. “Later, an exquisite portrait of the Virgin Mary simply appeared on Juan Diego’s tilma.”

“His tilma?” I said.

“His cloak,” Morgan clarified.

“Hm,” I said. “Reminds me of the Turin Shroud.”

“We still have the cloak, Tom! It’s on display. In a basilica down in Mexico City. Experts examined the cloak with infrared photography and saw no under-drawing.”

“No ‘under-drawing’?” I said.

“Tom, an artist can’t paint a picture like that without drawing it first,” Morgan explained. “Even the most talented artists, total freakazoids, can’t do that.”

“Mm hm,” I said. “And you’re comparing that to this?”

There was a moment of silence.

“I mean, at least we have the cloak, Morgan. Here, we have nothing. Nothing concrete, anyway. No hard evidence. All we have is them, Morgan. People

swearing to see the Virgin Mary on this woman's rooftop."

"Many people," Morgan said. "Dozens of people."

"Yeah, well, don't underestimate conformity," I said. "Like, don't underestimate the need to conform. Ever hear of the Solomon Asch Conformity Test?"

Morgan sighed, defeatedly.

"There's no convincing you. Is there, Tom?"

"Okay," I said, finally. "Okay, Morgan. So...like...are you saying you believe, then? So...like...you believe in some of these Marian Apparitions? For God's sake, you believe the Virgin Mary could be standing on our neighbor's rooftop?"

"Look, all I'm saying is some of these sightings are pretty creepy," Morgan said. "Anyway, who are we to say anything, Tom? Who are we to say anything? It's certainty that scares me."

Morgan and I continued walking down Callaway. We were approaching our little shotgun shacks, and when we got to them, we would go our separate ways.

There was a countercurrent of people on the road, on the sidewalks, people eagerly making their way to the miracle house, people eager to see the Virgin Mary. A lot of people walking around Mechanicsville on any given day look strung out, desperate, and these people were no exception. Mechanicsville can be scary. In fact, one time, I discovered a homeless woman living in my crawlspace. A homeless woman living in my crawlspace! I didn't know how she'd broken the lock, but there she was, living in my crawlspace, taking shelter from a rare winter storm. I called the police, and within minutes, a cop appeared at the side of my house, bending at the waist and peering into the crawlspace, shining his Maglite on the woman's face and telling her to "get the hell outta there" or there'd be trouble. Call me a monster all you want, but I got the woman kicked out of there, forcing her into the blizzard. No, I didn't press charges or anything like that, but I did get her kicked out of there.

I feel bad about that. (Always will?) Like, for all I know, the woman died that night, in the blizzard. But then, what do you want from me? I'm not her dad. And even if I was, we're talking about a woman here – a grown woman, an adult. Like, I'm not responsible for this person. It's not my fault she's

homeless. And what if she had died down there? Sorry, but what if she'd died and rotted out in my crawlspace, lowering my property value? Or what if she'd started a fire? Or what if the woman just got attached? Attached to my crawlspace? And invited other homeless people to live down there with her? My crawlspace would have become a haven, then. A haven for homeless people. People desperate to escape the harsh conditions. And there's a lot of people like that.

ZACK THA MANIAC

When I got to prison, Shih Tzu took me under his wing. He told me to forget the Outside. “Prison is your world now,” he said. “You have to forget the Outside even exists. Tell your loved ones not to visit. Tell them not to write. Say goodbye to them.”

Shih Tzu was a big guy, about six feet and five inches, weighing in at three-hundred pounds, or so I’d wager. I, on the other hand, am only five feet and four inches.

Before he died, Shih Tzu was protecting me. In exchange, I agreed to clean his cell once a week.

Shih Tzu told me he wanted his cell “colonoscopy clean.”

Shih Tzu and a few other guys started a business, protecting vulnerable dudes like me. Guys like me paid Shih Tzu money. For protection.

Shih Tzu’s business was lucrative. So lucrative, in fact, that Shih Tzu started sending money home. To his children. To his mother. Even though he’d told me to forget my loved ones.

Some of the guards have a business, too. They take a pack of cigarettes they got on the outside and cut each cigarette in half. Then they sell these diminutive cigarettes for ten bucks apiece to the inmates. They make serious dough-rei-me doin’ that.

Some of the inmates draw pictures of naked women. They sell their pictures for hundreds of dollars. That’s not unreasonable – the pictures are incredible in some cases, photorealism almost, AI-generated just about.

Some guys make their cells look like plush hotel rooms – they take about twenty towels and stitch them all together to make a “carpet.” The guys who do that tend to be happier. And because they’re happy, they tend to get out early. For good behavior.

I told Shih Tzu I believed in Judeo Bolshevism, but the truth is I think Judeo Bolshevism is wack. Even if it's true that a lot of the Bolsheviks were Jews, that doesn't mean the Holocaust was justified. Or that Jews are innately murderous or anything like that.

I told Shih Tzu the prevalence of slavery in the Antebellum South is a myth, that at the peak of slavery only about one percent of whites owned slaves. I don't believe that, either. I'm just trying to survive.

Shih Tzu once said people in Scandinavia are the happiest people on Earth precisely because they live in relatively homogenous societies. He told me diversity is a bad idea.

Shih Tzu demanded I get a face tat. That was a part of my "payment." For protection. I figured a Swastika on my face is a small price to pay. It's not like I'd be going on any blind dates any time soon. I'm in here for life. I'll be here until the day I die. I've accepted it. I've come to terms with it. And if I do get out, I'll just modify the Swastika.

"Some motherfuckers get Swastikas on their pecs where no one can see them," Shih Tzu said, one day, when we were sitting in the cafeteria. "Some motherfuckers get these fat bubbly Swastikas, with rounded corners. Know what I'm sayin'? Some motherfuckers get these cutie-pie Swastikas on their foreheads – you can't even fuckin' see 'em, they're so small! It's like the Swastika on Manson's forehead, know what I'm sayin'? Manson's swastika was bullshit. It's so small it might as well not even be there. Zack, I want your Swastika to be big and square and unmistakable. I want people aboard the International Space Station to be able to see it with the naked eye, feel me?"

"Compromisable," I said, sitting across the table from him, nodding.
"Compromisable."

I wanted to ask Shih Tzu why he'd gotten his Swastika on his left cheek. Sure, getting a Swastika on your cheek – or anywhere on your face, for that matter – is a sign of commitment, ardor, but I couldn't help thinking that Shih Tzu was contradicting himself. I mean, his right cheek was clear, "the way God made it." So, when you were looking at him from his right side, you didn't see the Swastika on his left cheek. One might argue, then, that Shih Tzu was two-faced, conflicted. What would Freud say? Was Shih Tzu as committed as he was making himself out to be? Isn't the decision to get a Swastika on one side of your face significant? Doesn't that mean something? Wasn't Shih Tzu just as cowardly as Manson? Go big or go home, I felt like telling Shih Tzu, but of course I didn't dare, because Shih Tzu was big, and muscular, and

intimidating.

“I want the Swastika to be on your forehead,” Shih Tzu said, from across the cafeteria table, where we were sitting. “Like a baptism, Zack. Like ash. If you can’t do that, I’m not protecting you no more.”

“Compromisable,” I said again, nodding.

Most days, the cafeteria food is gruel. On this particular day, we were eating fried chicken. It wasn’t bad, actually. Except fried chicken triggers my condition.

I have this thing. I think it’s called misophonia? Anyway, when people masticate crunchy foods, it drives me FUCKING NUTS. If people eat toast, for instance, or tortilla chips, I go berserk.

“Ever get to see any movies in here?” I asked Shih Tzu.

I’d been in prison only a little while at that point.

“Once in a while,” Shih Tzu said.

“Anything good?”

The cafeteria tables are small and circular, with small stools welded to the floor so the inmates can’t throw them at each other.

Pencils are prohibited. Meanwhile, IBM Selectrics are allowed, provided they have see-through casings, so the inmates can’t use them to hide contraband. Also, our Selectrics have to be chained to the wall, tautly, which is something the guards will do for you should you purchase a Selectric at the commissary.

“We watched *Monster-in-Law*,” Shih Tzu told me.

“*Monster-in-Law*?” I said, incredulously.

“You know, the 2005 Jennifer Lopez vehicle,” Shih Tzu said. “A few weeks before that, we watched *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days*.”

I looked at him, searchingly.

“They like to fuck with us,” Shih Tzu explained. “The guards.”

“Did the guys jerk off?” I said, smiling. “Like, did anyone jerk off to J-Lo?”

“Jesus, Zack, you think we’re animals, huh?” Shih Tzu said, staring me down, from across the cafeteria table.

“Yeah, you’re right,” I said, putting my hands up, defensively. “My apologies, Shih Tzu. I apologize.”

“I’ll have you know a lot of the guys around here are intellectuals, Zack. We read John Stuart Mill’s *On Liberty*. We read Adam Smith’s *The Wealth of Nations*.”

Shih Tzu rather resents the insinuation that prisoners are animals. And I see his point. But then, some of the guys in here are animals, to be sure. There’s no escaping that.

Career criminal Sean Custis is in here with us. Custis broke into a woman’s home and beat the shit out of her right in front of her daughter. He threw the woman down the stairs.

During the New Mexico State Penitentiary Riot of 1980, a group of prisoners took a blowtorch to a fellow inmate’s face until his head exploded.

Some prisoners are simply animals, humanzees. I know one guy in here who tased his eighteen-month-old son. Fuckin’ tazed the kid!

Shih Tzu was being disingenuous. My friend, Goblin, likes Charles Willeford. Goblin reads John D. MacDonald. Goblin likes Joseph Wambaugh. Goblin likes pulp fiction. Shih Tzu was being disingenuous. Not all the guys in here are sophisticates.

Except some of the guys are intellectuals. Prison intellectuals. Which should come as no surprise. I mean, what else is there to do in here but read?

Incidentally, reading a novel in prison is almost impossible. Like, you’ll be halfway through a novel, and on page one-hundred or so, you’ll see an annotation in the margin, saying, “Don’t finish this book. The mom commits suicide,” and then someone will annotate his annotation, saying, “Fuck you! You ruined this book for me, you piece of shit. Die in a grease fire, you fucking asshole! Just wait ‘til I get a hold of you.” And then a third guy will write, “I can’t believe anyone would be dying to see what happens at the end of this book, anyway. This book is trash.”

Reading a novel in prison is like reading a novel with ten other people.

“Anyway,” Shih Tzu said, “we’d been looking forward to a stimulating movie, and these dickheads turn on *How to Lose a Guy in Ten Days*. I swear there was almost a riot.”

He took a sip of his purple Flavor Aid, a juice box.

“Do they ever pick anything good?”

“We watched *Under the Skin*,” Shih Tzu said, and then he took a bite of his chicken breast, which made me wince. The sound Shih Tzu made, biting into that chicken breast, tearing meat from the bone, like a fucking *Australopithecus*...

“*Under the Skin*?” I said. “The sci-fi horror movie starring Scarlet Johansson?”

Shih Tzu nodded.

“Excellent!” I said. “That’s a fantastic movie. Truly fantastic. One of the most interesting movies of the Twenty-First Century, IMO.”

“I didn’t like it,” Shih Tzu said, masticating chicken, making me shudder. “The movie was too slow for my money.”

