

THE AUDIT

a love thriller



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THE AUDIT

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The Ride

The Audit

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THE AUDIT

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Introduction

"Government is the entertainment division of the Military Industrial Complex." Frank Zappa

We all know what happened so let's start there.

Before YouTube was forced to take down the video, millions of people had seen for themselves that there is no gold at Fort Knox. The man who made the video was missing and presumed dead. There was speculation the networks had the video and had repressed it by order of Homeland Security. Then the video appeared on the RT/Russia Today network. By evening there were commentaries everywhere.

There is no gold at Fort Knox, nor is there any gold at the Federal Reserve Bank of New York (following the release of the Fort Knox video, an employee at the Manhattan Gold Depository at the New York Federal Reserve Bank made that confirmation to the Los Angeles Times).

This revelation came in the wake of numerous countries actively seeking repatriation of their gold from the United States and Britain while, at the same time, propagandists were hard at it, impugning gold's reputation as a store of value, to the point where gold was no longer equated with money (at least in the Western world). The narrative being, that except for jewelry and scientific purposes, gold had no significance, so why would any country go to the cost, the trouble, and the security concerns of transporting gold back home? Still, the requests for gold repatriation persisted.

In the meantime, central banks had created more than 500 paper ounces for each ounce of real gold—paper they sold into the market each night to beat back the price and reputation of gold. But paper is not gold. History and the majority of the seven billion people on the planet are aware that gold, and its little brother silver, have been true wealth for more than 5000 years. Granted, real estate and collectibles are also wealth, but the degree to which cen-

tral banks were conducting financial repression had re-defined wealth: if the asset could not be held and hidden, it was not wealth.

A week earlier, in a shattering coincidence, the Chinese had announced to the world that they were in possession of more than 28,000 tons of gold, more than triple the stated holdings of the United States. Then, over a few days, Russia and India came forward with their numbers. It didn't take a mathematician to determine that this newly acquired gold had come from the West and moved to the East. The British had no gold. That portion of the German gold, supposedly held for safekeeping in New York, had long ago been leased back into the market, never to return. In its place was a mountain of paper: dollars, euros, sterling, and paper gold—all backed by the good faith and credit of governments and central banks that had amassed the largest debts in the history of mankind, and were effectively bankrupt.

The strategy of the United States had been to control the destinies of Syria, Ukraine, Iran, and Russia, through destabilization and crippling sanctions, with the ultimate goal of overthrowing Vladimir Putin. For that to have happened, Putin would have needed to be a stupid man, which he proved not to be. Instead, he sold his dollar surplus into the market to support the ruble, while forming an economic and military alliance with China. Then he took the initiative in Syria to break the hold of ISIS and the so-called moderates. Meanwhile, his approval rating at home topped 90%. There was another miscalculation concerning Russia. We'd forgotten that the Russians were the same people who had starved out the French at Moscow, and the Germans at Stalingrad.

In the week following the video release, there was calm. The man on the street had no inkling about the relationship between currency and gold. Besides, the world had a long-standing habit of exchanging a hundred dollar bill for goods and services. And the announcement from the FDIC that bank deposits were now insured to half a million dollars had been reassuring, as long as one didn't take seriously the conclusion in the Sacramento Bee that the FDIC

did not have the resources to cover a bank run in a city the size of Sacramento.

At the end of that first week, there was an expectation that the weekend would tidy things up but, by Friday afternoon, things got worse. The Comex, which stockpiles U.S. physical gold to settle contracts, defaulted on a huge settlement owed the Chinese who were unwilling to settle for dollars and demanded their gold. Unless the gold was delivered, the Chinese threatened to sell more than two trillion dollars of U.S. cash reserves into the market.

By Monday, the global perception of the United States was that of a favorite, overweight uncle, who, after slipping on an icy stoop, had broken his back, and had been moved upstairs to convalesce in the master suite, where his condition had deteriorated. The world had ignored his condition as long as he could pay his way. But now he was seen for what he was, a debt-engorged, third-world superpower, with little of value (not quite true—a rapacious world had begun to see the United States as the spoils of a lost economic war). And Uncle Sam was no longer everyone's favorite uncle.

Although the Banksters gave it a good try with a week's worth of stability reassurances, this was viewed as another attempt at equivocation and the following week found lines around the block at every major U.S. bank. The depositors wanted their money. One banking luminary made a stalwart plea for patience, but came across as a malfeasant in a three-quarters cashmere jacket with a fur collar. At the end of business, the next Monday, the banks closed by order of the President. A banking holiday—the sole festive description for that occasion.

1

Sometimes, leaving is all that's left.

Under an awning in a slanting rain, waiting for a bus, I thought back on our 1950's bus station, utilitarian, with a big arch for the buses to pull through, and the now long-forgotten lunch counter. A time embodied in s's—safer, simpler, slower, sit-ins. Nah, we didn't have those here. We had the sunset rule—all colored out of town by sundown.

The new passengers moved clumsily along the aisle, adding to wet footprints. Ahead of me, a fat woman carrying a sleeping child moved incrementally, while an old cowboy with a suitcase too large for carryon bumped me along from behind. I wanted into a seat before those last four rows that used to be the smoking section, which are still the party section—the drugs and alcohol seats—the most likely to get kicked off the bus seats.

An old woman taking up two seats and using her coat for a pillow didn't look to be asleep. I touched her arm and she sat up scornfully, the skin on her face hanging like old drapes. She scowled, jostling herself next to the window. I sat down without looking at her but I could feel a glower in the darksome gloom.

The rainy spring, through closed tinted windows, made for a purple twilight as the bus shifted up through its gears, slipping through town. I began humming to myself, without consideration, songs the old woman might know. I hummed recognizably about moonlight and magnolias and stars falling on Alabama. I mouthed words about a slow boat to China, and, as I medleyed into pennies in a stream and falling leaves of sycamore, she offered a barely audible melody, sharing our darkness. I sang love songs I knew from my folks and she quietly joined in, calling up words she'd known all her life. At one point I paused, and like a dog that nudges with his nose to keep his owner petting, she touched a slight elbow to

my arm. Later, in some verse or chorus, I drifted off. When I woke up in the Sacramento depot, the old woman was gone.

2

Most people lie three times in the first ten minutes of meeting someone.

I knew I wouldn't be able to sleep, and having the two seats to myself, I read a poem I'd written to Anna.

sorting through his things
we found this poem:
of all women
you work for me
joking, laughing, interrupting with
connected
and unconnected words
each inhale and exhale
stacking trust

moving in its own light
your moon passed close
and i found the courage to touch it
but tonight
without your arms and your legs
wrapped around me
holding me safe
i fear those
who wait
at the edge of dreams

Not a bad poem, maybe a good poem, except the stacking trust part. I don't trust Anna anymore. Three days ago, I initiated the first of the last three, of more than a thousand texts between us. It was one minute after midnight into her birthday. We hadn't been in touch for three weeks since I texted, "Just go away." Which she did, but I couldn't let her birthday go by. What I sent was "10-04-1969, hmm?" About twelve hours later she got back to me.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"That's what one texts when one is torn between, *Happy Birthday Anna*, and, *It's a fine line between calculation and deceit.*"

It was a sunny, late spring day, a year ago, when I ran into Anna. My son and three of his friends were going to a high school, varsity girl's soccer game. Two of them, not my son, suggested I come along, which I did, but I took my own car. My son loves me but I know he doesn't want me hanging out as one of the boys. I was keeping a respectful distance from them when I saw Anna talking with a couple of women. It had been some time since I had seen her, not since she was married, a marriage that had ended badly. Her husband was a charismatic shyster, forever peddling schemes—dredging the river for gold, or a chain letter called the Golden Egg. In the end he went bankrupt (the Chinese had dredged the river in 1900), leaving Anna bereft of possibilities, under a huge debt, with two daughters, both of whom he'd tried to turn against her. One of them was playing in the soccer game.

I'd always found Anna attractive, trim, long legs, and a shock of curly, short blond hair. Now she looked older—a bit haggard. When she saw me she brightened and came over. I asked about her divorce and she went into a full-on history, which I didn't mind because I had wondered how it went down? The game ended and the boys headed back in our direction. She suggested we get together for coffee and continue our talk. She wanted to share something with me—something she was into.

Two days later, over coffee, she described the thing she was into. When I began to shake my head, she asked what was the matter?

“You don’t invite a friend to lunch where you plan to ask him to invest in something, without forewarning him.”

“But I did tell you there was something I was into?”

“Yeah, but that something might have been motorcycles or poetry. Instead it’s a marketing scheme.”

She kept on with marketing tactics, reminding me of her husband. She assured me this was not a pyramid scheme—which it was. Thankfully, she realized I wasn’t interested and she let it go. When we parted she said something odd: how this meeting hadn’t gone well because this was the only time she’d met with a prospective male client without bringing someone with her. I didn’t ask about it. Strike one on me.

3

Lies in love are subject to the rules of baseball. Three strikes and you’re out.

Because I’m afraid to fly and because our public transportation system is stuck the 1960’s, it was taking two full days and fourteen hours to get as close to Fort Knox, Kentucky, as Greyhound gets. Go—Greyhound, or Amtrak, but don’t expect a direct route or to arrive on time. Getting to your ultimate destination may involve hitchhiking.

Six weeks ago, there was no way I would have seen myself on this bus tonight. I was in Southern California. Anna and I had decided we’d be together—on her terms: “If you can’t sleep naked against me, don’t bother. If you let three days go by and you don’t make love to me, don’t bother. If you go off on a motorcycle trip and you don’t take me, I won’t be there when you get back.” Years ago, for me, those demands would have been a deal breaker. Not now. Anna had been with her husband more than fifteen years and

they'd had sex almost daily—some of which she described as anger sex. Along with my new habit of drinking coffee in the mornings, I could have sex with Anna.

Remember strike one? I like baseball analogies. Strike two had to do with a trip we'd planned to the coast in my Camaro. Since leaving her husband three years ago, Anna's had a boyfriend—her boss in the (non-pyramid) scheme she sold. She described him as handsome, young, and Moldovan, name of Bojan, Slavic for battle. They don't live together. Her kids don't like him. He's a strict Catholic who wants a submissive wife, a weaker vessel, so to speak—one that couldn't (or at least wouldn't) cross the street without him. He was the one who usually showed up with her when she met with a male client.

We'd planned this trip. She'd lied to him about taking her daughter to a religious leadership camp. At the last minute he brought up that she'd never gone anywhere without him and he didn't want to start now. She texted me at three-thirty in the morning—something about 'not able to leave this valley'. It was apparent that Anna was in a controlled, committed relationship. Still I hung in there. Strike two.

Maybe that was strike three because of something that happened earlier that I'm calling a foul ball, because I need strike three for something that came later. What came earlier was a walk. One late night, when she had to work in the morning, she called, asking if I wanted to take a walk. She drove to me and we walked a well lit path. On the way out, we kissed a few times (during one kiss there was this little shaking in her body), but on the way back there were no kisses. Instead, she wanted to talk about astrology. She knew I was a Sagittarius, the same sign as Bojan, making both of us compatible with her sign, Aires. Because he was younger and immature, she wanted my thoughts on relating with younger and older men. Back at her car we kissed goodnight. She hadn't defined her relationship with Bojan as committed, but it was there to be seen, and I wasn't keeping my eye on the ball.

4

Ask not what you can do for your country—ask that your country be accountable.

My going to Fort Knox began with a talk I had with Ron Paul at a Filipino Veteran's hall in Las Vegas, this last time Ron was running for president. I asked what he did to keep his money safe? He bought gold. I asked what he would do as president? He would pull our country back from being an empire and bring our troops home. He would get rid of the Fed, or, if he couldn't accomplish that, audit the Fed, which would necessitate a supervised inventory of the gold at Fort Knox. I didn't tell him at the time but I'd decided to take on the job of auditing the gold. That of course was before the prospect of sleeping naked against Anna became an option.

I sought out Dr. Paul because our constitution and our rights have become a sham. The law of the land has devolved into a policy debate—the reason I had quit listening to the networks selling a future based on rigged markets and projections of past statistics, adjusted to favor transnational, corporate sponsors, without any necessity for evidence. The all-knowing, who populate the weekend news shows, assume we've already traded our right to privacy for Facebook and Homeland Security, rendering Edward Snowden, without question, a traitor. I can't remember whether it's a hundred thousand or a million persons with the necessary security clearance to access NSA surveillance, but Snowden's the only one to speak up about illegal and unconstitutional programs? And that makes him the traitor?

Because of what came down between Anna and me, I'm heading for Kentucky to audit the gold—something to get my mind off her. Back in high school, in the early 60's, my dad told me that no one could hitchhike to Central America—I left almost immediately for El Salvador. Same thing with riding a motorcycle to the Arctic, to

South America, or around the world. I do those things, unburdened by thinking it through, or planning it out. Had I thought or planned, I wouldn't have gone. There's nothing special about me. It's more a personality trait. But whatever it is, there's a good chance I can do it if I get started. Like Patton with the Germans—go till you run out of gas, then deal with it. Getting started is usually more than half of being successful, and having delusions of grandeur along the way is not necessarily a bad thing if it makes you move with audacity, accomplishing the seemingly impossible, providing you don't wake up in a python's lair, or find yourself in a slap fight that began as fun, with drunken, serial killer brothers. Like high-line walkers who work without a net, like writers who disdain working from an outline, I'm pulled along by plot—trying to keep up.

Fort Knox, where each day thousands of people pass through those gates going to work, some of whom work where the gold is (or is not I'm betting it's not, makes it way more fun). I've heard the argument before: if there were no gold in Fort Knox, wouldn't someone of all those people who work there have said something by now? We got that answer with Edward Snowden and the NSA surveillance. If they knew, they weren't saying.

But unlike Snowden, I'm going to audit the gold and not get caught because I have the coyote instinct to do the deed, a *escondidas* (that's my Spanish for hidden). Back when Daniel Ellsberg released the Pentagon Papers, that was a different time, the slow-pitch days. It's all hardball now. Cheney and Feinstein, a Republican and a Democrat, both good picks for the game show—*Are You Smarter than a Fifth Grader?* They're calling Snowden a traitor. They don't know the definition of a traitor?

On the plus side, I had an in that might help me. I had grown up with and went to school with Senator Ron Lackey, who's the same age as me, and because both of our last names begin with L, we often sat beside each other in class. I lost track of him for a time when he went to university in California (I was busy driving an old VW bus up and down the coast between San Francisco and Laguna Beach), but we met up again in Eugene, at law school. This past week, it wasn't difficult to find him because every year he visits

each of the counties in Oregon that he represents. I caught up with him at a diner in Milton-Freewater. I won't say what we talked about. He already has enough bad press (I think it was The New York Times that referred to him as that wonky senator).

As it turned out, he couldn't help me directly but he had an idea that Pietro DeBruzio, a congressman from the Oregon coast, might know someone? I asked if he would tell Pietro I was a standup guy, and ask him to meet with me? I'd do the rest. I didn't tell him I planned to talk with Pietro about my great aunt (who doesn't exist), who raised me and is now in her nineties, living in Elizabethtown, close by Fort Knox, who needs the care I can't afford to pay for. But I can relocate, get a job at Fort Knox, and help out. I have no problem lying, even to a good guy, if I'm doing something I think he would support. Later that day, I got a text that Pietro would meet me near his home in Cave Junction, at the only pizza joint.

I found it early so I sat in the parking lot a few minutes waiting for him to arrive. When he was five or ten minutes late, I scanned the lot one last time thinking I had better go in. The only car in the lot was parked in the farthest space, a faded red, 1963 Dodge Dart convertible. Coming through the door, I recognized him, in the last booth.

"I apologize Congressman. I've been sitting out there for ten minutes waiting for you to pull in."

"I saw you," he said. "Thought I'd let you figure it out but I'm getting hungry now."

"Let me get us a pizza," I said. "What kind do you like?"

"Congressmen find ways to make millions," he said, "but only a fool lets a constituent buy a pizza, when he hasn't heard what the constituent wants. Besides, it has to be bacon and tomato." While he ordered I thought about what to say, but he took the lead:

"Ron says he knows you and you need a reference I may be able to provide?" There was integrity in his eyes, candor on his face.

"I want to audit the gold at Fort Knox, so I need a job there." Sometimes I don't lie—save em for when you need em. He looked at me closely.

“An audit of Fort Knox would require approval of Congress and the Fed,” he replied.

“Yeah, were it to be done formally.”

“Two things,” he said, in that lawyerly way (I think all democrats in the House are lawyers). “First, you would be breaking the law, and second, what makes you think you could do the audit?”

“First,” I answered, “I’d just be counting and I’m not at all convinced what I’d do with the count, besides stay out of trouble. Second, if I get a job there, I can do the audit. It’s like this guy I read about in the letters to *The New Yorker*, who survived Auschwitz for five years. He planned an escape with others, slowly gathering what they needed for SS uniforms, and eating horse feed to gain weight so they would look like Germans. With Lugers carved from wood, they walked out, five miles to the tree-line, passing German patrols along the way. Two of them dressed as SS, with three prisoners. The letter was from Ashland, Oregon, my home town, so I called him because I wouldn’t have this opportunity again. We went to breakfast and talked all day. The point being, Congressman, if he could do that, I can count the gold!”

The pizza was ready He paid and asked questions while we ate.

“What’s your motivation?” he asked.

“I think we’re in the midst of a war most people are unaware of, between gold and paper currencies, a battle where the big boys need to beat down the price of gold to keep their paper credible.”

“You see it that simply?” he asked without skepticism.

“I do. I didn’t always but when I see gold going down and down, while the same reasons I began buying it in 2000 are still in play, except those reasons are more aggravated now. All the little guys who pay their bills and care more about a barbecue or working on an old Ford in the back yard, and who would like nothing better than a gold standard and a rock solid dollar with three or five percent interest on their money, they’ve been shafted. Meanwhile the powers that be, manipulate, doing whatever they need to do to beat down the price of gold, with rhetoric. Gold, a barbarous relic, and when they need something more they sell huge amounts of paper gold into the futures market, amounts of gold they don’t have,

or if they did and wanted a profit, they wouldn't sell all at once, in the middle of the night. In the process they destroy two groups, workers and savers, who are often the elderly." I must have sounded like a run-on sentence.

"You think the government is in cahoots with the banks on this?" he asked.

"They have to be—same endgame. Our government may even be abetting China in their massive purchases of gold by selling paper gold into the future's market to put off a threat from the Chinese to bankrupt us by flooding the world with surplus dollars. The Fed doesn't care about jobs. They care about the banks. If the banks go down the government goes with them, so their job is to keep this mess intact. If what they're doing doesn't work, they'll get rid of cash and confiscate gold, making pirates out of any that don't comply, maybe traitors?"

"How are you different from the wackos on the conservative blogs?" he asked with a smile that I let pass.

"I bought gold because I was scared and because it's a store of value. The transnational tyranny may win out but not because they have any ethical high ground." He looked at me for a time, chewing.

"I agree with you," he said. "not with all of it but I agree with you."

I told him about my talk with Ron Paul.

"You know Congressman Paul wouldn't support the little guy when it comes to food stamps and the minimum wage?"

"I know, but he supports bringing our troops home and getting rid of the Fed."

"Would you rather have him as president than President Obama?"

"I would. There's something about Obama that scares me—under that paper-thin, folksy presentation, there's something askew. I can't stand his voice anymore. It's the voice of someone who let me down—whose lack of courage and vision is destroying our country. Someone working behind the scenes. The beginnings of

fascism. Everything in the state—nothing outside the state—nothing against the state.”

“You make that up?” he asked.

“I don’t know who made it up?”

“Your views are strident,” he said.

“I don’t know. How many of your colleagues voted against the Patriot Act, twice?” Pensively, he replied:

“Because Senator Lackey speaks highly of you, and because I’m curious about you, I have someone I can speak to about getting you employed at Fort Knox.”

“How will I know what to do?” I asked.

“Give me your email address. I’ll talk with him in the morning. It shouldn’t be a problem.”

With that he stood up and shook my hand.

“Let me walk out to the car with you,” I said. “My first new car was a 63 Dodge Dart hardtop.”

I watched him drive off, the old Dodge emitting a propitious feeling about what lay in store for me, along with mixed idlings about Anna. I had a bus to catch.

5

“Getting there is half the fun.” Cunard Lines—crossing the choppy waters of the North Atlantic, many spent a week with a bucket between their knees.

There’s something about a Greyhound trip that refutes the wonder of travel. The best trips are on a motorcycle, in a car, or on foot, go where you choose, altering the route whenever the feeling moves you. Better than the bus is the train, with the dining car, the bar car, the snack bar, the observation car. The bus is a nothing. You sit be-

side whomever that person happens to be. Today, he was from somewhere in the desert kingdoms, obese, gushing pachouli or something like it. I made an attempt at conversation until he gave a look that conveyed any further annoyance would constitute a *fat-wa*.

At the next rest, I changed seats, getting two to myself, a luxurious space to listen to podcasts on my phone and read emails from Spike, my gold dealer. At one of them, I involuntarily shook my head in disbelief. The headline: "Obama Gives Himself Control of all Communication Systems in America". I understand scenarios where total control might be justified, but alongside Obama's war against whistleblowers, his restrictions on protests, his personal drone war, his surge in Afghanistan, his continued support of the Patriot Act, and his surveillance of the entire fucking world—at which Obama and Holder get caught then graciously announce more restrictive rules for obtaining the records of a reporter while announcing a congressional conference concerning drones and surveillance, is bullshit! During the last presidency, I feared that W. and Cheney would not leave office willingly. Now I have the same fears about Obama. Where do we get these guys?

We desperately need a president to explain the kind of pain we need to share to get back on track. Instead, this one passed through his first term with a wary eye on the polls for his second term. Now it's too late. He's downgraded whatever political capital he brought, to deficit. Had the Republicans brought a centrist, without Romney's rip-off company and his dog on the roof baggage, Obama would be back in Chicago writing a memoir on what went wrong.

The bus pushed through the night across open flatland. A slivered, tiny moon, cautiously illuminating an outline of the Rockies, rose up in the ridges. Drifting in and out of dreams about Anna, trying to find comfort in a double seat, two feet short of what I need to stretch out, my mind worked at cross-purposes with my heart, leaving little to assuage my doubts. I woke up cramped, disheveled,

and cranky about having to change buses—squinting into a morning sun that pushed into the horizon.

We offloaded in a sleepy herd, directed through a gate to a waiting bus, with Louisville spelled-out above the windshield. These bus changes happen at all hours and when they wake you from a troubled sleep, that's the worst kind. But Louisville's cool with me, Muhammed Ali's home town. It was 1964 when a young Cassius Clay, fought the heavyweight champion, Sonny Liston, as a seven-to-one underdog. Everyone hated Clay for his big mouth. I was just a kid but I bet everything on Clay.

The waiting bus was a through bus, meaning everybody on board had already staked-out their turf. We were the wannabes, the intruders. I boarded the bus with my smallish BMW motorcycle bag, with no idea where we were. The bus was near full as I made my way down the aisle looking for the least worst possibility. Half the passengers looked as they might be traveling to a fat farm. I don't say it to be mean—it's a fact. To most destinations, the poor have no alternative to Greyhound. That's these people. Towards the back, I came upon a youngish black woman, her hair in cornrows, sitting in the aisle seat, her bag on the window seat. I smiled to myself, having practiced the same hapless attempt at controlling space.

“Would you rather have the window seat?” I asked. “And would you like me to put your bag in the overhead?” She passed her bag to me and moved to the window seat. Setting my small bag on the seat, I went to the bathroom, which was blessedly unoccupied and came back with my face washed and my hair combed.

I introduced myself.

“Lavelle,” she said.

“Along with not being able to jump much higher than a curb,” I said, “another failing of white people is in the naming of their children. My mom and dad might have given me a name, something with a car motif. I could have been LaSalle, but no, a white, second grader, LaSalle, sitting between Billy and Tommy would have been a stretch?” She was smiling now.

“How far you going?” I asked.

“Lexington,” she said, which was farther than Louisville.

“Is that where you live?”

“Yes, I’ve been to see my sister, Vishey.” (This makes my point. Twice I’ve typed Vishey, but since computers are not attuned to black names, it autocorrects to Fishey).

“What do you do in Lexington?” I asked.

“Seeing my people for a couple of days, then back to NYU.”

“What’s going on there?”

“School. I’m doing a PHD in economics.” This was good. An attractive, young black woman, a bit formal, slightly conservative, doing a PHD in economics at NYU. A bus ride companion for me from Match.

“I’m an economist,” I said.

“Really?” she asked, quizzically, well, skeptically.

“I caught the look,” I said, “but I’ve done better than most who pursue wealth on their own.”

“Pray tell?” she asked. “What have you done?”

“What I did was take something my father told me, *Economy is making the relative maximum out of the relative minimum*, and being half Scottish, I naturally put it into play.”

“So that’s it, that simple? How you gonna write a thesis on that?”

“Who wants to write a thesis? I said. “I wanted to understand how it works—how to get rich.”

“Did you get rich? Why you riding the bus rich man?” she said with a half laugh.

“I think it’s a control thing. I’m afraid to fly.” Now, she laughed a laugh of abandon that comes from lifetimes where humor and music were the only saving graces.

I kept on, “I started reading economics. I’d been a builder but it was costing too much for a lot and a building permit. I was beginning to think something was wrong.”

“When was this?” she asked.

“Maybe 2000.” I answered.

“2000, there was six boom years to come,” she said. “You sound like a paranoid.”

“Maybe so, but the seeds of greed had already been planted and were being watered faithfully. Everything was changing in favor of the rich and powerful. It didn’t take a genius to figure it out.”

“So you did what?” she asked.

“I had a couple of hundred thousand dollars, enough to build another house. Houses I don’t sell. I rent them and the numbers no longer penciled so I looked at other asset classes. Gold at \$265 looked the best. In the long run it had to be.”

“How you feel now that it’s collapsed?”

“Collapsed? Gold is worth four times where I bought in. What they teaching you up there at NYU?”

We bantered and the bus purred through the night, a few hours without time, on toward distant cities, with distance measured by the ripening bouquet of passengers in close quarters.

6

Love is like poker—when things go bad, you’re playing to not lose everything.

From Louisville, getting to Fort Knox is not easy. I took Continental Trailways—*Go Big Red*, which took me within forty miles of the Fort, where there would be a shuttle at eight in the morning. The bus was maybe a third full and I didn’t feel like talking or reading. Instead, I watched rural Kentucky pass by, thinking about Anna's boyfriend, Bojan, who had come into my awareness like an oil painting, one brush stroke at a time. I give most credit for my dim-sightedness to Anna who sprinkled our conversations with, "Bojan isn't a problem for us." "Bojan doesn't count." "Bojan has to go." Anna and I were on the phone every day, texting through the waking (and sometimes sleeping) hours. There was one peculiarity. During the weekends, I would hear from her, maybe once—

just a few words. Then late Sunday night our communication would begin anew, sometimes into the night or Monday morning, as early as five, when she couldn't sleep. Then we'd have the whole week for coffee, lunch, whatever?

It was interesting how the lovemaking began. I had to go to San Francisco, where she'd grown up, and where her mother still lives. I texted her on my way south. She texted back, "I'll meet you there." In retrospect, this worked for her. She was going to visit her mother and bringing her daughter along. Bojan would be none the wiser. She texted she'd be there by four or five in the afternoon but later that changed to ten or eleven. "Making arrangements." Early in the afternoon, I concluded my business and asked her what she thought I was supposed to do until eleven. She suggested I get a nap.

I extended my stay at the Hilton for one night but I didn't take the nap. I should have. I'm older than her. I was thinking a nice bottle of wine, a bed. Maybe just the couch. What we did instead, was to go to a karaoke bar. We danced well together. Back at the hotel we made love and it wasn't good. I was tired. She'd told me about sex with her husband (even the anger sex), during which she'd always get off, but our first night together, that didn't happen, then she quickly had to go to her mother's to be there when the family woke up. Which made for another question I didn't ask? If she and Bojan weren't in a committed relationship, why couldn't she stay with me? I'll call that strike three, though at the time, I had no idea I was out.

The next morning she called about nine, all worked up about a pimple—and did I have herpes? I told her that most everybody who grew up in the 60's, and didn't live in the farm belt, had herpes. But I didn't. She came to my room, went to the bed, and pulled down her shorts, getting on her hands and knees. I examined the fever blister, ruminating how nice it would be if Bojan didn't like her to shave. She asked what I saw? I said it was a fully-formed fever blister.

"Could it be herpes?" she asked.

“It’s possible,” I said. “Herpes come in uneven numbers and one is an uneven number. But you don’t contract herpes and have an outbreak eight hours later. Maybe you got it from Bojan?”

“I didn’t. He doesn’t sleep with anyone but me! I’ve only ever been with four guys, including you, and you’re the only one I let in this fast. I don’t know what I’m doing? I didn’t even ask you about herpes?”

“Who’s the fourth guy?” I asked.

“In college. I wanted him to marry me. He was really tall, really handsome, and he wouldn’t marry me. It was a Christian college. I was pregnant and he wouldn’t marry me.

Her shyster husband was also tall and handsome and she’d described Bojan as the most handsome man she’d ever known. I wondered where that left me? Then again, she’d let me in sooner than the others. I told her I thought the pimple was a blister from shaving, which she should stop doing.

“Since you have your pants down and I’m already down here, do you think...?”

When it came to sex, she was the most natural woman I’ve ever known. She scooted back across the mattress until her knees slipped onto the carpet with her butt up in the air. After a few minutes, I stopped. It was half-hearted on my part. Something was troubling me. She wasn’t going to bring it up so I did:

“I’m holding back,” I said. “I don’t know where I stand with you? I need to know about your relationship to Bojan?”

“I’ve been wanting to talk with you about that.” she said, “but it seems like an unnatural thing for us to talk about so I’ve been keeping it compartmentalized. I’ve been with him almost three years. The first part was good. We used to laugh and have fun. Lately, there’s no sex. He says he can’t make love to me until he’s successful.”

I wondered? There’s more than one reason a guy can’t have sex with a woman, but I kept it to myself. What I also kept to myself was the thought that because he couldn’t have sex with Anna, she probably felt abandoned. And I was the backup, a backup who wasn’t performing.

“Anna, is your relationship, at least as it’s understood by Bojan, a committed relationship? And how do you see it?” She came back, I thought, a little defensively.

“Look, you came along and I wanted to explore this possibility. I’m not a quitter! I have pride and I don’t like to lose! Suppose you and I were together and you were going through a rough time and couldn’t make love to me?”

“Like now?” I said, with a small, reflexive laugh. She didn’t slow.

“Wouldn’t you want me to hang in there and not abandon you?” I let go a hard laugh of release.

“You mean, if I were going through a rough patch, I could look forward to you texting another guy a thousand times, tens of hours on the phone, out of town trips, walks in the moonlight, and fucking?”

“You’re blowing this out of proportion,” she said. “That relationship is not how it used to be and I’m exploring something with you. End of story!”

I guess this was our first fight and I’d been told to shut the fuck up! Okay, she was exploring a relationship with me, but she was lying to Bojan all the way. He didn’t know I existed, or maybe he did? And what about our first meeting, the one he didn’t get come to? I gave Anna my first, long overdue, skeptical look. Was Anna lying to me as well as to him? Could she maintain integrity with me while breaking most of her Christian precepts with him? But it was of little consequence because I was in too deep. I would play this out. And I would prevail. Like she said, “Bojan has to go!”

I wanted to leave it be, but the thought crossed, then lingered: Has this women, with whom you’ve fallen in love, erased the fine line between calculation and deceit?

7

An eyewitness needs to think about who he's testifying against.

It was past two in the morning when I got off the bus—I could have used some sleep but I wasn't doing a hotel for less than six hours. What I found instead was an all night donut shop with a half dozen black guys in the back—one doing a crossword puzzle. I hadn't realized how many people in Kentucky were going to be black. Back home there's just a few.

I don't eat donuts but tonight I made an exception, paying homage to my younger days when I cared little about diet. Back then, I'd stop by Winchell's and get a six pack. Always the same few choices, chocolate cake with chocolate icing and maybe the ones with white icing, dipped in nuts. Those are what I got tonight. I used to get a Coke but that seemed over the top.

The majority of patrons, who came and went, were black, though not all. Curiously, each customer, man or woman, most of whom were not known to the guys in the back, were greeted as brothers and sisters. And no bullshit with the women. Tired women heading home to families after pulling a graveyard bedpan shift.

The guy doing the crossword kept asking his posse for help, to little avail. When he asked for an eight letter word for, intending to cause delay, I offered *dilatory*. He gave me a *mind your own business* look, then came back with a shout out:

“Hey man, that's it! How'd you know that? Get your ass back here!” Which I did, spending the next hours laughing, greeting, hearing and telling stories, some that made mine look pedestrian. These guys moved closer along the edge than anything I'd known. In the first light of morning, I exchanged contact info with Antoine, the crossword guy. Yeah, the next time I happened to pass through Kentucky or he found himself in Ashland... .