“Compromisable,” I said. “Glazier’s work is kind of boring. And it’s inaccessible a lot of it. Impenetrable. Ever see *Birth* with Nicole Kidman? Even *Sexy Beast* – Glazier’s finest film, if you ask me – is a little baffling. I mean, what’s up with that rabbit holding the Uzi?”

“Hey,” Shih Tzu said, eyeing my chicken, chewing like a horse. “You got a drumstick, Zack.” And then he looked at me and said, “Trade me, will you?”

Briefly, I remembered my childhood, trading with the other fourth graders during lunchtime. How innocent I was then.

“Hey, motherfucker!” Shih Tzu said, pounding the table with his big fist. “Give me that fucking drumstick, Zack!”

“Gee,” I said, scratching my head. “I was kind of looking forward to my drumstick, Shih Tzu.”

“Give it to me,” Shih Tzu demanded. “Or tomorrow you’ll feel like you’ve been fucked by Wilt Chamberlain.”

“Compromisable,” I said, and then I reached over and dropped the drumstick on his tray.

“Goddamn it!” Shih Tzu snapped, looking at the two pieces of chicken in front of him. “You’ve eaten some of your drumstick already, Zack. You’ve eaten some of it already. I’m going to have to keep my chicken breast.”

He looked at me, awaiting my response.

“That’s only fair,” I said.

“Actually, it isn’t fair at all,” Shih Tzu said. “But it’s the way it is, Zack.”

He laughed.

I cleared my throat.

“So. What else?” I said, sitting across the tiny table from Shih Tzu, trying to change the subject. “What other movies?”

All around us, men were getting up and turning in their empty trays.

“Um. We got to see *Inglourious Basterds*,” Shih Tzu said.

“Whoa!” I said.

“I didn’t like it,” Shih Tzu said.

I laughed – looking at the giant Swastika on his cheek, I wasn’t surprised Shih Tzu hated *Inglourious Basterds*, an alternative history film that depicts Jews killing Nazis.

“We got to see *There Will Be Blood*,” Shih Tzu said.

“Oh, wow!” I exclaimed. “You got to see that one, too?”

Shih Tzu nodded.

“And people say prisons are too draconian.”

"They are," Shih Tzu said. "Subjecting us to that trash."

I glowered at him. What did he mean by "trash"? Surely, you jest, Shih Tzu. Surely, you fucking jest.

Shih Tzu certainly wasn't saying what I thought he was saying. He was kidding, of course. Had to be.

"Wait a minute," I said, astonished. "Back up."

I couldn't believe what I'd heard. It was haram. It was absolutely haram.

"Trash?" I said. "Did you say trash, Shih Tzu? You're talking about the Paul Thomas Anderson movie, right? Eight Academy Award nominations? Two Golden Globe nominations? The winner of two Oscars? You're talking about *There Will Be Blood*, right?"

There Will Be Blood was my favorite movie of all time. And that's saying a lot. Because I have always been a huge cinephile, movie mad.

Incidentally, I'm familiar with all of it. Classical Hollywood Cinema. Orson Welles. Buster Keaton. Harold Lloyd. Chaplin, of course. French New Wave. Coming-of-age movies like *The 400 Blows*. Italian films like *The Bicycle Thieves*. Russian propaganda films like *Battleship Potemkin*.

But *There Will Be Blood* may very well be numero uno. Forget Coppola, Kubrick, Tarantino, Scorsese... This film, *There Will Be Blood*... This was it, in my opinion.

"Trash," Shih Tzu repeated, and he took a sip of his purple Flavor Aid.

"Okay," I said, patiently, and then I took a deep breath and closed my eyes and counted to five in my head. "Mind telling me why you thought that, Shih Tzu? Mind telling me why you thought *There Will Be Blood* was such trash?"

"I dunno," Shih Tzu said, lazily. "I just think it's trash."

"Bullshit," I said, raising my voice a hair. "If you'd bothered to attend Freshman Composition in your first year of university, you'd know that you're expected to bolster your claims with reasons and evidence. For God's sake, ever hear of the Toulmin Model?"

"I just didn't like it," Shih Tzu said, irritably. "I don't have a reason, Zack. I

don't gotta have a reason, asshole."

"Have you even seen the movie?" I asked.

"You calling me a liar?" Shih Tzu said, threateningly, squinting at me from across the tiny cafeteria table. "You calling me a fucking liar, Zack?"

"There Will Be Blood is about an oil prospector at the turn of the century," I said, trying to jog his memory. "Ring any bells?"

"I remember!" Shih Tzu freaked. "No need to ring any bells, motherfucker."

"Daniel Plainview, the wildcatter protagonist, represents oil, progress," I said. "Meanwhile, the antagonist, Eli, represents religion. One thing comes from the earth, while the other comes from the sky. Know what I mean, Shih Tzu? And so, Daniel and Eli are...like...antipodes. You see? One thing is concrete, whereas the other's abstract."

Shih Tzu just sat there, eating the drumstick I'd begrudgingly handed over. He was looking at me, consuming my dissertation.

"At the end of the film, the oil prospector murders the religious leader," I said. "Did you hear me, Shih Tzu? The oil prospector murders the religious leader! The film could be understood, then, as a depiction of the death of religion, the death of the 'old way.' It is the death of the 'supernatural,' if you will. Meanwhile, it is the birth of progress."

"The birth of progress?" Shih Tzu said. "You mean the Industrial Revolution?"

I rolled my eyes.

"Fin de siècle progress," I said. "Cars, planes, the Space Race, the Internet, artificial intelligence..."

"How'd you like to get fucked, Zack? I'll make you wear bobby socks while I fuck you in the ass." He laughed, maniacally. "My dick is huge, Zack. My dick's so huge Alex Honnold is thinking of climbing it."

He'd consumed every bit of chicken on that drumstick by now. Every bit.

"Daniel Plainview, the protagonist, is a sociopath," I said. "He hates people. The movie is about the sociopathic corporation, boundlessly evil."

Deforestation. Cruelty to animals. Carbon emissions. Big tobacco. Big pharmaceuticals. Companies like Purdue. The corporation kills people, Shih Tzu. The corporation kills Mother Nature with no remorse. And, indeed, Daniel Plainview kills two people by the end of the movie and, by all appearances, doesn't feel the least bit bad about it."

Shih Tzu once told me he'd shot-gunned a man. He told me he'd bifurcated the man's head. He said the guy's head looked like Kennedy's.

Shih Tzu told me he once shot a man just as he was pulling up to an intersection. He was in a car in the neighboring lane, and he pulled right up to the guy, a total stranger, and just shot the man for no reason whatsoever. I asked Shih Tzu why he shot that man, and Shih Tzu told me no reason, that it was just fun. "My bullets were like asteroids, meteors. The man's head was like the Earth. It was Armageddon for that man. The end of the world. End of days." And then Shih Tzu laughed diabolically.

Shih Tzu told me he once robbed a convenience store with a grenade.

The type of brutality I have heard about in here has not been seen since the pre-Colombian civilizations of the Western Hemisphere – the Aztecs cutting people's hearts out on the pyramidal temple, the Mayans wearing robes decorated with the decapitated shrunken heads of their enemies. This is the kind of violence we're dealing with. The only thing missing is Aztec cannibalism.

Shih Tzu was a mad man, a psychotic killer. Simultaneously, however, he was a bit of a cinephile, au fait on the subject of film.

"If you can't appreciate the movie's themes," I said, calmly, "you could at least appreciate the cinematography, something that won an Oscar, I might add."

I took a sip of my purple Flavor Aid.

"And what about the score?" I continued, putting the tiny juice box down on the table.

"The score was interesting," Shih Tzu conceded, nodding. "Yes, yes, the score was interesting, Zack. Jonny Greenwood of Radiohead fame makes this cacophonous music, and it's supposed to sound like productivity, like the inside of Rouge River or some shit."

“Yes!” I said. “Yes, Shih Tzu! Precisely!”

“So when Daniel Plainview strikes oil and we begin to hear Greenwood’s music, it’s like we’re inside a factory. The gearwheels are in motion now. It is the kickoff to the twentieth century...”

“Exactly!” I said. “Right on the money, Shih Tzu! Right on the money!”

“Okay, I get it,” Shih Tzu said. “But I still don’t like *There Will Be Blood*. What do you want from me, Zack?”

“Well, what about the production design? The costumes?” I said. “What about the writing, the editing, the acting?” I was getting angry. I was sweating, even. “I suggest you re-watch the scenes featuring Paul Dano, the talented young actor who played Eli, the Christian charismatic.”

“Oh please,” said my interlocutor. “Dano’s acting was so over the top.”

“It’s supposed to be over the top!” I snapped. “Eli is the preacher, the cracker Pentecostalist. It’s meant to remind you of speaking in tongues and all that.”

I was no longer thinking about the tray of food in front of me, the assorted vegetables and mashed potatoes – the only foods I had left, now that Shih Tzu had taken my meat. I was laser-focused instead on my beefy tablemate.

“Look,” I said, fed up. “*There Will Be Blood* is a fucking masterwork, a towering towering achievement. Really, Shih Tzu, you are not allowed to hate this movie. You’re just not allowed. I forbid it. The movie is perfection, Shih Tzu. A chef d’oeuvre.”

I was getting worked up. Shih Tzu was chewing like a horse, and I got kind of crazy and screamed, “IT’S A MASTERPIECE, SHIH TZU! A FUCKING MASTERPIECE!”

That’s when one of the guards slithered up to our table.

“What do you want?” I freaked, looking across the table, over Shih Tzu’s left shoulder, where the guard was standing.

“Don’t take that tone with me, Zack,” the man said.

I was looking at the prison guard with murderous hostility. I tried to compose myself, get control of my emotions and so forth.

“Listen, Zack,” the guard said. “It’s getting loud over here. We gonna have a problem?”

I pointed at Shih Tzu and said, “This asshole doesn’t like *There Will Be Blood*.”

“Crime against humanity,” the guard said. “Somebody call the ACLU because Shih Tzu doesn’t like your favorite movie, Zack, you autistic fuck. Like, somebody call the Human Rights Watch.” And then the guard said, “Listen, Zack, dial it back a bit or else.”

The guard vanished.

I looked back at Shih Tzu – my sworn enemy by now – and said, “So you don’t like *There Will Be Blood*, eh? Jesus fucking Christ.” I was grinding my teeth, hard. “What the fuck is the world coming to? What the fuck is the world coming to? That’s like saying you don’t like *Apocalypse Now*.”

“I don’t,” Shih Tzu said, tersely.

Now he was trying to get me going. He was trolling.

“Shame on you,” I said, grinding my teeth. “Who’s your favorite director then?”

“Gotta be Michael Bay,” Shih Tzu said, smiling tauntingly.

At a certain point, words run out. Shih Tzu just sat there watching as I reached across the table and snatched up the chicken bone. It was on his tray, and he just let me take it from him, saying, “What you gonna do with that, Zack? Suck out the marrow, you little faggot?”

Without thinking, I snapped the bone in half, as though it were a wishbone, and looked at the two pieces. One piece, I observed, was rather sharp, a pre-Columbian murder weapon. I reached across the little table and jammed it into Shih Tzu’s neck.

Blood shot out. Shih Tzu’s eyes bull frogged. I did it fast, like a speed assassin – the deadly rattlesnake, the poisonous dart frog. Shih Tzu tried to patch up the hole in his neck, like Kennedy.