I got to the shuttle early to make sure I had a place. No need, there was more than one bus. What I wasn't ready for was Fort Knox itself. The place is huge. I found my way to administration and asked for Ira Jacoby, took a seat and spent the next hour getting hungry. When finally he came out to introduce himself, I was looking up at a tall man, salt and pepper hair, with a demeanor and accent suggesting one of the Five Burroughs.

"Sorry I took so long," he said, shaking my hand. "I understand you're a friend of Pietro's?"

"I wouldn't go that far," I said.

"He said I was to take good care of you." Pietro had gone to bat for me? "Have you eaten?" he asked.

"Actually, I'm starving."

"Good, the cafeteria's not half bad." On the way, he asked about my skills. I'd thought about this. I'd been the board president of a successful food coop with sales that had grown from three to twenty three million during my ten terms.

"Why would you leave that for a job here?" he asked.

"That was a volunteer job, Ira, and it was a few years back." I kept on about my organizational skills and the decades I spent as a builder.

"Quite a resume." he offered. "There's various things you could do here. Do you like outside work?"

"I do, but at this point, I think I'd prefer inside work, construction supervision, organizing—maybe auditing."

"Auditing?" he asked, giving me a look, to which I remained unaffected.

"Yeah, one of the things I found lacking at the coop was how few managers knew about the importance of tracking inventory, where it was stored, the amount of stock on hand (the coop actually excelled at this). Tracking inventory saves time and money." He nodded approval.

"I'll make some calls when we get back to the office."

When he got off the phone, he asked me, "Think you'd have any problem getting a security clearance. Have you been in trouble with any authorities, FBI, IRS, or the police?"

“Nothing,” I said. “Honorable discharge, an officer in the ROTC. No problems.”

“Are you aware that the gold holdings of the United States is here at Fort Knox?” he asked.

“Well,” I said, “I guess everybody associates Fort Knox with gold, but I hadn’t thought much about it.”

“No, but when you talked about the work you’ve done, including construction supervision, I thought you might be of value at the gold complex. Of course, you won’t be dealing with gold. Only a few select, old timers with special clearance are allowed near it, but there’s a building project happening there, so maybe that’s where you’re headed. It’s a ways so I’ll get someone to drive you over. The supervisor Lou—he can be a horse’s ass. So be prepared.”

Waiting to meet Lou, I thought about Ira saying I wouldn’t see any gold, but here I was, waiting for an interview at the gold complex. So far it had been easy, except I was about to be interviewed by Lou—a horse’s ass? I suppose it takes a tough guy to manage the gold, maybe even a tougher guy to manage gold that exists only in the imagination. I didn’t know if others had come here with a notion to audit the gold? More likely they came to steal it.

At a job interview, there’s two ways to go: go along with the program, or just be yourself. I was in an enviable position. I wanted to audit the gold but I didn’t need to. I remembered something I had told Anna, *People don’t just become doormats—first they have to get used to lying down.*

Now Lou was standing in front of me, maybe sixty-five, but with the same vitality he had at twenty-five. Obviously Irish. He had the look. Wavy grey hair that at one time had been red. A big head, connected to wide shoulders with short, thick cords of muscle. Impeccably dressed! Charcoal suit, thin lapels, crisp blue tie, not loosely knotted. Shined shoes. But what stood out were the two flag pins, one in each lapel. I surveyed them and smiled.

“Something funny?” asked Lou.

I met his eyes a little too long. I've never gotten the flag pin thing? As Americans, it seems our love of freedom and our willingness to serve our country should be enough without some kind of memento or souvenir (souvenir—the scene after a failed job interview in Stepbrothers, where Will Ferrell asks if they get some kind of souvenir from the interview?).

“Two flag pins, I've never seen two.” The stage was set. I might be out of here in less than a minute.

“Do you support law and order?” He asked an odd and a closed-end question in a manner that didn't invite nonconurrence. What do flag pins have to do with law and order? I demurred a second or two.

“Tough question. Let me put it this way—law and order makes society possible, but when law and order goes too far, it's a crock. Take Nevada Highway 140, from Denio Junction to Lakeview. The same road but no traffic. I mean no traffic. Maybe you see one car an hour. In Nevada the speed limit is 70, then you hit Oregon and it's 55. In Nevada I set the cruise for 74. There's no cops—none. Same in Oregon, but I slow down to 59. An arbitrary crock. Then there's this NSA surveillance thing. No matter what the big government boys tell us, it's unconstitutional, and not what this country is about.”

Lou pushed back: “I wear these pins because the times require we make our priorities known.” I met him straight on:

“Joe McCarthy may have used those same words during his commie *red scare* in the 50's.” He bristled.

“You ever make it through a job interview?”

“I have,” I said, “but I say what I think, and you asked if I found something funny?”

“Can you follow orders and do what you're told?”

“Absolutely!” I said. “When I work, I accomplish my tasks, with enthusiasm. I expect to be treated fairly, but I'm here to give it my all. Nothing less!”

“Ira sent over your work experience. You might be useful to me, if you could remember who's in charge here? Even if I were to give you a chance, housing is scarce. I know a woman with a

room, but with the attitude I'm hearing, I'm hesitant to recommend you. But let's talk about the work. This complex is built on three levels, two above the ground. The gold is stored below ground. Most everyone here knows the vault is below ground because security for the upper stories is not as rigorous as for the vault. The upper stories are administrative. We're in the beginning stages of a major remodel because technology has rendered some of our personnel and departments redundant. Because of that, the entire top story is being given over to Homeland Security. The bullion administration will occupy the first floor."

"Coming to your office, I saw a number of Marines," I said. "Are they security?"

"Yes, there's twenty-five Marines re-locating here as a military adjunct to Homeland Security. They'll take over for the Mint Police, controlling ingress and egress to the building and all security for the upper floor."

"How might I be useful to you, Lou?"

"Someone with building and organizational experience has to work with Homeland Security as my representative for the project. This is my complex and my primary mission here is security, but HS think of themselves as the chosen people. My rep needs to work at smoothing out the bumps with these guys during the remodel."

"I can do that. Do you have any idea of the difficulties associated with being board president of one of the most successful food coops in the country? Along with a vocal minority who become apoplectic at the thought of meat being sold, most everyone thinks the prices for organics is too high. When it came time to do a large expansion, I was the expansion manager, where I came to understand the adage, *a camel is a horse designed by a committee*. I'm a natural for this job, Lou, because I can get along with anyone," which caused my perspective boss to laugh. "If you give me a shot, I'll do it right. But dealing with Homeland Security, I might need one of your flag pins."

I got the job, subject to a daily review. Lou could let me go at a moment's notice, but he won't. I'll do a good job. He gave me the number of the woman with a room and offered to drive me there. I declined, thinking the walk would clear my head. Easy directions, out the gate, right, a ten or fifteen minute walk.

The street was wide and tree-lined, deciduous, the beginnings of a slow molt to winter. I walked along, talking to myself, like I did when things got tough with Anna when I'd fantasize things were different, creating whole conversations in which I had her wanting me back. I had to do it. Just to get through the day.

I was having such a dialogue, careful to not talk too loud or move my mouth noticeably. Sanity is an appearance—in this case based on ventriloquism. I was conjecturing about Homeland Security moving into the top floor and thinking about my friend Alex, and what he and Tara went through with Homeland Security—literally life and death. I wouldn't be bringing up their names any time soon. The whole top story? I laughed out loud. Two marines, walking towards the gold complex on the opposite sidewalk, gave me a look of surveillance. I crossed the street and introduced myself as Lou's expansion manager. I told them I was laughing because I did my boot camp at Pendleton, and these Homeland Security guys were not in the same league as marines. They shook my hand—like Tea Partiers celebrating the passing of Hillary Clinton.

I walked on, continuing my discussion, conjecturing that the gold complex no longer needed two stories for administration since there was no gold to administer. All that was needed was a ministry of obfuscation! I considered my great luck. Day one at Fort Knox and I was the gold complex, expansion manager. Maybe by day three, Lou would be asking me to take the gold home with me at night. I wondered what Anna was doing right now?

8

Love is giving someone the power to hurt you.

My relationship with Anna ended four or five times over eight months. We were like high school sophomores. Until this love triangle came along, I saw myself as having fairly good, emotional balance. Now I'm wrecked. At the Hilton Hotel in San Francisco, we broke up that first afternoon. Deciding it was for the better, we shook hands and she drove off to her mother's. I'd already paid for another night at the hotel so I tried distracting myself with TV which wasn't working when she called. Did I want to go salsa dancing?

Where she took us, there was a blues club downstairs with a good band, but we went upstairs to the salsa dance where a guy was making change from a cigar box on a Home Depot folding table. Music for the sparse audience was a repeating loop of salsa tunes. We danced a couple of times. She'd taken lessons here for years. Her balding ex-instructor asked her to dance. She came back with tales of all the women wanting him. Except her. I thought it fortunate the guy could dance because I saw nothing desirable or interesting about him. Then a younger guy asked her to dance and I went down to the blues bar.

I'd been there maybe half an hour, talking with a guy at the bar and the bartender. The guy on the barstool had been a marine and was now studying to be a clown, following in his father's big footsteps. I told them I'd been up salsa dancing where I met a woman who invited me back to her place after the dancing. She wasn't much to look at, I told them, but when it's getting late, you can't say no to a sweet invitation. Then she came in, all radiant, in her short white dress asking why I left? They looked at me in astonishment. She ordered a white wine and I got a medium coffee with a shot of Baileys, which we had brought to a table. She asked why the guys had looked at her oddly. She liked my explanation.

“You’re no different from other guys,” she said. “Just because a woman likes to dance, you freak out and have to leave.”

This wasn’t a first experience for her? She was deadpan serious.

“A well thought-out analysis,” I mused, “from a woman in a relationship built on Christian precepts, wherein, she’s expected to be a submissive wife who’s not allowed to cross the street alone.”

“Be that as it may,” she said. “I’m here with you because I’m having a problem with those kind of rules and I don’t see you being any different!”

“Anna, instead of being here, you should be having it out with Bojan, letting him know you won’t accept anything less than an equal partnership.”

“That’s not the subject.” she said with finality. I warmed back to the subject:

“Here’s the the way it is with men. We see dancing as a mating ritual, so it’s not okay for you to dance with men I don’t know. If you’re out with a girlfriend, you decide, but not when you’re with me. That doesn’t make me like Bojan. If our relationship was exclusive, you could cross any street without me. I didn’t give you a hard time—I just went downstairs. I didn’t like the way it made me feel to see you dancing with other men so I stepped back. That’s all I control, stepping back or moving forward.”

“Would you have left me there if there wasn’t this bar downstairs?” she asked.

“If we were a couple and we’d had this talk, I would have. But there’s a positive side to this Anna. I’m a romantic, and if I’m into you, it’s just you!”

We went back to the Hilton. This time was different. When she left to go back to her mother’s, I shifted across the bed looking for a place that wasn’t wet. I thought about getting into the fresh bed until I remembered how long I’d wanted exactly this and I fell into a deep sleep, suffused in her moisture and her aroma.

9

A room with a view.

Lou had given me the phone number and the address of the woman with the room to rent. Except for my texting romance with Anna, I like to do things in person, so I thought it best to not call. It was coming on evening, a red sun melting in the horizon, refracting color through the maples lining the street.

I found the place, not a large house, a bungalow from the 50's—a starter house for a family, one story with a low-pitched roof, well kept. A yard worked by persistent, knowing hands. I knocked on the door. Lou had written her name, Aiko. She opened the door with an appraising look, making me unsure about the introduction because I only had her first name and I didn't know if familiarity would be frowned upon by an Asian woman. For an instant I just stood there before she offered a firm handshake, introducing herself as Aiko, with the local accent—totally American. She was slight, small breasted, with short black hair parted in the middle and fanning across her eyes. Late forties—maybe fifty? Dressed for summer, though evenings were much cooler now—denim shorts, rolled up above the knee, white sandals and a dark burgundy tee shirt.

“Lou said he wasn't sure about you?”

“That's right. During our job interview I said what came to mind because I'd been forewarned that Lou could be a horse's ass, and I didn't want to work a job for someone where I had to watch everything I said.”

“That's taking a chance with Lou, but once he accepts you, you're in.” I wondered two things: how in would I be with Lou, if he knew I intended to audit the gold, and, was there something more between Aiko and Lou?

“I like the look of this place,” I said. “the house and the gardens.”

“Do you garden?” she asked.

“I don’t, but I appreciate it. My energy needs to be exhausted into the larger world, on a motorcycle or up a trail—a little rest and I’m ready to go again.”

“Too bad,” she said. “Gardening centers energy and brings beautiful order. Maybe I come by it honestly, being Japanese. We have thousands of years in the garden.”

“But I’m English and growing things is also our pastime. Will you show me the garden? Maybe I could grow something?”

“Are you interested or do you just want the room?”

“I’m interested,” I answered honestly. She stepped past me into the garden and I followed.

“The idea for this garden,” she said, “was to take what I found here, rocks, differences in elevation, trees, and work with it. If a tree or a boulder provided shade, I planted things that don’t tolerate direct sun. I wanted a multi-cultured garden, food and beauty.”

“Masanobu Fukuoka?—*The One Straw Revolution*?” I asked.

“How do you know that?” she asked, incredulously.

“I went to one of his seminar’s. Years ago.”

“And you’re not into gardening, even after that?”

“Even after that,” I replied. “But, I have an appreciation for it.”

“I bought this house,” she said, “because of the property—a large lot with trees and good soil, good enough soil. It hadn’t been worked so it needed nutrients, but it was the best nature could offer.” She took me on a small, late evening tour. I wondered if she had ever been married?

Cherry trees and an apricot tree, which she had planted, were now mature. Japanese anemones, on tall, graceful stems, white, creme, pink, and purple, some with many petals, some with fewer, wider petals. Late summer gladiolas graced the evening light in a rainbow of colors, smiling little faces, stacked on one another. Everything lush with moribundity, and just coming into view, a late full moon on the wane. Green beans, some climbing bamboo poles, some on horizontal strings. And tomatoes, lots of tomatoes, fat ones, small cherry ones.

“What about birds?” I asked. “Do you have bird feeders?”

“Gardeners, especially those of us who grow food or fruit, don’t want birds,” she said. “I tried bird feeders to keep them from the fruit, but too many came.”

“I grew something,” I said. “In the seventh grade. We each had our own plot. When my family moved and I was changing schools, my teacher and I walked out to the garden to grade my work, which was big, fine radishes!”

The room was upstairs. A good room, not large, not small, with a french window facing the maples where the sun was setting. There was only one room for rent and only one bathroom in the house. We would share the kitchen. She would not be responsible for my meals. She offered me the room and I accepted right away, asking if I could move in tonight as I had nowhere else to be. She gave me a key to the front door and told me I should be quiet because she went to sleep early. She offered to drive me to fetch my things. I wanted to walk but the thought of packing my big duffel made me accept her offer, appreciatively.

10

How much of the history of love has to do with three squares a day?

Looking back, one difficult thing for me is the possibility that Anna’s misogynist, marketing Moldovan hadn’t really loved her. Not that I hadn’t strung women along in my younger days, but I really loved Anna. Maybe women had loved me like I loved her, and this was karma—playing catchup? I think that’s why I hung in there so long. I assumed my love for Anna would bring a good outcome, and that Anna was playing me on the square.

After leaving the Hilton, I drove all the way into southern Texas, then west to Bisbee, Arizona, up to Four Corners, then north, all the way to the Bonneville Salt Flats. I took some pictures out on the salt at sunset, one of which I sent to Anna. She texted back, “Wherever you are tonight, I hope you’re all right.” I told her I loved her. She replied that she was glad, but she didn’t say she loved me. I hadn’t heard from her in five days.

When I came home things got better for us. One night, she was driving up from her mother’s and we talked about her working with me and Mason in a company we were starting up. I ordered salmon dinners and she came over. When Mason went to bed, we went into the other bedroom and got naked. She didn’t want to have sex because he was on the other side of a thin wall and she was afraid she’d make too much noise. But she got on top and french-kissed me for a longest time, her wetness moving up and down my belly while she one-handed my erection like a gearshift.

That night I kept the bargain. I wanted her but I held back. Unlike the bargain I would soon not keep: that in a relationship all I control is my presence and my absence, without reacting negatively when my expectations are not met.

11

If you stutter, avoid ‘fast draw’ competitions.

My room was perfect. Because it faced the sunset, I could sleep without invasive light in the morning. Lou told me I could take the next day to get things together, but I knew better. If I showed up for work, it would be in my favor. Before I showered, Aiko asked if I was hungry? “I know you haven’t had time to buy food so you can eat with me.” I thanked her and accepted. When I came out from the bathroom, I could smell bacon and scrambled eggs, with a

cup of coffee and toast. I thanked my landlady again and paid her rent for the first and last months, in cash.

The walk to work was brisk—a fast twelve minutes. This walk would clear my head in the evenings, on the way home, and wake me up in the morning. I hadn't brought much of a wardrobe but I had enough to be presentable. In my small backpack were a pair of handmade, brown, Italian, round-toed leather shoes, and a black, high grade cotton, thin laped, light-weight suit, from the Ludlow Shop at J Crew, along with a good white dress shirt, and a narrow black silk tie. Not good walking clothes, they would remain in my work locker. When I reached the complex, I went into the bathroom and changed before reporting to Lou. I looked pretty good.

I introduced myself to Lou's secretary, Dottie—a throwback name. Lou was in the conference room with officials from Homeland Security, a marine officer, Ira Jacoby, and two of Lou's senior staff. She offered to text Lou to see if I should attend. I told her I was expected. Dottie directed me to the conference room, where I stood outside, taking a couple of deep breaths to quiet my being, like a cross-country skier in the biathlon slowing his heart rate before taking a shot. Without knocking and with a full smile, I opened the door and walked imperiously into the room.

12

When first entering a room, find the exits. In hotels, don't stay above the second floor. In love, ask what might later hurt?

During that evening I spent with Anna and Mason, he asked her about our relationship—candidly. How did she see our relationship, and had she and Bojan been making love? That's Mason. I don't think I let her answers sink in because I later remembered she said something about how she was into this exploration with

me as long as it didn't interfere with her relationship. That wasn't how I was seeing it or how she characterized it when we talked. She told Mason they'd made love the week before. Needing an analogy for what Anna said that night, I think about subsisting on table scraps where there's just enough, as long as the host is none the wiser. That night, her intense physicalness intoxicated me, obliterating her words, until the next day when again I was full of doubts.

Then came the weekend with no texts or calls. I'd danced to this tune before. For the number of days I didn't hear from her, I gave the same back at her, answering neither her calls nor her texts. As usual, I gave in first, but this time I'd made up my mind to move to California. Before leaving, I offered to email the story I had written about our relationship.

She freaked out, saying she needed to see me before I went anywhere. I met her at her part-time job after work. I have few images of Anna that stay with me. This is one. She was waiting outside, in a red print dress, with shoulder straps. She was beautiful. She got in the car and kissed me hard on the mouth, something she wouldn't usually do where we might be seen. We got some lunch to go and went for a drive. At one point we pulled over and talked. We kissed and she told me she didn't want me to move. I asked her why? "Because I love you," she said. She repeated it a few times and when we got back to her car, she kept saying she loved me. That I should go on a trip south but not move away because this thing between us was just starting up. Was this happening because I had stayed away and thought about moving? Did she love me, or was I dealing with the queen of compartmentalization and her two worlds, where she might crown a new champion at any time?

You think you know somebody—then something happens. What happened between Anna and me involved a conversation and a nap. I had been gone a couple of weeks, out with friends and clients one night, when she called. This time apart had made us close. She called me as much on the weekends as the weekdays, and when I asked her about it, she said she'd reassessed things and

wanted to call me as much as she could. And I wasn't getting tired of it. There was nothing that could have come between us except for what did, and my reaction to it! She told me she needed thirty days to break off the relationship with Bojan, which stopped me mid-sentence. I asked her why she needed thirty days to tell him? She said that she wanted the break to be gradual. How could breaking up with a guy who sees you as the weaker vessel be gradual, or anything but difficult?

I still don't get it, though I might. She'd told me that Bojan was leaving in a month, to work in Europe. In thirty days he would be gone, so there was nothing she had to do. None of it would be on her. All her options would remain open. For the past three years she'd been questioning Christianity, as limiting equality between men and women. Yet nothing had changed for them. She was no closer to confronting him for an equal partnership than after our first talk. She continued to see him as a powerful leader who went about giving seminars. Now he would be intercontinental.

What followed was some troubling phone talk and texting between us that I did nothing to stop. She apologized for lying to me. Later, she tried to take it back, saying she was sorry for lying, but the lying had been to Bojan, not me. Then she apologized for lying to me about her relationship with Bojan, and the damage was done.

I was psychologically drained and took a nap. When I woke up there was a long text from her. I wish I hadn't deleted it but I can remember enough of it to recall how it made me feel. In the midst of a difficult relationship, waking up from a troubled sleep, to a message that couldn't possibly have been written by your lover, can take you over the edge. After eight months of weekends during which I might die of loneliness, that edge wasn't far. Her text was a shoddy defense, rationalizing her need to lie, shielding one lover from the other to better explore possibilities. She used words like moral and just (I think she maybe used the word chaste?). She rationalized everything. Instead of saying, *Yeah, you see where I am! I lie to Bojan more than I tell him the truth and in the process of keeping my options open, I've misrepresented things to you as well.*

Ironically, without ever having to tell the truth, not wanting to lie is the insight Anna came to, but not in any way I'd imagined.

She'd said to Mason, "I sometimes think, that he (me) should get together with a different woman, perhaps a bit older, maybe someone with a different mindset, who knows more of what she wants." I let that go at the time because I was her part time lover—Bojan was the man. But things changed when we became the focus. Much of our undoing was my fault because of how I dealt with the thirty days comment and her self-serving text. Instead of giving her thirty days, I went off on her. Over two or three hours, nothing other men might have said to her in the past could have outdone my performance. All my doubts, all my ups and downs, all my lonely weekends, coalesced into one lashing out! Whatever the failings of Bojan, he was now preferable to me. Looking back, it was too bad because I'd played Anna straight—all the way.

When I got back into town we had lunch. I gave her a card: "I'm sorry—I forgot you were my friend." Inside was a couple of hundred dollars because she always needed money. Again things gradually improved to where we were talking and texting. Once, while shopping, she wanted me to buy something for her. I told her Bojan was that man in her life. She suggestively wrapped one of her calves around mine and asked, "Are you sure?" Then one night, she'd been drinking with a girlfriend who wanted to know if I was Jewish because I'm into publishing and making films. Anna asked if I wanted to come over, and was there anything she could do for me?

For the most part, I sustained the distinction between friend and lover (deluded all the while that she and I would end up together). I liked being with her, talking and laughing with her. I wanted to help her get ahead financially, but not by giving her money. Instead, by offering something for her to work at. I had a few young friends who were doing well as independent videographers and filmmakers, and because she was a personable, attractive woman, with a degree in economics and a sales background, I convinced them to give her a look. Then another thing happened.

Mason wrote an email to me, one paragraph, that I was the best friend in any possible world. I wanted to share it with Anna, which I did. The warmest email I had ever received, shared with a woman I loved, brought my world to its knees for a second time. She sternly admonished me for sending it because her email address was linked to Bojan's. That I should email an apology (I assume she meant correction, depending on how careful we needed to be of Bojan's feelings?), for having forwarded the email to the wrong person. I should also mention in the apology that I knew of a company looking for a person, in sales and marketing, with her skill set.

I remember despairing while doing what she asked. I didn't mention the job. If she needed his approval to leave a job that kept her near starvation, she could deal with that. Instead, I wrote that I had intended the email for my sister Anita, not Anna. But I pointed out that the email spoke to the possibilities of equality for all caring relationships. She read it, expressing frustration that I cast doubt on their relationship, that my email was nothing more than an expression of ego. Then, she changed her mind—abruptly. I was awesome and she would simply compartmentalize. Nothing had changed. Even a Platonic friendship would need the approval of Bojan. Live and lie—but never in the light of day.

I was done and I told her as much, but I didn't tell her straight out. Her misrepresenting, along with her over the top reaction to Mason's email, had done us in. We argued. It wasn't pretty, more subdued than the thirty days fight. But it wasn't pretty.

13

You're like a jukebox. I quit putting in quarters and you turn off. Well, not right away—I get my three picks.

Anna suggested we meet. I knew our romance was over, but what she didn't know was I wouldn't accept her offer to be friends and work together. We met at Starbucks where she presented the idea of being friends and working together. There were to be crystal clear lines between us. She and Bojan were the lovers. We were to be the unapproved friends. We could talk about their problems, her problems with her kids, and she could make some money. She didn't present it that way: she said we'd never had a clear path for our relationship. I smiled in bemusement. To reinforce the idea that tragedy needs an injection of humor, she asked to borrow two thousand dollars to declare bankruptcy. I reminded her that Bojan was the man in her life, not me, and if he was unwilling to help her, she needed to ask herself what she was doing with him? I said something about Bojan's bullshit leadership training—that no hierarchical belief system has much to offer in terms of leadership, and besides, we needed less leaders—more self-movement and human interaction!

It's amazing how the prospect of a couple of thousand bucks can suppress the spark of a potential argument. I kept fanning the flames, wishing that before one of her weekends with him, I had slapped her ass hard enough to leave a brand that stayed for two weeks—the spread five ranch!

I told her we didn't have the basis for a friendship. We were lovers—unrequited, but lovers. Without the man-woman part, I didn't want the friendship. I couldn't see much she brought to it. I reminded her that she'd said we couldn't go back. She asked if some of it hadn't been fun? “Like Hurricane Katrina had been good for surfing?” I asked. This past year had been more pain than pleasure, not just because of her, but mostly. Had she offered me,

at the onset, an incidental relationship, while she tried to figure out where she was with Bojan, that might have been different (probably not). Instead, without showing her cards, she played her hand.

She reacted badly when I wouldn't loan her money. In her mind it was because she would not, and could not, be intimate with me. I gave back to her that intimacy without authenticity and courage is simply sex. She was choosing a different life from the one we'd been making together and I saw it as inferior. It didn't matter to me if he was younger, more handsome, whatever it was. I wanted the same thing I'd wanted from the beginning: to know where I stood. I'd spent the better part of a year trying to guess her motives and I couldn't be friends with that. I asked about her decision-making process? Why she was staying in a relationship with someone who *has to go*.

"You don't get to hear anything more because you've already made your choice," she said. Then some prattle about her expecting more wisdom from an older man, which was delivered with a comfortable complacent smugness (no commas—I like the roll). I smiled and agreed with her, knowing I wouldn't let her set the terms of departure.

"The problem I'm left with," I said, "is Bojan. It's not fair that our full-on love relationship was part of his life, without him knowing. I know you think of him as street-smart, but I see him as a plodder who can't see past his belief structure. Still, he deserves to know. He needs to hear it from one, or both of us!" I had no desire for him to know, nor did I want to talk with him. This was all for me. This was the end. There would be no more five in the morning I can't sleep texts.

I was now a threat to her well-being. I wouldn't hear from her again. Unbeknownst to her, I shared the opinion that whatever played out with them needed to stay between them. But at this moment, revenge was one of those dishes, best served cold, to raise the heat. The Starbucks was air-conditioned, but I saw her sweat.

Then one of the two things I wanted to happen, happened. The one that didn't happen was her begging me to not tell—my second choice. What I got instead was the cornered badger, with teeth and

claws. She ridiculed me. She shamed me for my lack of decency. My friend Leon used to say that most people need at least two good rationalizations to get through the day. This devil needed six. When the scoffing and solicitation failed, she threatened me. Bojan was Serbian (I thought he was Moldovan), lived with his cousins, each of whom had killed someone. She was afraid for me if he found out. I smiled, thinking through my Mexican friends—it's never the Bojan who sticks you for fucking his woman. It's the cousin, Alphonso. I wasn't afraid of this small time Christian operator. Besides, there was more cultural likelihood that he and the cousins would take her to a field and stone her. I referred to Bojan by his last name, which she hadn't told me. She walked to the bathroom, unsteadily. Considering whether the moment was best portrayed as, bringing her to heel, or setting her back on her heels, I slipped out.

On the way through life you meet some fun, beautiful people who lie, and in those wondrous first days, you find yourself pushing forward because it feels good. But just below consciousness, in that obscure region between hopes and needs, movement may have already begun down the path of love and attachment, where heartache is the distance travelled before deception pushes up against self-worth. And when that happens, why does it come as a surprise?

I hoped what I'd said to her, along with what I ought to have said: *Who besides me is going to love you when they see what it is they get?*, would make me feel vindicated and strong. But it didn't. Sometimes, even now, the only way I can get to sleep is holding my pillow close as if she's with me. In the spring, when her birthday comes, I'll text her something nice. I mean, I loved her. I still do.

Men and women are different—like night and other planet.

Sometimes, what we want, defies logic. My relationship with Anna should never have been and it makes me wonder what I do want? There's good women out there. Like my new landlady, Aiko. But the Aikos scare me. It's been too long since I've been with a down to earth woman. I wouldn't know how to act. One thing I do know, I don't do well with women who come without baggage.

Let me jump ahead. It hadn't been long since it ended with Anna and I hadn't been on my new job more than a week, but already I was thinking about another woman. Not just thinking, but intrigued by Zoe, another personal assistant to Lou, someone who's job it was to organize and to make secure, the gold complex. That was Lou's job, but it didn't happen without Zoe.

She tended to give everyone a hard time—everybody but me. Maybe she could sense I wouldn't take it. I worked and talked with her daily. Now I was thinking about her at night. We bantered, we talked about books and movies. She'd suggested we take walks and share our poetry. Maybe write together. She was different from Anna, actively interested in the arts. And there was no Bojan or Christian precepts. She'd been out of a relationship for years. Maybe it was a good thing the relationship with Anna had fallen apart?

One afternoon, waiting for Lou to come back from a meeting, I simply asked her,

“Can I sleep with you tonight?” That I asked, surprised me.

“Why do you want to?” she asked. I told her I wanted to be close to her. That was true. She said she'd think about it. The rest of the the afternoon and evening I was energized because I'd asked her. Asking is more important than the answer you get back. Like my friend John says: you can't get a hit without an at-bat. I did a construction walk-through with Lou and when I got back she was

in the break lounge. I asked if she'd thought about it? "You can sleep with me," she said. "I think it would be nice to do some hugging."

If only it were that simple. Zoe's in her late 40's. She asked me, not long ago, how old I was? A question to which I demurred. I suppose it's because I look younger than I am. My dad lied about his age to a woman he later married. Guess the asshole doesn't fall far from the tree?

I had told her about my father lying about his age. Also, about the night he and his new wife got married in Vegas and my dad wanted to go up to the room. Maybe because his new wife was younger and had more energy, she wanted to come up later. She was having fun, gambling.

"You know why you want to stay down?" my dad asked.

"Because I haven't played blackjack in a long time?"

"No, because you're a whore." And he went up.

Zoe was aghast, demanding to know why she'd stayed with him? Years later, after he'd passed on, his wife told me he was the finest man she'd known, the most caring, the most considerate. Her husband had been in a wheelchair and my father had re-awakened her sexually. Once he trusted her, he was a wonderful husband. Zoe wasn't buying it.

A couple of nights before I asked the sleeping question, we watched a movie at her place. The main character's attitude towards women was classic misogyny. But the plot was good and the acting was better. At some point, Zoe went into the kitchen and didn't come back. I finished watching it, then went to her.

"Why did you leave?"

"Why you would watch trash is more the question?" I told her that not all the critics liked the movie.

"I could have told you that," she said

"But they all found the acting superb."

"Yeah, but they still didn't like it. It's a movie about an asshole," she said. "And I don't see why you would watch it again, with me?"

"I wanted you to see it. It's a good film—it doesn't bother me because I'm not that guy and I'm not a woman. I don't have scars from guys like that."

It is a good movie. Life is portrayed as it is—at least as it is for some. But, if the measure of a film is some kind of political correctness or redeeming social value, I fear this movie will be another in a long list that seldom screen. Because there's no Steve Jobs to put all these films into a rental library, the way he did with iTunes, this film and thousands like it will slip slowly into oblivion, with all the early Peter Sellers English comedies—never to be heard from again.

Zoe, my sleeping partner, is something of a new-age warrior, spending her money and much of her time on self-help and enlightenment. I don't know all she does but she's often busy. When we have coffee, she fits me into her schedule.

She has wild hair. When she lets it down it's regular, disheveled. But when it's up—it drives me crazy. I'm hoping to find another thick handful of that hair, sometime soon. She's ample without being fat. She has a fine ass that jiggles and shows itself in much of what she wears. But what I'm looking forward to, mostly, is her belly. It's small. I've been looking at it every day. I want to fall asleep with it in my hand.

Physically she's not my type. Usually, I get involved with smaller women, or if taller, they're trim. Size-wise, she and I are probably within the carnival barker's—*guess your weight within three pounds and win any prize on the second shelf*. Good looking? Enough to keep me interested, and the way she dresses shows off her breasts. I like that.

When I got to her house, the sun had gone down and the lights were off. I thought about leaving, but the front door was unlocked. I made my way down the hall to the bedroom with her giving me directions. Sitting on the bed, undressing, I decided to keep my boxers on. This sleepover had not been identified as a sex date.

I stretched out and rested for a moment in the dark before drawing her to me. She had on a top covering her breasts and tight panties. I wanted to touch and kiss every part of her—her ears, her

calves, her face, and especially her hair and that belly. I asked if she'd take off the top—she said she'd raise it up instead. After some exploring I asked if I could take off her panties and put my mouth down there. She said not now. That for her, that's more intimate than the other thing. I understood that.

She curled next to me, my arm around her, holding her close, her head tucked into my neck. It used to be I couldn't sleep this way with a woman. I needed to sleep with maybe just our bums touching, or for a brief time we could spoon. Now it's different. I wanted her close—my arm draped across her.

I was asleep, at least I think I was, when one of my hands came to rest on her bottom and the strand of cloth between her cheeks. My smallest finger rested in the cleavage, moving slightly with the rise and fall of my breathing. I don't know if I meant to, but one finger became slightly heavier than it's fellows and moved almost imperceptibly. almost by it's own volition. In confluence, her bottom moved, almost unnoticeably, towards me. I strayed in small increments towards what I wanted to touch, then she turned over onto her back, took my hand and laid it on her belly. From there I reached into her panties and found that handful of thick hair I'd been hoping for.

“I wanted to find this. I'm glad you don't shave.”

“I went with my friend,” she said. “Out to some rocks where we got naked. Her's was shaved. I found it pre-pubescent. Never thought about shaving mine.”

Sensing I had permission, I slipped her panties over her hips and down her legs (with a little help). I kissed her belly and ran my fingers through newfound hair, exploring a tuft of furrowed skin that payed homage to what waited within. The tuft was damp and the slit was wet. I kissed and licked on it, working one finger in, and then two. I thought how much fun it would be to get in there three times a day—like monkeys do. Sometimes for just a couple of minutes. At other times the whole thing! At some point I held her in my arms and went back to sleep.

Morning started early, a workday for both of us. She scrambled some eggs, with toast and coffee. She talked about a seven day Zen seshin (session, I guess) she was going to attend, while I glibly went on about the Jimmy Buffet school of enlightenment. Just a few friends—just a few friends.

I don't know why I have such an aversion to authority—whether it be the cops or the Buddha. But people who glom onto systems of authority and belief scare me?

“You'd benefit from a life coach,” she said.

“When did life coaches even come into being?” I asked. “There was no such thing, and then they arrived. And how are the coaches doing? How's their relationships? How's their kids? Zoe, that's what friends are for! Good friends who can ask good questions.”

“That's exactly the problem,” she said. “People and their egos thinking they can deal with lifelong existential problems themselves or with their friends. It doesn't hurt to get a little help. In your case it might give you more respect for spirituality.”

“I already have respect for spirituality. When I have doubts, I read the enlightenment experiences at the end of the *Three Pillars of Zen*—which I believe to be authentic.”

“Then why not take it a step further,” she asked. “Involve yourself in a practice. Maybe something based on the noble truths of Buddhism.”

“Because I'm not sure the noble truths are noble?”

“Now you know more than the Buddha?” she asked.

“Maybe yes, maybe no? To me he's the guy who preached to young people in a garden. And who believed all of life is suffering and the cause of suffering is attachment.”

“I can't accept that you think you know more than the Buddha.”

“Maybe I don't think that? Maybe I think it would be nice to hang with you this weekend. Walk and talk. Watch movies together, eat together, get to know each other.”

“Maybe you're afraid of what you'd see if you opened up to a spiritual leader?” I'd come full circle back to Bojan, the spiritual leader. But I hadn't come far enough to get away and I'd heard it all before: *If you just invite Jesus into your life*—if you really do it

—he’ll take away all your suffering and sins. Bring you peace and certainty. For the most part, I enjoyed life. I didn’t need my doubts to be removed.

“Zoe, forgive me for not being more caring about this, but I don’t see any possibility for psychological freedom until we bottom out, admit how lonely we are, and what we need to change? Life for me is basically a fee-based system. In the end I’ll be asked to pay for my life and my experiences with old age and death. But all is not suffering—maybe the end will be. Attachments are the best part for me. Not the worst. I want to die like Zorba the Greek, old, tough, maybe a younger wife and kids, working a copper mine. Alive! When Zorba was dying, he got out of bed, brushed aside a couple of stout young neighbors, went to the window, dug his nails into the wood sash, neighed like a horse, and died.”

At work, the next afternoon, we had a couple of brief exchanges. She seemed upset. I asked if she was? She’d been angry with me all day—more than she could remember. She wouldn’t have invited me to stay over if she knew what a mockery I’d make of spiritual practice. She asked me again how old I am? I didn’t see it as a question this time—she was looking for reasons to write me off. Tonight, I wouldn’t be holding her and feeling her soft, even breaths on my neck. I’d be at my place, with my biblical allotment of three score and ten—the simple math that informs that life, viewed as a soccer game, indicates when the official time is used up and only the *great umpire* knows the number of stoppage minutes left to be played.

She called me Saturday morning, early. If I wanted to finish our talk before she headed for the Zendo, we could do it over coffee, at her place. She served the coffee, with little trays and napkins. Women are such a wonder! She asked if I wanted to sit on the bed. Like I might rather sit at the table than on her bed? Talking, I told her again, that were I to see anything about myself, it would have to come from me. We talked for maybe a half hour and I said some respectful things about spiritual practice. She was both surprised and pleased about what I said. She moved our coffee things off the

bed and came next to me, taking my hand in hers and rubbing it with her fingers and thumb. We started kissing—her tongue moving in harmony with her thumb.

We talked about relationships. She had some issues with men. She hadn't found the compatibility she wanted. She'd find something with one guy and something else with another. She had good sex with one, which continued even after they broke up. She liked sex. He used to interrupt her for sex, whatever she was doing—yoga, whatever. She appreciated him for that.

She talked about her physicality. At school, she'd been athletic, but tall and well put together. Men had a problem with that—some men. They wanted a smaller woman and were intimidated by her. I told her it wasn't a problem for me. I wasn't threatened by our parity—I'd look forward to it. She spoke of one more problem. She was juicy. She liked sex, she's ample, and she's juicy. Men have a problem with that? Really? She told me I was incredible!

15

There's two ways to alienate you—be critical of you—or present an alternate view of reality.

Zoe was off on her Zen thing, and the next morning I was off to a week of meetings in D.C. with Homeland Security. I drove the thousand miles from Fort Knox to D.C.—straight through the night. The last stretch, over three hours or so, I recorded into my iPhone, almost in a stupor, “You're Nobody Till Somebody Loves You”, maybe a dozen times. The best one (none were very good), I sent to her, along with a poem I had written on the road. I'd get inspired and pull off the highway to make a voice memo. When I had most of it, I pulled into a truck stop to eat and write. I emailed it to her in the small hours.

prayer

this one thing i ask
this ample woman
give her to me

let me slip behind her
on the couch
lifting under her knees and
working into her
until we sleep
my dreaming hands on her belly

let no one know what I have
let no one see
her blush
at dinner
or the slight touch on my neck
as she passes
from the kitchen

and when the moon be waxing
or harvest
let the couch
not suffice
her jailbreaking of my dreams
in the small hours
her busy hands
and probing tongue
betraying insane hair

forcing unspeakable demands
her farm girl thighs and ass
beating my body
into sheet steel
pounded as on a factory floor
in just enough morning light
to glimpse her eyes
that rend homilies asunder
setting loose
this dangerous woman

let it finish
each time
with her finding you
then spent against me
my belly a swamp
of rivulet souvenirs
small pools on the bedclothes

She texted she was a lucky girl. She got a song as well as a poem. She sent a poem in response. Her poem was sensual and sexual, with allusions to our future. Her next to last stanza was powerful, yet she followed it with a stanza that had no right to exist. I lauded the poem, reminding her that emphasis belongs to the end. Her response: “Yikes!” The opening word for our eventual debacle. She called a day or two later saying she needed to hear my voice, but we soon hit more bumps along the texting road, until she sent a reminder that she was pursuing spiritual self-knowledge, making her emotionally unavailable for a relationship.

I told her I needed to back away. She responded with her hope that I didn’t back away from the friendship—with a semicolon at the end of the text. Someone had to explain to me that a semicolon

is a wink, which explained her followup: if there were something in this for us, it would be there for us later.

She had pulled back. I reminded her she was almost fifty, and she didn't have a relationship that gave her what she needed. And she was giving me just enough to support my existence. She agreed with the last part. She disagreed with everything else. A couple of times I sent late night texts and apologized for waking her. She texted back that she liked the nudge.

Our differences grew and we tried to deal with them through texting which is a vehicle from hell—the devil's scribblings. I had made things worse by replying with song lyrics, which infuriated her. At some point our texts became despair.

Again, when things didn't go my way, I didn't back off without reacting. So far, it hadn't been nearly as bad as with Anna. That was some consolation. When I saw what was happening with Zoe, I asked that we forget this past week? She couldn't do that, but she could start over without the putdowns and retribution. She was cautiously optimistic about our friendship, but for her, psychologically and sexually, where the door had been open a crack—that door would now remain closed.

I wanted to stop being critical of her, and everyone else. I needed to accept my condition of lonely, shaky self-confidence. Let other people be, without expectations from me.

In her last text, she mentioned the first two of the Four Noble Truths of Buddhism, which translate as: *All is suffering and the cause of suffering is attachment*. Difficult to open the door any more than a crack with that on the other side. Besides, I was a lousy Buddhist, disputing the first truth. Then again, one of the things I enjoy is disputing what I take issue with.

Besides, I'm into attachments. I love my friends, nature. I love music, books, movies, motorcycles. And I could love the hell out of one woman. Of course, she'd have to be prepared for 5000 apologies along the way, and she'd have to be okay with the possibility that if all the women in the world, four billion of them, were

to line up, facing me in a single file, there would be some chance I could alienate each of them, one at a time.

Her texts were becoming more and more structured to where it felt like a job interview. I made attempts at making things more casual. I suggested we enjoy it now—pay later. She dealt with my suggestion rather harshly. I stopped soft-shoeing, pointing out that acolytes, denunciates (this is what came up on spell check for renunciates), are often people with disdain for life, having experienced the dregs, losing a loved one in a fire, a car crash, etc. There was no reply from her.

I got back to the Fort a day before she did. When she finished her time at the zendo, there were two long emails waiting for her, sent from me as PDF's. They were made to look like cards, conveying I would respect her way, her path, as long as she'd respect mine. That was a Thursday. I didn't hear back. Finally, on Sunday, I called her. She'd been busy, she said, so many emails and texts from friends while she was gone for a week. I looked back through my texts and emails. Over seven days, two weeks ago, there were 117 from her.

Monday morning, I had a briefing with Lou to discuss my meetings with Homeland Security. Before we went into it, he had something to tell me. Zoe would no longer be with us. Her desk had been cleared and her office re-assigned. I was bewildered? How could she quit her job, end her career, over me wanting my own spiritual path? I tried to let it go and concentrate on the talk with Lou. I had a job to do.

Mid-sentence, he changed the subject: "I don't let a personal assistant go without an explanation, especially to another personal assistant. Zoe was good at her job—exactng. Too exactng. Over the past few months, when we didn't see things the same way, I would leave discussions feeling as if I'd been dealing with a demanding wife and not someone with a job description to support my decisions. I had to let her go. I'm sorry it played out this way, and that you have to find out about it like this."

Lou didn't seem bothered Zoe was gone. I was. I suppose it's because I'm a romantic and things between us had looked good for a time. While Lou was telling me why he let her go, I thought back to an earlier time when I had wanted to go to Marfa, Texas and to the Isle of Man. She'd wanted to go with me. And her comment about my poem, "I like it too much."

Towards the end, I'd asked if she'd take a look at something I'd written. She didn't get back to me. I asked about it a couple of days later. She texted that it had problems with punctuation and there was a misspelling. I asked if her response was a spiritual bitch slap?

I didn't hear from her after that. I have my work and I have my audit to conduct. And I have one noble truth to work on. The same one I wanted to have with Anna and then with Zoe: lower expectations, don't react, be okay with being lonely..

16

Character flaws, masquerading as human beings.

Besides my loneliness and troubles with women, I had a difficult job. My boss, Lou, had been in the Marine Corps, where he acquired a no-nonsense military outlook—size up the situation and act. He was tough, but he was a team player who appreciated and recognized good work.

Upstairs, was Homeland Security, or should I say the Secret Service? After 911, many government agencies were placed under the Homeland Security rubric, with a mission to protect the United States from attack, from inside our borders. Initially, the department was to include the FBI and the CIA. Before 911, disparate agencies had made 911 possible by withholding information from

one another. Post 911, the plan was to combine agencies to make for efficiency.

Instead, they'd created a many-headed hydra, funded to the tune of sixty billion dollars a year, with 180,000 employees, all of whom were initially stripped of their collective bargaining rights and union affiliations. To combat the terrorist threat, we can't be having union reps. Employees could be let go without explanation, because disclosing the reasons could put national security at risk? No due process and a re-write of JFK's famous quote: "Ask not what your country can do for you", became, "Which of your personal freedoms are you willing to give up to your country?"

Then there's the word *homeland*. When I was growing up we referred to what went on inside the United States as domestic, which I suppose didn't have enough of the *fatherland* ring to it. Homeland is better—one step closer to fascism.

As it played out, the FBI and CIA were able to shake free and continue their oppression of freedom on their own terms, but the Secret Service became part of HS, in our case, assigned to the Bullion Depository. The Department of Defense maintains our security, outside of the United States, and at first glance one might assume the Secret Service belongs there rather than being let loose on our citizens. But no, they're part of Homeland Security.

Clint, I'm not allowed to call him by his first name, but for this account, that's who he is. He's in charge upstairs and he's a Secret Service man. Like the old Johnny Rivers' song, "Secret Agent Man". Upstairs, they're all from the Secret Service. I don't know whose crony Clint is, but it looks as if somebody got his brother-in-law a plush job, because Clint is not as quite as bright as a yellow lab and his world view is best described by my friend, Alex, who likes the term, flat-earther.

For instance, Fort Knox has it's own police force, the Mint Police. They know their job, they're professional, and they've been here since back when we had gold that needed protecting. Clint and the secret agents showed up at the first meeting with Lou, Ira, and myself, with a proposal to get rid of the Mint Police, replacing them with a Coast Guard deployment (the Coast Guard is part of

HS). Lou tried to be diplomatic and I worked to keep him that way, but he couldn't help himself, "Clint, do you see any ocean around here?" Which made for some guffaws, and the last time anyone referred to Clint by his first name. They came to a compromise—Bullion Depository security would be provided by the Marine Corps, but the vault would remain the jurisdiction of the Mint Police. A compromise Lou didn't mind at all. Semper Fi!

Sixty billion dollars a year to fund HS is 60,000 million dollars of mostly wasted money! We knew about plans to use airliners as weapons and didn't think to put flight instruction schools on the lookout for students seeking instruction in how to steer planes? We could have saved sixty billion dollars a year by coordinating agencies and firing somebody big who didn't want to share information.

In the end, Fort Knox got the Secret Service, which is fitting, given that Congress does not have the right to audit the gold, because the amount of gold is a secret. Within it, the Secret Service has a federal law enforcement unit that deals with financial crimes and the counterfeiting of treasury securities, which originally could not have been counterfeited because treasury securities were gold and silver.

There's an interesting statistic concerning Homeland Security. Of the thirty-six government agencies polled, HS has the worst job numbers overall: in management, leadership, knowledge, job satisfaction, and results oriented performance. Areas with the poorest results include: management and supervision, rewarding creativity and innovation, recognition for a job well done, and lack of information about what's going on.

17

The gods stumble forward, inept, lugging our just desserts.

Hank Grey first showed up at the weekly meeting with Clint's posse. I refer to them as a posse because there's an element of self-appointed, self-righteousness about them, and they're armed. I took an occasional look at Hank, wondering who he was? Not tall, slight, maybe fifty, with salt and pepper hair, he commanded a presence. It was a given that Lou and Clint were in charge, but something about Hank went beyond that.

The meeting concluded without an introduction but he approached me. Behind steely grey eyes, he proffered a hand and introduced himself: "Hank Grey," he said, "Personal assistant to the director." I introduced myself as the personal assistant to Lou. He knew.

"Why didn't Clint introduce you?" I asked.

"You're not supposed to call him by his first name," he said, "and he didn't introduce me because he's an asshole." Was I hearing this?

"You refer to your boss as an asshole, to someone you don't know?"

"The world is what it is," he said. "Anything that gets done here will depend on the two of us—if you're not in touch with reality, it's better for me to know it now."

"What happened to your fingers?" I asked. When we shook hands, I saw that three fingers on his right hand, excluding the forefinger, had been sliced off, across the first knuckles.

"Nam," he said, with just a smidge of John Wayne. "I was taking pictures in Saigon, my M16 strapped across my back, when this guy came at me with a machete. Like a fool I raised my hand to protect myself."

"Then what happened?"

"I killed him."

Hank and I began spending time with each other. With Zoe gone, I had no one. I had Lou and Ira, but if we shared anything beyond the job, they weren't saying. Not guys to hang with—Hank and I were the teenagers.

Winter came, early and hard. One morning, I had just arrived at my office when Hank came in without knocking.

"You got anything vital this morning?" I didn't.

"Great, let's go!" he said

"Let's go where?"

"None of that," he said. "Just dress warm and let's go." We were becoming best friends and that's what best friends do—go along without question?

It had snowed all night. When we reached the railway tracks, we headed up towards an abandoned radar station and train tunnel, maybe six miles from the Fort. Only once had I seen a train go up these rusted tracks. About a mile out, we were spotted by an army patrol in a Humvee, which came to a fast stop. Three guys with weapons, spread out and approached. Hank was unconcerned.

"Face down on the snow now!" yelled the closest soldier.

"If my face touches the snow," said Hank, with unnatural calmness, "you will either be reassigned or out of the service by morning." Like that first meeting, Hank commanded a presence. He wasn't fucking around. It was obvious.

"Who are you?" asked the soldier, warily.

"Do I have permission to produce my ID?" asked Hank.

After seeing the ID, the soldiers retreated.

"May I see that?" I asked. It read: *Hank Grey—Law Enforcement—Homeland Security—The United States of America.*

Breaking an uphill trail through the snow between the tracks, I sang some Elvis songs. Then we both did.

"I prefer Orbison," he said, which launched us into a Roy fest, which would have met with outright prolonged laughter on American Idol. The air was crisp but I wasn't cold. I looked back on the Fort, which grew smaller as we ascended. Stark and clean air reflected off the snow, suggesting I bring sunglasses next time.

We reached and passed the radar station, causing no interest in Hank, as we pressed on for the tunnel. I asked why he kept looking at his watch?

"There's a HS drill at three," he said. "They're bringing a locomotive with a boxcar and a caboose, up through the tunnel. Of all tunnels in the United States, this may be the narrowest, and I intend to be in that tunnel when the train goes through." He gave me a challenging look.

"I want to see what I'm agreeing to before I say," I answered.

He was right. The opening of the tunnel looked to be in miniature. It seemed doubtful a train could push its way in. Narrow and long, straight, with a spot of light at the far end. I looked at my phone. We had fifteen minutes.

Inside, I turned on my iPhone flashlight. It was pitch black and the porthole at the other end was more hope than light.

"Turn that fucking thing off," he said. "Make like the enemy's in here with us."

I felt my way along the rock wall, finding a post, maybe a 10x10, every ten or twelve feet. About a third the way in, I heard a train whistle. We said nothing and kept moving. The decision had been made. I would be in the tunnel when the train came through. I wanted to use the flashlight but I couldn't bring myself to show fear to this bastard. I searched for any indentation in the rock but had to settle for a thick post, maybe an inch thicker than the others. Thank god we weren't big guys. Hank was against the wall across from me.

The engine came into the tunnel and bore down on us with its headlight giving off a frenetic up and down warning. Then it was passing, missing the posts by no more than five or six inches, filling the tunnel with diesel fumes, making it difficult to breathe, which sent a shot of adrenaline through my system. Hank had been wrong about the train, as boxcar after boxcar passed, an ancient diesel freight train with no end in sight. Keeping an elbow close to my body I took out my phone and turned on the light.

The train was passing at maybe five miles an hour. The boxcar doors were open, to where every few seconds I could see Hank. As in a movie—five frames of train—one frame of Hank. In the rank air, my mind was becoming a fog.

Hank yelled something like: "We gotta get the fuck out of here," and in the same instant, using my beam of light, he leapt for a box-car opening. There was no sound and I couldn't see whether he'd made it. Now it was my turn, but making the leap while holding the light was unlikely. Which pissed me off! Without the light, the dark boxcars and door openings differed by no more than two shades of black.

Whenever I bent my knees to jump, I'd get shaky. Years back, I'd stood atop some rocks along the Applegate River, after telling everyone I was going to jump, but the outcropping below projected out just far enough for fear to find its way into my legs each time I readied to jump. After several failed attempts, I quit trying and just stood there looking down at my friends. I don't remember jumping or deciding to jump. Just hitting the water.

The caboose passed and headed into daylight at the end of the tunnel. Hank was waiting for me when I came out.

Next morning Hank popped into my office and plopped a book on my desk. *Ever Since Darwin*, by Stephen J. Gould. I'd heard of this guy but not read him. At lunch I opened it to the first page: "Organisms vary and pass on to their offspring these variations, but organisms produce more offspring than can possibly survive, and offspring that vary most strongly in directions favored by the environment will survive and propagate by natural selection." Of course, that was it, natural selection, not survival of the fittest! If, during the industrial revolution, there were species of moths that lived on warm brick chimneys, greyed by smoke and dust, those moths that tended more to grey, being less visible to predators, were selected while the white moth population ceased to exist.

Over the next months, Hank and I read most of Gould, article by article. Gould was a font of scientific theory and knowledge as well as natural history. We got together and talked about articles, maybe twice a week. Our meetings were becoming common knowledge around the Fort and others wanted to join us. Hank agreed and we set up a meeting, to which he didn't show up. No call, no nothing. It was a Friday and I didn't see him until work on

Monday. When I brought it up, he waved me off. That was the end of it.

Hank was enigmatic but that was okay with me. We all have our quirks and there was much about him I admired. But, as with Anna, there were signs of trouble—about which I was in denial.

When spring came, he knew the common and Latin names for plants and birds. Most days we'd take a hike, with him pointing out blue sailors (chicory), and in the next moment, shooting stars. Or he'd burst into my office, "You best come quick—you won't see what's outside, this side of Oregon." Halfway up a birch or aspen, drumming for his lunch, was a Red-headed Pileated Woodpecker, the size of a small crow, black with bold white stripes down the neck and a flaming red crest. Hank was right—the only other place I've seen one, is Oregon.

For all I loved about Hank, there was much that gave me pause. Those moments of pause came more often the longer he was around. His attitude became increasingly condescending. He had an extensive vocabulary and when he used a word I didn't know, he would slight me. On the other hand, he was a helpful guy. When one of the Marines called for help with a rattlesnake behind his water heater, Hank insisted we go to the rescue—with a bit too much melodrama (Hank insisted the guy's attractive wife and two kids go back into the house). I didn't see a reason for them to leave—it was a two-car garage and the snake was twenty feet away, hiding under the water heater. Something kids would want to see.

Hank went to work like a journeyman snake handler, dragging in from outside, a cardboard box for a kid's bicycle. He taped the long side flap shut and cut one end off the box, then he placed the open end against the heater. We beat on the tank with broom handles until the snake went into the box. Then Hank turned the box on end and out of the garage we walked, with a rattlesnake at the bottom of a cardboard box. The appreciative Marine wife, Darlene, (one of many women Hank had sex with during his time here) watched from the kitchen door. We walked the box to a bridge across a fast-moving irrigation ditch. For fun, we dumped the

snake into the water. I swear I heard him hissing as he swam with the current, sidwinding downstream.

The thing with Hank and women was a phenomena. He was incapable of sustained positive emotion (though he did seem to sustain and care about our friendship, at least for a time), but many women found him irresistible. Not all women. I remember thinking about it in terms of a savvy factor. If a woman was savvy to the ways of the world, she could size up Hank and shut him down in short order, but if a woman was needy, with a history of troubled relationships, Hank was in. Sometimes these women were good looking. One was especially good looking, a sergeant from a tank battalion. In her fitted uniform, she could take away your breath. Hank was getting it on with her the second day they met, along with two or three others in his active file at the time.

Attempts at dealing with his faithlessness made things worse. He and the sergeant, Molly, had a blowup, then decided to get married. She moved out of military housing and rented a house for them in town. She moved in on a Friday and he was to move in Saturday. He never went to the house, and as far as I know, he didn't speak to her again. When he was no longer at the Fort, she talked to me one night, in tears. I asked what was so special about Hank? "Those hands. It was those hands." Maybe it's sour grapes on my part. Hank could do more with three compromised digits than the rest of us with standard equipment.

One afternoon, at his apartment, we talked about astrology. Hank was a double Scorpio. That told me something. Scorpions are reputed to be sexual, and have the most potential of all the signs for transformation. Of course, transformation can go either of two ways. Astrology is considered to be unfounded—but when it comes to Scorpions, it may be hard science.

That was the same afternoon he showed me his album—nude photos of his many girlfriends, neither pornographic nor salacious, but nude. Which to me betrayed a needy self-consciousness. The women of his life, and they were all nude.

There was no way for Hank to sink roots here or anywhere else, because he would soon run out of women. Women talk, and it wasn't long before the word was out. That left only uninformed females (sounds like uniformed) and that's the direction he went. Other than Elizabethtown, where his reputation was getting around, he was restricted to base, and the hundreds of army wives stationed at Fort Knox.

That worked for Hank. Presidents W. Bush and Obama had devastated many an army marriage through long, isolated tours in Green Zones. Lonely wives with husbands on deployment. Others were living with husbands they no longer knew. All of which presented opportunities for Hank, except for one inevitable problem—two, considering the likely consequences. Lonely wives are not above revealing they have a lover, during heated arguments, as a last resort, to get the attention of their husbands. Arguments that take place on military bases which are statistically among the most dangerous places in America, populated by troubled men, having returned from meaningless wars, now shopping for groceries with automatic rifles.

Hank and women went from bad to worse. Rumors abounded of angry men, and women. Still he kept on. There was this one older woman that stalked him. She was unattractive and weird. What was she doing here? Was she military, ex military? Why was she allowed sit on a wall or a lawn, on a military compound, and move along as Hank's shadow? This went on for weeks before she finally disappeared.

It sounds as if we didn't do any work but that wasn't the case. Work for us was like school for teenagers. When the day was over, unless we had homework, we were done. Besides, the remodel was going well and as long as Hank and I got along, everything fell into place. Even my audit took a back seat to Hank. At times I came close to telling him what I was planning, thinking he might join me. But something held me back. Scorpios have that stinger, and if you end up on the losing end... .

To have more time outdoors, and to be able to leave the depository earlier in the day, we would devote the first part of our hikes

to work. There were always problems needing resolved. Homeland Security, for me, was impossible to deal with, like a endless boxing match I had no chance of winning because I had no power punch. Instead, I held them off, one day at a time, with my jab and foot-work.

Things with Hank were beginning to strain because of the women and his not showing up for things. But those things had no direct effect on me—or us. When he first arrived, other than hanging with me, he kept mostly to himself. Now, he had a group around him, seeking his approval, and he found a way to capitalize on it. Poker. He bought a round oak table and every Monday night was poker night. Hank never lost. On a bad night he would be \$100 ahead but on a good night maybe \$500. The guys didn't mind losing because they got to be with Hank. And Hank was the man.

He wanted me there but I'm no gambler. He still wanted me there—to *kibitz*. He said they liked my sense of humor. I suppose he thought I could keep the sheep merry while he fleeced them. I went the first two times but that was enough. One Monday, after work (we didn't hike on Mondays anymore because it was poker night), I went to his place to tell him I wouldn't be at poker anymore. He was cold towards me and I noticed, though Christmas was long gone, the tree we'd cut together was still up, mostly dead, and his presents, one of which was from me, were still under it—wrapped.

That night he lost heavily, which brought him back to our friendship. But now, things about Hank bothered me and some things scared me. Over the course of months, he'd either alluded to, or told me too much about his personal history, and I had done the same. Something like waking up in a police interrogation room only to discover you've signed a confession. Some things he'd told me were about killings—murders? One had something to do with a hitchhiker, and another, about his best friend, Alan. He came close to telling me he'd murdered Alan.

Clearly, his life before arriving here had been macabre. His time at the Fort was an interlude, a respite from a sinister reality, a

respite where I had a starring role. Now, he shared less. He lost money at poker to the point where he shut it down, disparaging the other players. More than a few times, he referred to me as Alan. One might mistake the name of one's best friend for another, but I knew something of Hank's dire past. Maybe he sought my company as a way of keeping an eye on me. I thought hard about forgetting the audit and moving on.

One of our favorite hikes was up a dirt road to a crossroads, then down a trail to the Fort, but there was no more singing, no more plants and birds (maybe once in a while). If there was natural selection, it now had to do with him and me. One afternoon, up at the crossroads, there was a car, some kind of used-up sports car, inhabited by a couple of large derelict hillbillies, with the windows rolled up, with just a crack at the top, out of which sheets of smoke, wafted. Beside the passenger door were five or six beer cans and cigarette butts. Hank went up to the passenger window and rapped with his skeleton ring. When they didn't respond he rapped harder until the window came down. He pointed to the trash.

"You're not thinking of leaving that trash?" There was no response so he just stared at the guys, who together outweighed him two hundred pounds.

"No, I guess not," the closest one said. But that wasn't enough for Hank. He backed off maybe ten feet and stood there until the guy got out and picked up the mess. Back down the trail, he said to me, "I need to borrow a thousand bucks. I can pay you back in thirty days." The gambling had gotten out of hand and he owed money. We both knew what the money was for but it didn't stop him from asking. Loan him a grand and I would get it back in a month. Maybe yes, maybe no. I was thinking more along the lines that it might be worth a thousand bucks to put Hank behind me.

The affairs with soldier's wives continued. I sometimes wondered if there was a better chance he would turn up dead than make it in the next morning. But he was always there. Lou took me aside one afternoon to talk about it. I mostly leveled with him. He was con-

cerned but there wasn't anything he could do. His relationship with Clint and HS didn't extend to getting rid of one of them.

Then something happened with the husband of one of the wives. One night, there was a serious confrontation between Hank and the husband. Serious to the point where Hank didn't come in for three days. Then the husband was gone, as though he never existed.

A couple of days before the clash, Hank had asked me to help roll a classic Mercedes from their carport, which he wanted to take into Louisville to sell. I declined. Now the husband was gone, along with the Mercedes. His wife stayed on for a couple of months, and whatever had happened didn't slow Hank, who was often in her company, a happy couple until he simply stopped seeing her. Sometime later, I talked with her—just a how you doing? I didn't ask about her husband or the car. Hank had told me she was in on the caper, his rationale for why it was safe for me to help him. She brought up Hank, then looking like she wished she hadn't, she said, "I know you've been his friend and lately you've turned on him, but Hank was just what I needed. Life was bad and he gave me what I needed. Without him I don't think I could have made it."

There it was again, Hank was the guy and I had turned on him? I'd see him on the tennis court, in his short shorts with socks pulled up above the calves, laughing and joking with an Army nurse, Paulette, with her great body and almost non-existent waist. With Paulette around, I was on call only half time, which was fine by me. A couple of times the three of us walked. The last time, when we got back to his place, he said she wanted to buy a house, and since I knew about real estate, would I take some time and talk with her? He left us out front while he went inside. We talked, maybe half an hour, in plain sight. When I'd shared with her what I knew, she went inside.

Half an hour later, there was a frantic knock on my office door. It was Paulette and she was a mess. How she'd gotten past security was beyond me. She'd been crying hard and her cheeks were stained. When she'd gone inside, Hank had beaten her, throwing

her down several times. She asked me to help. I had no intention of helping her but I told her I'd talk to him.

I went over to his house and knocked but he didn't answer. Then I saw him coming from the side of the house—a 38 in his belt.

"You best not be here to fuck with me," he said. The calmness I was used to seeing wasn't there. I lied:

"No intention Hank. Just wanted to see if you were all right?"

"You know Alan," he said. "Even a great body doesn't do anything for me after awhile." I nodded.

I don't know why they kept him as part of Homeland Security? They must all be psychos. That's the only explanation Lou could come up with. Hank wouldn't have lasted a day with the Bullion Depository. Then, one morning, out of the blue, Hank handed me a thousand dollars, money he'd borrowed from his brother in Santa Barbara. He didn't repay debts. Was I more important to him than his brother? That I got my money back made me more important, and it scared me!

The last Saturday in May, I had to work in the morning and when I got back to my room, Hank was helping Aiko clean out the garage for a dump run, using a HS pickup truck. I had no idea they even knew each other. When I saw Lou on Monday, I told him and he warned Aiko about Hank. I steered clear, remembering, if a woman were troubled, or, as in Aiko's case, had been lonely for a long time, Hank prevailed. They saw in him, an outsider, someone who had been denied fair access to the world and they reached out to him. Aiko and Hank became lovers. He was now at my house constantly. I'd lie in bed at night listening to them go at it, wondering if the naked photo had been taken? Lou didn't hear from Aiko and there was a coolness from her to me. I wondered if I should start looking for new digs?