I got up, quickly walked around the table, and gave Shih Tzu a quick straight

jab, not one of these wide looping punches you can see coming a mile away but a quick straight jab that really connected with his mandible. Then I stabbed him a second time, through his left cheek – right through that fucking Swastika. I stabbed him a third time. In the chest this time. Then I pushed Shih Tzu off his stool, getting him to the floor. I did it all in an attosecond. I crouched over him, stabbing him dozens of times all over his body. The blood was Noachian. It was Exxon Valdez, Deepwater Horizon...

All the other guys shot up from their tables and backed away, giving me a wide berth – whenever there's a murder, the guys in the immediate vicinity get as far away from the action as possible, worried they'll be linked to the crime.

It was a stabathon. It was truly a stabathon. I stabbed Shih Tzu until I was exhausted and panting. Then I stood up.

The guards were trying to get to me but couldn't make their way through the throng of inmates.

"Get out the way!" they screamed, desperately. "Move! Move! Move!"

I stood over Shih Tzu, watching him for a moment. He was still moving, so I bent down and stabbed him again. He kept convulsing. So I stabbed him several more times. "Succumb! Obey!"

The blood was black, and I knew that Shih Tzu was fucked, down for the ten count, that I'd hit the liver.

"Ever thus to philistines!" I screamed, and I stabbed him.

Shih Tzu lay there, on the cold floor, staring up at the ceiling. His eyes welled up. His face was white. I heard his disgusting death rattle.

I stood over him and looked him in the eye. "What happened to the badass who bragged about his dick size?" And then I kicked him in the ribs, and then I spat on him, and then I reached down and stabbed him again. And then I stabbed him one more time.

It all happened so fast.

The guards finally got a hold of me. They bent me over the small circular table and cuffed me. Then they stood me up straight and hauled me off.

The other inmates were saying, "Damn, bruh. Shih Tzu bleed a lot. Shih Tzu

bleed a lot, bruh.” One man kept saying, “Shih Tzu got got! You believe that shit? Shih Tzu got got!”

Another man kept saying, “Somebody get a doctor,” and then another man said, “Nah, man, Zack murked him. Dude fucking murked that motherfucker.”

Certain things you can’t deny.

A KAKISTOCRACY

For five years, I was only quasi employed, living in my father's fieldstone cottage in the lakeside town of Beulah, Mich., bearing patiently the weight of my stepmother's tongue, her repeated calls for me to get a job, to stop being "a bump on a log," to stop being a "burden" and a "loafer" and a "bum," my father telling her to back off, my poor octogenarian father protecting his son of forty, telling his septuagenarian wife to "leave Basil alone," telling her that Basil was working, that Basil did have a job, that I was working on my novel, *The Deliverables*, the brilliance of which he could attest to, having read a draft, though clearly he was biased. For five years, I worked and worked on *The Deliverables*. Verso, recto! Verso, recto! I taught at a nearby college, too – I wasn't a total ne'er-do-well – but I was only a lowly adjunct there, and I made dogshit for a living, absolute dogshit!, and I was a bloated miserable drunk, putting away a twelve pack of Busch each night.

Then, finally, some good news. For once, something good.

My novel... It had not been published yet. In fact, *The Deliverables* would not be published for another year or so – or so said my editor at *The Index Librorum Prohibitorum*, the small press that had saved my life, agreeing to publish my book.

The novel had not yet been published. Not yet. But I managed to parlay news of the publication into a full-time teaching appointment at nearby Diderot College. The novel was forthcoming, I promised Dr. Aaron Farley, the man who interviewed me and later hired me.

Despite his age, my father helped me move. On the day I left Beulah, my stepmother was practically doing jetes.

Diderot was fine at first. In my first month at Diderot College, there was some "shuffling about," which, though a bit disorienting, was hardly a dealbreaker. While Dr. Farley had hired me, I learned I would no longer be

his employee. Instead, I would be working with a Dr. M.T. Cranium, who was rumored to be a misandrist. (Later, I would learn Dr. Farley had been terminated.)

I didn't ask questions. These things happen, do they not? At any company, there are always "transfers," "corporate relocations." And this was a company, a for-profit college. And, anyway, Dr. Cranium turned out to be quite lovely. In the ensuing months, she would tell me several times that she was very pleased with my work. Very pleased. And how could she not be? My English Composition students adored me, or so they indicated on their instructor evaluations. And I'd done an excellent job on my first teaching observation.

Everything was fine at first. But then one day, I met a man named Jesus De Jesus. He too was a teacher. He'd moved into the office across the hall from mine. Jesus De Jesus. Within weeks of his start date, he was promoted to Writing Lab Coordinator. And weeks after that, he was promoted again, this time to General Education Department Chair. Now, suddenly, Jesus was my superior.

I resented Jesus. I mean, how could they promote him to Department Chair? Wasn't I the one with the novel? A published novel, albeit at a small press? Had he, Jesus De Jesus, published a novel? Or even written one?

Of course not. But try telling Dr. Cranium that. Dr. Dr. M.T. Cranium, the "Supreme Cunt," as I'd started calling her. Dr. M.T. Cranium, the Gatekeeper. Did she need to be reminded of what it is to publish a book? Was she capable of such a feat? Dr. M.T. Cranium, who thinks a tadpole turns into a butterfly?

(It was a kakistocracy. Diderot was truly a kakistocracy – a rinky-dink Mickey Mouse organization, but I needed the job.)

By the time my novel, *The Deliverables*, came out, I'd been working at Diderot for over a year. "Congratulations!" Dr. Cranium said to me, in an email, the day *The Deliverables* was released, but did it truly register with her? What I had done? Did Dr. Cranium truly understand what it takes to write a novel? A novelist is more than just a typist, for Christ's sake. Writing a novel requires a certain human capital – knowledge, skills, and knowhow that take years to acquire. Not to mention the perseverance, the determination, the commitment. And it's humiliating! O, the atrocious writing you did in your twenties... And you did it in front of everyone, in front of friends and family.

You humiliated yourself. With all that juvenilia. All along, your friends and family told you it was good work. “Keep it up,” they said. Only later do you realize they were being kind.

O, the humiliation! The years and years of hard work. Only for people like Dr. Cranium to say, “Congratulations!” in an email you receive one morning when you arrive at the office. But then, she did add that exclamation point. And an emoji to boot. And did you really expect a bunch of pomp and circumstance? Did you expect a party? Mylar balloons? Confetti? What did you expect from Dr. M.T. Cranium upon the publication of your book? What the fuck did you expect??? Except maybe a promotion. And, while I’m at it, more fucking money, in recognition of your awesome intellect, your unrivaled work ethic, a work ethic you would have happily applied to any job Dr. Cranium offered you. But no. The promotion, the money... It all goes to Jesus, Jesus who’s gay and Latino and an outspoken Marxist and communist, never mind the untold millions who died under communism in the twentieth century. It all goes to Jesus – Jesus, who’s written nothing, Jesus who’s written nada.

Now that Jesus is Department Chair, his old position of “Writing Lab Coordinator” is vacant. Surely, you’ll get the job. Surely, you’ll get it. After all, you’re a writer. You wrote a goddamn novel. And the position you’re applying for... It’s the Writing Lab Coordinator. Seems like they’d want a writer to be the Writing Lab Coordinator. And not just any writer but an experienced writer, an accomplished writer. And you’re accomplished, having published a novel. Have they, your competitors, published a novel? And while I’m at it, isn’t it true you’ve worked in the Writing Lab at every institution you’ve ever taught at? Isn’t it true??? Isn’t it true you’ve been working at Diderot’s Writing Lab for over twelve months? And isn’t it true you’ve done an excellent job? Don’t Diderot kids request your tutoring services specifically?

But, of course, they give the position to Katherine – Katherine Moran, who’d been with the company for a whopping six weeks and whose tutoring work, you happen to know, is totally substandard.

Another injustice. Yet another injustice: Now they’re looking for a “General Education Coordinator.” It’s a unique position. The Gen. Ed. Coordinator will reach out to noncompliant instructors and ask them why they’re not doing their jobs, or so it says in the advertisement they send out to interested faculty. And you’re interested. You’re repulsed by lazy people, if that means

anything. Noncompliant instructors, you have always argued, might as well be stealing money. You've got the right disposition, in other words. The right attitude. So, you apply for the job. But, of course, the position goes to a woman – this time a woman of color, Ms. Sonja Evans.

In the ensuing months, you work your ass off. You don't let your immobility discourage you. You try to have a good attitude. You smile at everyone in the Diderot corridors. You smile at everyone getting coffee in the breakroom. You smile at the people waiting at the bank of elevators. When the Writing Lab is especially busy, you do "extra innings." You reach out to Ms. Moran, the new Writing Lab Coordinator, the one who got your promotion, offering to help her with the Writing Lab queue. "Don't hesitate to let me know if you need help," you tell her, on more than one occasion. Heretofore, you and the other WL tutors rotated orientations, but now you offer to be the official WL representative, meaning you'll present at every single orientation (or "welcome session") going forward, telling incoming students how to find the Writing Lab, telling them your hours of operation, etcetera and so forth. You believe in giving yourself away to the company, working nights, working weekends. And you do! You meet with your students on Zoom on Friday nights. You meet with them on Saturdays, in person. You meet them on Sundays. And your students adore you. For being so attentive. In fact, you develop a list of student praise – you take screenshots of the compliments students send you via email and paste them onto a Word document, and that document grows and grows and grows and grows and grows, until it's as long as a ladder.

Jesus De Jesus (fucking golden child) gets promoted yet again. Yet again, he gets promoted, meaning they're looking for a new Department Chair now. And you apply. And your performance during the interview is a goddamn tour de force. But, of course, you're denied the opportunity.

What the fuck do you have to do to get promoted around here? Do they want you to paint the building? Do they want you to do some landscaping architecture out front? Do you have to be some kind of victim? Should you lie and tell them you're gay? Should you tell them you're trans? Should you cut your fucking dick off???

No! If you cut your dick off, how will you marry and have children? And you want to marry and have children. You are trying to start your life. To start your life at forty.

Instead of promoting you to Department Chair, they promote a woman

named Jamie Wilberforce – Jamie Wilberforce, who’s been with the company for less than three months. And, okay, perhaps Ms. Wilberforce is a world-beater. Maybe she does have more experience than you do. Maybe she was Department Chair at another institution. And maybe she does have a Ph.D., something missing from your portfolio. Still, what about my work ethic? What about my hunger, my passion, my enthusiasm? Doesn’t that mean anything??? Doesn’t that count???

Fed up, I sent my gripe portfolio to the top of the pyramid, the Chief Academic Officer of the college, Dr. Greta Mickelberg. I’d become bitter and resentful and crazy. Bitter and resentful and crazy and even murderous at this point. Cain murderous. After everything I’d done for Diderot. After everything I’d done for this fucking company. After everything I’d done for our students, for whom I’d developed a genuine affection, which is more than I can say for my colleagues, a bunch of “work-life-balance” assholes for whom teaching is merely a job, the thing they do so they can enjoy their college football games on Saturday afternoons.

In my email to Dr. Mickelberg, I requested a meeting, so I could give her a fuller understanding of my grievances. Dr. Mickelberg replied, saying she was too busy to meet. She said if I didn’t like my job, I was free to leave, and it was that simple, and there was nothing more to say on the matter. An old mentor of mine tells me to advocate for myself, so I emailed Dr. Mickelberg again, this time insisting I was the last person at Diderot who deserved this “paralysis.” In that second email, I told Dr. Mickelberg about The Eagles, who in 2001 fired Don Felder, the songsmith behind “Hotel California,” the band’s biggest hit. Dr. Mickelberg emailed me back, correcting me about the composition of “Hotel California,” saying Felder, Frey, and Henley had co-written the song. She told me my use of the word paralysis offended her. She again denied my request for a meeting.