Now I was worried about the pistol he had with him wherever he was. It would be next to him when they watched TV, on the kitchen counter when he chopped vegetables. There was distance between us, which I didn't mind, except it was being played out in

my living room. Sometimes, he looked at me through those cold, grey, maybe murderous eyes?

Then things changed again, abruptly. His time at my house shifted from constant to never. Instead, he wanted to take hikes and talk. I was the default. When all else failed there was me. I didn't like it—in fact I hated it. But more than that, I hated myself for putting up with it.

"Let's go back up to the tunnel," he said. I didn't want to go but I feared what might come my way if I refused. He brought the gun, which was something he hadn't done before. Maybe half way up the tracks he stopped and pulled out the pistol then put it back in his belt. He took some papers from his pocket on which he'd written names. Clint, Lou, Ira, and others. No women's names. He set about attaching the papers to bushes, then pulled out the pistol and started shooting at the papers. He was worked up, occasionally looking at me to see if I was afraid, which I was but I didn't let on. I'd had enough.

"I need that \$1000 again for a month," he said. "I'll get it back to you."

"I'm done loaning you money, Hank, and I'm done with this gun bullshit. You're whacked and the last thing anybody needs is you with a gun."

"You gonna be the one to take it from me," he said, coming straight for me.

"No," I said, "but I'm the one who's done with you unless you get rid of it." He started down the trail without me, for maybe a hundred yards, then turned back quickly and came towards me with the gun out in front of him. Just because you love someone isn't reason enough to let them live. I lost my composure and found myself weakly reaching for the gun, the same move Hank had used on the guy with the machete. He pulled the gun out of range and laughed: "I came back to give you the gun," he said. "I'm liking your new attitude."

Then one morning Hank didn't come in to work. No one said anything about Hank not being there. He was gone and nothing was said.

18

"License and registration, please."

April came and my job was phasing out. The remodel would be completed in two months and I had no ideas for getting into the vault. Ira had been asking me where I wanted to work next. Aiko hadn't warmed towards me since Hank left, even though I'd done nothing to create distance between us. On some level, I expect she was embarrassed, adding to the imperative that I finish what I had come to do, and get out of here.

Maybe I was being stupid to think I could pull this off. I reminded myself that I wouldn't get caught. I wouldn't end up like Edward Snowden, then again, you don't take on the Empire and predict the outcome. Were I sane, I might have taken into account that I was dealing with the Department of the Treasury, the United States Marine Corps, and the Mint Police (all of whom were armed), at a facility regarded as impregnable. I remembered early recollections about Fort Knox. The comedians, Abbott and Costello, making jokes about nothing being safer than Fort Knox, and the saying on the street: "I wouldn't trade for all the gold in Fort Knox." I had my doubts about the gold, but no doubts about the depository being secure.

Getting to work in the morning was about security. The depository was ringed with electrified fences, security alarms, video cameras, microphones, razor-wire, and tank battalions. If needed, there were helicopter gunships and artillery.

There are no visitors allowed in the Bullion Depository, but I was on the inside, five or six days a week. But even being inside for months, I had found no solution for getting into the basement or, once there, for dealing with two, huge, blast-proof, vault doors, the larger of which weighed twenty-two tons. Each door had a separate combination and no one person had access to both.

The last time non-essential personnel had been invited into the vault was 1974 when there was a public outcry about there being no gold. There was gold back then. We'd been on the gold standard until 1971. A Congressional delegation had been allowed in, not to audit, but to observe (amazingly, it's accepted that a bunch of bankers dictate to Congress, who may and may not view the country's gold). The last fully-approved audit was in the 1930's when FDR made it illegal for citizens to own gold.

That was the first gold confiscation in the United States—different from the one that's coming. The United States was on a gold standard in 1933 when, with Executive Order 6120, FDR outlawed private ownership of gold coins, bullion and gold certificates—making it illegal for United States Citizens to own or trade gold anywhere in the world. In the next confiscation of gold, there will be no gold standard. Instead, governments will be confiscating coins that they minted and sold to citizens—sometimes buying back bullion for less than was paid.

There were six guys who worked in the vault, underground. Old guys, the gold guys, who mainly kept to themselves. I needed a way into that group. Although I work in the Depository, it had been much easier to get to where I am than to where I need to go.

Sometimes, in the midst of a puzzle, it's best to come up with a metaphor that fits the circumstances and stay with that metaphor until it resolves itself. I saw myself as a boxer who finally gains a title shot with a champion who's just a little too good—who wins every close round. In my case, the champ was Fort Knox and the challenger was me. A championship fight, with all the belts at stake, in which I was losing each of the middle rounds, left me with just one hope. A knockout, against a champion who'd never even been knocked down. I needed to exploit weaknesses and I saw only one—six older guys, complacent, from years of guarding gold that wasn't there.

The first time I saw one of them alone, in the cafeteria, I introduced myself and asked if I could join him?

"I was thinking," I said, "there's hundreds of families living on the base with only the one high school. Out in the world, civilian kids have to deal with corporate indoctrination—but these kids get that, plus military indoctrination. That's worse than Catholic school." He didn't reply, just looked at me through old, blue, Paul Newman eyes. I imagined him living with the same woman for forty years, putting in his hours at work, looking forward to going home.

"I'm Buddy," he said. "Don't you think those views will get you fired?"

"Not really, Most people agree with me about the propaganda, they just don't say it. I'm thinking about getting together with these kids to talk about power and personal rights. They're still young and haven't yet made the decision to give in to the government. I'm going to ask at the high school for a room where I can talk with students about staying out of trouble with the authorities and about their rights."

"That'll last just long enough to walk you off the base."

"I'll bet you I can make it ten weeks," I said.

"There's no way. What you just said to me will get you kicked out."

"Twenty bucks," I said, holding out my hand.

"Fifty," he said, "and somebody else holds the money, cause you're gonna get walked to the gate."

I knew he was right but at least we were talking and we had something to talk about. That afternoon I went over to the school, home of the Eagles, to see about putting my plan into motion. I was told by the assistant principle that there was a strict policy, that only military personnel could use the classrooms for extra-curricular activities, but since I was the liaison between the Mint Police and Homeland Security, that was close enough. Over the next half hour, I convinced her of the worthiness of my project. To get young people thinking about staying away from trouble, how to deal with a police stop, and understand their rights. To get them off their cell phones and thinking about their lives. The best thing about educators is their regard for self-knowledge. She gave me a

room I could use any weekday after school. A room that could be taken back at any time.

Leaving the school, I thought about coyotes and hounds. I was a coyote, but was I clever enough to avoid the middle of a pack of hounds? Could I pull this off, at a military complex in Kentucky? Working with the kids would be a challenge. Could I make it interesting and close to the edge, without getting bumped over?

I needed to plan and I'm no planner. I only had a week so I had to work fast. A format: it's about power, your power. How much of it are you willing to trade for security? And how much security do you get for what you trade? Once traded, can you ever get it back? That was it. How much power were these young people willing to give to institutions?

I spent my waking hours at the Fort, getting the word out. I got it on the radio, every day. I put it on virtual posts and every cork board. I asked everyone I knew to put it on the social network. I began getting email inquiries. Some were enthusiastic. Some were skeptical. A few were hostile. But what did I expect? I was bringing up the relationship between power and personal liberties at one of the more secure military complexes in the country.

Over four days, I wrote a book, not a long book, twenty-some pages, but a book, which I posted online. I called it *Probable Cause*. I'd been thinking about writing it for a long time, since a coffee with an ex-chief of police. During the days leading up to the first class, I slept little and worked hard. I thought about Jack London's character, Martin Eden, in the novel of the same name. He goes to work in a laundry, thinking he'll be free to write in the evenings. He couldn't be more wrong. The work is endless, debilitating to the point of constant exhaustion and alcoholism. With that in mind, writing a short book was not an impossibility. Here's the book:

PROBABLE CAUSE

**What You Need to Know
about
Dealing with the Police
The Fourth Amendment
and
Your Right to Privacy**

**I'm not an attorney
and
this book is not intended as legal advice.
Instead,
this book is a distillation
of my research and experience.
This is how I would deal with the police.
Before adopting any tactic or strategy
contained in this book, consult with an attorney. This
book is offered free of charge.**

Introduction

Probable Cause was ready for publication when I asked our former chief of police to coffee. I had known him for years and wanted his take on what I'd written. His department and the way he ran it was unique. I don't recall him patrolling in a car. Instead, I remember him in the downtown area, on foot. He assigned an officer to the plaza, who walked the beat, dealing firsthand with the homeless and skateboarders. As chief, he conveyed no attitude of authority, handling threatening situations without lethal force. The kind of person he is, in the end, cost him his job. The culture he moved in would not support his protect and serve approach to policing.

Our coffee meeting went well, with large areas of confluence. He agreed to read Probable Cause and get back to me. It didn't take long before I heard from him. He was brutally honest about what I'd written. Here's his email to me:

"I read it! I totally support the intention. I have sat my own boys down and given them the father/son talk about dealing with the police. The execution I found less than helpful. Psychology is overdone. It is interesting, yes. Some, a tiny bit, can be injected but it sets you up for anti-cop bias. Citing court cases is way too academic for the audience you want to connect with. This was to be a primer of excellent advice for police encounters...give excellent advice then. Real, practical tactics. You do have some lurking in these pages...but not enough and not emphatic. A little bit of cute writing thrown in obscures the nuts and bolts application that would help a kid be ready for a police stop. The history, how we got down the slippery slope from the Founders' intent to our current mess....well, drop all that. Good reading for academics, but not kids. We are where we are...so address that. Talk about what the reality is...here is how you deal with it. It's a commentary on power...who has it, who doesn't...and what is likely to happen. The police are prepared for certain responses by citizens...attack, defi-

ance, panic, etc. A kid could benefit from reviewing options and consequences. This work needs some clear objective. What is it? Stay out of jail? Stay out of trouble? Stay away from police contact? Or something other? Each of those needs a different strategy. As I write to you I just realized what I'd want for an objective...how to be prepared for a police stop. And that would include a mindset, a plan, visualization, and a few...only a few...rules to follow.

Be invisible to the police. Don't drive a shitty car, one that smokes, makes a lot of noise, has broken lights. Don't blast out the music. Don't hang out the window yelling. Don't stop the car in the road to talk to somebody. All these actions give the police justification for pulling you over. And do I even have to mention speed and driving right? Once a police encounter begins for any reason, even minor traffic stuff, not all, but many officers use that as a starting point to extend the encounter. The purpose of extending the encounter is simple: find more violations, dig deeper and uncover evidence of crime. Best advice, don't let the encounter begin. Stay invisible. Don't draw attention to yourself in public by unusual behaviors. Unusual behavior equals reasonable suspicion.

Driving a car, even being in a car, makes you particularly likely for a police encounter. Officers are always in their cars, by the look of things. There are so many rules of the road that an officer doesn't need to follow a car too long before seeing a violation. The game begins; the officer started it and has chosen the time and place and already is prepared with information from the vehicle registration. Whether the officer is just trying to get an easy ticket before ending shift, or wants to invest in digging deeper into what you and this car are all about will unfold right after the words... 'License and registration, please'."

After my initial shock to his response, I looked closely at his criticism and advice. I agreed that being invisible to the police is excellent advice. But, our tactics for handling a police stop came from

differing assumptions. To the chief, the cops have all the power—every advantage. During a stop, the police are in a position of power, but, if we surrender to that assumption, and conduct ourselves in a submissive manner, without the benefit of our rights, what's left but cooperation. Maybe a bit of fawning? I shared these thoughts and he got back to me:

“Great exchange! I love it when the feedback loop gets raw, honest, even contentious.” I was thinking his reply had some finality to it, when I received this:

“I was on a panel one time for who knows what? After listening to a hard-hitting, aggressive defense attorney (yes, some of those exist) rail against bad police conduct my turn came. I lightened the mood and the tension...and got laughs...by stating that, 'new officers spend up to a year at Police Academy learning how to violate your rights'. Underneath that humor there is some wisdom.

An officer knows the rules and has had formal training about the Constitution, the Fourth Amendment, reasonable suspicion, probable cause, Terry v. Ohio etc. When you know the rules, especially with experience, you know how to stretch them, bend them..and what to say and do when you break them. Plus, the training isn't particularly presented to honor and respect these rules. It is presented on how to do your job, make arrests, do searches in spite of these rules. Most instructors, with a few exceptions, and most police view our constitutional protections as a hinderance to doing effective police work...and the game becomes one of appearing to comply but always placing the importance of getting the bad guy as a higher, nobler end than strict adherence to what citizens, the courts, and sometimes even police supervisors expect. We glorify the rogue cop breaking rules to get the killer theme in our movies and, I think, the national psyche...except when it's our rights being stomped on.

The officer has all the advantage on the street. Knows the rules, has trained in field interrogations, understands and uses subtle and not subtle intimidation, has experience with all the types of responses from people being stopped: anger, aggression, fear, panic, shock, nervousness, argumentative, cooperation, cool, casual. You name it, the cop has dealt with it...and has one intention: to control every bit of this encounter, whether it's trivial or deadly. That's what a pro does. I'm not saying every cop is a pro. I've seen a lot of amateurs on the job. The point is kids have to understand they are up against pros."

Here it was—in three paragraphs. How the cop pulling us over sees the situation; how he or she views our rights, as well as what's likely to happen. I don't agree that most cops understand probable cause rights and court rulings, but nevertheless, here was an inside look at policing few of us will ever get. I got back to him:

"This is what I'm hearing from you: just a few rules, emphatically stated. Because of your input, I've redone Probable Cause in two parts. Part 1 acknowledges the police have the power, control, and expertise. Given that assumption, how do we stay clear of police contact, trouble, and jail?"

That view of policing, however, beyond a certain point, is fatalistic because it renders us subservient during a police stop, creating the need for Part 2: what to do when we've complied with the rules of conduct in Part 1, and it's not working. We've been respectful and cooperative, but our rights are being violated, necessitating different tactics, stemming from our probable cause rights, backed by essential court findings concerning unlawful police stops—without which the situation cannot be addressed."

He got back to me: "I am very excited about your mission with this project. I like the approach you've outlined here. I've been fascinated by the police motto, Protect and Serve. Don't know where or when it arose but it has captured the public imagination and is em-

bossed on the emblems of many police departments. It has become a mantra of our expectation of the police. I think the reality is quite different. I'd contend the police mission is to keep order protecting property, especially the property of those who are powerful in any community, above protecting or serving any individual. In fact, there is no legal duty to take action to protect anyone except when the law specifically demands it."

At coffee, the chief said something that remains with me: "By the end of the shift, the officer has forgotten the stop you will probably remember for the rest of your life." With that in mind, Part 1 of Probable Cause offers advice on how to stay invisible to the police and avoid police stops. Part 2 deals with police stops, especially those where we are compelled to insist on our rights.

Part One

"The greater the power, the more dangerous the abuse." Edmund Burke

Assume the police have all the power and you have none. They're ready for whatever attitude and response you bring. They've spent up to a year at police academy learning how to, or not to, violate your rights. They know the rules and they have experience stretching them, bending them, and they know what to say and do when they break them. They are engaged in the competitive enterprise of doing their job, ferreting out crime, making arrests, and doing searches in spite of these rules. They view constitutional protections as a hinderance to doing effective police work. That's their job, appearing to comply, but always placing the importance of getting the bad guy as a higher, nobler end than strict adherence to the rights of the citizens.

“The officer has all the advantage on the street. Knows the rules, has trained in field interrogations, understands and uses subtle and not subtle intimidation, has experience with all the types of responses from people being stopped: anger, aggression, fear, panic, shock, nervousness, argumentative, cooperation, cool, casual. You name it, the cop has dealt with it...and has one intention: to control every bit of this encounter, whether it's trivial or deadly. ”

Your objective is to avoid police contact, stay out of trouble, and stay out of jail. Here’s your rules:

Rule 1. Things you don’t do—drinking and driving, blasting your music, pranking while driving, bravado drinking, stopping illegally to chat, driving erratically, speeding. Anything that’s against the law.

Rule 2. Don’t give in to peer pressure. Breaking the law happens most often when you’re out with friends. Develop a mindset. When you’re out with friends, you’re your own person. Visualize and plan on saying no to your friends.

Rule 3. Don’t drive a car that’s not in good working order. One bad turn signal, brake light, or an overly loud exhaust, and the encounter with the cops begins.

Rule 4. You’ve done your best to take care of Rules 1, 2, and 3, but you find yourself hearing, “License and registration, please.” A police stop, but you’re prepared. You have a mindset and a plan. You can’t anticipate the officer’s motive for pulling you over, but you know your strategy. Minimize the encounter and continue on your way. They have the power so you conduct yourself with respect and non-aggressive behavior. You don’t act submissive because that might be mistaken for unusual conduct. If all goes well, you’re free to go about your business.

Part 2

“The most common way people give up their power is by thinking they don’t have any.” Alice Walker

You’ve been stopped by the police. You’ve been respectful and cooperative, but the cops persist in expanding the encounter, “digging deeper into what you and this car are all about”. You need to know your rights.

The Fourth Amendment

"The right of the people to be secure in their persons, houses, papers, and effects, against unreasonable searches and seizures, shall not be violated, and no warrants shall issue, but upon probable cause, supported by oath or affirmation, and particularly describing the place to be searched, and the persons or things to be seized."

Some police don’t understand probable cause, or, if they do, they don’t respect it, citing a dirty car, a nervous driver, red eyes, or driving north from Florida on a main drug route as reasonable suspicion for a search. When you get pulled over, think on Willie Nelson’s rules for a successful life, breathe deeply, and never miss an opportunity to “shut the fuck up!”. Clam down; don’t say anything you don’t need to. Here’s a court finding that supports you in not volunteering information:

"Though the police are honest and their aims worthy, history shows they are not appropriate guardians of the privacy which the Fourth Amendment protects." Jones v. United States

It’s assumed you’re nervous. These are the cops and you’re eighteen (maybe you’re seventy). Ask questions that matter: “Are you saying that being nervous is probable cause I’m engaging in a

crime?" How about that drug route across Florida? Is the fact you're on it reasonable suspicion for detaining or searching you?

"The use of the highways for the purpose of travel and transportation is not a privilege, but a common and fundamental Right of which the public and the individual cannot be rightfully deprived."

Chicago Motor Coach v. Chicago

Being on a highway, one used to transport drugs, is not probable cause you're engaging in a crime, and you don't have to answer questions about where you're coming from or where you're going. What questions do you have to answer?

"While the police have the right to request citizens to answer voluntary questions concerning unsolved crimes they have no right to compel them to answer." Davis v. Mississippi

Anytime an officer detains you, even for a short time, that officer has seized you. Even though it's a limited, short-term stop, you are seized. When officers detain and require you to identify yourself, they make a seizure of your person, violating the Fourth Amendment, unless they have probable cause you are, or have been, engaged in criminal conduct. Here's a court case:

"It must be recognized that whenever a police officer accosts an individual and restrains his freedom to walk away, he has 'seized' that person." Terry v. Ohio

You have a smart phone right? You're recording the stop, videoing if you are able—but at least a voice memo. Inform the officer you're recording the stop. Calm yourself with deep breathes. Keep to the subject of your rights. Ask if you're being detained; if so, what is the probable cause for your detention? Remember, if the detention is unlawful, you're recording the whole thing. Is it legal for you to record the stop? The Courts of Appeals for the First and

Seventh Circuits found the Constitution protects the right to videotape police officers while they perform official duties. The Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal, so the court of appeals ruling stands.

Recording the stop is crucial because a recording is instant replay! Usually, the police are recording, but since the court found them to not be appropriate guardians of your privacy, you need your own recording.

Be careful. Often, the police are looking for justification you're consenting to a search. Don't give them your keys. Tell them calmly, but in no uncertain terms, you do not consent to a search. Repeat it as often as necessary, keeping in mind they needed probable cause or reasonable suspicion to have stopped you in the first place. Usually they won't have a dog with them and they need reasonable suspicion to detain you while they call for a drug dog. You're recording the stop. Ask him or her, "Officer, am I free to go?" Without probable cause they can't detain you. If they refuse to let you go, make it clear your Fourth Amendment rights are being violated. They won't want to be legally challenged when they are wrong.

Whether it be a detention, a seizure, or an arrest, there must be probable cause. Without probable cause, each of these events is unlawful. Here's a court case:

"An illegal arrest is an assault and battery. The person so attempted to be restrained of his liberty has the same right, and only the same right, to use force in defending himself as he would have in repelling any other assault and battery."

State of Maine v. Robinson

The police do not have immunity during an unlawful arrest. They are regarded, under the law, as common criminals. Nevertheless,

you have the responsibility to conduct yourself with non-aggressive, respectful behavior.

What about felonies and misdemeanors? What are the ground rules? Here's a court case:

"The usual rule is that a police officer may arrest without warrant one believed by the officer upon reasonable cause to have been guilty of a felony, and that he may only arrest without a warrant one guilty of a misdemeanor if committed in his presence." Kurtz v. Moffitt

Did the officer witness you committing a misdemeanor? Does the officer have probable cause that you're involved in a felony?

The Fourth Amendment establishes the citizen's right to privacy and security, denying arbitrary search and seizure by the police. Here's a court case:

"The point of the Fourth Amendment, which often is not grasped by zealous officers, is not that it denies law enforcement the support of the usual inferences which reasonable men draw from evidence. Its protection consists in requiring that those inferences be drawn by a neutral and detached magistrate instead of being judged by the officer engaged in the often competitive enterprise of ferreting out crime." Terry v. Ohio

Do the protections of the Fourth Amendment change with the times? Here's a case:

"The Fourth Amendment is to be construed in the light of what was deemed an unreasonable search and seizure when it was adopted, and in a manner which will conserve public interests as well as the interests and rights of individual citizens." Carroll v. U.S.

Your rights cannot be violated through law enforcement policy determinations. What probable cause meant the day the Fourth Amendment became law is what it means now.

If the stop has to do with alcohol, be mindful, because refusing to blow the balloon loses your license. If you accept the test and fail, whatever's on your person or in the car is in play. Don't agree to a field sobriety test. Those things are arbitrary and can be used to intimidate you. You have two choices. Blow, with the potential of a DUI, or don't blow and lose your license for however long. Better yet, avoid the whole mess. Assuming you're an adult, you're out to dinner and you're driving. Say no to the second drink.

Envision a traffic stop—four young persons in the car. You've already talked with your friends and parents about what to do when pulled over by the police. Smartphones are recording and you've informed the officer that you are recording. The less you say the better and only the driver speaks unless the passengers are asked a direct question. If the stop has to do with a driving infraction or the condition of the vehicle, that concerns the driver and the officer. Will that stop the officer from asking questions of the passengers. No, but without probable cause the passengers are not compelled to answer.

So there's the basics. Just a few rules and a few court cases. That said, there's enough here to help you stay out of trouble.

19

Americans who don't support the Bill of Rights aren't really Americans—they just happen to live here.

Monday evening came too soon and I had no specific plan for this first meeting. My energy had gone into writing and getting the word out. Walking to the school in a light rain, rather than thinking on how to begin, I thought about Bill Nighy, how at the beginning of the movie, *Love Actually*, he struggles with several takes of a song he's recording and each time, though he's not a great singer, he sings it like he owns it. Like the advice I got from a journeyman player in my first band. "None of these people came here to see you. Picture the audience in their underwear, and have fun." Except now, anybody coming out in this rain was coming to see me.

I had been to the classroom once so I knew where it was, but I wasn't prepared for what I found when I rounded the corner of the building. I expected turnout, but not this many. I don't have a loud voice so I dug deep and did my best Bill Nighy: "This classroom has forty chairs and everyone in the room has to have a chair. So, I'll make this offer. I'll be here at seven o'clock every weekday night and I won't quit until you stop coming. So let's get started!"

I stood at the blackboard in front of forty persons, the majority of them students, but not all. Maybe ten were in uniform. I remembered the old band adage: never more than a half a minute between songs and get started on time.

"Where shall we start?" I asked. "Do you want to talk about what's going on with the police or the government? Give me a show of hands." A guy, maybe fifty, with a provoking jaw, Sergeant First Class, United States Army, spoke up:

"What makes you an authority on the government?" he asked. Here we were, right into it. This guy was military, patriotic, probably a witness to horror I hadn't even contemplated, and he was

ready to take me on. If I could engage this man, there would be a chance for what I wanted to happen.

"Sergeant," I said, "for tonight, are you willing to hold on to that question and see me as the guy who got all these people to come out in the rain to talk about our relationship to authority?" There was only one woman in the group. She was in uniform and she was beautiful, a marine and an officer. She took over:

"I don't want to know if you're an authority," she said, "but maybe you could talk about your background and give us some perspective on where you're coming from?" Sometimes I get caught up by a beautiful woman and say things she might want to hear. I had to stay focused.

"Everyone in this room is good at something," I said. "Look at the person next to you. There's something he or she can do better than you. Maybe because of a god-given gift or because they took the time to learn to do something well. Maybe both. And while you've been doing whatever it is you do, when I haven't been riding motorcycles or playing music, I've been working to understand this world, through history, novels, films, and the internet, following the money and power. That's what I do, I follow the money, and those who control and accumulate it—the bankers, the corporations, and the politicians. I follow them to see where they're headed and what they have in store for us along the way."

"I wanna talk about the cops," said a teenage boy with longish hair and baggy pants, a toned-down version of a kid from the projects. Nevertheless a statement on a military base.

"What do you want to say about the cops?" I asked.

"What do you do when they won't leave you alone. When you haven't done nothing. When you're just out having a good time and they roust you?"

"You get a haircut and buy some Levis," said a soldier in the back—to laughter. The kid was incensed, twisting in his chair to address the guy:

"You're not in high school. The military police don't hassle guys like you, but they gotta hassle somebody!" I was content to watch this play out.

"Like I said, get a haircut." There was now some furor in the room, which reached an inflection point, where I needed to take charge.

"Okay, enough," I said. "There's one rule here, I keep order, ask questions, and remind you this is a discussion where we need to go deep. No one talks over anyone else."

"That's more than one rule," said the woman marine."

I smiled a good-natured smile. "Let me say it another way. If anyone came here to win arguments, I don't want you here. Attacking each other won't get us anywhere."

The same thing going on here had been going on during the Vietnam protests. Those against the war were dirty hippies—gutless liberals. Those supporting the war were the *love it or leave it* crew—insisting on conformity. But love it or leave it had no depth—a twisted version of the bumper sticker Franklin and Jefferson would have come up with: *those who don't support the Bill of Rights aren't really Americans. They just happen to live here.*

I asked the soldier in the back why he thought the kid should get a haircut?

"Because then they'd leave him alone."

"Maybe they'd leave him alone. Or, maybe there's some cops who aren't there to protect and serve—instead they exceed their authority?"

"Yeah, some do," said the soldier, "but if he cleaned up his act, he could steer clear of trouble."

"Okay, now we're getting somewhere," I said, facing the blackboard. Picking up a chalk and using my outstretched arm as a radius, I made an almost perfect circle.

"Let's do two things," I said. "First, since we don't want to be pulled over by the police, military or civilian, let's talk about how to stay invisible to the cops." I told them how to access Probable Cause online. After some lively discussion, we had a circle ringed with ideas on how to avoid a police stop. The kid jumped back in:

"What if it doesn't work. What if you do all those things and they still roust you? What if you're respectful but they won't let go? What if they want to search you and your car."

"Let's ask your friend in the back," I said. "What if you do the things we have on the circle and they won't back off—they insist on a personal search,?"

"Did he get the haircut?" he asked, again to laughter.

"Not him," I said. "You. You're coming home from a three night bivouac—you're tired and all you want is your bed—but you find yourself being detained. They say your red eyes are evidence you're on drugs and they want you to wait while they send for a canine unit. They want to search your car."

"That's hasn't happened to me since I was in high school," he said.

"Exactly. It happens more to young people, or minorities, especially blacks—who can't take care of the problem by getting a haircut."

"So what do I do?" he asked.

"You accept the search, let them humiliate you with a search of your body and your vehicle, or you respectfully stand up for your rights."

"What are my rights?" he asked.

For the next two hours, without a break, we talked about the right, not the privilege of using the roadways, about our rights under the Fourth Amendment, no search without probable cause, and how to conduct oneself during a police stop. We talked about recording the stop with a cell phone, what the police could ask the driver and what questions you were responsible for answering. Another kid asked if the police could bother you if you weren't the driver? Then the kid, with the longish hair who had started it off, asked:

"Were the cops the same when you were in high school?"

"No," I said. "There were problems with the police, but not like now. Cops were cops. They'd get pissed if you dissed them but they were willing to cut you slack. Let me share a memory. I was into motorcycles. One night, coming down Pacific Coast Highway, which was hardly travelled at night, I passed through Seal Beach at maybe 80 miles an hour, and soon the red and blue lights were in my mirrors. Being a smart-ass, I twisted my Triumph throttle until

I came to Surfside where I knew a guy with a garage. It was open and I put the bike inside (people didn't lock things up as much back then), closed the door, and made it behind a three foot wood fence before the cops arrived, running around with their flashlights, along the beach and up and down the rows of small houses.

They left, but since I had to ride through Seal Beach every day, he soon had me. I admitted to nothing but I denied nothing. He told me the next time he saw me speeding I was going to jail. He asked me where I'd stashed the bike when they were looking for me. I told him and he let me go. I admitted to a crime and he let me go. That might not happen now. Back then, mostly, it was like that. There were no SWAT teams, no explosives trucks, no civilian assault vehicles. Just two cops in a car, who would kick your ass if you pushed it too far. And the difference between then and now was that it meant more to be an American back then. The Republicans and Democrats would fight away the morning in Congress, then go to lunch together. It wasn't about rich and poor. It was more about the middle class. We were mostly some kind of middle class and we took some pride in our democracy, our Constitution—our Bill of Rights."

I was hoping the woman Marine would stay afterwards—it looked as though she might, but it was Buddy who stayed, which was good because I needed Buddy to be there. But then again, just like with Anna, I would trade everything... .

"I just may have lost fifty bucks," he said.

"No worries mate," I said. "I have no intention of collecting if I win, but I could use a beer."

Buddy and I became friends. There was no wife of forty years he had to get home to. It had been a long time since there'd been a woman. He'd only ever had two jobs—twenty years as the large animal man at the San Diego Zoo and more than twenty years with the Mint Police. He came to all the classes. After the third class he invited me to his place.

The men who worked the vault were special. They had to live on-post because off-post could be a security risk. Single or mar-

ried, they were housed in stand-alone family units. There were now six men who worked in the vault. At one time there had been twelve—when there was gold to guard? They all lived within a rock's throw of each other. Only one of them was married.

We walked to Buddy's house through intermittent showers. From the street, it could have passed as a faux craftsman in Klamath Falls or Duluth, small, well built, with a tiny entryway providing nothing more than a space out of the rain to unlock the door. Inside was a foyer, no deeper than three feet with an arched entryway to the living room, offset from the front door. Most of the living room was taken up with a match-play pool table, made of solid dark-brown, almost black, hardwood, with a tan felt surface. The only needed clue of bachelorhood. Only one woman in fifty goes for a pool table in the living room.

The rest of the house could have used a woman too. A small rickety card table, with folding metal chairs, thinly padded, completed the dining room. On the table was a pyrex coffee pot, with coffee, which looked to be well-aged. And a few mugs with dried lip prints. The folding chairs were the only place to sit unless you counted the couch next to the pool table, with legroom underneath. The interior of the house needed painting.

There's nothing wrong with bachelors—at least not at first. But as the years pass, most of them come to resemble aborted missile launches from Vandenberg in the 50's. During liftoff, they're maybe a degree or two out of trajectory, but over the years those few degrees become twenty, then forty, before the hard return to earth. Bachelors become set in their ways, showing more deviation from the mainstream. With no woman to knock off and round their edges, their living situations tend in the direction of gas station rest rooms.

Which was fine with me, but then there was the bird. Like I said, Buddy had been the large animal guy at the zoo and he'd retained one colorful example from those days, a giant, green macaw, perched on an upside down, five-gallon, plastic paint bucket, de-marking the dining room from the living room. The bucket was another clue no woman lived here. Like a confection-

er's cake, the bucket had amassed a colorful, cascading build-up of drippings, in white and black, layered over one other, like a frozen Niagara Falls, or an expensive birthday cake. Not one woman in a hundred, at least none you'd want around, would go for the bird and the bucket.

Then there was the bird itself. She was huge, as loud as she was huge, and aggressive. I don't think Buddy had many visitors and the bird was possessive of her man. After I'd been there ten minutes, she was worked up to the point I worried for my safety. Buddy took it in stride and put her in the bedroom from where she shrieked until I left.

"You make more sense of, and know more about this economy than anyone I've met," he said. "Whatta you think's gonna happen?"

"I don't think the question is what's going to happen, Buddy, it's when will it happen? Which will be a complete collapse. You can't spend more than you take. I should say you can't do it forever! Simple math. Anyone who runs a household knows."

"When do you think it will happen?"

"Dunno. And anyone who thinks he knows, doesn't know. I'm surprised they've kept it going this long. The powers that be are all in this together. One country prints money, then passes it on to the next. But they'll all go down. At least those with huge debt—which is almost all of them."

"You see any way out?"

"Yeah. But it's not likely. In 2007 we needed to cut back twenty percent of government spending—now it's forty. The size of the government could be cut in half and still regulate the big banks while protecting us. I know it's hard to understand but think about Medicare. It's an 80—20 thing. The government pays 80 percent. The individual pays 20, for which they get supplementary insurance. But if our health care costs were brought in line with other industrial countries, the 20 percent we have to cover would pay all the costs and Medicare could go away. That would take a big bite out of the problem."

"That's what my friend Dewey and I've been talking about," he said. "Maybe it could be fixed but it doesn't look like it will, so we need a buddy system—like me and Dewey. He took me to the range last week. I have never owned a gun but there I was shooting an AR15. Just in case. We need weapons and food. And friends we trust."

Walking back to my office, where I would spend another night on the couch, which I did more and more now, I walked under a light rain that made everything shiny, while my conscience brought me under scrutiny. Buddy, and maybe his friend, were different cats from me. But Buddy was a good man with good values. Something in me feared I would use him to get what I wanted. But what I wanted was to look out for the little guy who was being subjected to an economy and a life, torn apart by the big guys.

I would just rather we went for beers without the coffee remains, the bird, and the bucket.

20

"They that would give up essential liberty for a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety."

Benjamin Franklin

Without any fanfare, April had become mid-June. The re-model was slated to be complete by the first of July, when I would have two weeks to be re-assigned. For all intents and purposes my job was done. I still did walkthroughs twice a day but the sheetrock finishers and painters didn't need much supervision. Both Ira and Lou were going to recommend me for any new job I wanted. The same strife I went through as to whether I was using Buddy, applied to them. But what could I do? There was no one I could tell.

The class meetings were coming to an end. The first night, maybe a hundred showed up, then for three weeks we met three times a week. Now it was just Mondays, with a core group. The end of the world as we know it isn't enough to hold everyone's attention.

The marine lieutenant showed up, regularly. She and I had developed a banter. There were probably those who thought there was more going on between us, but there wasn't. She was something else—Gwen. She was so good looking it was too much to even hope for. Always in uniform, she was infantry and fit. She was smart and with it. I fantasized she was all these things without Anna's baggage.

It didn't matter. She was out of reach, too young and too desirable. Were I to get the chance with her, I'd blow it. But I kept the faith, keeping up with the banter and irony. I was as quick as her, maybe as funny. Being around her made me funnier. At the end of our meetings, when everyone was getting heavy lidded, one look at Gwen, for me, was two shots of espresso. I bided time with the hope she would approach me. She didn't.

I spent time with Buddy almost every day, and some time with his friend, Dewey, whose house was clean and bright. Dewey was Armenian, short, dark, and thick. The first one in his family to be born in the United States, which made him fiercely patriotic to this country. For the way it used to be.

Dewey scared me. I agreed with most everything he said but his attitude was frightening. And he had all those weapons with which he was proficient. He was someone who would support my plan but he was the last person I'd tell. Dewey would conduct the audit with gunfire! Any delusions I held out for me and Gwen, it was best she didn't come to Buddy's house, or hang out with Dewey's personality.

"Remember what Will Rogers said about America and the Great Depression?" I asked Buddy over a second beer.

"What are you thinking of?" he asked.

"America's the only country that ever went to the poorhouse in an automobile."

"That's where we're going and you get some of the blame, Buddy," said Dewey, using an unfamiliar tone on his friend.

"Why are you saying that?" asked Buddy.

"Because of the gold. Those who knew Saddam didn't have weapons of mass destruction, know there's no gold. It's one lie after another. But, you and your cronies keep collecting paychecks and retirement benefits for keeping your mouths shut. For keeping track of gold that was sold off long ago?"

Here it was and I hadn't brought it up. Buddy, the complacent enabler for the central bank, was also an iconoclast. He didn't say much, but he was an outsider. I'd been wondering just how much of an outsider he was? Now we'd find out. Dewey had knocked the cards all over the room.

Buddy said nothing, but his gaze fixed on his friend.

"There's choices a man has to make, Dewey, and sometimes they're not pretty." Was this an admission on Buddy's part?

Dewey, in his accommodating way, responded:

"Like you deciding to bankrupt every poor stiff who saved a dollar and counted on bank interest to live out his years? You get to decide his fate so you can save the banks and the fascist government?"

I saw the narrow path. Dewey was his best friend, who was now pushing Buddy to the edge. Buddy looked to be on the verge of telling us to get out. If he were to say there was no gold, he would be a traitor—either in the eyes of his friend, or his government. I hardly breathed.

"It's not just about savers, Dewey, it's about the whole world. This may be the most precarious time in our history, and we have to prevail. Putin's unravelling the Ukraine and building his war machine. China's doing the same, trying to control the Far East. If we can't keep the dollar solid, it's over!"

Here it was. The gold was not there. The guardians had been briefed as if they were high-up state departmenters, with a mission to save the planet. Without saying it, Buddy had said as much. But,

Dewey was not Buddy's foil—neither was he a *mark* in the government's *con* game, a game where Buddy and five other guys were the *shills*.

Foil is an interesting word to describe what Buddy did—foil was what they used before there was lighting, as a backdrop for gems, to enhance the sheen.

"Did you ever watch that untold history series by Oliver Stone, I told you about?" asked Dewey. "No, you didn't. You just want to do your job and be left alone—a lackey for the Empire! You bought into the propaganda and you perpetuate the myth, somehow justifying to yourself you're some kind of patriot! And it isn't just me who sees it like this. You've just spent weeks in a class digging into the motivation of the authorities. If you really think what you're doing is helping the guy on the street, I need to pray for you!" With that Dewey left.

We sat for a few minutes. I suggested a game of pool. Buddy declined. I said I was hungry and we should get some air. He thought so too. We walked to where you could get breakfast twenty four hours.

Walking to the eatery, I thought on my Gwen strategy, which was also Willie Blackfoot's, high school, boomerang strategy: quit pursuing, throw it away, and see if it comes back on its own. Across from each other in a booth, I looked at my friend and thought of Yoda: *Joined the Empire, did you not?*

"You agree with Dewey?" he asked.

"About what?"

"You know, that I'm an accomplice for the mob?"

"I don't know how to answer. Obviously, you and the others have been schooled. But everything they tell you should be backed by evidence. The things you said about Putin, the Chinese, the dollar—all of it. You're an interesting guy, Buddy. You must have a kind of fearlessness to have been the big animal guy at the zoo, and you seem to be your own man? Do you think the briefings they give you are the whole story? And why would they give you briefings at all? You're security guards."

“What do you mean?” he asked.

My relationship with Buddy and the audit were on the line.

“Think about the dollar. Why does it need to be saved? In 1971, it was backed by gold and invincible. Now it’s crap, but for now it’s the best crap paper out there. But it can’t last. You said yourself it’s in jeopardy. Like Rome, we’re now vulnerable to adversaries, in our case the Chinese and the Russians. It’s because we’ve destroyed ourselves from within through greed and cronyism. Is it because we won the great war, and rather than promote democracy and freedom around the world we went for control? Is that why Gallup polls around the world, when they ask what’s the main threat to world peace, the answer comes back, the United States.”

Buddy wasn’t buying. “You’re over the top. You watch any news channel and you see the Chinese exerting their power, building and arming islands in the South China Sea. And Russia invading Ukraine.”

“What’s the evidence?” I asked. “Any news channel? Who funds those channels? Transnational corporations, along with corrupt, crony governments. The kind of news you get to hear is what they want you to hear!”

“Okay. But that doesn’t take away the facts. What about China and Russia?”

“What about them? Did your briefings play the clip where we admit spending five billion dollars to destabilize Ukraine? Did they tell you we supported the overthrow of a democratically elected president because we didn’t like what he was doing? Did they show any proof of a Russian invasion? Did they tell you any Russian invasion of the Ukraine would be over in days? Where are those islands Buddy—the South China Sea? Close to China, the greatest power in the region? Hasn’t China laid claim to those islands for centuries? The problem is what we call the Wolfowitz Doctrine, which supposes we are the only power that matters, and everyone else is either our vassal or our enemy!”

“But China has no right to control a region. There are other countries in the region!” I had to keep from laughing.

“What about our hundreds of bases around the world? What do the Chinese have—those islands? Where are the Russian bases? Our foreign policy is to control the world, not for guys like you and me, it’s for the greedy elite that give a fuck for nobody but themselves. Patriotic as long as it suits them, and when it doesn’t, they have gated communities and citizenship elsewhere.”

“You’re just like Dewey,” he said.

“You know me, Buddy, and you know that’s not true.” With that I bade him a good night.

21

America’s a place where they dumb down the conversation enough to force it through copper wires.

The ball was in Buddy’s court. Dewey and I had rocked his boat—now he would have to decide. One thing was sure, his complacency was gone.

I thought about the gold in terms of Aristotle and his causes: material cause; that of which something is made. That was the gold. efficient cause; Buddy and his buddies who perpetuated the lie. Final cause; that for the sake of which a thing is done. What was the purpose of perpetuating the lie that things are fine and we have the gold? Was it to hold back unimaginable consequences? Unspeakable consequences?

I didn’t see him for a couple of days, then he was waiting for me after work.

“How you doing?” he asked.

“I’m fine, thanks. It’s good to see you.”

“You too. You talked to Dewey?” he asked.

“Haven’t seen him. I don’t usually see him without you. He knew about my classes but he never came.”

“The other night I thought you guys had rehearsed.”

“We had. So have a lot of people, but we did it on our own. Dewey’s just a tad more strident than your average bear.”

“That he is, but he’s good guy. He’s someone I count on.” His friendship with Dewey was making Buddy weigh different takes on the truth. He had a large stake in both.”

“What do you think?” he asked.

“Since you asked, you shouldn’t do the bidding of others. If the gold’s not there, you can continue on, keeping your mouth shut, or quit the job and forgo the pension. The consequences of confronting the authorities would be far worse than the loss of a pension.”

“Those are the only possibilities you see?” he asked.

“No, there’s another.”

“What are you thinking?”

“You get proof to the American people the government is lying to them?”

He laughed. “That’s a death warrant! I listened to an interview with General Clarkson. He thinks disloyal Americans need to be put in internment camps. That we need to re-write our laws. He’s talking about radical Muslims, but you know where it goes once the law’s in place.”

I asked, “Did he mention he went after our government over unjust wars in the Middle East? Is he offering himself as the first internee? Did he mention he now works for Blackwater and he’s singing a different tune? But I hear you, Buddy. Today, at work, this former congressman, Sassafras, said we should hang Snowden from the courthouse the moment we get him! Our government used to just be stupid. Now they’ve graduated to stupid fascists!”

“I don’t know what to do,” said Buddy.

Taking a deep breathe, I said. “I have an idea.”

I would do the audit. Doing the audit was the right thing to do, and a way out of his troubles with Dewey. I’d take the risk and not get anyone else involved if it backfired. It wasn’t an easy idea for him to accept, but he looked as though he was considering it. He

said he needed to think it through, to come up with a way it could be done, without putting him and the other guards at risk.

The next morning when I came into the depository, Dottie greeted me with a serious demeanor:

“Lou wants you in his office, right now.”

I went in and he pointed to a chair. I sat down.

“How well do you know Buddy Martin?”

“He comes to my meetings and sometimes we get a bite to eat.”

“And a friend of his, Dewey Webber?”

“He hasn’t come to any of the meetings, but when I see Buddy outside of the school, he’s sometimes there. I think they’re best friends. Why do you ask Lou?”

“Apparently, he had some falling out with Martin about Martin’s job with the vault police. What do you think of Webber? The word’s out he’s a hothead.” How the hell did Lou know all this?

“Well, he does have a militant personality and he doesn’t hold back when he talks about personal freedoms being lost to the government.”

“Do you think he’s dangerous?”

“To the status quo, yeah. But do I think he’s going to take it on himself to harm anyone? I don’t think so. What’s this about Lou?”

“Buddy Martin has been talking to other vault guards about whether the briefings they get from Homeland Security are backed by evidence, or just propaganda?”

“Whoa,” I said. “That could get him in deep shit!”

“You’re damn right it could. Clint advised me, in no uncertain terms to steer clear of talking to you about this. When you started those classes, Clint went ballistic and wanted me to fire you. But instead he bugged the room. He and I listened to the first two hours. I thought you’d be fired but Clint saw you as being respectful. That your views on personal rights could be helpful for young people dealing with the police.”

It had confused Ira, and now me, that Clint would take that view. “Anyway, I’m advising you to stay away from Martin and Webber. I doubt they’ll be making trouble here for much longer.”

between a rock...

My job was ending this week and I was to stay away from Buddy? Maybe Buddy was already gone? Why would they let him stay on? Then I got a text from him. Could I meet him after work, up by the radar tower, up where Hank and I used to walk?

Along the path, everything had changed. It had been winter and spring when I was up here. Now it was the early evening of a Kentucky summer and things became drier as I ascended. No more chicory alongside the trail. Everything had also changed for me. Hank was a memory I didn't even know where to store. My job was ending and I hadn't done what I came here to do. Soon, I would be gone, and Gwen would be here, untouched by a private word between us.

He wasn't at the tower, then he stepped out of the bushes.

"Hey"

"Hey," I gave back. "Why'd you want to meet up here?"

"I'm being followed."

"Who by?"

"Not sure, maybe it's that guy you used to hang out with?"

"Hank—Hank Grey?"

"Maybe. Last night I caught a glimpse—there was something in the way the guy moved that reminded me."

"That can't be. He left here in disgrace."

"I see what I see," he said. "Tomorrow morning, I'm to report to Homeland Security at 0600. That's what I want to talk to you about. I work tonight—I assume I work tonight? And that may be it." He handed me a piece of graph paper on which he'd made a diagram. "There's an escape tunnel from the vault. I don't think it's been used, or even checked out in years. It can only be opened from inside. I looked it over and I didn't see any alarm mechanism,

but I didn't open it. If you still want to do it, and if I work tonight and if I can make it so I'm the last one out, I'll wedge it open when I leave. But if I leave it open, you have to make sure it's closed when you go." He reminded me to destroy the diagram after I studied it, and he headed back down the trail.

I waited a good twenty minutes before heading back. I went straight to the depository and did a walkthrough. The work was complete except for two electricians installing outlet covers and florescent tubes (the kind I'd insisted on—the natural ones). On the way to my office, Lou's door was open and the look he gave me said there was more. What would I do from now until 0400 when Buddy's shift ended? I could get something to eat, hang out at the library, or go back to my office. I opted to not go to my office.

With a whole night of everything and nothing on the line, and with the sun barely in the sky, I went looking for Gwen. I knew where she lived, in the stand-alone housing area. She was an officer, but other bachelor officers didn't get a house? I had followed Gwen home one night.

Now, I watched her place from across a vacant lot where I wouldn't be seen. Sitting with my back against a tree for more than an hour, I reckoned I would rather be here than the library. At least here I had hope. A car pulled up to her house, and out of it, on my side, stepped Clint! He went to the door and she let him in.

My mind ran: *Gwen was a marine. Gwen was an officer. The only marines at the Fort had to do with Homeland Security. I hadn't seen her at the depository?* How could I have not made those connections?

After fifteen minutes, he left. I continued to sit there, speculating: *Was Gwen in charge of the marines? Was Gwen assigned to my class by Clint? And what brought him to her door? Was he her lover? Did it have to do with Buddy and me?* With the last light of day to my back, I worked at letting go of my assumptions. Tomorrow would be a different world. I walked to her door and knocked. She answered the door and moved aside to let me in.

I had knocked on her door. I should have something to say. I didn't say anything.

"What have you gotten yourself into?" she asked, motioning me to the couch. It was the first time I'd seen her out of uniform, Levis, bare feet and a simple, white v-neck tee shirt. And her hair was down—un-military. I wanted it to be up. I needed her to be consistent. What could I tell someone who was possibly in charge of security for the depository? That I was going to audit the gold and give what I found to the world?

"I don't know what I've gotten into? Buddy Martin came to the classes and stayed after. We'd get a drink, or play pool in his living room."

"What about the other guy, Webber?"

"Buddy's best friend."

She sat on the other end of a long couch, mildly shaking her head.

"I saw Clint come and go. What's that about?"

"You know what it's about. He wanted you out of here yesterday. Lou spoke up for you. Said he'd talk to you. Tell you to stay away from Martin. Lou and Jacoby have a high opinion of you. They wanted you around. But not now."

"What's different now?"

"What's different now is they gave you a chance. You got a warning to stay away from Martin and Webber. But you didn't do it."

"Buddy texted me, he needed to talk. What else could I do? I know he's a harmless guy, but he's at cross-purposes with himself, loyal to his job, but he has to deal with his friend."

"This is the military," she said. "We live and die by orders. You can't disrespect an order because of a friend! It jeopardizes everything."

"I'm not in the military, Gwen, and neither is Buddy! He's in the Mint Police, a hired gun, guarding gold his best friend says doesn't exist. Buddy told us about the briefings for the mint cops and it sounded like propaganda. Remember Gwen, I spent weeks with you talking about some of these things, and unless you were

lying, you have concerns about what's going on? Were you assigned to the classroom, Gwen?"

"If I were, I couldn't tell you."

"Why not, I don't give a fuck. I saw the real you there, whether you were ordered to be there or not."

"You wouldn't be in this trouble if you had stayed away from Martin."

"I might not be in this trouble if you'd stayed after class. But I'd always be there for Buddy, at least as much as you're there for the *cause*—in your case, a cause without a cause."

"It's too late now," she said. "Your bosses are meeting right now, and you won't be here tomorrow. The other two are already gone."

Already gone? Gone where? Dewey was military but Buddy was not. Dewey was most likely in big trouble, but Buddy—had they walked him to the gate, like my dad's partner Rob LaCash, who'd been walked to the gate during the Saturn program for taking kickbacks? Unlike my dad, who'd had a 1949 MG TC rebuilt, part by part, by those same vendors who'd kicked back to Rob.

"With all those orders they gave you," I said, "it's too bad for me they hadn't ordered you to get as close to me as possible."

"Would you have wanted that?"

"I would have given whatever I had." I got up to leave. She put herself between me and the door.

"You're not in control of this situation. For Homeland Security, orders are orders, and the cause is the cause. I wouldn't bank on any of the three of you having a future."

I smiled, thinking about my friends Alex and Tara, and what they'd been through with Homeland Security.

"Why are you smiling?"

"I'm not the first person in a mess because he wouldn't bend to authority." She continued to block my way.

That small item on page ten—soon to be the horror on page one.

I don't think I slept but she did. I didn't look at my phone but when I thought it was close to 3:30, I dressed and left quietly. I had two things to do: be outside the depository at 0400, in case Gwen was wrong and Buddy did work the shift. And, if he wasn't there, I had to get off the base without being seen. And without taking a shuttle or returning to my office or room.

The night kept me hidden but I would be conspicuous if someone saw me. Most likely, somebody was watching my room and my office. They couldn't know I'd been with Gwen and that I was staking out the depository.

At five minutes to four, I was in the prone position under a large red mulberry bush, from where I could see the entrance to the depository and the marine guards. If Buddy worked this last shift and I did the audit, getting out of here was going to be tough. I couldn't chance going through the gate. Were I able to get outside the depository gate, I would still be inside the Fort. And, if they were looking for me at one gate, they'd be looking for me at another.

Two Mint Police came from the depository, making small talk with the marines and headed for the gate. Buddy was not one of them. I felt despair but I could probably get out of here. What was I guilty of—knowing Buddy? I crawled from under the bush, which hung almost to the ground, gently pushing branches out of my way. In the streetlight, I could see mulberries and I picked a couple. One was tart, the other was delicious.

Then I saw Buddy. He came out of the depository, said something to the marines, then paused out front. When the marines were occupied with something else, he headed away from the gate, across the grass, alongside the building? I thought to go after him when I heard a rustle not ten feet from where I was squatting. A

figure in the faint light moved furtively but deliberately in the direction Buddy had taken. It was Hank Grey. To Homeland Security there are no good guys or bad guys. Only those who are useful to power and those who are not. Buddy's usefulness was used up and he was at the bottom of the food chain. But Hank was useful—and dinner was served.

I moved like a shadow without a form. Other than the general direction, I didn't know where the escape tunnel for the depository came out. The diagram, which I'd looked at briefly, was in my pocket, but there was no way I could shine a light on it and not be seen. It showed the entrance to the tunnel inside the fence perimeter and the general direction it took from the depository. Luckily, this wasn't a prison with roving patrols and high intensity lights. Just a fenced perimeter with marines at the gate and the entrance to the building. There were, however, no more bushes to use as cover.

Things always seem easier when you don't think them through. I could have asked Buddy more about the location of the mouth of the tunnel but I assumed it would be obvious. What became obvious was tooling around in the dark looking for the entrance to an escape tunnel located somewhere on a few acres of ground was hit and miss at best. One set of headlights, lighting me up, would end my night.

I spent time crisscrossing the empty field, in quadrants, looking for a way in. What if the diagram were wrong and the tunnel came out on the other side of the fence? During a thought that I was like one of those pilots, searching a million square miles for debris from a plane that went down, I fell into a hole in the night—rather badly. There was nothing, no railing, just a concrete box in the ground with concrete steps, maybe eight or ten of them. I don't know how many because I fell in from the side, missing all but the bottom steps. I lay there, gasping for a breath, then feeling for injuries. Satisfied I would live, I got to my hands and knees, then to my feet.

There was almost no light in the tunnel so I took out my iPhone and switched on the light. It didn't work, and worse, the screen

was shattered. Which probably meant the camera didn't work. I made my way towards the depository thinking about the guys who constructed this tunnel. Was it a vaulted ceiling or just a box? How long was this thing? I continued into a fade to black reality, keeping one hand outstretched for the end of the tunnel until I found a steel door. It was a narrow door, maybe twenty-eight inches wide, opening to the inside. It was ajar. I opened it enough to pass through, my foot pushing something out of the way, between the steel jamb and the edge of the door.

Inside, I let the door go and it closed with a solid click. I was inside the vault. But was I alone in here? Where were the lights? I'd been so stupid. I hadn't even asked Buddy where the vault cops hung out. Was it inside the vault? Then I remembered the two huge vault doors and that no one person had the combinations to both. Did that mean they had a room outside the vault? Did they come into the vault every day? Did they ever come in?

I was in a sanctuary with double vault doors, each of which weighed tens of tons, and I had come in through a narrow, steel clad door, compromised by one old guy. So much for being as safe as Fort Knox.

I felt along the wall for light switches. Why wouldn't they keep the lights on all the time? What's the cost of a few bulbs when compared to the wealth of the world's greatest nation? I worked my way from one room into another, along the wall to the vault door. On the far side of it, I found a row of switches. I flipped one and a fan started up. I turned it off. I flipped a second and the overhead lights came on.

I checked out my phone. It was a mess. I took it out of the case, which I put in my back pocket. I tried the light again but it wouldn't come on. I could get the drop screen to work but no flashlight. I tried the camera. Turning off the lights in the main vault room I took a picture. No flash. I turned the lights back on and took a picture. It worked. Then I tried video. It worked.

Three rooms and I was in one of them, the main room with the vault door. There was nothing in it. It was the size of a small gym, big enough for a good-sized swimming pool. Clean and painted

grey. It had a vaulted ceiling made of bricks and painted—but no bricks of gold. There was nothing! I moved to the second room which was smaller. There were four overhead lights, incandescent bulbs with metal shades, painted black on the tops and white underneath to reflect light. Four lights and two of them didn't work. Which was fitting because there was nothing in the room. I thought about one of the *Grimm's Fairy Tales*—the one where the old witch lowers a soldier into the ground where he finds rooms, each one with a bigger chest of gold in it, and a bigger, ferocious dog atop the chest. The Grimm brothers had a plot, but here there was nothing. That was the plot.

I walked back across the main room into the room where I had come in. Here was the wealth of the United States. Along the wall, opposite the wall I had felt my way along, were metal shelves, floor to ceiling. Here was the gold, and in here all the lights worked. But how much light was needed to illuminate four plastic boxes, two of them red, and two of them green, each maybe fourteen inches long, eight inches wide, and five inches high. Four small plastic boxes to store 8200 tons of gold?

I began videoing in the main room, narrating as I went, slowly panning, focusing on the vault door to give credibility to the video. Then I went into the room with the shelving and the plastic boxes. The room with the escape tunnel door.

It was time to audit the gold so I set the boxes on the floor. I knew about these red boxes. They're called monster boxes, each made to hold 500 ounces of gold. I lifted off a red lid. The upper tray was empty. The bottom tray contained nine tubes, each housing twenty American Gold Eagle, one ounce gold coins. Without putting the box back together I put it aside. The bottom box was intact, still wrapped in the West Point Mint plastic wrappers. I cut the wrappers loose and took off the lid. It had the full complement of 500. Between the two boxes there was 680 ounces of gold. Like the red monster boxes, the green monster boxes were made to hold 500 ounces of American Silver Eagles. I was precise with my video, breaking down the math. Giving the gold at Fort Knox a nominal value of \$1000 an ounce, the wealth of our great nation, if

backed by gold, was in the range of \$748 thousand dollars. To keep it secure, we needed Homeland Security, the Mint Police, and twenty-five marines. I guess one can't be too careful? I didn't add in the silver because it wouldn't change things enough to mention.

Since I couldn't go back to my room, I took a tube of Gold Eagles and a tube of Silver Eagles, for which I would reimburse the depository once I got settled. I did a quick video of the third room then went back to the tunnel door, when I heard something from the direction of the vault door. It was time to go. I thought about putting the gold and silver back in the boxes and switching off the lights but there wasn't time. I grabbed the handle on the steel door and it didn't turn. It was a keyed handle. I had let it close and click shut.

I was trapped. Tens of tons of vault doors had been breached by a simple locking mechanism from a hardware store. To which I had no key—where did Buddy get the key?

Now I was in no hurry. I wasn't going anywhere. I walked across the main room and flipped off the lights. Dark as a mine-shaft and not a sound. Then light, as the heavy vault door began to swing on its bearings, silently.

I opted for the room off the main room, the one without the shelving. Not that it would help. There was nothing in there except two small sections of wall where I would be hidden until someone came into the room. I saw them cross the room, two mint cops and a marine. They went into the room with the gold laid out on the shelves and I walked out through both sets of vault doors. I went up the stairs I had never been down and unlocked my office. There was no one around. I turned on both lights and spread papers on the desk. Some of which I took with me to the couch where I lay down, making like I was asleep with a report on my chest.

My job hadn't ended. I was in my office, asleep on my couch. This was actually the place to be. I slowed my breathing. No one had seen me come in, but what level of security doesn't see someone come in? That could be a problem. How long had I been here? That posed another problem. If someone had been watching my

office, when did they stop? If I were in trouble, what could I do about it now? I took a nap.

Lou didn't knock. He was standing over me when I woke up. I gave him a quizzical frown?

"What are you doing here?" he asked.

"Doing where?"

"Here!" he said.

"I work here."

"I mean tonight—what are you doing here tonight?"

"I'm being quizzed as to why I'm in my office?"

"How long have you been here?"

"Almost a year," I said.

"Goddamnit, how long have you been here? We've been looking for you since last night."

"After you started sounding like Clint, just because I knew Buddy, I figured I was through here. I went and stayed with my girlfriend until she kicked me out."

"Your girlfriend? Who's your girlfriend?"

"Lou, this is a military base. If you have a girlfriend, she's married, and you don't tell anyone. I came back here because her husband was getting off duty."

He sat for a moment thinking.

"Buddy's dead."

I didn't say anything.

"There was a breach of the vault tonight. It was Buddy. He was followed, trying to return to the vault through an escape tunnel."

Buddy was dead, in the escape tunnel, with a locked door and nowhere to go. An old man.

"You mean he was murdered. Murdered by a killer—Hank Grey. I saw Buddy come out of the depository when I was coming in. I was surprised. I didn't understand why you all let him have another shift after knowing what you knew? I watched him. He didn't head towards the gate. He headed around the building. Guess who was following him, Lou?"

He didn't answer. He knew. Maybe he could moderate a conversation between his two flag pins and rationalize the whole mess?

"Hank Grey killed Buddy, Lou. Old Buddy who wouldn't hurt a fly. Buddy who posed no physical threat to anyone, Lou. Murdered in a tunnel by a guy that left here in disgrace. I saw it Lou. I saw Buddy heading around back of the depository. I saw Hank Grey following him. And the question you have is why am I in my office?"

I took the initiative and began gathering my personal things. There wasn't much. In less than a minute I was ready to leave.

"You best stay," he said. "Homeland Security will have have questions for you." I laughed out loud.

"You mean there will be some queries about why I'm in my office and what was my relationship to Buddy? Questions from motherfuckers who bring in a psychopath to kill a harmless old man. Yeah, I best hang around for that, Lou. You just go ahead and raise a cry that you found me, Lou. Because I won't be coming back. And I won't be waiting here for questions."

I walked through and out of the depository, past the marines, with Lou standing in the hall watching me go. The two marines watched Lou, expectantly (they had not seen me come in). I ruminated on Aiko saying that once Lou trusted you, he had your back. Now, he was watching my back as I headed towards the depository guard house and a second pair of marines, the same guys who had nodded me in earlier. Now, they nodded me out.

I didn't know where I was going but I walked briskly. Each time I saw a car, I got off the street into the shadows. I had two choices: head for the Fort gate. Then what? There were no shuttles this time of the morning and it was a long walk to where I could get a bus to Louisville.

The sky was clear and still, filaments of silver in the east. The best thing I could do for myself was get off the base. That's what Jack Reacher would do. He'd walk. He'd go cross-country, and if anybody got in his way he'd fuck them up. But he's a huge guy who can fight three or four at a time. I was just me, and he's a guy in a book.

I went past the sidewalk, up the side of the house, and knocked quietly on Gwen's back door.

I hadn't thought it past this point. What would I do with the audit? The first thing to not do is to knock on a marine officer's door who's part of the security contingent—before dawn. The door opened. The look on her face told me she'd been brought up to speed. She moved just enough for me to come in. It wasn't yet morning and she was in uniform, ready for the day.

"Where've you been?" she asked.

"I went to see if Buddy worked his shift."

"Did he?"

"C'mon Gwen, you know he did! Who talked to you? Clint, Lou—both? Hank Grey murdered Buddy. I saw Hank follow him behind the depository."

"Grey did what he had to do. Buddy Martin breached the vault." I looked at her in disbelief.

"Lou could have gotten me busted tonight and he didn't do it. He let me go. So when I hear you talking about Grey, who happens to be a psychopath, and you refer to Buddy by his full name, you're hiding behind language, Gwen, if you're not an accomplice to murder, you're aiding and abetting murder."

"I think you better leave."

"Okay, I'll leave, but first tell me one thing. Is there any gold in the vault? Maybe you know for sure? If there's no gold and Buddy knew it, was his death—murder?"

"How would I know? I don't work in the vault."

"What if you did know there was no gold, would his death be a murder, done to perpetuate a coverup?"

"Like I told you, you best leave—now."

"Why don't you leave Gwen? Wouldn't being with me be better than the Marine Corps or Homeland Security? Wouldn't you rather be with somebody who gets you, likes talking to you, and wants you naked at least twice a day? Or would you rather hand me over? It's a tough world Gwen—maybe sometimes you have to give over friends for the cause?"

“I’ve slept with you once. It’s crazy for you to be proposing we give everything up for that.”

“Gwen, you’ve spent at least ten nights seeing who I am and how I behave with people. When I tried to leave here tonight, you didn’t want me to go. What do you have here that’s worth anything? Maybe another ten or fifteen years for a pension that won’t be there when you need it? I’m offering to trade that for thousands of late walks and talks, kids if you want them, and adventures the military could only dream of. Think about it, while I go to the bathroom.”

There was something I needed to do. In the bathroom, I sent the video to myself, then forwarded it to four persons, two of whom were friends, who would send it to four friends with a request to pass it to four more. The other’s were: Max Keiser, who hosts the Keiser Report, and I sent it to Ron Paul. He deserved to know.

I came into the living room and asked if we could sit for a couple of minutes. I wanted to talk. I told her what I’d done, and what I’d just done in the bathroom, to a reception somewhere between amazement and disbelief. When I saw her reaction, I wished I’d sent it to more people. If the authorities could quash my audit, all of this would have been for nothing.

“It’s treason,” she said.

“Is what Snowden did treason?”

“Most people I know think so!”

“Most people you know are jarheads. What about you Gwen—what do you think? Is he a traitor, and if he is, is he any more a traitor than that idiot, what’s his name—Clapper, who lied to Congress about the NSA not collecting information on millions of Americans?”

“It’s different,” she said. “It’s his job to protect the interests of the United States.”

“There it is Gwen! What are the interests of the United States? Are they the Bill of Rights, or are they some policy directives from the fascist empire?”

“What gives you the right to expose our nation?”