I was Job. I was truly Job.

A week later, I was demoted. Fucking demoted! Dr. Cranium and I met in a conference room in the library. (The truth is her name is Dr. Crane, but for fun, I called her Dr. M.T. Cranium.) There, in the conference room, Dr. Cranium told me she’d hired a black, trans, disabled person and “needless to say,” they were giving her my job. She actually used the phrase “needless to say.”

This is their work, their Opus DEI.

I would continue to work in the Writing Lab, Dr. Cranium assured me, but I would no longer teach English Composition. That job would go to the black, trans, disabled person – she was once, twice, three times a victim, so of course she deserved my job, never mind her ability to do the work.

Now, instead of teaching Composition, I would teach the lowly student success course, College Management, an important class, though the subject matter (i.e. time management, study techniques, test-taking tips) is hardly stimulating.

“But, Dr. Crane, I don’t have experience teaching College Management,” I said.

“Hush, Basil. Be adaptable,” Dr. Cranium said. “That’s what employers like, Basil. Adaptability. Resourcefulness. Debrouillard.”

“Dr. Crane, please,” I said, sitting there, at the conference table, close to tears. “What have I done to deserve all of this?”

Dr. Cranium shook her head.

“Don’t be negative, Basil.”

“Dr. Crane, please,” I said again. “I’m...like...as professionally flummoxed as...”

I was getting emotional, and I couldn’t finish the sentence.

Dr. Cranium clucked her tongue.

“My God, the arrogance on you,” she hissed, squinting at me, shaking her head again. “The enormous arrogance. The entitlement.”

“Yes, well, perhaps that’s why men make more, Dr. Crane.”

I was careful to get her name right.

“Excuse me?”

“Like, maybe that’s why men make more money than women,” I said. “Because...well...men are entitled. Except I might use the word aggressive. Men are more aggressive than women.”

There was a moment of silence.

“Basil,” Dr. Cranium said, “I warn you. Govern that tongue.”

“Dr. Crane, forgive me,” I said, “but you are violating Title VI of the 1964 Civil Rights Act.”

“Actually, it’s Title VII.”

For a moment, I just sat there, astonished.

“Oh? So you admit you’re breaking federal law?”

“The law, Basil, is against my heart.”

Dr. Cranium grabbed her chest.

“Dr. Crane,” I said, “this college is named after Denis Diderot.”

“Who?”

“Denis Diderot. You’re not familiar?”

“Some dead white guy?”

“Denis Diderot, to whom we owe the Encyclopedia.”

Dr. Cranium shrugged.

“One would think,” I continued, “that a college named after the founder of the Encyclopedia would be a place of learning, a place of...you know...erudition. Shouldn’t we make sure the people we’re promoting are exceptional, that they’re as knowledgeable as the name Denis Diderot suggests they are?”

“Are you saying Ms. Moran, Ms. Evans, and Dr. Wilberforce are not knowledgeable?” Dr. Cranium said, almost threateningly.

“No, I’m not saying that at all.”

“What, then, are you saying, Basil?”

“Look, I’m sure my female colleagues are quite knowledgeable,” I said. “But

that right there should be the reason for their promotions. And if, hypothetically, they're not very knowledgeable, should they really be figureheads for our institution? Should ignorance be rewarded, Dr. Crane? Shouldn't we hire and promote based on erudition? Should ignorance be rewarded? Like, shouldn't we make sure we're promoting the most learned of us?"

It was then that Dr. Cranium became quite snarling. Quite snarling indeed. She pounded the conference table with her fist.

"What do you know about being 'learned,' Basil?" She was grinding her teeth, hard. "If by learning you mean hard times, the kind of learning that comes from profound suffering, then what could you possibly know? As a rich, white, heterosexual male, what could you possibly know?"

"I'm hardly rich."

"What does the rich, white, heterosexual male really know?" Dr. Cranium repeated. "What could the RWHM possibly know about relentless pain and suffering? What does he know about pain and suffering and adversity and hardship? What could he possibly know about rape, for instance? About compromising your health, gaining weight just so you won't feel like prey anymore? About trust – I mean, the loss of it, the inability to trust men ever again? Perhaps you should be made to know suffering, Basil. How would ya like that? Then you'll really be 'learned,' eh?"

It was then that Dr. Cranium terminated my employment.

I have an Andrew Wyeth calendar on my wall, and I spent Christina's World and Pennsylvania Landscape applying for jobs, collecting unemployment, and working on a lengthy article called "Spice Girls Have Captured Academia." A lame title, perhaps, but Dr. Cranium really did remind me of the Spice Girls – yes, the Spice Girls, who in the '90s went around screaming "Girl Power!"

Minding the Campus published the article. It appeared on their website for three days before the litigious Diderot College demanded they pull the article and MTC, geldings that they are, hopped to.

I wanted to get a lawyer. Of course, I wanted to hire a lawyer, but with what money? One attorney wanted seven grand. It would cost seven grand, he told me over the phone one day, to initiate the discovery process. (Perhaps he was hustling me?) And if Diderot refused to give him access to their emails, the

attorney would have to file a motion forcing Diderot to cooperate, which would cost me even more money.

I swiped left on the attorney option. Yes, yes, I swiped left on the attorney.

At night, I drank cheap wine and drunkenly stormed around my living room, hollering, “Cyka blyat, you don’t belong in academia! You’re an activist, not an academic. YOU’RE A FUCKING ACTIVIST!!!”

I threw picture frames at the wall. I threw wine glasses and even lamps. I punched a hole in the tan globe on my desk. On more than one occasion, cops showed up at my doorstep asking if everything was okay, saying I’d frightened the neighbors.

I went nuts on Facebook, too, telling my friends and family what had happened to me at Diderot. I posted an article from the American Enterprise Institute. “Check this out,” I captioned the article. “According to this, roughly half of young men now feel they face discrimination.”

My FB friends were gaslighting me. They refused to comment on my Facebook posts. Nor did they hit the “Like” button. It seemed they did not want to encourage my social media behavior.

But I wasn’t crazy. I posted an article about an organization called Faculty, Alumni & Students Opposed to Racial Preferences (FASORP), which was suing Northwestern University for reverse discrimination. Were they crazy? Were they fucking crazy???

I was trying to get people to see. For God’s sake, people needed to see this! They needed to know! Discrimination against white men... Not only was it conceivable, but also, it was happening. It was fucking happening! At least two other colleges!

White dudes were coming forward. And, of course, these were just the victims we knew about. These were just the ones we could see. This kind of discrimination was, I was convinced, more widespread than people were giving it credit for.

I posted an article about reverse discrimination at the University of Washington, but my Facebook friends gave negative fucks, so preoccupied were they with their own careers, their own lives, their children, which is understandable, except what kind of world were they bringing their children into? They were indebted to people like me (people who spoke up, who

pushed back), and yet they seemed to be telling me, without saying anything at all, to get a life. They posted pics of themselves in stupid Halloween costumes. They posted pics of their vacations. They took pics of themselves at the White Cliffs of Dover and uploaded them to Facebook, getting hundreds of likes. I, meanwhile, was the cheese – utterly alone. If only people would stop blowing Tom Brady, I thought. If only they'd stop blowing college football players and pick up a goddamn book, read a fucking article...

A few friends texted me, telling me I was embarrassing myself on FB. They told me to let it go, to move on. They told me to put all that energy into finding a job. A job is like a girlfriend, they said – there are plenty of them out there, and I'd feel better when I found another one.

It was the Cassandra Complex. It was truly the Cassandra Complex: I was grabbing people by the lapels, demanding they pull their heads out of their asses, but of course, the more I protested, the more I looked like a lunatic. In fact, my friend Bentley, whom I'd met at Diderot, reached out, telling me I needed help. "Basil, you're not well," she said. "These are delusions of grandeur, Basil. You're not well!"

Bentley recommended a book called *Life Is in the Transitions*.

I filed a complaint with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission (EEOC) and had a phone interview with an "Enforcement Specialist" named Stafford Northcott. I told Mr. Northcott everything – about my thirteen years of teaching experience in higher education; my two master's degrees, one of which is a terminal degree; and my lengthy list of publications, which now included *The Deliverables*. I told him how beloved I was by students. I told him how hardworking I was, how I'd gone the extra mile on several occasions (e.g., in the Writing Lab). I told him that women and people of color had zoomed past me at Diderot, getting promoted with weeks of their start dates. Finally, I told Mr. Northcott what Dr. Cranium had said to me in the conference room the day of my termination. I told him she'd admitted to violating Title VII of the 1964 Civil Rights Act!

"Uh huh," Northcott said. "And were there any witnesses to this conversation?"

I sighed and said, "Unfortunately, no."

I told Mr. Northcott that I was the only one in the Gen. Ed. department who'd published a novel.

“Well,” he said. “I mean, does a novel mean you’re especially qualified to do your job?”

“Excuse me?” I said.

(I was a bit triggered, I admit.)

“I mean, it’s cool that you published a novel, Sir, but does that really qualify you to do your job?”

“It evinces hard work!” I snapped.

“Well,” Northcott said, “I mean, a Rube Goldberg machine evinces hard work, too. But does making a Rube Goldberg machine qualify you to run the Writing Lab? Or the Gen. Ed. Department?”

I began to wonder if Northcott was one of them.

“Ugh,” I said, exasperated – I was sick and tired of having to sing my own praise. “A novel, Mr. Northcott, bespeaks commitment, perseverance... It means you know how to stick with it, whatever ‘it’ is, even when it’s not going well. To stick with it and see it through, you know? To finish what you started. People tend to look at a novel as an artistic achievement, which of course it is, but it also evinces commitment, perseverance, dedication. You know?”

For a moment, neither of us said anything. Then Northcott cleared his throat and said, delicately, “Look, Sir, I think everyone just sort of agrees right now that we need to redress for systemic racism. We must redress for past injustices, Sir. We must dismantle the Patriarchy, too. Everyone off the bench, know what I mean?”

“Oh, God,” I moaned. “Oh, God!”

“Desperate times call for desperate measures, Sir.”

“For God’s sake,” I said, getting emotional. “What do I have to do? For Christ’s sake, do I have to self-immolate???”

“We must narrow the achievement gap,” Northcott said. “The income gap.”

“But you’re the EEOC,” I said. “For fuck’s sake, you’re supposed to be the

Equal Employment Opportunity Commission!”

“The income gap between men and women,” Northcott continued, “between whites and blacks.”

“Those gaps can be explained innocently!”

“The time has come,” Northcott said. “Silence is violence, Mr. Basil. Everyone off the bench.”

Once again, I moved into my father’s lakeside cottage.

One night, during dinner, my stepmother lectured me, and who could blame her? Yes, yes, I understood her frustration. I didn’t blame her. And, no, I didn’t like this anymore than she did.

“A real man,” my stepmother said, sitting with me and my father at the dinner table, “makes sure he has a job. Couldn’t you just go along, Basil? For God’s sake, couldn’t you just go along?”

“You’d never say that to a woman,” I said to her.

“Or a person of color,” my father said.

I was terribly depressed, terribly terribly depressed. My time at Diderot had been nothing more than a detour, a three-year detour, a great circle. Now here I was again. Except now I was in my forties.

“Okay, so you were transferred,” my stepmother shrugged.

“Demoted,” my father corrected her.

“Whatever!” my stepmother yelled, looking across the table, at my father. “They didn’t reduce Basil’s pay, did they? And even if they did, less pay is better than no pay.”

“What about respect?” I said. “Respect for my hard work. Respect for my experience, my education, my accomplishments.”

“Need I remind you he’s written a novel?” my father asked his wife.

“As long as the checks clear, Basil,” my stepmother said, stabbing a piece of

broccoli with her fork. “As long as the checks clear, you know? Anyway, I’m sure they would have promoted you eventually.”

One night, I had a conniption. An epic meltdown. A foulmouthed tantrum.

“Dr. Cranium, you cunt!” I screamed, drunkenly storming around my father’s cottage with a glass of beer, waking the elderly neighbors. “Dr. Cranium, I will never forgive you for this! Dr. Cranium, I’m going to find you and shit down your throat, you feminazi woketard cunt!”

(I am not, I assure you, proud of my behavior that night. I’m not proud of it.)

“How, you ask, will I find you, Dr. Cranium? I’ll just follow the smell of your cunt – your rancid maggot-infested cunt!”

I’m not proud of it. I was just mad is all. I was very, very mad.

“Dr. Cranium, I hope your kids die of AIDS! I hope your family dog gets AIDS and transmits it to everyone in the family, you fucking diamondback! I curse you, Dr. Cranium! I curse those two horrible boobs!”

I was a rage demon, a total rage demon.

“I want death, death, death!” I screamed, jumping up and down in my father’s retirement-home kitchen. “I want death immeasurable, death maximization!”

I was just so mad is all. I was just so fucking mad.

It was then that my stepmother stormed into the kitchen, and when she grabbed my arm, trying to manhandle me, I knew I had carte blanche to pop her in the face, which I did. I am not proud of this either, I assure you, but my stepmother did, I assure you, put her hands on me first, I assure you.

Astonished, my stepmother tumbled back, thrown back on her heels. She hit the stainless-steel fridge. Then she just stood there for a moment, against the fridge, totally astonished. She did not think that I would do it. She did not think I was capable of it.

Anyway, now I’d done it. Now I’d really done it.

I have since been labeled “criminally insane” and have been taken to a

psychiatric unit where even my father won't visit me. O, the horror of it all. That, incidentally, is where I am now – the psych ward. That's where I'm writing this.

Dear God, won't somebody help me? The world has become an Up with People concert. Won't somebody help me???

Here, in the psychiatric unit, we attend daily “re-education” sessions. We are not going anywhere, we are told, until we recognize that the Patriarchy and systemic racism exist, that white men are to blame for achievement gaps between men and women, whites and blacks.

Dear God, won't somebody help me? Mine is a voice calling from an abyss. For God's sake, won't somebody help me???

The psychiatric unit is a terrifying place. A terrifying terrifying place. There have even been a few lobotomies. Because some people just won't do the work.

PEOPLE WITH WHOM I AM QUITE PISSED: *A Confession*

part i

This whole thing started two years ago, in 2016, when I moved to Knoxville and began coursework at the University of Tennessee. I, Arthur Kemp, had been accepted into the MFA program along with three other writers – Kira Helferty, Gemma Carey, Wolfgang Tate.

I'd been really isolated up in Michigan, where I'd been teaching freshman composition (or First-Year Composition, as it's now being called) for about five years at a community college, and on the drive down to Knoxville, I was not unlike a kindergartener on his first day of school, saying in effect, I hope I make friends! I hope I make friends! It's not the most flattering thing to admit – I was thirty-one, for Christ's sake – but I really wanted to make friends down here. People pay lip service to helping their friends, being there for them and all that – “I'm just a phone call away,” they say – but when push comes to shove, your “friends,” if we can call them that, don't want to talk you off the ledge, not really, not if they happen to be in a good place, not if they're not struggling, not if everything in their life is going well and they're happy – though who can ever be happy? Most people won't stand by you through a bad haircut. Get cancer, and see if your “friends” shave their heads for you in solidarity. I wanted real friends, people I could confide in, people who'd put their house up to bail me out of jail – even if they thought I was guilty. I wanted to connect, to really connect with someone.

It's hard connecting with Gemma, for instance. It's hard talking with her. After two years, I feel like I never got to know Gemma. I found I had to think hard about what to say, dig deep and scrape together a few topics of discussion before I arrived at the bar where Kira and Gemma and Wolfgang and I were planning on having drinks. Maybe jot down the topics of discussion on my forearm as though they're tattoos – incidentally, a tattoo always makes a good conversation starter, does it not? If Kira and Wolfgang go to the bathroom, leaving me and Gemma alone together, or if they go to

the bar for another drink, should I ask Gemma what she thought of that Soon-Yi Previn interview, the article that appeared in *Vulture*, the Woody and Mia saga? Should I bring up the Rohingya? Or maybe I should keep it light, asking Gemma about her fiction. Not that Gemma's fiction is light – last I checked, she was working on a story called “Post Colonialism” about contentious family relationships, more specifically stepparents, stepchildren.

I don't know why I have to do all the heavy lifting in the first place, but I do. Gemma isn't the greatest conversationalist. She's not conversant at all, really. Not unless Kira is there to back her up, be her “wingman” – or wing person, I guess. Maybe Gemma just freezes up around me because she thinks I'm so creepy.

I want to meet people with whom the conversation is effortless. That's what I mean by connecting, real connections. My therapist tells me I have abandonment issues, that because my father left me when I was four, now, as an adult, I'm essentially grabbing people by the lapels, screaming, I need this from you! Like me, like me, like me! Be my friend! Or maybe I'm saying, Don't leave me! Don't go anywhere!

It doesn't help that talking with Kira and Gemma is like walking through a mine field – you make one false move, and they're offended. Case in point: We talked about traveling one night, at Preservation Pub – a rooftop bar with lots of exposed brick – and I said I didn't want to go anywhere in the developing world, anywhere poor or dangerous, like Sub-Saharan Africa or West Africa or Central America or South America or Southeast Asia.

“That's such an obnoxious thing to say,” Gemma said, angrily.

“What is?” I asked.

“Southeast Asia? So, you wouldn't go to...like...Japan?” Gemma said.

“Is Japan in Southeast Asia?” Wolfgang said.

“Oh, I might go to Japan,” I said, looking at Gemma. “I just wouldn't go anywhere with tsetse flies, if you know what I mean.”

“Does Japan have tsetse flies?” Wolfgang said.

“You said Southeast Asia,” Gemma told me. “So that means you wouldn't go to Japan. Am I right, Arthur?”

“Oh, I’d go to Japan,” I clarified. “But I wouldn’t go to...like...Indonesia or...like...Papua New Guinea. Nor would I go to Juarez. Not that Juarez is in Southeast Asia, it occurs to me.”

“You know, I studied abroad in Mexico,” Kira chimed in. “It was amazing, Arthur. Amazing!”

Kira has dark hair, dark eyes, olive skin. She has this dark Italian look, though I don’t think her last name, Helferty, is Italian.

Kira was a runner in high school, a track star, and her legs are muscly. She’s always wearing skirts, exposing her beautiful legs. I’ve ogled her legs a few times, and maybe Gemma caught me ogling them once or twice or three times, and maybe that’s one of the reasons Gemma thought I was so creepy.

Gemma, meanwhile, has bright orange hair, like a Golden Lion Tamarin. She has pale skin. She’s Irish and Scottish – not that I’m preoccupied with ancestry or anything.

At Preservation Pub, the four of us were sharing a charcuterie board – brie and Edam and mimolette and aged gouda. We were drinking wine.

“In Mexico, I met people who had nothing,” Kira said. “You start to appreciate things. Like, you feel blessed. You know?”

“See, Arthur?” Gemma said, looking at me.

“See what?” I said.

“You need to go places, dude. It’s obnoxious to say you don’t want to go anywhere.”

“You know, by a world standard, we’re all in the top one percent,” Wolfgang said.

It was a bit of a non-sequitur.

The server came to our table, and Wolfgang ordered another bottle of wine. Gemma turned to Wolfgang and said, “No more for me thanks.” Kira, meanwhile, would have one more glass. Just a small one. Wolfgang and I would drink the rest.

We had a few laughs. There were anecdotes, jokes. Then, deeper into the

evening, Gemma told me she'd "bumped into me" on Bumble, and I blushed.

"Whoa. Did you swipe right?" Wolfgang asked Gemma, smiling, but of course there was no way Gemma would swipe right. No one would ever swipe right for me. Isn't that right, Gemma? Isn't that right?

"Arthur, you don't look anything like your Bumble picture," Gemma told me.

"What do you mean?" I said, drunkenly, my lips no doubt "bruised" from the wine.

"Your profile pic," Gemma said, smiling. "Like, when was it taken, Arthur?"

"I dunno," I shrugged.

"You look...like...twenty years younger in it," Gemma exaggerated.

I took a drink of water. I'd had too much wine, and I was trying to sober up a bit before walking back to my apartment.

"Well, I guess my Bumble pic is a few years old," I confessed.

"That's deceptive," Kira said.

"Deceptive?" I said, pivoting to Kira – her dark hair, her olive skin, that beautiful Italian face, though not nearly as beautiful as Gemma's.

"For God's sake, Arthur, you don't look like that anymore," Gemma said.

I looked back at Gemma. I was being whipsawed.

"Are you saying I'm ugly?" I asked.

But Gemma would never say that. Not because she didn't believe it. But because she was too politically correct.

Incidentally, I must have been Hitler in a previous life. Or a conquistador. Cortes. Pizzaro. Feeding the indigenous to dogs. I must have been Tippoo Tib, the nineteenth century Zanzibarian slave trader, who went on slave raid after slave raid. I must have been a monster. Because now, in this life, I am painfully painfully short, like Mozart. I never get any sleep, so I look haggard all the time. I drink a lot of soda, so my skin isn't exactly radiant. I have this round bulbous nose, a big tumescent proboscis, like Andy Warhol. And now,

at thirty-three, on top of everything else, I have thinning hair. God couldn't have shit on anyone more than me.

I suppose it could be worse. Yes, yes, it could be worse. I mean, of course it could be worse. I don't have harlequin ichthyosis, or microcephaly, or anything like that. But still, God has been cruel with me. God has been very cruel to me.

There's a painting I love called *Big Night down the Drain*. It's a picture of a badly disfigured dwarf holding his big erect cock. (The painting is no doubt a reference to Priapus?) Anyway, the dwarf is battered, totaled. He has a bit of a hangdog look, like he's at the end of a long night of heavy drinking.

I've often wondered if that's how the artist, Georg Baselitz, sees himself – a deformed dwarf, a walking hard on, masturbating to Internet porn three or four times a day. The artist feels like a monster, like something out of a Cronenberg film. An animal. Jerking off constantly. Drinking too much. Eating shit. The artist feels like a hideous mess. At least that's how I feel when I look at the painting. Like the artist is painting himself. Like he hates himself. Except Georg Baselitz is tall, so there goes that theory.

Gemma rolled her eyes.

"You should upload only current pics," she said. "Just be forthcoming, Arthur. Just be honest."

Wolfgang just sat there, listening.