“It’s the same question Gwen? What gives you the right to defend a nation at odds with it’s principles? What gave them the right to hand over the creation of our money to the Fed—a banking cartel? What gives you the right to lie to the American people about the gold in Fort Knox?”

“Why do you get to expose the lie?”

“Same question, Gwen. Why do you get to perpetuate the lie? Do you know the facts about this?”

I knew because I look for the facts. I don’t read commentaries. When I want to know about Hinduism, I dig into the Upanishads—to hell with some scholar’s scribblings. Decide for yourself. That’s what this country was founded on. It’s a republic, goddamnit, not a democracy. What’s the difference? In a republic you can tell your elected representative they don’t know shit!

This thing between us was hopeless. She came from a cloister, raised in the status quo. Why else would she be a marine officer? It was fun in class where she could slum, then again, she was ordered to slum. There was only one light turned on in the living room and its shadings rendered her even more beautiful. I couldn’t help comparing her to Anna and Zoe. She was too lovely, out of reach. I thought of this cheerleader who was a senior when I was a sophomore. Once, I saw her talking with her boyfriend, her face streaked with tears. I wanted to kiss away those tears. Gwen would rat me out—or not. It was too late to do anything about the audit. The damage was done, and sometimes—duty calls.

“What will you do now?” she asked.

“What will you do now?” I asked.

“What do you think I should do?”

“It’s a republic, I think you should decide for yourself.”

“What do you want me to do?” she asked.

“To not tell anybody you’ve seen me.”

“That’s all?” Something inside me moved.

“No, that’s not all. I want you to be with me.”

“I’m not doing that. You’re going to jail, unless Hank Grey gets to you first. As soon as this audit hits the airways, your future ceases to be.”

24

I won’t ask anything more, if I get to count her freckles with my tongue.

I walked into the coolness of the early morning—shaky. Her last kiss stayed with me. I didn’t care what happened now. The audit was done and it was out there. More importantly, Gwen might be in love with me. Death may be out there stalking, but the most important thing possible for me had just happened.

Soon, there would be shuttles coming in and going back out. I headed towards the gate. Did they know about Gwen? Not much chance, but maybe somebody saw me? Somebody saw Buddy. Had they connected me with Buddy and the audit? Lou wouldn’t have let me leave. Was Homeland Security looking for me as a person of interest? Oh, yeah.

There’s something I like about these old bases; security wasn’t as big a deal back then. Who was going to mess with us? We had the gold and we had the power. They made a depository inside a guarded area, inside the fort. But the fort was old-school, which accounted for a convenience store, inside the fence, not two hundred feet from the sentry post.

I needed a coffee. The coffee here wasn’t bad and they had real half and half. I fail to understand places with the packets of powder for cream? I mean, if you have a convenience store, what stops you from putting out some ice in a bowl with some half and half?

In the store I was a free man, having a cup. I didn't need anything more. I might just stay here, forever, by the magazine rack. I thumbed through a magazine having to do with photography today, sensing an older guy at the rack, with more than a passing interest in me. I looked at him and he reflexively looked away. One of those old guys who wore a vest with dozens of pins on it. They look like walking, refrigerator art. Usually the stuff has to do with unions or military and sometimes they wear a hat advertising some local, or the USS Reedbird, a coastal mine sweeper. This guy was without the hat. But he was curious about me and I broke the ice:

"What are those pins? I have some but mine have to do with motorcycle riding to the Arctic or Ruta 40 in Argentina."

"These are from forty-one years of service in the United States Army," he said. The guy looked old enough to have been in WW2, but I guess those guys are gone now.

"Thanks for your service," I said and I meant it. He wasn't the one who sent our kids all over the world to steal bananas with the United Fruit Company.

"Don't you work at the depository?" he asked.

"I was the construction manager. I just quit."

There was something he wanted to ask, but he couldn't. He'd heard something. He had questions?

"Do you know any of the Mint Police?" I asked.

"Not well, but rumors are flying about what happened to one of them."

"Yeah, that's why I quit."

"Because of the rumors?"

"What rumors did you hear?"

"That one of the vault guards was stabbed to death last night."

What kind of a guy would stab an old man in a tunnel? Son of a bitch.

"I knew he was murdered—I didn't know it was a stabbing."

"Why do you call it it murder?"

"Because his crime was asking why he guarded gold that wasn't there? Anyway, he was my friend and the remodel of the depository is finished, so I quit."

“Where are you going?” he asked.

“Louisville, to get a bus.”

“I’m going to Louisville but you’ll have to ride in the back. I have a birthday cake for my granddaughter up front and I need to keep the air conditioner on it.”

The vehicle was a Mercedes, a sprint van. Windows for the driver and passenger and a small window in the back, with three rows of seats. I told him I was tired and I stretched out across the middle seat. This might work, a retired vet, with dozens of commemorative badges and a child’s birthday cake, with seats in the rear that weren’t clearly visible? A couple of questions from the sentries and we were through without a problem, except for the one voice in the sentry post I recognized. As we pulled forward, I peaked through the back window to confirm Hank Grey was in the sentry shack. Dumb shit! Taken in by vest pins and a cake, letting a ten passenger van through without a look? Was Hank being at the gate a coincidence? No, it was not a coincidence.

25

“Float like a butterfly—sting like a bee.”

Cassius Marcellus Clay

The old timer let me off in downtown Louisville, \$20 in my pocket, and my coins. I had the thought I was Judas, which would make the United States, Jesus. That’s a stretch.

The first thing I saw, in a shop window, was an ad for the Muhammed Ali Center. I asked for directions. I could walk it. On the way I passed a Radio Shack where I bought a throw-away phone for nineteen dollars and eighty four cents. I’d forgotten about the tax. I offered the kid an ounce of silver for fifteen bucks.

He gave it to me without the tax. I continued through a busy downtown to North 6th.

The Center is in a row of museums. I went to the entrance—nine bucks for adults and five for military. I told the woman I worked at Fort Knox and I'd forgotten my credit card. Would let me in for an ounce of silver? She asked what it was worth. I told her fifteen bucks. She let me in as military and gave me a ten dollar bill as change.

For those who don't know about Muhammed Ali—I'm going to call him Cassius Clay—that's who he was when he grew up here. I hear all that stuff about Clay being his slave name, but all black names were slave names? A muslim name. Was that any more him?

I was big into him. He was ostentatious, he was brash. He gave me hope! He was naturally endowed as a boxer and he was fast. He also had a chin of steel. He was a genius when it came to being him, but he wasn't all that bright. When Malcolm X had his falling out with the Nation of Islam, Cassius (Muhammed by then) was too entrenched to continue the friendship. Such a pity. Two of the seminal figures of recent history.

Ali (Cassius) was my guy. My generation's first celebrity to stand up to the American Empire. I wandered through the exhibit, the gloves, the posters, and the photographs, finding myself wanting more. Like with Steve Jobs. I had walked by his large home in Palo Alto before seeking out his boyhood home in Los Altos. Leaving the center, I asked the woman at the door and she went on line for me.

"That's not a neighborhood you want to go into," she said. I could get there walking, in about an hour, unless I opted for the route along the Ohio River, which was twice the distance. An hour was plenty. I set a brisk pace and called Gwen. She answered, telling whoever she was with she had to take this call.

"Where are you?"

"Best you don't know," I said, "enhanced interrogation and all."

"I need to talk to you."

"You are talking to me. Sounds like you need to see me."

“How did you get off the base? This place is locked down.”

“Apparently not. I’m walking around Louisville. Can you come and meet me?”

“Where?”

“I gave her the address on Grand Avenue.”

“What’s there?”

“You’ll see. Can you bring me some money. I promise to get it back to you soon.”

I turned up Grand until I found 3302. It wasn’t hard to spot with a Commonwealth of Kentucky historical marker out front, commemorating him—as both Cassius Clay and Muhammed Ali. It was a simple house, the porch supported by decorative ironwork, with one of those things on the roof that’s not a dormer, but something someone could look out from an upstairs bedroom (maybe it is a dormer?). The place was so small, like the Elvis home in Tupelo. We didn’t have much back then. But we had a strong dollar!

After ten minutes of thoughts and memories, how one of the two times he fought Sonny Liston for the championship, the first time, I bet everything I had on him and the next morning when I was raving about the victory and this older red-headed kid broke my nose.

I was ready to go but I had to wait for Gwen, so I hung out front, on the sidewalk. Down the block, on the corner, there were four, black teenagers who gave me more looks the longer I stood there. I knew my hanging around would make me familiar, and soon they sauntered down the block to where I was leaning against the marker.

“Whatcha you doing here, ol man?” I was reminded how blacks who haven’t been blended with whites, can look so different from one another.

“You don’t live here,” said another.

“I’m buying this house,” I said, pointing to the dilapidated, boarded up Clay house.

“Some dude from Vegas just bought it,” he said. “Said he gonna turn it to a museum.”

“He’s just looking to make a buck,” I said. “This place is a shrine to a great man, not for white man’s profit!”

“You a white man and you bitches all the same.” They laughed. I’d told a lie to get them on my side, but I also had something that wasn’t a lie.

“How old are you?” I asked one of them.

“None of your bisiss, old man.”

“I bet you’re eighteen?”

“Nineteen.”

When I was eighteen, I spent the summer in Mississippi registering black voters, in towns where they had separate black drinking fountains and bathrooms, where blacks couldn’t go into stores or sit at a lunch counter. One night I hitchhiked to Atlanta. It was hot and muggy. I was at a gas station somewhere when this black guy in bibbed overalls pulled in for diesel with a load of cotton. I asked for a ride. He gave me a song and dance about *No Riders*, pointing to a sticker in the passenger corner of his windshield. I showed him my ID—field worker for the NAACP. He told me to get in the truck and all the way into Atlanta he talked about how *black mens were the best friends white mens could ever have.*"

That story wouldn't make me safe with these guys. Too much had happened since the 60's. The gap between the races is maybe wider than ever. Black sports heroes and entertainers aren't enough because most of black America hasn't been granted access. Gwen pulled up in a black government sedan and got out. With a few white bitch comments, my guys headed back to their corner.

You can't make this shit up.

Race relations are troubled, just below the surface. You can't lock up twenty-five percent of young black men and have the situation get better. In Europe, the rate of crime for blacks isn't much different than for whites so it's not about blacks. It's about being black—here.

I don't know, maybe it's better now? Back when I was a senior in high school, I went, one night, with my friend Harley, to Dodger Stadium, in Chavez Ravine. The City of Angels had just forcibly removed the ravine's inhabitants to make way for the ball park. Harley's mom, Beulah, who was an usherette at our local theater, was to pick us up. She didn't show.

After a couple of hours, I decided to walk home, twenty miles, on a weekend night. Somewhere, maybe Echo Park, I recognized a street where I had driven with my friend, Nick Torrieri, the 3rd, to junk out his old Buick. The brakes had gone out and the way we stopped the three-thousand pound car was to make a hard right and run into the back of a parked car.

Anyway, this street I recognized was a long way from the suburbs I called home. Interrupting my thoughts, came an Oldsmobile round the corner, way too fast, and flipped over. Not exactly over, she came to rest on her side, on the doors (something a stuntman couldn't have re-enacted in twenty tries). The driver, at the stage of drunkenness next to unconsciousness, climbed up and out through a side window and asked if I would help him push her back over. Well we got that baby rockin to where she almost went, then with one more series of rockings, we got out of the way, and two thousand pounds came down on the wheels. He got in and took off—without offering me a lift.

Next, I came on a scene where a fight had broken out. All black guys and a few cruisers of mostly black cops. The fight was bloody

and the blood extended to the back seats of different cruisers where two brothers, bleeding profusely, were handcuffed, but continued the fight, kicking at the windows, and smearing blood like finger paint.

I continued on towards the suburbs, which seemed farther than when I began. Ahead, on my side of the street, came a group of black guys. I crossed to the other side and they did the same. I crossed back and so did they. I thought about running but what's the odds of a white kid outrunning a pack of black guys? When they got to me they stopped in a half circle and began to taunt me. Before someone takes a beating, there's usually a shaming, to set the stage. One of them spit on me. I was more sad than scared. Sounds good but I was terrified. Then it changed.

“Ronnie Powell, what the fuck! What you doing here, Ronnie?”

“You shut you mouth motherfucker—you don't know me!”

“Ronnie Powell. We were in boot camp. Where's Albert?”

“Motherfucker! I know the dude. Albert's home. His mommas's pissed at em. He can't get out.” Albert Bell, who we referred to as the Watusi. Six two—135 pounds.

“Ask this dude the words to any song,” exclaimed Ronnie. “He know R&B better than any of ya.”

They walked with me maybe ten blocks telling me the whole way it wasn't safe. At a certain street they stopped. The other side was Mexican and they didn't go there.

Los Angeles is bigger now. The chances one of the blacks would be Ronnie Powell was unlikely then, maybe impossible now? The world was smaller back then, and probably the worst that would happen was a bad ass kicking. Nobody was going to shoot you. Compton was a place you went to to buy hot rod parts. Now, it's a place to die.

“Piss on em Whip—they ain’t shit.”

Ed Landing’s commentary on authority—the day before he died in a fiery Sicilian car crash—1965

“What’s all that about,” asked Gwen.

“I was waiting for you and this is their turf. After a while they came over to explain the facts of life.”

“What are you doing here?”

“I was waiting for you, but I came to see where the great man grew up.”

“A man who went to jail for refusing to serve his country.”

“If you must,” I said. “He refused to fight for an unjust country in an unjust war”

“There’s more than one way to look at what happened in Vietnam,” she said.

“No there's not. There were elections scheduled before we got into it, and when it became clear Ho Chi Min was going to win, we called them off. It unravelled from there.”

“You make it all so simple,” she said, “while you take the side of everybody we need to contain.”

“Like who?”

“Russia.”

“We're at least as much the problem as Putin, and I'll bet, euphemistically, we spend more on propaganda to discredit Russia than they spend on defense. Remember Stars Wars? Hans Solo and Chewy were the good guys, the space cowboys. Remember the Empire guys in the white suits and helmets. We're them now. And my girlfriend is security for Homeland Security.”

“Really, and who is this girl friend?”

“She’s the one I dream about.”

“You take yourself too seriously. Why do you have to save the world? Ten years after you’re gone, no one will remember you.”

“Thank god!” I said. “But it won’t change what we’ve done to the world with our greed. Look at the Greeks. They’re slaves—chained to an oar of a Roman man of war, (German, in their case), for all of time.”

“Things have always been bad,” she said.

“Yeah, but not this bad. You wanna see fascism close up? Look for prepositions—*of the state, by the state, for the state, in the state*. They control everything through the complacency of the people and collectivization. Everything’s dumbed down. Unlike my friend’s LA—University High School in 1960, racially mixed, and politically incorrect. At football games, they belted out their chant: *Buddhahead’s spooks, greyboys and jews, with that combination how can we lose? Then they followed up: shake that blue and white me ama ama ama, shake that blue and white!*

"That's not true?"

"I swear it," I said. "I swear it on any chance I may have with you."

28

Inertia is not an energy solution—keep moving.

“I have Buddy’s phone,” she said.

“How?”

“I found it.”

“And you didn’t give it to them?”

“It might implicate you.”

We sat in her car. It was an older phone, not a smart phone, but with a camera. The twenty photos were of the vault rooms. Each room was empty, except for what I’d found. I checked his emails. All were deleted except one.

To Whom It May Concern:

I'm a member of the the Mint Police at Fort Knox. I'm assigned to the vault to protect the gold. There is no gold. Six of us work there and we all know it. Each week we're briefed by Homeland Security on the need for the United States to control the world and the importance of a strong dollar to support that mission. I've had enough of the lies and propaganda. Everything is rigged, including Fort Knox. Americans deserve the truth.

Buddy Martin

United States Mint Police

The email was like the diagram of the escape tunnel. Both were big trouble.

"That cost him his life," she said.

"No, they stole his life."

"What are you going to do now?" she asked.

"I don't know. What are you going to do?"

"I'm going back to Fort Knox to tender my resignation to the Marine Corps"

"Then what?"

"Then nothing."

She dropped me downtown after giving me \$500. I thought about ditching Buddy's phone but that got me wondering why there were no comments on the video I'd sent out. I was feeling uninspired when I should be feeling good. Gwen was quitting the Marine Corps, with only a small chance she could be tried for treason. And she was quitting because of me! What was I going to do? Where was I going to go? All I wanted was to be like our nearest genetic relatives, the bonobos, who settle all interpersonal issues through genital rubbing (our nearest genetic relatives ought to be addressed as who). But the one thing I couldn't do was plan in terms of Gwen. She was right. I'd likely be dead soon. All my energy had to go towards making sure that didn't happen. I thought it through on

my way to the bus station. I'd go west. West is always the best way to go.

I got lucky. Crossing to the Greyhound station, I saw Hank Grey before he saw me and I backtracked. Moving quickly I flashed on these two brothers in Aspen, Colorado, beating the shit out of a guy in front of a local tavern. They lived in that beautiful town and travelled for work as hired assassins. Beatings were something they administered for fun, between jobs. They were contractors like Hank. From the bonobo point of view, they simply didn't exist.

West was the direction in which the sun was heading and I went there. It was a lazy, end of a summer day, a bit muggy for my liking, but it would get better as I made my way west.

Why hadn't I heard from anyone. It isn't everyday you get proof there's no gold in Fort Knox. I texted a friend on my throwaway phone. He got right back. He hadn't heard from me. Neither email nor text were working on my iPhone. Back to square one. If they caught me now, I'd have accomplished nothing. Interrupting my thought were two guys who weren't regular guys, crossing the street towards me, diagonally.

They were the enemy, so I ran. Could they have followed me from the bus station? That was almost an hour ago. I set a pace where they were gaining on me slightly—if I ran all out, at my age, they would soon run down a loss of adrenaline and massed lactic acid. I made turns at each block and held them off. Slowly, I increased the distance between us, then headed back to the main street. I slowed at a dry cleaners and went in. I needed a paper clip. The guy gave me two. I looked both ways out the back and headed towards the river until I found somewhere quiet to get the SIM card out of my iPhone. But first I sent the message and the photos on Buddy's phone, to me. Then I continued west.

Then I saw them again, with Hank Grey. How the fuck did they know where I was? Buddy's phone. I didn't know how to get the SIM card out of it! Was Gwen in trouble? As long as his phone was active, they could track me, so I'd run a few blocks then stop to use

my paper clip probe until I got it out. I crossed a foot bridge over a stream and continued west.

But I wasn't in the clear. I was on foot and they had vehicles. Night was coming on and I had long afternoon shadows to help hide me. I saw a sign for Corydon and St. Croix, so I crossed the Ohio River into Indiana. Crossing the bridge I walked backwards and hitched until an older Chevrolet station wagon stopped for me. He was heading to Jefferson City, Missouri. That was west, a long way west. I was tired and I must have nodded off. He said there was room in the back for me to stretch out. I slid over the bench seat into a spot just wide enough for me to stretch out and go to sleep.

29

The heartland has no tourist towns.

I must have slept long because there was light in the east, enough to see that I was sleeping between small cages, stacked two high, on either side of me. Each cage was maybe a foot by a foot, containing a small furry animal, each of which made a chirping racket with their neighbors. I closed my eyes and came back into reality again, this time more slowly. I almost went back to sleep but that seemed absurd. I called out to the driver:

“How long did I sleep?”

“All night. Maybe six hours. You slept through Indiana, Illinois and most of Missouri.”

“Do you want to sleep? Do you want me to drive?”

“I'm almost home. I have one stop to make, about five miles up the road. I'll let you out in Jefferson City.”

I made my way between the cages, across the bench seat into the front. Soon, he took an uphill right on a dirt road, into a high

meadow with an old farmhouse and a newer outbuilding, some kind of a shop. A guy came out and my driver got out. They talked a couple of minutes before the guy headed in the direction of the shop and we followed in the wagon.

We both got out and the talk resumed. There were no introductions. This was business. I was the only one aware of my presence. We walked through the shop with the guy describing the heating and cooling systems and something about humidifiers. This place had to do with these rodents, because it was all cages, high end cages with stainless bars. Unlike the cages in the wagon, there were four animals in each of these. The driver went into the first cage, snatching a furry rodent and separated its lips, exposing the stubs of two buck teeth. In one motion, he squeezed on the animal's jaw to force open the mouth, drew a pair of surgical clippers from a back pocket and clipped the buck teeth to the gum line. There were probably twenty animals in five cages. He checked them all and clipped most of them. Two, he crushed under his boot on the concrete floor.

“What the fuck,” said the guy. “You just stomped \$800!”

“I told you that mink teeth grow back and you need to clip them every week. The coats of the two I stepped on were ruined in fights with teeth. You were feeding those two for nothing.”

Minks? Did people still raise minks? Do they still wear mink coats? Wasn't my mother, with the mink stole she couldn't afford, and the second-hand Caddy with the tired vinyl roof, the last of the breed? Then again, this was the Midwest, where any throwback is possible.

The guy bought six minks, all clipped, and paid in cash. Cash—was this an illegal enterprise? Back down the dirt driveway, I asked the driver if it was painful for the minks to have their teeth clipped off?

“You know, I never thought about it.” This guy was all of fifty. He'd been to the dentist. He'd had toothaches, and he never thought about it?

I thanked him for the ride and I meant it. He pointed me out with a thumbs up to a farmer in a pickup truck who took me into Sedalia. Sedalia, where I was again thinking about Alex and Tara.

“Can I ask how old you are?” I asked my new driver.

“Why sure, I’m seventy-four on Saturday.”

“Happy Birthday! You’re ten years older than the Beatles song.”

“I wouldn’t know about the Beatles,” he said.

“No matter. I asked about your age cause there was a western, way back, on Saturday mornings, called *Wild Bill Hickok*. His sidekick was Andy Divine—on the show he was Jingles Jones. He was always talking about going home to East Sedalia.”

“This is the place,” he said. “It’s where I live, East Sedalia. There was a plaque up for years but they took it down. Hardly anybody here knows Andy Devine—nobody knows Jingles Jones.”

It ought to have made me sad, but it didn’t. I knew who they were and I had been in front of a TV for all the fun.

Where he let me out was a good place to hitch, a crossroads where one road headed north to the interstate and Kansas City, and a secondary road, straight ahead, through the four way stop, also going to Kansas City. I hitched at the stop sign. I’d take the first ride going either way towards Kansas City. I was three states away from Fort Knox and feeling pretty good.

And, here was a girl my lord, in a pickup Ford, slowing down to take a look at me. I saw her decide to take a chance.

“Where you headed?” she asked.

“Kansas City.”

“Get in. You give me any trouble and you’ll regret it.”

“This motorcycle don’t got no reverse gear!”

Tats

I could tell she meant it. We went through the four-way and headed along the secondary road towards Kansas City, in this newer, four-door pickup with heavy equipment in the backseat and the pickup bed. She asked when I’d eaten last. I had to think. It was before Gwen came into Louisville.

“You’re in luck,” she said. “There’s a good diner about five miles up the road. And I haven’t eaten today.”

The landscape had changed overnight. Three states can do that. The humidity had disappeared out here on the plains, a place designed for buffalo herds. The one road trip I’d taken in Kentucky was to the Daniel Boone mountains, over twisty roads, and green hills so thick, it would take a man with a machete the best part of a day to hack through a couple of miles. I had watched a snake, banded in red and yellow, move up the trunk of a tree. I’ll take the buffalo, at least I can see them coming.

We ordered breakfast, I weighed ham and sausage but went with bacon. Scrambled eggs, wheat toast and bacon. The basics and coffee.

“What’s in Kansas City?” she asked.

It’s the West, west of Kentucky, Indiana, Illinois. I’m heading west. How about you? Where do you live?”

“For now I live in Kansas City. I just broke up with my boyfriend in Sedalia.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I did the breaking up. I got together with him because of how he looked. He’s a bodybuilder, got second in the Mr. Universe thing. But there was nothing more to him than how he looked. He’s a loser. When he wasn’t lifting weights, he’d fall asleep. And even when he didn’t, there’s one muscle weightlifting

does nothing for. For awhile it was all fine because I could masturbate and not have to worry about waking him up.”

In a tank top, which would have been a wife-beater on a guy, she didn’t look like a guy, but something about her brought a boy thought. Her hair was black and long, not tied back, and most all her skin was ink, including her chest and part of her neck. On her chest were a pair of wings that probably began between her breasts. There was something very sexy about those wings. Her arms, sleeves in the tattoo world, were full ink from above her biceps to her wrists. Her hands were inkless, but her shoulders rained designs down her arms. She introduced herself as Tats and I had to hold back a laugh. Had I laughed, as long as it wasn’t malicious, I think she would have been alright with it.

“What do you do, Tats?”

“I run a crew in KC—ironworkers.”

“What do they do?”

“We assemble structural steel framework for high rises.”

“You mean you walk on girders, ten stories up.”

“Sometimes you walk, seventy stories up. But it doesn’t really matter—anything above the first five has the same ending.”

“Does it happen, Tats?”

“It used to be the most dangerous occupation. An ironworker who worked more than ten years was on borrowed time. Now with safety lines, it’s better.”

“Ironworkers must get paid well?”

“Not really, used to, but now people need jobs. We get about \$20 an hour.”

“That’s nothing,” I said. She shrugged.

An interesting girl. Something fresh and honest about her. She did go on about herself but she was good listener. When she asked what I did, I told her about the Fort, right up to the part that mattered.

I paid for the breakfast, the least I could do. It was an easy rapport and I was having fun.

“Where you staying in KC?” she asked.

“I don’t know if I’m staying? I’ve been curious about Kansas City. I’ve had the thought that if I lived one place during the jazz years it would be there.”

“The people here,” she said, “think KC was the jazz epicenter, where the great dark blues of slavery met up with Chicago and New York’s, big city improvisations.”

“Yeah, that’s what I think, the blues and Count Basie. Do you know anywhere I could stay?”

“You asking if you can stay with me?” I didn’t say anything.

“Remember what I said when you got in the truck?”

I could stay at her place with those same conditions.

I liked Tats. There was no bullshit about her.

“You wanna hear a story?” I asked

31

“Mission Accomplished!”

George W. Bush

Tats' place was a second story walkup, downtown, but not on a main street. She had plants, healthy plants, and a cat. She also had to go to work in about an hour.

“Go to work where?”

“*The Beaver*—I’m a bartender.”

“*The Beaver*—you got to be kidding.”

“Nope, but it’s not what you think. It’s been there since the thirties.”

“How come it is, as crew chief, you have to work as a bartender.”

“I do it for fun—love the job. But before I go, I wanna ask about your story?”

She asked questions and I gave answers. Curiously, she had no questions about why I'd done it. To Tats, it was obvious it had to be done, and, as a necessary consequence, my friend was dead. She talked about Hank Grey. She knew the type well. She'd done her time on the wrong side of the tracks. Nothing surprised her because there was little that hadn't happened to her or been done to her. But it didn't matter—there was an honesty coming off her like a halo. I remembered a Platonic question about whether something is loved by the gods because it's sacred, or, is it sacred because it's loved by the gods? Tats was loved by the gods, but in her case it was a different question: what came first, the hundred tattoos, or the wrong side of the tracks?

She asked about the direction I saw the world going? I explained the basics, a zero-sum gain where wealth is not lost, it merely changes hands. How the now bankrupt Greeks had signed on for more and more loans, although none of the money went to Greece. Just enough to pay back bankers who'd made bad loans, while those same bankers persuaded governments to transfer debt onto the taxpayers, while the European Union demanded fifty billion in assets, to be held in escrow. If and when the loans weren't paid back, the Greeks would lose their water, electrical utilities, their ports. Whatever made them sovereign.

“Do you know,” I asked, “that for most of our history, the federal government was small? In their day to day lives, most people only interacted with it through the postman? Now, it's big government and huge debt, backed by nothing!”

She went off to bartend, after giving me the WiFi password.

The things I'd gathered up before leaving Lou were my toilet gear, a grey cashmere, v-necked sweater, and my MacBook Pro, in its carrying case. I turned it on and put the SIM card into my phone, then connected my phone to the MacBook. But nothing uploaded.

Exhausting my expertise, I put the SIM card back in Buddy's phone, again sending his photos and his email to my address. That worked. They were on my MacBook. But it wasn't a video and it wasn't the work I'd done. Then, I got caught up on the internet

where I spent maybe half an hour reading articles and listening to an interview. I checked my phone for Buddy's photos and email. I had them. I wondered, did I have the picture of Gwen on my MacBook that I had taken with the iPhone? I did, and what else I had, was the video of the vault, stored in the cloud, and accessible with the MacBook.

I didn't need either phone for the video or the photos so I popped the SIM cards back out. Then, I sent the videos and the photos. This time I was confident they would be delivered. I also sent a more complete explanation in the form of an email.

The replies were immediate, expressing wonder, disbelief, worry, and enthusiasm. George W. had said it from the deck of an aircraft carrier, but I had done it: *mission accomplished*.

Celebration was called for. I washed my face and hands, donned my cashmere and headed out for *The Beaver*.

32

a wink and no nod

In the late 50's, the jazz scene in Kansas City had wound down, but in 1959, an R&B artist named Wilbert Harrison put KC back on the map with his rendition of "Kansas City". Written in 1952, by Leiber and Stoller who went on to great fame as songwriters, Harrison offered the song as a driving shuffle, which shuffled up the charts to number one. In it, he sings about standing on the corner of 12th Street and Vine. *The Beaver* was on 12th Street, a few blocks from Vine. I had to stand on that corner. I would have put the coordinates in my phone but the SIM card was in my wallet. I knew that Vine was before Paseo, so when I came to Paseo, I asked an old black guy, carrying a folded newspaper, coming towards me.

“Can you direct me to 12th Street and Vine?”

“Not a problem, brother. First you need to get a copy of the record. It’s on a Fury 45. Other than that there is no 12th Street and Vine. I been waiting fifty years for somebody to ask that!” He let loose a laugh and kept on walking.

The Beaver had an inviting look to it. It was narrow and long, always good for a bar. There were two small tables outside where no one was sitting, although it was a pleasant night. Through the windows, I could see two barkeeps, one was Tats, and maybe ten customers. She was moving and talking, having fun. When I came in, she gave me a wink.

I was in such a good mood. I wanted to talk. Maybe I wanted to drink. I asked a guy on the barstool next to me if he could recommend a drink. He said they were famous for margaritas. Tats came by.

“What’ll it be, soldier?”

“I think I’ll have a margarita.”

“One shot or two?” I looked to the guy for a recommendation. He held up two fingers. It was more than I wanted but I went ahead.

“Salt?”

“Claro!”

The guy next to me was a builder with pleasant stories, but when my second double arrived, I took a table in the back. A woman came in, Mexican, maybe fifty. She’d been a looker, but a hard life had altered time, and she’d gotten big on us.

“You alone?” she asked.

“Yeah.”

“May I sit down?”

“You may” She sat across from me. I liked that she just asked.

“Would you buy me one drink?”

“I would buy you one drink,” I said. “What will you have?”

“What you’re having.”

I motioned to Tats and pointed at my drink. She gave me a look, then nodded. She’d seen this woman before.

“You know,” said the woman, “there’s moments in your life that tell you something and if you don’t hear what they’re saying you miss it.”

“You thinking of something in particular?” I asked.

“Yes I am. When I was a girl, eighteen, I took a trip on the Greyhound, from my family in Blythe to my aunt in Salinas. It was my first trip. I was such a little thing in a flowered dress. I couldn’t speak English, maybe a few words. A boy got on the bus, a boy like I’d never seen. He was a gringo with hair to his shoulders, clean golden hair with just a blush of red. He talked with me. He had little Spanish so he talked with me outside of language. When we pulled into San Luis Obispo, where I had to change buses, I wanted this boy.

“We went to the cafeteria and had apple pie. I didn’t let him pay. He was staying in San Luis Obispo and he wanted me to stay. I couldn’t. I was Mexican, I was Catholic. I wanted him to come with me to Blythe. We talked about my family, my three older brothers, which didn’t make him comfortable. But, something was between us, something important. No girl would ever love this boy the way I would love him. I’m sure my eyes told him. We talked about my town and my family. I could feel in my stomach, and all over down there that he wanted to come with me. His eyes made a story but his face told the doubts. I offered to pay for his ticket—I could deal with my family. Uncertainty showed in his eyes and I watched him slip away. I let him go. Instead of taking his white hands in my dark ones and telling him I loved him and we could do this thing. But I was young and I let him go. He was my best chance to make a world. Maybe I was his?”

She asked if I would dance with her. I did, but when the song finished I went and sat at the bar.

“What are you drinking?” asked a young guy on the next stool.

Tats came over when he insisted I have another. That would be six shots of Tequila. Too much for the likes of me. But I was celebrating.

“What do you do?” I asked.

“I’m a writer, but I work as a greenskeeper at a golf course. The economy here is crap. They just cut me to part time.”

“It’s everywhere,” I said. “The world’s in a huge deflation and they keep lying to us. Somehow, China, maybe the world’s biggest economy, can fall apart, day after day, and it won’t affect us. The countries that produce commodities are being ruined—Canada, Australia, Brazil. But somehow, we, with most of the debt of the world, we’ll be okay. Except, we’ve lost a million and a half manufacturing jobs and added the same amount of bartenders and waiters.”