"When am I ever dishonest?"

Kira and Gemma looked at each other and sort of giggled.

"Tell me," I said. "When am I ever dishonest?"

For a moment, I felt like defenestrating all three of them, or maybe just Kira and Gemma. We were sitting on a rooftop bar, so of course it would have been easy to defenestrate them. Is defenestrate the right word? Does defenestration occur when you throw someone from a rooftop?

Kira and Gemma were always doing this to me. There was always something just under the surface they weren't telling me, something they weren't saying, a secret between the two of them they wouldn't let me in on, an inside joke. And if I asked them about it, they would shut down.

I hate it when women shut down on me like that.

“Look, I wasn’t trying to be deceptive,” I told Gemma and Kira.

“If there’s one thing I hate, it’s a bait and switch,” Gemma said, looking at Kira. “I’ve been through that before – guys who say they look one way and turn out to look completely different when you show up on the first date.”

“Or guys who come off one way and turn out to be totally different when you get to know them,” Kira said, looking back at Gemma, crossing her beautiful runner’s legs.

“I was just trying to...like...put my best foot forward,” I said. “I needed a good pic. I’d hardly call that dishonest.”

“A good pic is an honest pic,” Gemma told me.

I rolled my eyes.

“Okay,” I said. “Well, anyway...” I broke off. “You know, Gemma, I’m just trying to find someone, okay? Just trying to get through life, Gemma.”

Why, oh why, did I have to go and say that? It was so pathetic. Incidentally, women pretend to want a guy who’s sweet, but really, they find that sort of thing repulsive.

We ordered another charcuterie board; it was the cheapest thing on the menu, believe it or not, and it seemed the waitress was annoyed because we weren’t ordering top-shelf liquor or the ossobuco, which was the special that night, le specialite de la maison, and I knew the waitress was receiving pressure from her boss to sell the ossobuco because I’d once worked in a restaurant myself, though I’d been fired for telling the Francophone manager that his French accent made him sound like he had cerebral palsy. I didn’t mean anything by it. I wasn’t trying to be mean. For God’s sake, it was just an observation. Is there something wrong with me?

Anyway, when I mentioned the “waitress’s attitude,” Gemma insisted I call her a server, not a waitress. And I saw Gemma’s point. To be fair, server is more dignified – though come to think of it, the word server is close to servant, and isn’t it condescending to call someone your servant?

Gemma thinks I’m a total creep because one night I got drunk and stumbled

home from The Library (another bar we like), and when I got back to my apartment, I texted Gemma telling her I'd gotten home okay, and then she texted me back saying she was glad to hear I'd gotten home safely, and then I texted, "So cool that I have your number now! I will save you!" and then Gemma said, "Goodnight," and her reply was rather abrupt, short, and I knew there was something wrong with Gemma, that she was creeped out by me, and the next night I saw Gemma at a cocktail party, and we were standing in the hosts' kitchen, and I said, "Jesus, Gemma, I just meant I would save you into my phone. You know, as a contact," and then Gemma guffawed, and I smiled and said, "You can relax, Gemma. I'm not gonna send you my ear in the mail," and then she laughed raucously and said, "Okay, okay, it was a misunderstanding, Artie. Just a misunderstanding. Sorry, bud," and I hated the fact that she'd called me "bud." Anyway, I could tell Gemma wasn't convinced. Like, I could tell she was still creeped out by me and that she wouldn't be friends with me now no matter how hard I tried to engineer the friendship, and yes, I did try to engineer the friendship, buying Kira and Gemma and Wolfgang nice bourbon picture frames from Pottery Barn toward the end of the program (just recently), and I bought myself a picture frame, too, and I thought it might be nice to snap a picture of the four of us, one we could all put in our matching picture frames, and then we would always remember each other, our time together at the University of Tennessee, Knoxville, where we chummed around a bit before going our separate ways.

What did Gemma think I meant by "saving her," anyway? Saving her from what, exactly? From her boyfriend Kurt? I SWEAR I DIDN'T MEAN THAT, GEMMA!!! THE TEXT WAS TOTALLY INNOCENT!!! FFS, I JUST MEANT I WOULD SAVE YOU INTO MY PHONE!!! But after that night, I might as well have deleted her number. We would not be friends, I knew. Certainly not good friends, anyway.

Thereafter, it was always a tad awkward around Gemma. I hadn't had friends in a long time, and I was lonely, and yes, I was hoping to meet the one down here. Like, maybe I'd fall in love. Like, maybe we'd both achieve wild success as writers, and maybe we'd graduate and get teaching positions at the University of Tennessee, and maybe we'd even buy a house together and ride off into the sunset, the whole shebang. You could do a lot worse than Knoxville. And you could do a lot worse than Gemma. Though, to tell you the truth, she wasn't even on my radar initially. She really wasn't! In fact, I didn't even find her attractive right away. It took me a year or so to really notice Gemma. But then, in our second year of grad school, it dawned on me. How beautiful she was. Her orange hair, big and wild and curly and sort of kinky, and so so so so orange, as if someone (no doubt a man) had set fire to

it; those humungous blue eyes; her white white skin. “Like a forty-watt lightbulb,” I’d joked, once, just teasing her of course, but Gemma didn’t find that funny. She thought it was insulting. “A forty-watt lightbulb, Art? I look like a forty-watt lightbulb? Gee, thanks, asshole.” And I saw her point there, too, though for God’s sake I was only trying to be playful with her. FFS, JUST HORSING AROUND A BIT, GEMMA! JUST TEASING YOU, FFS!

“Anyway, the hook is in deep now,” I told Amanda, my beautician, whom I see a couple times a month, which is all I can afford. “Gemma hung the moon.”

part ii

Tonight, we are at a fiction reading. Iman Farhadi, a novelist out of Detroit – Dearborn, more specifically – is going to read an excerpt from her novel, *Abdullah’s Mission*, about a Middle Eastern guy who smuggles kidnapped women out of ISIS-controlled Syria, saving them, bringing them home, reuniting them with their families. I am wearing a cap low over my eyes. It’s just a plain Nike cap – I was never a big sports guy. I started wearing hats soon after it happened. A few days after Gemma died, I was walking home from class, and I was near Ayers Hall when this kid, a sophomore maybe, threw a cup of hot coffee at me, saying, “I know you did it, you evil piece of shit! Everyone knows you did it, Arthur Kemp. Everyone knows you did it, you vile, disgusting, reprehensible, rodential...”

He had to have ordered the coffee a good fifteen minutes earlier, because it wasn’t too hot – not, like, two-hundred degrees or anything – but, still, it did burn me, and it was humiliating, walking through campus with coffee all over my white University of Tennessee sweater. Anyway, that’s when I decided to go incognito. That’s why tonight I’m wearing my Nike cap, here in the auditorium, low over my eyes.

“Before I begin,” says Iman Farhadi, standing at the lectern, “I would just like to say that I was sorry to hear about the tragedy that occurred here a few weeks ago.”

Of course, she’s referring to Gemma. About three weeks ago, Gemma Carey perished in a housefire. She’d been renting a carriage house behind someone’s house, and one night the carriage house burned to the ground with her inside of it.

The medical examiner says foul play.

“By now, the whole country has heard,” Iman Farhadi is saying, from behind the lectern. “You can imagine my surprise when I turned on the news on the morning of April 19 and saw that such a gruesome murder had occurred in the place I was slated to read at in less than a month. Anyway, I want to say I’m very sorry for your loss [grabbing her chest, here] and thank you, all of you, for coming out tonight.”

Everyone claps.

Iman Farhadi pauses for a moment, takes a drink of water from her plastic

cup, then clears her throat and says, “In 2016, in the United States, there were, according to the Bureau of Justice Statistics, almost two million female victims of violent crime.”

She pauses again, scans the audience, lets that sink in. Never mind that men are far more likely than women to be victims of violent crime.

“Some people say we should rejoice. Because this number has been cut in half in the last twenty years. I say it is our activism that has mitigated this problem and instead of just rolling over and being pleased with ourselves we should continue our activism. Yes, continue our activism. And not let go until this number is zero. Until the world is safe again for women.”

A five-minute standing ovation here. A five-minute standing ovation. During which, I look around and notice the auditorium is full of women. It’s quite the turnout, actually. And that comes as no surprise, since Iman Farhadi’s fiction is about violence toward women and right now everyone is very interested in violence toward women – no, not in committing acts of violence toward women, but in stopping said acts, in raising awareness – and all semester, there have been pink flyers all over campus trying to get people to attend the upcoming Iman Farhadi reading, but I suspect the murder of Gemma Carey helped with the turnout more than anything, more so than the pink flyers.

Of course, our fiction professor, Zachariah Miller, is here, too – he picked up Ms. Farhadi at the Tyson-McGhee Airport. Zachariah Miller is the author of the little-read novel, *Ungoverned Tongues*. His novel is about free speech. It’s a very important book, IMO, what with all this runaway political correctness going on. Incidentally, I sometimes think we should give the whole country Dilaudid. So people will say whatever the fuck they want, come what may. They can’t fire all of us, can they?

Wolfgang is here, too. He’s sitting back and to the right – three rows behind me, a good dozen or so seats to my right. I see him down there. I see you, Wolfgang!

Kira is also here. She’s sitting in the front row, which is where I am sitting, but she’s sitting several dozen seats away. I don’t think she knows I’m here. Likely due to my “disguise.”

I’ve never felt more repulsive than I do around Kira. I have never felt more like that disfigured dwarf in the Baselitz painting.

Gemma too had a talent for making me feel bad. One time, after a Jeffrey

McDaniel reading, a poetry reading, we were all just standing around, talking, saying how wonderful the reading had been.

“You know, I really like how accessible McDaniel’s poetry is,” said Zachariah.

We were standing in a messy circle near the stage, off to the right a bit, by the emergency exit. Jeffrey McDaniel had set up a cheap collapsible table on stage and was selling his books to his fans waiting in line. He was signing autographs and talking briefly with each fan.

“I’m all for a challenging poem, but it’s refreshing to hear poetry that’s...just...accessible,” Zachariah told us, standing with us in the messy circle.

“I know what you mean,” Gemma told our professor, nodding, gum cracking. “For God’s sake, you don’t always feel like deciphering these things.”

They laughed.

I tried to hug Gemma, there in the auditorium, as we were standing around talking. I hadn’t seen her in a while, a few days or so – we’d both been so busy. She was standing there with her hands in the pockets of her jean jacket, and I tried to hug Gemma, and she said, “Ugh” and backed away, as if I had hemorrhagic fever or something, and she made a big spectacle out of it, and then later, we all went to Preservation Pub, and Professor Zachariah Miller was there, and the great Jeffrey McDaniel joined us, and we had a few drinks together, and at one point, after I’d had a few glasses of Bushmills or Jameson (I forget which), I leaned in to Gemma from across the table and said, “You know, Gemma, that was really humiliating. What you did earlier. You did that in front of everyone. When I tried to hug you, you backed away, like I had hemorrhagic fever or some shit. You did it in front of everyone, Gemma. In front of Zachariah. And that was just...like...really embarrassing, Gemma. And I just thought I’d let you know that you made me feel like shit tonight.” Gemma was sitting across the table from me. She leaned across the table and whispered, “Artie, women don’t always want to be hugged, okay? You need to learn boundaries, dude. Boundaries!”

It was like getting hit with a bat.