I had to stop.

Tats, passing by with a couple of drinks, asked:

“And what’s wrong with bartenders?”

I finished my thought:

“It doesn’t show up in the headlines but it shows up in millions of guys like you who get cutback or laid-off.”

“Maybe you’re too pessimistic?” he said.

“Maybe not. We’re living the theme of man and superman. Regular guys can’t afford the green fees because their wealth has been transferred to superman and the rich can’t seem to get enough.

“So what’s your solution?”

“Wish I had one. With Congress having an approval rating lower than poisonous snakes, we’re in the endgame, where they take the pension funds, bank deposits, and outlaw cash.”

“Why would they outlaw cash?”

“Because they need money and what’s left for them is negative interest rates, where they give back less back than what was deposited. Only the stupid will go for that. Most will keep their money at home or buy gold and silver. The big boys need control over the money so they can tax it and claim it. So cash has to go. Maybe gold and silver too. Maybe, the internet as we know it, and Bitcoin. Then maybe, just maybe, what Ben Franklin answered to a woman, as to whether we have a republic or a monarchy, will matter: ‘A republic madam, if you can keep it.’ .”

We talked and drank for hours. All told I'd had eight shots of tequila. They closed the place at 2, drew the blinds and we drank until after 4, when the phone rang. It was a woman from the apartment next to Tats. The police and federal officers were there looking for her. She hadn't told them about *The Beaver*.

A car braked outside. I peeked through the mini blinds at a black Suburban with black wheels. And we were out the back.

33

Today wrote its own script—without my input.

I was drunk. We loaded into Tats' truck, sending the golf course kid on his way. Then she was on the phone with one of her crew, telling him to meet her at the job.

"They'll be looking for you at work, Tats," I said, "The first place they'll look."

"Right, and that's where I'll be. Good little Tats. At work!"

"Where's that leave me?" I asked.

"I got it figured." She knew the town, and we worked our way along the river without using the main drag, instead sticking to alleys and one-way streets.

"How do you think they knew where you were and connected you to me?" she asked.

"The phones. I used the phones to send out photos and videos. I put the SIM cards in to do that." I didn't tell her I was online messaging about before taking them out.

"Where's the phones now?"

"Buddy's is in a trash can in an alley, without the SIM and the SIM's in another alley. Mine's in my pocket without the SIM."

"And your computer's at my place. What else?"

“Just toilet stuff.” She made a couple of turns to a pay phone where she pulled over.

“We got a call to make.” She dialed her cell phone number.

“You gotta leave this message on my phone,” she said. “You’re worked up. You’re drunk. You got back to my place. You saw the cops. You gotta leave. You can’t tell me why they’re looking for you. You hope you didn’t get me in any trouble!” She handed me the receiver. When I handed it back, she made another call.

We arrived at the skeleton of a high rise along the river. It was so damn high, with no floors—a massive erector set. How could she work up there? One time I had to come down from the space needle because I didn’t trust being up there! I never trust tall buildings. At hotels I have to be on the third floor or lower. I had a good friend who was a marathon runner. He got invited to races and he would take me with him. It was difficult for me to sleep in those rooms on the fifteenth floor. And no elevators. I take the stairs.

Whoever she’d called, rolled in with some things for her. She went into the trailer to change while he fired up the massive crane. She emerged in coveralls and boots, a little welding hat, backwards, and a leather belt with a pouch on one side with a tool attached to her belt that looked to be a hammer at one end and a spear on the other. In the distance, a black SUV making its way around the massive chain link fence, that enclosed the project.

“Move fast,” she said.

“Where?”

“Work.” She scurried to a ball with a huge hook dangling from the crane.

“Get on,” she said.

“I can’t!”

“Then fuck you—go with your buddies!” It was a tough call, get on that ball, or find out what lay in store for me down here. I got on with Tats behind me, her legs wrapped around me, signaling for us to ascend into the grey sky of morning. And up we went. I was close to drunken vomiting the whole ride that was made at the

speed of a modern elevator. I clung to the ball and cable. I didn't look down.

Tats was moving one arm in a circular motion, signaling higher, and higher is where we went, all the way to the top. The top was an outline of the building in horizontal girders, with a row of horizontals down the middle, uprights at the corners, and a row of uprights across the middle. The ball and hook were now against the outside middle upright. I was frozen with fear. Tats climbed over me onto the horizontal girder with hardly a touch to the upright.

"We need to get you out to the second upright," she said. "Otherwise they'll be able to see you."

"I can't."

"Then let's go back down because they can see you on this edge. Grab the upright, stand up on the girder, and sit down with your back to the upright. You can lean back," she chuckled, "kinda reverse cowgirl. You gotta do it now, soldier. Your buddies are through the gate!"

The upright was a large I-beam, fortunately positioned for good handholds. I grabbed it and pulled myself onto the girder. I didn't look down. Getting past the I-beam, to sit down on the other side was more difficult than it looked because I had to end up with my back to the upright, meaning I had to hold the upright from behind and sit down. I stepped past and thought I had it, then it moved, sending me into a drunken swoon. How the fuck could it move?

"It's safe," she said. "It won't go anywhere." She stepped past me and walked out to the second upright, maybe 12 feet away. She shook it and it moved.

"All the bolts are in. They're just not snugged."

"Great, fucking great!"

"Slide along the beam," she said. "Keep looking at me. Pretend you're on a piece of gym equipment, five feet off the floor. You'll be fine."

Yeah, fine. I began to move in smallish increments—motivated by shame. My balance, even sitting, was bad. I was drunk—way drunk. All I had to do was scoot my ass three inches at a time, then re-assess—without retching. One retch and it was over. I remem-

bered the famous photo of those dudes, ironworkers from the 1930s, on 50th floor girders, feet dangling over the side, sitting there having lunch.

Now I was halfway across. I had fooled myself. Going forward was now easier than going back. Soon I had hold of the upright, got myself up, passed it, and sat down facing it with my arms wrapped around it. Tats' phone rang.

"What do they want?" she asked. She was on speaker.

"The FBI are here and they want to talk to you."

"Send them up." Which got a laugh from her co-worker.

"They're not kidding, Tats." She said she'd come down.

"If they think you're up here, I can't help you," she said. "If they don't think you're up here, I can't say. You did serious shit—one lie could be the end of me." She stepped around me and walked back to the hook.

How long would I be up here? She might not be coming back. They might arrest her or at least take her away for questioning.

It was light now. The sun hadn't come up but I could see clearly. What would I do when the workers arrived? I was feeling more comfortable so I tried looking around. That was okay. Were the Feds still down there? I tried lowering my gaze, then I looked down. There were two cars much farther down than I'd imagined. Like when you're gonna jump off the high dive and everything's okay until you walk out onto the platform and all you want is to be back in your room. I clung to the upright, almost passing out. Then I vomited, with the presence of mind to vomit into the U of the I-beam so it would go between my legs on the girder instead of splashing on the ground twenty feet from the Feds.

I thought about Rudy and the night he died. How he'd called me on the phone asking me to come up. He had called an ambulance before crawling out and throwing up on his door mat. He said he was feeling better. But only, I reminded him, until he got the bill for the ambulance. Two hours later he was dead. He had fallen six feet and busted his liver. There was nothing they could do. He bled out.

The smell got lousy—margarita puke—pooling under my pants and soaking through my boxer shorts. The I-beam was wet and sticky and I was afraid to look down. The closer I hugged the beam, the worse the stench. Like Rudy, I felt better after heaving, but this was not a six foot fall. I was tired, really tired, and I would have given part of any future for a safety harness so I could sleep.

34

The far side of imagination—suspended disbelief

Strange, the things one thinks of, hour after hour, holding on to an I-beam, twenty stories up, hungover, without water. I could look down now without committing suicide. The Feds were gone, the sun was high and no workers had arrived. Strange, until I remembered it was a Sunday.

I thought about things to take me away. About a scene from *Goodfellows*, when after a rich heist, the capo orders his gang to not attract attention with ostentatious spending. One of them shows up at a party in his new Cadillac with his wife in a fur coat. Deniro slaps the shit out of him. Same as now. When this economy goes down, if you're holding precious metals, you be careful or you be dead. And this time, it's the supposed good guys, the authorities, along with everybody else, who will be coming for you. If you grew up wanting to be a pirate, you'll have your day.

I daydreamed about love: welcome to *Go for Broke*, the game show where you risk everything for love. And, if you lose, which happens more often than not, you end up with nothing, not even friendship.

Then another thought: The best flirt is accurate. The best encounters are a slow sustain, but intense.

Would I ever see Gwen again? Was doing what I did worth not having her? Blah, blah, blah. Without the audit, I wouldn't even know her.

What about Tats? Would Homeland Security let her be? Would Tats find a love? He'd need to be an extraordinary spirit.

I had to stop, I was getting delusional in the sun and now the wind was beginning to pick up. The vomit made me nauseous and it was everywhere. I was tired.

I don't know how long I'd been asleep but the start of waking almost tossed me from my perch. I could scarcely believe I had fallen asleep until I remembered Harold Higley. We were sixteen, into motorcycles, and we'd gone to Mexico. The first night out, we made it to Tecate where it was marrow cold. We took a motel room without heat and huddled together under a flimsy blanket. When we couldn't take the cold anymore, we rode, over the high plain, then down and down to Mexicali where it got warm and we lay in a sandy arroyo with the sun baking our shirtless bodies.

But that's not what made me think of it. Later the same day, on the way back into California, I fell asleep on my bike and woke up on an ice-plant hill along the freeway. The bike hadn't even fallen over. It just stopped. From here would be a different kind of stop.

There was pain in my upper body from holding on but the pain in my legs was worse. I tried moving my feet, one at a time, up into the I-beam. That helped. I tried singing and moving my body up and down. That helped but not for long.

First I got scared, then worse. It was as if scared was black and white until the color of terror began to seep in under the tent flaps. I took deep breaths and tried to be still. There was no way out of this unless Tats came back. Without the ball and hook I was dead.

What would Tats do? Would she die up here? No, she would not. What would she do? She'd climb down. Just the thought made me sick. I had two options, both involved descent. One involved dying but the other seemed worse. I would try, but first I needed to get myself into that place.

The part of being that tries to figure things out went to work, without concern for my parched throat, the wind, and the long grey sky of an autumn evening. I had scooted out to this upright, so I could scoot back, though the first time, I had Tats for encouragement. If I did make it back to the perimeter, I needed to climb down, some twenty stories. "But you get to rest at each floor," said the fix-it voice. That voice—sometimes I need it but the rest of the time it's as stupid as a barge horse (barge horses are probably sensitive and intelligent). Suppose I had to make a three thousand mile swim? That voice would simply divide it up into ten, three-hundred mile legs. If getting off this erector set would happen it would happen with will. Nothing but will! The fairy-tale analysis wasn't totally worthless. But nearly.

The first thing I had to do was get up. My fantasy friend hadn't thought about that. Most everything within reach was sticky, eggs and bacon vomit, mixed with tequila, and each time I tried to rise, I slipped. It didn't matter if I tried to get up on a knee or get a foot into the beam. The whole process was made worse by pain and near paralysis in my legs. Were I able to get up and pass the upright to the next horizontal girder and sit back down to cross, I would be sitting in pants, soaked through in slimy vomit.

Somehow, I got myself up and clasped the upright, using my reach to keep the vomit between me and the post. I wiped my shoes one at a time on my pants. I did it a few times. Then I stepped past the upright onto the next girder, which was vomit free. With my hands behind me, clasping the upright, and my back against it, I was too scared to cross on my slippery ass, so I made the decision to walk it. There must be a thousand preteen girls who could walk this beam, doing flips and all I had to do was walk—which I began with slow sure steps, across twelve feet to safety. What I hadn't factored was the wind. Halfway across, a gust swiped at me, enough that I lost my equilibrium and then my balance. I made a frenzied dash, lurching forward and grasping at the movable upright—everything below my chest dangling below the girder. It was all I could do to get back onto the horizontal beam.

Even now there was no solace. Daylight was almost gone. Maybe I could climb down in the dark. Climbing would mostly be a feel thing anyway, but the first couple of descents depended on seeing my options. I decided to climb down the inside of the structure though I couldn't come up with a good reason why. The geometry was the same. No it wasn't. If I fell on the inside, I had a better chance of grabbing a horizontal. Like there'd be any chance at all. I just didn't want to be on the outside of the structure. The thought terrified me.

I-beams are just that, beams in the shape of the letter I. Great for climbing. I reached behind the upright and grabbed half inch thick steel handholds, then lowered myself to where I could wrap my legs around the upright below and lower my body to where I could get a new grip with my hands. My legs holding on for dear life. Then slide down one floor. I tried it. Except for the pain in my legs and a queasy stomach, it was easy. The slide was hard to control, making a soft landing in doubt, so I kept a good grip.

I was euphoric but I reminded myself I was maybe 150 feet above the ground and it hadn't been ten minutes since I was going to die. I still might die if I didn't pay respect. But this wasn't even tiring. I had gravity my side. I was a kid at the playground. It became rote. I tried to remember how many stories I had come down but I'd lost track. Now it was dark, totally dark. I was in the middle of a city, but I was in the one square block where there were no lights. What about security? Didn't they need lights for security? I continued down. Then I was on the ground—my butt and legs on the concrete slab.

**“I know motherfuckers who know motherfuckers.”
Maybe Sean Combs?**

I sat a spell. Coming down, I had adrenaline. Now, I was hungover and exhausted, suffering from exposure, and hungry. Being hungry made my post-tequila stomach worse. I used the I-beam to pull myself up. Sitting on a beam for many hours had made me bow-legged, my first few steps were those of a sailor walking the deck in a rolling sea.

It was completely dark. The whole complex was dark. The lights of KC were all around but not here. I staggered to the gate, which was locked with the single biggest padlock in existence. The chainlink fence, which I managed to climb, thankfully had no barbed wire at the top. I rolled over and down the other side.

Now what? West, head west. I started walking. Once I got into town I could ask. There was no way I was putting the SIM card back in my phone. I made my way along the fence toward the lights. Then there were lights behind me. I froze but continued on. If it were cops, freezing wouldn't help. I didn't look back at sound of a throaty exhaust. Cops drive loud cars. It pulled up beside me, a roadster, BMW, from the late 90's, Z3. Very tasteful—white with black powder-coated wheels. The passenger window came down. It was Tats. No words. She opened the door and I got in.

“Whose car is this?”

“How the fuck did you get down?”

“I jumped. Used my shirt as a wing. I was determined to die, until I realized you wouldn't die up there. So I climbed down.”

She looked at me through an incredulous smile: “You didn't have to worry about dying up there,” she said. “You would have died down here. You climbed down?”

“Yeah, it wasn’t difficult. Makes me wonder why I sat there all day. Once I walked the beam back to the perimeter, the rest was easy.”

“How long you been down?”

“Just now”

“You climbed down in the dark?”

“I only had a couple of options, Tats. And I would have felt the fool to have been up there when you came back.”

"Get out!" she exclaimed. "What's that fucking smell?" She made me wait while she unlocked the gate and went in. She came back with some rags and a set of coveralls. I had to strip naked and wipe myself down, and before I could get back in the car, she inspected my shoes and sniffed around me. She threw my things over the fence and we got back into the car.

"What happened to you, Tats?"

“Oh, I had a lovely day. Agent Grey began by telling me I would probably be executed for treason.”

“How did you get out?”

“My ex. His friends are guys like Schwarzenegger. They had one of OJ’s lawyers call. From what they said, I’m in deep shit, but they let me go. I’m not allowed to leave town, but I think that only applies when you’re under arrest. I gave a cabby twenty to make sure we weren’t tailed and I tossed my phone into the Ohio. I got out a few blocks from where I keep this car. It’s registered to someone else. And here I am!”

“What now?”

“Well, I just came by to say I can't help you anymore. It's too dangerous.”

“So what are you going to do?”

“I’m heading for Palm Springs. I know someone with a nice little bar out there.”

“If you can drop me just outside of town?”

“I can’t. That would be helping you. You need to come with me so we can fuck things up so badly it can’t be inferred that I was helping you.”

We rode out of Kansas City into the night. What an unlikely trip? Reminded me of the Farmer brothers. They were old when I met them. Dan was the one I knew. He was born on a hill, in Oregon, which I bought, though not from him. I asked him up to tell me the history. They'd been up there since the 1850s. Well, his family was, he wasn't that old. He showed me the remaining few stones from the fireplace of the first house, and he told me about Mrs. Bird, who had a photograph taken from her living room in the 1870's.

An unlikely trip had been made by Dan and his brother. He told it in terms of Woodrow Wilson, an idealistic fool, who like so many idealistic fools, got us into another stupid war. Dan and his brother were to be conscripted into the Great War, but they didn't wait to be called up. Instead, they gathered some provisions, saddled their horses and headed for Veracruz and Tampico. I asked how long was the trip? A year—he answered in terms of time—not distance. I can't remember if he said it took a year or a year each way. We came into the Great War at the tail end, so maybe it was a year, there and back.

I asked about tourists down there? He smiled the benevolent smile of someone who's seen it all before you got there. There were no tourists in Veracruz. Where would they have come from? How would they have gotten there?

Ours was another unlikely trip. We were being conscripted for sports duty at Guantanamo—waterboarding! I'd almost drowned once and I didn't like it. Two unlikely trips, similar in unlikeliness, fashioned by crony, idealist fascists, hellbent on owning the world.

"I don't want you to get in deeper shit, Tats?"

"I don't think about a future. High wire work and body art are not indicators for social stability."

"Yeah, but you're young yet."

"I'm still young, but you won't be after you see the front page of the paper on the floor by your feet."

I picked it up. The New York Times, the paper of record (maybe once upon a time). Front page news: The United States Gold Cache at Fort Knox Shown to be 680 ounces, not 8200 tons. The whole

front page, along with a corroborating report from a whistleblower at the New York Fed. No gold stored there either, neither ours, nor what we supposedly held for our allies, with speculation about what it all might mean? What wasn't speculation was the anger coming from countries that had given over their gold to us, through coercion or need. Those responses were not measured. They were furious. Why would it take seven years for Germany to get back a small portion of their gold, when it could all be repatriated overnight? When and where had all that gold gone? Had it been sold, leased out? To whom? Was the Fed behind it? Did the presidents and congress know? And what about our allies who put their faith in the U.S. dollar as the reserve currency? What was that faith worth now?

“You’re the most famous person in the world,” she said. “You’re the lead story. Everybody wants to talk to you, or do something with you or to you. Maybe a quarter or a third of people asked, see you as a hero. Many women would like to have a child by you. The rest want to make it so you could never have children. Usually constrained people think you should be shot on site as a traitor. With a bounty on your head.”

I mused on Judge Roy Bean, law west of the Pecos, where one could be found guilty and hung the same afternoon. The difference was some kind of a trial. I thought back on Langtry, Texas, where I came through with my dad, way back. How Roy’s little bar and courtroom had been the same one room right on the highway (trail back in Roy’s time)—free to the public. The last time I rode through, they’d moved the whole highway and fenced the compound. Another fee-based roadside attraction. It being late, with nobody around, I snuck up on it, as if it were in the Green Zone, in Iraq, pulling myself up the chain link, just high enough to see the old wooden building.

It’s sad what we do. Earlier that day, in San Antonio, I thought I’d just stop in at the Alamo. But it was the same thing—\$20 to park in the Denny’s lot. *Event Parking*. I called out to the dudes collecting the twenties: “What’s the event?” The Alamo. “Haven't you guys heard. The event's over!”

“You want to hear the news?” she asked

“No. This is something they’ll run with forever. They get months out of a love child sired by a little known congressman. Anyway, they’ll just be reading what Homeland Security and the White House gives them. I think you should go on alone, Tats.”

“I would,” she said. “but I don’t want to miss any of this!”

At Lawrence we cut south, taking the least-used backroads, which would pass us north of Wichita. I thought on Josh and *The Hues*, “Windstorm in Wichita”. I could play songs without the SIM card and the radio had a plug in.

“This radio have bluetooth?”

“Nope, but I have a cable.”

I set up *The Hues*. “That girl’s a windstorm in Wichita—she’s gonna hit you like a wrecking ball—she’s a Kansas City runaway—she ain’t never gonna stay.”

Could there be a more appropriate song? And I can write out the lyrics without copyright infringement because Josh is a friend.

Before heading west on the backroads, we passed a Waffle House. There aren’t many in Kansas and I wanted to go in. Best we don’t. Maybe after I cut my hair and died it black with a backwards ball cap and shades. Then there was Tats. She was hard to hide.

We settled for fast food at a drive-thru. I got out and used the rest room in the back so no one would see me.

I asked how far she wanted to drive tonight?

“I’m thinking a long way, maybe till motel check-in time tomorrow. We need some miles between us and KC.”

“Can I drive?”

“Aren’t you tired?”

“Yeah, but this large coffee’s gonna take me well past midnight. You could sleep a bit.”

“I can’t sleep without at least two orgasms.”

I didn’t say a thing.

“You’re not offering to help?”

“I can’t. Any other time, but this thing with Gwen... .”

“See it as work. Do it while you drive. In the Clinton vernacular—no sex.”

I didn’t respond.

“Then I have to take care of it myself. That bother you?”

“Nope. I wanna see that.”

36

Every small town has a Dollar General and a Family Dollar. We’re down and nearly out—we’ve lost the narrative for our lives.

I wasn’t tired, just happy to be alive. The small hours of the morning came and went. We fused with 54 at Pratt and headed southwest for the panhandle of Oklahoma, then the panhandle of Texas. The Okie panhandle looks like a panhandle on the map. I passed a cutoff for Dodge City and kept on to Liberal. At one time that might have been a great name for a town.

I drifted back to days when highways were lined with billboards. *Brylcreem—a little dab’ll do ya! Brylcreem—you’ll look so debonaire. Brylcreem—the gals’ll all pursue ya; they’ll love to run their fingers through your hair!* That ad had been a series of signs (maybe seven), one every hundred feet along the road. I’m betting there was no such thing as a permit for ads along the highways back then. Instead, we had cars that weighed a ton, with no seat belts, and a driver reading signs and singing jingles to the kids in the back, along two-lane highways, which rose and fell with the lay of the land.

I stayed off main highways. Tats slept. At Dalhart, Texas, I took 395 South to Brownfield, then west on 380 towards Roswell, New Mexico. We were hungry and it was way past breakfast, but I was looking for something more important. I asked Tats to wait outside

while I went in. Her eyes were closed before I was out of the car. There was no barber in the town, but there was, off the highway, a beauty salon, whose trade looked to be exclusively Mexican. Inside, there were no customers and only the one woman. She was incurious, which was good. And there was no TV. As best I could, I explained what I needed: my longish hair cut back to no longer than an inch and dyed black. She didn't seem surprised. I suppose she deals with men who don't want the grey. It took about an hour. I had to laugh. I looked older—short hair and the black brought out the wrinkles.

Over protest, I brought Tats inside and instructed the woman to cut her hair short and dye it blond. Tats was furious—maybe a tad curious. I left them to it, walked out to the highway and crossed. At an one-store-does-it-all place, I bought a medium, green and black plaid, long-sleeved shirt, an adjustable Texas Longhorns, orange and white cap, with horns sewn into the brim, and a pair of shades. Back at the parlor, there were two women waiting and Tats, who, except for her arms, chest and shoulders, inked, looked to be someone else. In my shades, with my makeover and my backwards cap, I felt inconspicuous. Without asking, I sat on a low stool made for what I needed. I lifted a foot, removed a shoe and painted her black toenails and fingernails to a deep shade of red. Tats was compliant.

While I paid, she went into the bathroom to look herself over and change into the plaid shirt. She came out smiling—she looked pretty good. Treating her like my younger sister, I enforced a dress code, turning down her sleeves until there was no visible ink. Completing the indignity, I buttoned one more button on her shirt and we headed for Roswell.

At the edge of town, heading west, there was a local eatery—well attended. We hadn't eaten so I pulled in. The place was clean, the windows were clean. The waitress was kept. I don't know why but in places like this it's usually breakfast. Right there at the top of the menu—'breakfast all day'.

There were two booths, which were occupied. We sat at a small table, in a line of three, separated by no more than three feet. A guy

at the counter got a large coffee to go, in a paper cup with a lid. He looked around and headed our way. Instead of taking the third table, he took the one next to us. He wanted company.

“What do people do for work around here?” I asked.

“Whatever’s possible.”

“Is there work?”

“Sometimes, sometimes I work. But like now there’s nothing. I work as a landscaper or whatever I can find.”

“What’s your name?” I asked.

“Joe.”

“How much is rent here, Joe?”

“Expensive, more than 600 a month.”

“Do you have a family—kids?”

“Not that I know of,” he said, with a rueful smile.

“You’ve never been married? How old are you?”

Tats looked at me like I was getting too personal, but guys can ask anything as long as there’s no challenge to it.

“Never been married—fifty four.”

“You make enough to pay rent?”

“Don’t pay rent.” Joe wasn’t homeless—he was too well maintained—he was living with family. Maybe he’d always been living with family. I skipped through some things I had done in life—I was older than this guy, but we were from different planets. He was a nice enough guy but he’d lived here all his life and not ventured out much, if at all. But a good guy—if I lived here I could be friends with him.

“Have you always lived around here?”

“Yeah, within ten miles.”

He talked about government assistance. He took the food stamps, but anything more made him feel shame.

“Do your people come from around here?” Something told me he was French?

“No, Italian—Sicilian.”

“*Dove?*”

“That made him light up. He only had a few words of Italian, but he used them. His people were from Agrigento and I had lived close to Agrigento for two years.

After a few minutes, Joe was telling me he came by here about this time every day. Later in the car, Tats mused: “Why was he telling you he comes here every day? Does he think we’re going to stay here?”

“Maybe it’s like meeting someone from Mongolia and exchanging addresses,” I said. “Anyway, he’s a good guy.”

“He’s a loser—a fucking loser!” She was right. He’s a loser but not the kind of a loser that the elites are. Joe has a conscience; something the accumulation of vast wealth pushes aside, then eradicates. If you think it’s all about profit and about yourself, you’re the loser. I couldn’t abide this loser talk from her.

“Let me tell you something,” I said. “I built this rental hall for classes, weddings, parties. I met a lot of people during those years; some who rented from me again and again. This one late night, a wedding was wrapping up. Tommy and I had a long night ahead of us to get ready for another wedding the next morning. Tattoo Tommy, what everybody called him, was a guy like Joe. A friend had built him a fresh new apartment and when I stopped by to visit, maybe a month later, it was unrecognizable—as if Romanian gypsies had squatted there for years.

“Tommy was a character—always wore a beret, covering a bald top and dirty grey hair. As a young man, he’d been taken from NYC, in handcuffs, where he’d reined as the jitterbug king, to Vietnam where he spent two years, from which he never recovered. He came back with three types of hepatitis, but he worked hard, mostly under houses where he would find marbles—he had jars of them, dating from the 20’s. He preferred to work with a shovel and never above the ground floor. He would help me to clean at night, as long as I could put up with his abuse.

“Two guys I sort of knew were still there after the wedding. One was an attorney, maybe the other was a doctor—more likely a stockbroker.

“Why do you work with that guy?” asked the attorney.

'Because he works hard and I get him on short notice—in the middle of the night?'

"That didn't satisfy either of them. Tommy repulsed them."

'Lemmie put it another way,' I said. 'For whatever reasons, Tommy has never gotten ahead. But here's the problem: if everything collapsed tomorrow and the three of us had to start over, in a few months we would be finding our way and Tommy would still be Tommy. And because we can't do what we do without Tommy, we sometimes have to help him, whether we like it or not. Besides, he's the one who can dance better than either of you.'

"That's Joe, Tats. He can't build skyscrapers so he has to rely on the hard work of his beautifully illustrated big sister!"

"Stop here," she said, pointing out a rather large adult shop with a blinking neon—*Love Potion Number 9*—24 hours (we do need more neon!). I waited outside while she went in, returning shortly with a blue toy, not in a bag and nothing fancy, just a curved rubber toy. She unscrewed one end to insert a single AA battery, which, with a twist, caused the bulbous head, the size of half a roll of quarters, to gyrate up and down and around, while it vibrated. She rubbed it against my cheek.

"I offered you the job," she said.

37

"When Popcorn Sutton found out about gasoline and pussy it about drove him crazy."

Interview with Johnny Knoxville?

Now we were coming into Carlsbad and I was thinking about women. Anna. Zoe. Had I learned anything? Maybe. Compared to what had come before. Gwen was my shot at a relationship. I would be with her as long as she would have me. I was hopeful,

except she's part of the government; the same government I had exposed. Sounds like a formidable first challenge for any relationship. But we were a good mix. I had always been a little to far out and Gwen could reel me in. Would I ever see her again?

I'd never been to Carlsbad Caverns. I remember coming across the southwest with my parents and wanting to go, but we didn't. I pulled into the parking lot and turned off the engine. Tats woke up.

"Where are we?"

"Carlsbad, I thought we could see the caverns."

"Not me," she said.

"Why not?"

"Being underground scares the shit out of me. I get claustrophobic."

I thought of my friend Mark in Los Angeles worrying about his apartments and earthquakes. He almost can't own real estate and when he does he puts huge insurance policies on it. Tats has a job where one slip is all you get and she worries something will go amiss with the Carlsbad Caverns while she happens to be down there?

She wasn't hungry so we kept heading south.

"Where we going?"

"Van Horn, Texas."

"What's there?"

"Not much, even Subway closed because there's no business."

"And we're going there?"

"Yeah, because it's on the way to Marfa."

"And what's there?"

"An artist's town. Great hotel. Then Big Bend and Alpine, and another great hotel."

Once you get down below the interstate in southern Texas, things change. Until then it's barren, except for the occasional Comfort Inn and KFC. Below the interstate, it's plain barren. Before long we were in Van Horn eating at what was referred to in *Blue Highways*, as a three-calendar cafe—three different calendars advertising local businesses.

I had been here, years before, when I'd had supper with some guys I met in a bar. Those were the days when I'd get a little drunk, call my girlfriend, and have her talk with whomever I was with. Couple of nights earlier, it had been geologists in Tonopah, Nevada. Now it was Van Horn and more geologists. But that night I got the news she was pregnant. I bid farewell to my friends, got in my white Tacoma (I always had one—a 4x4) and drove straight back to Oregon with the help of late night radio. Through New Mexico, to keep awake, I thought about how many miles I had to go—maybe a thousand. At the equator, it's some 30,000 miles, all the way around. Which meant, if there were a road, I could conceivably drive around the whole thing in thirty days. So, the world is quite small, but hosting millions of tiny space heaters called internal combustion engines and everything else associated with BTUs—all heating up a narrow atmosphere, which doesn't extend much beyond the cloud cover we see. Instantly, I became aware we're warming this baby up. My first realization of our ability to wreck everything.

Same cafe, but tonight there was nobody except the waitress. Tonight we had catfish, which was not a difficult choice as three items on the small menu were a variation on catfish.

“We gotta get serious,” said Tats.

“About what?”

“About what the fuck we're doing. We're driving around Texas like hippie drifters!”

“At least down here we have some semblance of safety and we can have some fun.”

“But, do you have an overall plan?” she asked.

“Yeah, maybe. Keep going west and settle in someplace not too big and not too small.”

The catfish was delicious. I remember hearing catfish are bottom feeders—a dirty, fat fish. But tonight fried catfish was extraordinary, served with a butter sauce and long grained rice, with a loaf of fresh-baked, unsliced white bread, served on a wooden board with a serrated knife stuck in the loaf.

“Tell me something crazy,” she said.

“Okay, this didn't happen to me but to my friend Lee: there was this girl, Candy Cox, he picked up in a bar, and brought back to the one-bedroom apartment he and his friend Homey shared. Homey came in from the bar where he'd been fox-holing all night. He was short, thick and not especially good looking. For him to score took all night. He had to dig in. Hence fox-holing. Lee, on the other hand, was charismatic and good looking. Homey came home to Lee and Candy going at it. When he'd finally had enough, he picked up the 22 pistol laying at the foot of the bed and emptied it at the wall.”

“I like that,” she said. “He didn't put up with it, he did something! Have you fucked in elevators?”

“No.”

“I don't keep friends who haven't fucked in elevators,” she said. “Life's all about pussy. Guys fall in love, write the great novels, get rich, and they do it all for pussy! When they go on Oprah they should tell the truth—they wrote the song or the book to get pussy! If they're the monogamous sort, they're doing it for one great pussy, but, if they recognize reality, they're doing it for all the good pussy they can get!”

“C'mon Tats. What about kids and cars and altruism?”

“Kids are a consequence of pussy. And car songs where every woman I know is crazy bout an automobile, and altruism, yeah, there's that, taking a break from pussy to do something good.”

Now it was night and the place was filling up, especially the bar. And we were drinking. Tats had ordered coffee with a double shot of Bailey's. I did the same. We were into our second.

“Sometimes I don't know which head your ass is up?” she said, giving no time for a reply.