Anyway, right now, Iman Farhadi is reading her fiction, here in the auditorium. I’m trying to pay attention to Abdullah’s Mission, but I keep looking over my shoulder, at Wolfgang sitting three rows behind me and a

dozen or so seats over. I keep glancing over at Kira, too. She's sitting in the same row as me but several seats away, close to the wall. She's got her legs crossed, as she always does. Her beautiful runner's legs.

I feel sad, sitting here in the auditorium. Because our creative writing program is winding down and I've made so many mistakes. I know this is all very high school, like really immature and everything, and it's all quite silly to carry on this way, but it bothers me. Yes, it bothers me. It bothers me that the four of us didn't become friends. I've never had a friend. Not really. The plan was to come down here, to Knoxville, and make friends, and for a while there, before Gemma died, it was all going rather well. Like, believe it or not, we were friends. Not close friends or anything like that. But friends, nevertheless. And we were going out a couple nights a week, and the four of us were really getting along, really hitting it off, chumming around and so forth, and we were like a little quartet, and that's why I hugged Gemma at the Jeffrey McDaniel reading – because I felt such affection for her then, because I felt close to her, because I was so happy things were going so well, and for God's sake it was only a loose hug, and incidentally that's why I bought everyone picture frames. Because I felt close to them. But, anyway, I fucked everything up, and it's really depressing, and now I feel isolated, like I did up in Michigan, when I was teaching at that college. Incidentally, the Roseto Effect is a term used to describe a phenomenon where people in close-knit communities have greater longevity. Sabastian Junger talks about this in his book *Tribe*. I read a few pages of *Tribe*. Then I got bored and tossed it carelessly aside. Now, incidentally, I'm reading Jennifer Egan's collection of short stories, *A Visit from the Good Squad*. I especially like "Forty-Minute Lunch," the one about the bipolar celebrity journalist, who at the end of the story (SPOILER ALERT!) tries to strangle a young starlet. I think what Junger is saying in *Tribe*, though, is that human beings need community. Need it the way they need water. Community makes people happy. Not love or having children necessarily, though certainly those things will make you happy, too. Not money or success. Not a big-time writing career. But community. Community is the thing, or so says Sabastian Junger.

Right now, Iman Farhadi has pictures on the overhead, and we in the audience are looking at Middle Eastern women wearing the hijab and everything, and these are real Middle Eastern women, real Middle Eastern women who've been saved by this Abdullah fellow – Farhadi's novel, it turns out, is based on true events.

One of the women in the pictures has lost her eyeball. Her eyeball is hanging out of its socket, literally hanging there!, two or three inches, like a tetherball. Iman Farhadi explains this, telling us an IED or whatever went off near this

woman's head.

Iman Farhadi was born in America. Her parents were born in Syria, but she's American. Farhadi did a bunch of research; lived in Syria for six months; met all these amazing people; then, when she felt she'd done enough research, started writing Abdullah's Mission. Next month, it'll be out in stores.

I'm on track to graduate and everything, and that's wonderful and everything, but what will I do after this, and who will hire me, and where will I go, and who will be my friend? I've felt happier here in Knoxville for sure, and I think it has something to do with the sunlight, the nice weather, the color of Knoxville. Knoxville feels a bit like a Hockney painting – that one that sold for ninety mil recently. So vibrant and verdant and colorful. Can't imagine a life of solitude: coming home from work every night and eating chicken and vegetables by yourself; masturbating to pop shot compilations in your fifties; showing up for family reunions – Thanksgiving dinners, Christmases, weddings – without a significant other, without so much as a date; watching your nieces and nephews (not that I have nieces and nephews or anything) zoom past you, growing up and getting jobs and getting married, checking off the seven sacraments. And all the while you have no one. You're still chasing this will-o-the-wisps writing career. So pathetic. And then, one day, months after you've stopped paying your rent, Management does a wellness check, crowbarring their way into the apartment you're renting and finding a mischief of rats feasting on your body, nibbling on your face, having ganged up on you, not unlike the misfortunes of your life.

But, anyway, I don't want to sound like a sad sack. For God's sake, get it together, Art! No one likes a sad sack!

I'm beginning to lose interest in this reading. FOR GOD'S SAKE, THERE ARE 200,000 WORDS IN THE ENGLISH LANGUAGE, AND IMAN FARHADI IS USING ABOUT FIFTY OF THEM! Her writing is so prosaic, in other words. So plain. I hate that.

Why the fuck did I come here, anyway? Why did I bother with this reading tonight? I could be at home right now, working on my own fiction, my own novel.

Incidentally, my novel, Woko Haram, is the best novel I've ever written, and I've written five of them, as well as two short story collections. But, of course, Woko Haram will not be published in my lifetime. My work will not be understood for centuries. That's just the cost of being a genius. Geniuses are almost always ahead of their time. In fact, I believe it was Emmerson who

said, “The genius always finds himself a century too early.” And wasn’t it Eysenck, Hans Eysenck, who said, “Genius will almost certainly be opposed by the great mediocre majority”?

How, then, did I expect to get along with Kira and Gemma and Wolfgang? The work they do (or did do, in Gemma’s case) is bullshit, tripe, menudo. Kira, for instance, wrote a story about a man who’s very happy with the woman he’s dating until a hotter edgier girl comes along and then he’s torn between doing the right thing (i.e. being faithful to his longtime girlfriend) and satisfying fundamental biological urges (i.e. the urge to leave a genetic legacy, to fuck everything on two legs). Gemma’s work is, I admit, a little more interesting. Before she died, she was working on a story about stepchildren and stepparents called “Post-Colonialism.”

Anyway, as a workshopper, I’m not supposed to say things like this, but the truth is Kira and Gemma and Wolfgang are patzers. They are a silly people – their obsidian blades playthings next to my thunderous harquebus.

My cohorts can’t be bothered with Nabokov. I just don’t get that. I come from a different world, I guess. Of course, dressing up a story with four-syllable words, a la Nabokov, won’t necessarily make your story good (of course not), but I do believe in beautiful sentences, language, words, and my cohorts can’t be bothered with words, so preoccupied are they with minimalist writers like Raymond Carver, and I know it’s subjective and everything, but let’s call a spade a spade – can Carver really stand up to Nabokov the Susquipedalianist?

NO!!! CARVER DOES NOT DESERVE TO SMELL NABOKOV’S SHIT!!! Nabokov was a genius. A sublime genius. He, too, liked language, literary devices. “A banked banker,” Nabokov writes, at one point in *Lolita*, his undisputed masterpiece, a towering towering achievement, an exquisite corner-turning work of art as far as I’m concerned, one of the great artistic feats of humanity, a crucial monumental work.

[Establishing shot of the auditorium.] Kira is sitting several seats away, near the wall. She’s wearing a skirt, and I can see her legs, and she’s very sexy, and I’m almost drooling, looking at her thighs covertly from under my Nike hat, her beautiful thighs and calves. Iman Farhadi is of course reading an excerpt from Abdullah’s *Mission*, a boring book about Yazidi sex slaves. This is neither the time nor the place, it occurs to me, to be ogling Kira’s fleshy legs and licking my lips. Reminds me of the time Kira and Gemma and Wolfgang and I did a tour of one of the old slave plantations around Knoxville and I started complaining about the heat just as we were approaching the slave

quarters – in my defense, it was an especially hot day that day. Kira and Gemma gave me shit for that, too – just like they gave me shit about my aversion to travel. “Jesus, Artie, we can’t take you anywhere, can we? Can’t take you anywhere, Artie.” They were truly disgusted that day. Truly disgusted. And I didn’t see them after that for a good long while, two weeks to be exact, but who’s counting?

Kira is riveted to Iman Farhadi’s reading, like it’s television. Everyone is riveted. And if everyone else is riveted, there must be something to this. There must be something wrong with me.

But then, it isn’t surprising that everyone is riveted, since everyone in the program, all the MFA-holes, want fiction that is noble. They want “victim narratives.” And they all want plain English to boot. And Abdullah’s Mission gives them that. For the MFA-holes, ideology trumps aesthetics. Mike Judge says we’re becoming an Idiocracy. Too true. FOR GOD’S SAKE, DO MY COHORTS HAVE THE IQ OF A SHOE??? It is so frustrating, so infuriating, being a genius surrounded by colossal dunces. Doesn’t anyone want to make great art? And isn’t brilliant prose the sine qua non of the literary masterpiece? (Am I using that term correctly?) Those who love plain English ought to be crucified. Beheaded. And, in my country, they would be. (Well, not crucified or beheaded necessarily but certainly they’d be subjected to corporal punishment, stripped and whipped, like Kunta Kinte or some shit.) All kidding aside: In my country, I’d make Nabokov required reading. But now, in 2018, in the States, everyone wants prosaic prose. Case in point: the success of Tommy Orange, his recent novel, *There, There*. Gag me with ten-thousand spoons.

Incidentally, do people realize what a genius Nabokov was? The man was a God, and while I like *Lolita*, I happen to be a bigger fan of *Speak, Memory*, his memoir. And I happen to like *Transparent Things* – his swan song, published in 1977, the year of the old lion’s death.

Lolita is, of course, about a pedophile, and one night, at Preservation Pub (the rooftop bar), the Appropriate Police gave me shit about this, too.

“God, how can you read that?” Kira said, disgustedly, harpooning the ice cubes in her Collins glass with her metal straw. “How can you read that, Artie?”

“A depiction is not an endorsement,” Wolfgang said, looking at Kira, coming to my defense.

“That’s right!” I said, looking at Wolfgang. “A depiction is not an endorsement. Thank you, Wolfgang. A depiction of pedophilia is certainly not an endorsement of pedophilia.” Then I looked at Kira. “Anyway, *Speak, Memory* is actually my favorite book by Nabokov. And I’m a Nabokov completist.”

“*Speak, Memory* might be your favorite Nabokov book, but you do like *Lolita*,” Gemma said, interrogating me – she sounded like the fucking House of Un-American Activities, suddenly.

“Yes. Yes, I do,” I confessed, pivoting to Gemma, the grand inquisitor.

Of course, deep into *Lolita*, at the Enchanted Hunters Hotel, the protagonist drugs his stepdaughter, the twelve-year-old eponymous character. I suppose I can see, then, why Kira and Gemma dislike this novel – especially now, in 2018, with MeToo lurking in the background, all this Cosby stuff, etcetera.

Still, since getting to know Gemma and Kira (or “Thelma & Louise,” as I sometimes call them), I have never felt so creepy, have never felt more like scum, have never felt worse about myself. I always leave the bar (coming down from that rooftop) feeling bad about myself. The truth is I’m thirty-three now, and I’m not getting any younger, and this is not a very flattering thing to admit, but...well...if you want to know the truth, I’m sort of flailing and gasping at this point, flailing and gasping, and it’s no excuse or anything, but it is an explanation, and for God’s sake, I refuse to take myself to the woodshed too many times, because the truth is Gemma hurt me pretty badly.

part iii

I had a Zoom interview with the search committee at a community college in Buffalo, and the night before the interview I sent Kira and Gemma and Wolfgang a group text, asking if one of them wouldn't mind letting me come over to use their iron, so I could iron my Brooks Brothers shirt, the one I'd picked out for my upcoming interview, and Gemma texted me back, saying yes, I could come over.

Big mistake, Gemma. Big mistake.

I did not, I assure you, mean to do it. When I got to Gemma's apartment, I looked around and said, "Wow. You're reeeeeeally into Japanese culture, Gemma. You're reeeeeeally into Japanese culture." And then I asked her, boyishly, if I could play with her samurai sword, and she said sure, as long as I was careful with it, and I remember thinking it was kind of nice that Gemma was worried about me hurting myself, though maybe she was only worried about herself, and I took the sword down from its holder and studied it for a moment, admiring the tight Japanese characters along the blade, and then I asked Gemma why she would allow me to come over, and this question seemed to shock her, and she said, "What do you mean, Artie? I want to help you. With your Zoom interview" and she smiled sweetly and said, "You're silly, Artie. I mean, you're politically incorrect and everything, but we do love you," and then she poked me in the belly and said, "By the way, you know you can buy an iron for...like...ten bucks at Wal-Mart, right?" and then I smiled warmly and said, "The truth is I was hoping to see you, Gemma. I was hoping to see you."

It was like hitting a switch – if Gemma was being flirty with me, then I'd taken her out of flirtatious mode. Gemma felt uncomfortable now. She smiled and said, "Uh oh. You haven't...like...developed...like...feelings for me or anything. Have you, Art?" and I shrugged and said, "These things happen, Gemma. These things happen?" and she covered her face with her hands and said, "Oh, no! Oh, no!" and then she said, sternly, "Arthur. I have a boyfriend. His name is Kurt. Remember? We've been together for six years? Six years, Art. We're getting married," and I said, "I know, I know... It's not like I meant to fall in love with you, Gemma. The heart wants what the heart wants, Gemma. The heart wants what the heart wants?" and then Gemma rolled her eyes and said, "Oh, God," and then she ran her hand through her kinky curly hair and said, "You did not just quote Woody Allen, Arthur. You did not just quote Woody Allen," and I was still holding the sword, and she folded her arms at her chest (her breasts appearing fuller) and said, "This

makes me uncomfortable, Art,” and I asked her why it was making her uncomfortable, and she said, “Oh, God. Oh, no. Art, did you think something was gonna...[gulp]...happen between us? Like, when you got to my apartment this evening... Did you think something was gonna happen between the two of us?”

The truth is I had hoped something would happen. I did, I assure you, need to iron my shirt (that wasn’t bullshit), but when I saw that text message from Gemma, a small part of me was hoping something would happen.

“Gross!” Gemma said, rolling her eyes again. “Ugh, please tell me you didn’t think something was gonna...like...happen between the two of us when you got here, Art.”

(Gemma had no idea what kind of anger I was sitting on.)

I cleared my throat.

“Let me just iron my shirt,” I said, my eyes puddling. “Then I’ll be out of your hair, Gemma.”

Gemma just stood there looking at me for a moment, her arms folded at her chest, pushing up her big beautiful breasts.

“You know, I kinda want you to leave now, Arthur. I think I want you to leave now.”

I was getting furious.

“I’m feeling very uncomfortable, Arthur. Okay? And I’d appreciate it if you left immediately.”

“I came all the way over here, Gemma. Jesus Christ, just let me iron my shirt, okay?”

“How long will it take?”

“Five fucking minutes!” I said, raising my voice. “Jesus Christ, I really hope I get this job in Buffalo, because I cannot wait to get out of Knoxville.”

What can I say? I WAS SICK OF THE MUFFIA, SICK OF THESE CUNT’S TREATING ME LIKE I HAD SOME KIND OF DISEASE, LIKE I WAS THE FUCKING ELEPHANT MAN!!! I wanted Gemma to

respect me, to treat me with decency. I was a human being, wasn't I? Someone's son?

I was still holding the samurai sword. Gemma was looking at me like I was a tapeworm, something ugly and vile and repulsive, and I started grinding my teeth, and Gemma could see that I was seething, absolutely seething, and she said, "Are you okay, Art? Are you okay?" and she laughed nervously, and I could tell she felt vulnerable now, that she felt really really afraid (like a mouse dropped into a snake terrarium), and she had every right to feel that way, because I was about to do something awful to her, something monstrous, and it was then that I raised the sword high above my head, and Gemma looked at me and said, "Art, what are you doing? What the hell are you d..."

I sliced her fucking arm off. Gemma and I just stood there together in her living room, stunned. The carriage house was silent.

A single tear spilled down Gemma's cheek. Then, possessed, I raised the sword a second time and brought it down again.

It was not until both arms were gone that Gemma became hysterical.

Shrieking, Gemma ran to the front door of the carriage house and kicked at the installed glass with her bare feet, trying to break the square windowpanes. I stood there watching.

Now she was trying to open the door with her foot – no longer trying to break the little windowpanes but trying to lift her leg and somehow turn the doorknob with the sole of her foot. I watched as Gemma got low and tried to open the door with her head, bending at the waist like one of those drinking birds and pushing her forehead down onto the top of the doorknob, applying as much pressure as she could, then trying to retract the latch, then falling to her knees and sobbing defeatedly, realizing it was hopeless.

For a couple of minutes, Gemma wept. (Her forehead was bruised now.) Then she started screaming out for help, screaming so loud her voice became hoarse.

"Shhh! Shut the fuck up!" I hissed, frantically, terrified she'd wake the neighbors, her landlords, though it wasn't very late at night and her landlords were probably still awake.

She sat there, on the floor, hopelessly, her legs splayed. She looked up at me. She pleaded with me, telling me how badly she wanted to see her mummy

and daddy again, telling me she needed to get home so she wouldn't be late for dinner, begging me to let her go, to look deep within myself and find something, an ounce of compassion if I could, and open the door and let her out, no doubt so she could run ostrich-like across her landlords' lawn and into the safety of their house. I was mesmerized. When I didn't answer her, Gemma just sat there and cried, blood flowing from her strawberry wounds. She knew she was fucked, that this was it, the end of her life. Death was standing in the corner of the room like a grandfather clock. All her life, it had been hurtling toward her like an asteroid, and now it was here.

I stood there, astonished. I'd created my own Venus de Milo. I was a scientific researcher. A behaviorist, standing there in the bright overhead light of Gemma's apartment with my pen and clipboard, wearing my white lab coat, my nerd glasses, jotting down notes, wondering if this subject would get through the maze I'd designed for her. But of course it wouldn't. In fact, the poor creature was already fading. Sitting there, on the floor, Gemma looked at the arms I'd severed in mind-bending horror, and she told me to end her life, that upon closer inspection of the idea she didn't want to live like this after all, not like this, not as a double amputee, for God's sake.

"Do it already, you sick fuck! Get it over with!"

I looked at her arms. They were covered in blood. And so meaty. Chicken wings dripping with hot sauce.

When I plunged the sword through her midriff, I was screaming, "Allahu Akbar!" as loud as I could. I said it a few times. I was terrified, and I wasn't thinking clearly, and it was all very harum-scarum, and now that Gemma was dead, the only thing I could think to do is burn down the carriage house, erasing any evidence (dactylograms and so forth) substantiating the claim that I'd been there.

Later, canines found the body, and the fire department saw that someone had chopped Gemma's arms off, and the medical examiner saw that someone had stabbed her through the abdomen, and you didn't need to be in Mensa to rule this a homicide, and of course all of these details appeared in the paper, and all of Knoxville was horrified, and yes, one of the neighbors had heard the assailant yelling "Allahu Akbar!" and this made the papers, too, but Kira and Wolfgang suspected me, because they remember getting that group text, the group text!, the one about the iron and the shirt and the Zoom interview, and they knew, simply knew, that I was in Gemma's apartment the night of the murder. They shared this information with the police (no omerta among English majors). They shared this information with everyone.

When the police came to my apartment, I told them I hadn't gone over there after all, that I'd never been to Gemma's apartment, that on the day of the murder I decided it would be easier to just back down and buy an iron at Wal-Mart, except when I checked the website I didn't see any that were reasonably priced, so I just decided not to iron the shirt at all, that maybe I was being silly and surely it'd be no big deal if the shirt were a tad wrinkled. (I didn't get the job, BTW.) I maintained my innocence, weeping before the police and saying how awful it was that someone had murdered Gemma Carey.

I stayed home the day of the funeral. Out of respect for Gemma's parents, who are now foolishly suing the university because, by their light, the university admitted the psychopath that killed their daughter. Out of respect for Kurt, too – who, I've heard, is convinced I killed his bashert and has called me many names, including a "creep," in the press (I would very much like to tell you, Kurt, that while Gemma was blubbering on the floor of her carriage house, telling me how much she wanted to see her mommy and daddy again, at no point did she express a longing to see her football-playing fiancé.)

This whole thing has made national headlines. First it appeared in local papers, and of course the Knoxvilleans, if that's what we're called, were horrified, and then reporters from major news organizations caught wind of it and descended on Knoxville, patronizing the hotels and restaurants, no doubt spurring the local economy, and now the whole country, the whole country, is talking about the murder, and now everyone knows the names Arthur Kemp and Gemma Carey, which I must admit makes me sort of happy.

The whole country says I killed her. The whole country! According to a recent poll, 96% of women and 84% of men think I killed her. I've become another Joran van der Sloot, the prime suspect in the Natalie Holliday case. One journalist called me a modern-day Caravaggio, the Renaissance painter, who allegedly killed a man before hiding in Naples – I'd be lying if I said I didn't love the comparison. On some morning radio show, they took phone calls from the audience, and one snarling bloodthirsty woman said they should chop my head off. Another bitch thought they ought to tie my wrists to one 1970s muscle car and my ankles to another 1970s muscle car and have the cars pull me apart like I'm a wishbone or something. All the women interviewed agreed I should be executed. "Yet another woman is dead, and once again, it's at the hands of men," goes the *cri de coeur*. People all over the country (everyone listening to Iman Farhadi in this stupid auditorium right now) suspect me, but everyone knows there's no evidence. Still, though

we lack specifics, it was certainly a man that did this. It was certainly a man who did this. We're living in a chimp enclosure, says the Feminazi. All men are chimps – aggressive, powerful, terrifying. All men are arboreal. All women are primatologists.

Anyway, not surprisingly, Kira and Wolfgang don't talk to me anymore. They won't even look at me. Surely, they've burned the Pottery Barn frames I gave them. Surely, they've burned my picture frames. This happened a few weeks ago, and things are beginning to calm down now, thank God, and reporters are no longer calling, no longer pounding on my door, no longer sleeping in the parking lot under my building hoping to get a shot of me taking my garbage out to the waste receptable. It looks like I'm going to get away with this.

I never wanted this. (Perhaps I have a tumor on my brain? Like Charles Whitman?) Of course, it is a great injustice that I am free. Life is not fair. But then, which is worse? The inside or the outside? Which punishment is more inhumane? I ask you to think about this, to really think about it. Here, on the outside, no one will even come near me – I am Joran van der Sloot, a diseased sewer rat, a leper, a suspected murderer, and not just a suspected murderer but a suspected dismemberer, a maimer. Meanwhile, in prison, I'd be surrounded by mutilators. We'd compare notes. Making friends would be a cinch. I'd have community. In prison, at least I'd have community, which is everything, really.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

MICK MCGRATH has an MFA from the University of Tennessee. His writing has appeared in Terror House Magazine, The Thieving Magpie, and elsewhere. His novel **The Deplorable** was serialized in 2023. McGrath is the cofounder of the journal **Index Librorum Prohibitorum** debuting in 2023 as one of the few online resources that welcomes anti-woke content.

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