“Take Gwen, for instance. Gwen's a marine, probably assigned to keep tabs on you. But she fell in love with you? And maybe she'll be there for you. I wouldn't bet on it. When she sees what you've done and the shitstorm you've created, she may have second, third, and fourth thoughts. Maybe when she sees she's going to be tried for treason and you're dead. Besides, for you, it's just

about pussy. She's the best pussy to ever wear a uniform—and there's something about a uniform!" She was getting louder and slightly impaired.

"Gwen represents the good girls. I represent the sluts. When I'm being moved out, I say to the new girl: 'I've had more orgasms on that mattress than you'll ever have—bitch!' Tats was on her third Irish Cream and coffee. I desisted after the second. "What you can't know about Gwen is whether she's betting a handful of change and keeping the big bills in her socks. Besides you'll be dead in two weeks!"

I thought back to Gwen in Louisville. There was much Tats didn't know about her. But, thickening our plot, were two thick cowboys, who had edged closer to our conversation. So far I'd held them back with eye contact.

"You ever been on the Natchez Parkway?" she asked. "The Natchez Trace Parkway is like a beautiful woman with no dark side. 55 MPH. Pardon me, 50. Lovely to look at. No stop signs. No life. No go signs. Boring. Bore me to death. Natchez Trace is like heaven. Like when you're dead. Unnaturally contrived—maybe like Gwen? I'm the girl with stiff dark nipples, who can get off in thirty seconds. Try keeping that faithful."

I held the cowboys back by holding up three fingers, mouthing three minutes. They didn't retreat but neither did Tats:

"What makes you think you'll be able to fuck Gwen after six months? Have you been able to stay interested through 180 fucks—more counting the odd one in the middle of the night. Have you done that?" She was right, I'd never done it. I felt like I could, but I hadn't.

"I'm willing to be with one guy," she said, "but anytime he's not there for me, I make excursions to the fringe of divorce."

There's an old Iranian proverb: when the women stop smiling, it's time to go. Tats had stopped smiling and she had become strident.

"Tats, do you see where this is going? Let's go back to the room." She shook her head as the cowboys pulled chairs up to our table. One asked if she wanted another drink?

“I’m not your kept woman,” she said. “I don’t take money except for services rendered.” She looked at me through cake-glazed eyes. “And after six months, when you’re getting tired of regular pussy, and on your birthday she says you ain’t going up her dirt road, that’s when you’ll begin to notice body odor.”

I went to the bar and payed our tab to date. Any further drinks would be on the cowboys. There was laughing from the table. I heard her reply to a question: "It may not be the best scenario, but two men are better than none."

I went to our room and dead bolted the door behind me. Tats wasn’t getting in here tonight. I thought back to a woman who one time approached me at the Sacramento bus station. "I’m just a piece of meat," was all she said. Tats wasn’t like her. Tats was marred but she had things going for her. But what she’d said tonight gave me pause. Could Gwen keep her flame lit for me? Would I even see that flame again? Could I build it into a fire?

38

Hillbillies name their kids things like *Rose a Sharon*, cause that’s all they got to give em.

Tats rapping on the door woke me at nine. I opened it to a disheveled woman with the look of someone who had just fought Rhonda Rousey and Holly Holm—at the same time. The bastards hadn’t even let her shower and brush out her sticky hair.

“Take a shower and a nap,” I said. “Give me those clothes.”

I took her clothes to the guest laundry, which was a good idea because she had nothing else to wear. Which meant she couldn’t leave the room. During the wash cycle, I took a walk out along the highway, not far, half a mile out, then back. The day was clear,

maybe 60 degrees on its way to 75. Delicate cirrus clouds on the distant horizon. The only action along the road was local cops, using two cars, to stop motorists for speeding. I watched them. The criminals were traveling ten to twelve miles over the limit—tops. One cop car never moved. Radar spotter. Back at the motel, I put the clothes in the dryer—45 minutes. Checkout at 11. Perfect.

I was hungry. At the cafe, the two cop cars were parked outside. Inside, the troopers, both big boys in flak-jackets, were in a booth. And I was the most wanted man in America.

“Do you officers mind if I ask a couple of questions?” I asked. One deferred to the other, who raised his head in an *if you must* motion. Taking the initiative, I pulled up a chair to the end of their table. I mean, they’d already ordered and they were just sitting there waiting for their food.

“Okay. I’m definitely not an anti-cop guy, but being a cop has changed from when I grew up. So, here’s a question, the mission back then was *protect and serve*. It was painted on all the cars. Now, for whatever reason, it’s a more narrow version of law and order. If things were like back then, would that be better for you?”

The one who had been deferred to, replied, “You don’t see what’s changed between then and now. We’re at much greater risk from whoever we stop. Being an officer now is not like it was back then.”

“I agree your job is more difficult,” I replied. “But what about the question in general? Would you rather it be like then?”

“Of course. But, it’s not like then.”

“Suppose I agree with you again,” I said, “It’s not like then and your job is more difficult because of who you have to deal with. Is being a citizen now more difficult because of the police we have to deal with?” I don’t think this was expected because of the length of the pause—so I went on:

“You guys have been on YouTube. It’s a two-way street. The cops can be as obnoxious and threatening as the drivers.” Had I gone too far?

“I know,” he said, nodding. “I could name names.”

“And what about the lousy economy and the big fines. I was out for a walk this morning and I saw you guys pulling cars over for speeding, maybe I should say exceeding the posted limit, because, given the conditions, they probably weren’t being unsafe. And, it’s not like the old days when the cruiser had to come up behind and clock your speed. Today, you guys wait for them—ten miles over—300 bucks. Mostly from people who can’t afford it.

Now it was the other guy: “There is a speed limit and nobody’s making them break it.”

“But, the big fines,” I interjected, “and the lousy economy, what about that?”

“I know,” he said, “but there’s nothing I can do about it.” Their food had arrived. Big plates for big boys.

“Last question,” I said. I could tell they were done with me. “I’ll make it fast. There’s an FBI report that shows the amount of money taken from motorists by police, under civil asset forfeiture, in 2014, without charging anyone with a crime, is more than all burglaries in the United States during the same year. What do you guys think?”

Neither spoke.

I wanted to add that most of the amounts taken were just a few hundred bucks at a time, but it added up to billions. Most of which the departments get to keep. Did this make police common criminals? And their departments, a crime syndicate? But they were done with me. I thanked them and left.

Back at the room, Tats was still sleeping. I wanted to get going so I told her about a couple of suspicious cops. Soon we were on the road south.

“What were the cops doing?” I told her what had happened.

“You fucking idiot! Making me sweat for something you did!” I thought on what she did last night but I said nothing.

“Your parents didn’t name you Tats, did they?”

“What do you think?” she said. “They named me *Princess Rose*.”

“Where was this?”

“West Virginia.”

“Did you see the movie, *A Winter’s Bone*, with that bow and arrow girl? That your neck of the woods?”

“Yeah, except in my neck, they’d a kilt her with a banjo.”

“How long did you live there?”

“Almost to my 14th birthday, then I ran away to Wheeling.”

“What’d you do there?”

“You guess what?”

“Why’d you run off?”

“Oh, loss of virginity at the threat of death. My dad’s friend. Dad knew, but it wasn’t enough to stop his drinking for a whole day. Mom was catatonic by then. My family might have been a laugh for me if I hadn’t been a member. We didn’t have running water—TVA never got to our holler. I relied on my grandparents until one morning I was listening to them argue and grandpa followed my grandmother from the bedroom out to the landing. ‘Tess, he said, you just don’t get it, I put my pants on one leg at a time.’ With that, he mis-stepped into his pants, putting both feet through the same hole, lost his balance, fell down two flights of stairs, and broke his neck. Grandma cried for two months—then she died.”

We stopped along the highway at a place called Jake’s. Nothing there but a small restaurant and gas station. We had to pay cash so I went in to prepay. It wasn’t really an office, just an ante room for the repair shop. There were two big pickups on the lifts and a guy with his back to me.

“Can I pay for some gas?”

“Go ahead and pump it and come back in. Only got regular out here. They shut down my premium tank because I couldn’t afford the testing.” I had heard about this—rules lobbied for and pushed through by the big gas companies to put small independents out of business. Yeah, I know, it’s all for our safety, like having to be certified to cut hair. Imagine the embarrassment of someone mucking up your bangs.

I filled up with regular. We’d drive slower so it wouldn’t ping. I could get gas at Marfa but I didn’t feel like helping put Jake’s out of business. I went back in to pay. The ante room walls had photos

of this place back in the fifties—Southern Texas in the fifties. I didn't have to imagine because I'd come through with my dad—gassed up in Sanderson where it hadn't rained for seven years. The guy came into the ante-room. I paid, in cash.

“You heard they're going to get rid of cash?”

He looked at me strangely.

“I'm not kidding—I think they even have a euphemism for it.”

“What's a euphemism?”

“Like a smoother way to describe bullshit. In this case it's, *calling in the cash*.”

“Sons of bitches!”

“Or *enhanced interrogation*,” I said. He glowered and said nothing.

“But the one I like the best is civil asset forfeiture.”

“I know about that one,” he said. “I was a Texas Ranger for twenty-seven years.”

“Can I buy you lunch?”

“No, but I'll come next door and have lunch with you. Let me finish up.”

Tats was asleep again. I cracked her window to let in some air. Somehow we'd driven this roadster all the way to Texas with the top up. That was going to change as of now.

She woke up and she was hungry. I told her to go into the bathroom and freshen up, button up her shirt and cuffs because of who we were having lunch with.

“Are you fucking nuts?” she asked.

I took a booth where I faced the door. Tim from Jake's came in. I told him my friend would be here directly. He sat in the booth opposite me.

“How long have you been off the force, Tim? You seem young to be retired?”

“I am, but once I did my pension requirement, I had to go. That was almost four years ago. It was the young guys who drove me out. They don't know how to deal with people. It was as if they came from someplace else. They knew everything and they didn't

need to learn from guys who'd been on the job a quarter of a century!"

Tats came from the bathroom and introduced herself—as Rose. She was presentable and she was friendly. No ink showed. Her blond hair looked like it could be so, especially compared to my black hair stubble, below my orange backwards Longhorn cap and shades.

"I saw the sign, Tim. The garage opened in 1953—gas and full service. Did you know the owners?"

"My grandparents, then my parents. When my dad retired, I quit the force and took over. Now, most everyone goes into Marfa for gas but I do better repairs and service. I get undercut on everything else, including tires and gas. But what you were talking about, civil asset forfeiture, was coming on strong before I retired, especially with the Border Patrol. Those guys think they have carte blanche to do whatever they want. And they don't last long—the highest turnover rate in policing." I thought about Homeland Security.

"Let me tell you how things have changed in the years since I retired. There's a guy down the road who really disliked Obama. He never threatened the president but he was vocal about what he didn't like. One spring, three black Suburbans pulled into his lot with a search warrant and tore his place apart. That warrant became a laughing stock around here. The Fourth Amendment is specific about the premises to be searched and what they are looking for. This was harassment.

"Worse was what happened to my wife. She got stopped for seven miles over the limit. She told the cop who she was and who I was. He ran her and it came back she had a concealed permit—there's probably more people around here have one than don't. He got her out of the car, under protest, and frisked her for a weapon—then cited her for speeding. She's a tough woman but she came home in tears. I got my service revolver from the bedroom, got in my truck, and drove to the cop shop flat out, all the while hoping he would be there. I went into the chief. I was shaking. He asked for my revolver, for my protection. I gave it to him."

"Was that the end of it, Tim?"

“No, they fired him, but those stories are common with younger cops, at least around here. During my day, I would never have patted down a woman who wasn’t under arrest. Even then I would have done it reluctantly.”

“What about civil asset forfeiture, Tim?”

“Well, I don’t know where it started but I’d bet it began here in the South. Like I was saying, the Border Patrol are police, but they see themselves as military. They’re outside the law!”

“Texans might object, strenuously, to how I see it, Tim, but here it is: big government is essentially the same, some brand of communism or national socialism. They have the same goals: to homogenize, to divide and conquer. Make us subservient to the group mind. Make it impossible for us to function as individuals. So, every politician or president who votes for these huge budgets is no different than tax collectors for the Sheriff of Nottingham. Now, they’re going to call in the cash to stop drug smuggling and terrorism, when what they’re really doing is buying more time before the roof falls in on them. Call in the guns. Call in the gold. Maybe nullify a few amendments—1, 2, 4, and 5, for starters!”

“You’re the guy, aren’t you?” he asked. Rose’s leg pushed hard against mine. I didn’t know what to do? So I did nothing.

“Have you two been listening to the news?” I hadn’t wanted to hear it. I didn’t even know how many days it had been since we left Missouri? I looked around the cafe. There was no one to overhear us.

“Do you know what’s happened since you went public?” he asked.

“No, I haven’t paid much attention to the news.”

“The United States and Australia sent naval vessels to breach China’s twelve mile limit. The Chinese president threatened to sink them, but instead China backed its currency with gold—28,000 tons of gold and offered to conduct an audit? Then they unilaterally set the price of gold at \$9000 an ounce.”

“Unreal,” I said. “The Chinese are usually deliberate in their actions. This was coming but this is a bold step? A few decades back they were making iron in their back yards for Chairman Mao.

I guess they've had enough, and what they would have done later, they did now."

"That was last week," he said. "Then all the banks closed for a bank holiday."

"How long were they closed?"

"They're still closed and the dollar keeps falling. And worse, anyone with more than \$3000 in the bank loses a third of their money!"

"What about the insurance?" asked Rose.

"No more insurance. I suggest you two be cautious. Many Texans feel good about the Feds being brought down, but those same Texans would likely go after whoever did this."

"What about you, Tim?"

"For me it's different. I didn't have much in banks and I don't have much. I still have my livelihood and I suppose I'm one of the happiest to see those son-of-a-bitches in Washington get what's coming to them. You don't have anything to fear from me, but you best be wary and nimble with everybody else."

Marfa. I parked on a side street to be inconspicuous. Marfa's a tourist town, an artisan town with one nice hotel, *The Paisano*. Inside, there's photos of James Dean and Rock Hudson. Marfa's where they filmed *Giant*. I hadn't splurged for *The Paisano* before, but it was early afternoon and we'd get good use of the room. The room was formerly \$200, reduced to \$80 because they could no longer accept credit cards or checks.

"So, the only payment you accept is cash?"

"No, Texas has okayed gold and silver at the spot rates."

"Really, what's the exchange rate for silver?"

"Today it's \$286."

"For how much?"

"An ounce, of course!"

We took our meager possessions to our room, which was located on the ground floor, adjacent the garden. I wished I had taken more silver and forgot the gold. How the hell was I going to get change for a ten grand piece of gold with the banks closed?

We walked around town in a comfortable afternoon sun. It's basically one main street, ninety degrees to the highway, which dead ends into the courthouse grounds. Must be the county seat or something, Spacious grounds and a majestic courthouse.

"Lemme ask you something, Rose?"

"Why are you calling me Rose?" she asked. "Nobody calls me Rose!"

"No, but there was a time a woman dreamed and planned and hoped for her Rose."

She looked at me hard, then she quickly walked away. I let her go. It's just the one street—she wouldn't go far. Besides, I like walking around this town. Usually, there's artsy people but now there weren't many visitors. Guess I'd seen to that.

I went into shops, galleries, book stores, whatever. I stayed out of the curios. On a side street before the highway there was a large, unique building that looked to be a gathering place for artisans. Outside were a group of musicians playing Irish music. Inside, there were tables with information about do-good causes. Rose was looking at the handouts.

"I was going to ask you—did you see the guy pulling away from the adult book store when we left Van Horn this morning?"

"Yeah, in the huge black Caddy with all the antennas," she said. "What do you think he was about?"

"Just keeping in touch with worldwide pedophilia." Rose cracked up!

"I get angry when you call me Rose. You don't have the right!"

"Is Rose someone you protect? Is Rose what you have left from being a girl?" Tears showed and she moved to break away, but I wrapped her in my arms.

Google tailors its search engine to fit your profile. Everybody gets back something different. Maybe that's why everything Emory gets back is dressed like a Japanese schoolgirl.

We left the next morning around eleven heading for Big Bend. It's about an hour to Presidio on the Mexican border. We had the top down and it must have been 70 degrees. At breakfast we heard prices were changing every few hours and the exchange rate for the dollar against gold and silver was hard to come by. Life was barter. Food was more expensive than lodging because truckers and food handlers wouldn't show up for work without assurance the dollars they were paid would spend, or would they be paid at all?

I put on a jazz playlist from my phone—Coltrane, Miles, Bix, and Bird, and we headed for the border town of Presidio. There, the highway south was barricaded—closed by order of Homeland Security. Past the barriers I could see armed military so we continued east another hour to Terlingua. A long time ago, Jerry Jeff Walker had an album, *Viva Terlingua!* There used to have a renowned chili cook-off here.

That was years back. The general store next to the opera house was open and there was a handbill on the wall for Butch Hancock from a month ago, but no handbills for coming attractions. Butch and Joe Ely and another guy, I think maybe the guy from the Byrds who played the twelve string. They were the *Flatlanders*, and they had a song, "Homeland Refugee", about leaving California, going back to the dust bowl. No, the twelve string guy wasn't from the Byrds. He was Jimmie Dale Gilmore. The opera house was as I remembered. A good place to hear a concert. Smallish, but an unexpected elegance out here.

We passed a motel where I had stayed a decade earlier, maybe thirty rooms. There were no cars. I was rooting about for my get in

free to national parks card when we pulled up to the deserted and boarded up check-in booth. There was no barrier but there was a sign—Big Bend National Park—closed by order of Homeland Security. Since we were driving a loop through the park then back up to Alpine, I wasn't going back. Besides, the park was closed on account of me.

We drove the twenty-five miles to Panther Junction without seeing anyone. The park was as forlorn and wondrous as ever. This isn't the southernmost part of the United States, but it is the bottom. From here we would head north to Marathon then back west to Alpine where I wanted to spend the night at my other favorite hotel I'd never stayed at, The Gage. Must have had something to do with the railroad. Alpine is in the mountains, a pine forest, at 4500 ft., a different climate from Marfa, but only twenty-five miles apart. Alpine has a university—Sul Ross. I stopped there once and checked out photos of the football team at the visitor's center. One of the linemen was Dan Blocker—Big Hoss on Bonanza.

I'd planned on going south from Panther Junction to Boquillas. I hadn't talked about it to Rose but I'd been thinking of walking across the Rio Grande into Mexico. Now the road was barricaded and the crossing was closed. If we went that way, there would be cops or military—any police stop would likely be a problem. Without talking to Rose, I headed north to Marathon.

“Wanna talk more about the slut—good girl thing?” I asked.

“Like what?”

“Like the other night in Van Horn. Was it worth it?”

“It was intense, blowing off energy. Needed!”

“Really? Those cowboys, did they treat you well? Or the longer it went on, did they treat you like shit? Did they abuse you? I'm taking the liberty of conjecture because of how you showed up in the morning. Did they offer you a shower? Or once they were done with you...”

She didn't say anything.

“That's what most porn's become,” I said. “The dehumanization of women, street pickups, college girls fucking for money, fake castings, fake taxis. Every kind of fake you can imagine. The

women don't know what's happened to them until a million guys have watched them getting worked and fucked online."

"I've seen as much as you have," she said. "and those girls get into it with their yelping and pleading for more! They're just sluts when it comes down to it!"

"Are you defending those girls getting talked into fucking on camera, without realizing that countless guys are going to whack off to twenty-five minutes of them being abused? And when they later realize they're part of a tube channel for all time... "

"I'm just saying."

"You're just saying, Rose, the girls are usually younger and inexperienced. They don't expect what comes from a proven formula to get girls to fuck on camera, on account of they can't pay for a taxi ride or because they showed up for a non-existent modeling job. And because the sex is intense, you justify all of it."

"You're making to big of a deal out of this."

"The other night when you got drunk enough, you got loud about taking it up your dumper—up your dirt road. Where's that come from, Rose?"

She kept looking straight ahead and I kept on:

"There's this one site called NetVideoGirls. It costs \$30 a month to sign up for it, or you can see most of it on the tube sites."

"I've seen it."

"Then you know what I'm going to describe. There's this guy—the master of ceremonies. They always show his shoes as he waits for a girl to come to her appointment. Nice shoes or expensive sneakers. She knocks and he opens the door abruptly, his video camera in hand, recording. Most women object to the camera being on but he says he'll explain as they go along. Then comes what I'll call boot camp where he works to take away their identity and get them to follow instructions. Slowly, like a sixty pound cougar, wearing down an unarmed teenager, he talks them into giving a blow job to his camera man, then getting fucked. He's always saying they can just leave but he's using every piece of psychology he can muster to make sure they don't. The phone rings. It's another women who wants the job—unless this one can take it a bit further

and show she's a naughty girl, he'll give the job to someone else. And there is no job! These are women on their lunch hour, elementary school teachers who will soon be out of a job—ostracized by their peers. And these motherfuckers could care less. Remind you of anything, Rose? They're not thirteen and there's no death threat, but many of these women lose more than they could imagine over a lunch hour."

"I'd like to kill those guys."

"Why, Rose?"

"Because they don't know the pain they cause. Because they don't care about the pain they cause. Because they've been doing it for so long they no longer think about who they hurt."

"Let's say," I said, "we all have things that happened in our lives, some we've never gotten past. And sometimes we get triggered back into that place. Some of us end up back there. So how do we disarm the trigger?"

"I don't know," she said. "Obviously."

"Some of what you need you have, Rose. Courage. That's probably the most important."

"If that were it, I'd be better off than I am."

"How about with the cowboys? Was Rose around?"

"No—it's like a switch gets flipped and I say fuck it!"

"That night. What made you say fuck it?"

She didn't say anything the next few miles but I could see she was grinding away at something.

"I know what it is."

"Tell me."

"It's that fucking Gwen! You and your stupid love fable. You're going to be there for each other. All you'll need is each other. That good little Midwest upbringing that made her a marine officer who doesn't quite get that she works for the world's biggest mafia. That's going to be the formula for true love? Life isn't that. The world is the world I know, and it won't be long before you'll be at one another and she'll be getting it on with the bag boy at Safeway!"

“I’m with you, Rose. Gwen brings who she is and I bring who I am. But what if, what if each of us sees just enough to make it possible?”

“Then you’d be my grandfather and grandma, Tess. They lived every day in a love fable.”

40

Diamonds are not a girl's best friend.

Our road ended at Highway 90, at Marathon, but I didn’t turn west towards Alpine. Instead, I turned east towards Sanderson and Langtry. Rose didn’t ask why?

“Wanna hear a definition of tyranny?” I asked.

“Okay.”

“The removal of nuance.”

“I like that!” she said. “Everybody’s the same and it’s all crap. No beauty! Nothing subtle. Just another high wire chick with a body covered in ink!”

“Not fair Rose! You’re subtle and nuanced. But with a trigger.”

“Yeah,” she said. “Get rid of it for me.”

I remembered this road with my dad, where it hadn’t rained in seven years.

“Takes everything you have, and are, to remove the trigger. Your own twelve-step. Bad habits, addictions, whatever you have—those can be handled. But the trigger is formidable. It’s disguised as you. Nobody but you gets to pull it.”

“Why are we heading east?” she asked

“I don’t know why. I just didn’t want to head back to Alpine.”

“Where do you think we end up tonight?”

“Probably Del Rio. Close to Mexico. A huge lake. And military—lots of military.”

Del Rio, Texas. I hadn't been here since I rode my R80GS down from Oregon. 2000 miles, on my way to New Orleans. But the rest of that trip was going to be one San Antonio and Houston after another, and I don't ride cities, so I rode out to the smallish Del Rio airport (another international airport with one flight a month to Mexico). They had just lost their United contract, but the Hertz desk was still open and they had one VW Passat which, with the back seats folded down becomes a camper. And, by the time I got back to my bike I was ready for a ride.

I'd stayed at the Motel 6 on the south side of the highway heading into town. It was great. Two rooms, flat screen, and completely done over. We pulled into their lot.

Inside, Rose wanted to watch NetVideoGirls. I balked but went along with it.

"We need an agreement, Rose. Bill Maher says you've been watching porn too long when your forget to feed the dog. So let's say an hour?" All we had to watch it on were our phones. Her's was better. A 6 Plus with a bigger screen. She went on Tube 8 and I suggested she go to XVideos. She gave me a quizzical look. Once there I suggested she look for Margaret or Zoi. We did an hour.

"Wow. Margaret gets talked into it, but she really gets into it. I wanted to be there with her—maybe just her," she said.

"Yeah, Margaret is something else, kind of innocent but highly sexual. She's the best possible interviewee for these guys! Wanna walk?" I asked.

"There's something I gotta do first," she said, getting her blue toy from the backpack. "I like this one, but back in KC I had another, same color, but with a finger to explore the door to your powder room." I got off the couch to go into the other room.

"One more thing?" she asked. "I want you to watch. I like it when somebody watches."

My sense of comity rose up, but I acquiesced. Good that I did. Rose is one naughty woman!

It was dark when we left the room. Del Rio, these days, is like so many towns. Had you driven through in the 50's or the 60's, you would have found a hamlet with a downtown that was the shopping district. It's still there but not much happens at night and, paying homage to the automobile, they've added a few miles of strip mall, patterned on El Paso, the measure for strip malls.

For Rose, dinner is not a dining event. When we'd had enough of the strip mall and come upon a barbecue, Rudy's, obviously part of a chain, that worked for her. It had a 50's look with a long porch roof out front to cover the gas pumps, which gave the place some definition. Meat sounded good and that was the menu, baby back, brisket—whatever. Everything had a price including the sides and desserts and it was all reasonable. Most prices ended in an odd number of pennies. I wondered how that would translate into the new economy? There weren't many patrons, but some had left newspapers. *USA Today* from this morning and *The Texas Observer* from San Antonio. There were doubles so we each had our own.

"I think you're missing something about women and porn," she said. I looked up.

"Those guys are smooth talkers but the women are really into it! More than men would believe. Women are highly sexual!"

"I agree, especially about how much the girls get into it. Maybe if people fucked more we wouldn't need as big of a Marine Corps!"

"Exactly," she said. "Puritanism is on the march!"

"But there's more, Rose. Puritanism's more than sexual repression. Its main teaching is you're no damn good!"

"I just don't want to put down sex and passion," she said. "The guys are dirtbags, but the women are real."

"Yeah. The one woman, Margaret, said it was a long time since she'd been with a guy and when she got going, there was no stopping her! Laud the sex, then have the women's brothers take the two assholes out back."

They brought our food and we read. We were there a long time.

“Damn! Give me your phone Rose. We forgot to take out the SIM card. Don’t put it past them to add a charge of child porn on top of whatever else.”

41

“Somebody had blundered and the most expensive orgy in history was over.” F. Scott Fitzgerald

Del Rio was cold and dark. We walked on the side of the street opposite the motel, but before crossing, I spotted two black Suburbans out front of the office. The damn SIM card!

We ducked behind a taco place with a drive-up window and stood in the bushes. We needed a ride. There were two cars in the drive-up, teenagers. I couldn’t chance asking them for a ride. They might see us on the news. Then the dishwasher or a kitchen worker brought trash out to the dumpster. I approached him. He didn’t speak English so we spoke in Spanish. Did he have a car? Could he give us a quick ride. He couldn’t. He was on shift. I showed him an ounce of silver. Silver is gold to Mexicans. *Plata*. Maybe what their currency was backed with now. And this plata was worth almost \$300.

He went in for his his keys. Four door Honda, 80’s model. They all look alike. He wanted the plata up front and I gave it to him. Rose got in the back. De donde? Aeropuerto, via Main Street, Norte, pues, 10th St. Which would take us away from the motel. No one spoke. He dropped us at the administration building. Bleak—no one around. The waiting room was locked and there was no one out on the tarmac. The reality of our situation was coming clear. Were the Hertz desk to open in the morning, which it wouldn’t because credit cards were not in use and the banks were closed, there would be a third reason we couldn’t rent a car—ID. I

wondered if businesses were still taking checks, a promise to be paid later? Were cities and states issuing chits and credit? In our case it wouldn't matter.

Desert nights are cold. We huddled in the doorway of the admin building to keep out of the wind. We weren't dressed for anything more than a walk to dinner. It was early and we had a long night ahead. For us to walk back into town was likely the beginning of the end. An hour passed, a few degrees colder, when lights came our way along the airport road. We went around back and found a dumpster. I held the lid open while Rose climbed in, then she did the same for me. It smelled bad, not supermarket bad, mostly paper. Soon, we heard voices coming closer, until they drifted away. Maybe ten minutes later, the sound of a vehicle heading away from the airport.

We went back to the admin building and resumed our post.

"What's that," asked Rose.

Out on the tarmac there was a light and the shape of a small truck—definitely not the larger vehicle we had run from. We made our way towards the light.

"Don't scare whoever it is," said Rose. "Let me talk to him."

"We missed our ride," she said. "Did you see an SUV?"

"What I saw wasn't your ride," he said. "There were two Suburbans here when I pulled in. They gave me a grilling about what I was doing here, then they left. Some kind of federal officers? Who were you looking for?"

"My aunt, she was going to give us a ride to San Antonio but we missed her. The engine went out in my car today so we're on foot. Is this your plane?"

"Yeah. I was going to leave earlier but there's some kind of lockdown for the whole town. Roadblocks in both directions. Cops checking. No flights in or out of this airport. They were grilling me about whether or not I was intending to fly. I told them no. That we were beginning a 1500 hour maintenance on my plane in the morning and I wouldn't get clearance for takeoff until the work was signed off."

"How long does that maintenance take?" asked Rose.

“Oh, I think it took us a whole day last week.” In the dim light from his lamp and a half moon, he wore a constant smile.

“So, are you going somewhere?” she asked.

“Considering it. If I takeoff in the opposite direction I’m supposed to, I’ll be flying away from where they are. I’m thinking they won’t hear me. Besides, the dopes didn’t get my name and there was so little light I doubt they’d recognize me. Anyway, this place has been shut for a week, so nobody knows my plane, or that I’m here.”

“Where’re you going? she asked.

“Home, Fort Stockton.”

“Is that east or west?”

“Northwest.”

“Could we get a ride with you?”

“You asking if I’ll give a ride to two people I can hardly see, one, a guy who hasn’t said a word? Two people at a deserted airport in a town that’s locked down. And you’ll take a ride in the opposite direction your supposed aunt was going to take you? Start by telling me where you were when the federal guys were swarming around here. And why they didn’t find you? I didn’t see you on the road when I came in?”

My turn: “We were in the dumpster out back.”

“Pray tell,” he said. I was beginning to like this guy. Another Tim from Jake’s garage. I was going to take a chance on this guy.

“We were in the dumpster because the lockdown is about us.”

His smile became a laugh.

“What did you two do?” Rose jumped in.

“He’s the one who did it. I’ve done nothing more than commit treason for aiding and abetting him.” Now he wasn’t laughing.

“What did you do?” he asked, peering at me in the dim light.

“You read the papers?” I asked.

“Most of them quit printing. *The Observer* is the only daily left in Texas. But I do listen to the news.”

“What’s the biggest news story?” asked Rose.

“No shit! You’re them?”

“We’re them,” she said.

We were exposed but it didn't matter. Our chances of getting through a locked-down town at night weren't good. This guy was our best bet.

"I'll give you a ride," he said. "You know why? For years there's been no good jobs in Texas but there have been plenty of lies. And little by little, I saw they had no damn idea what they were doing. Or maybe they knew exactly what they were doing"

We had the right guy! If there were two guys in Texas who were on our side, we'd met both of them..

An hour later we dropped out of the night onto a barely-lit runway at Fort Stockton, Texas—another airport that was closed. Not closed because of the government, not closed because of Homeland Security—closed because of a failed economy.

42

**“Sooner or later we all sit down to a banquet of consequences.”
Robert Louis Stevenson**

The Deluxe Inn wasn't much to look at but it was downtown and more than a three hour drive from Del Rio. I took a shower. When I came out, Rose was watching TV.

“You're not going to like this.”

I sat down while she surfed some channels until she found what she was looking for on FOX Breaking News. It was about Gwen, but they didn't show her or give her name. She'd been threatened by me, at knifepoint, to bring money to Louisville, where I'd recited the names and addresses of her family members. She knew better than to help me but she did it out of fear. No charges were being brought against her and she had been re-assigned.

"See, I was right about Gwen. When it came right down to it, she'd weighed the alternatives and picked the safety of the status

quo. Good little Mid-West girl!" I didn't want to talk about it. Not now and not ever.

Next morning the room looked more depressing than the night before. Motel art was on the walls, two paintings, a landscape and a bouquet, framed, each painted in fifteen minutes or less. The place was clean but worn, almost threadbare. The one queen bed was old, a coil spring mattress, in which the steel coils had finally made their way to the surface. If nothing else, motels need to change out the mattresses every few years. Forget the TV, the fridge, the microwave, but for god's sake, we need to sleep!

There were four pillows, rubbery. I'd used one under my bony hip and I could still feel the damn coils, so I'd gathered all the towels, and folded them into pads, one for my chest, one under the hip pillow, another for my legs.

I left Rose, asleep, and walked down the main drag to a gas station and convenience store, hoping they had a *local vehicles for sale rag*, which they did. In addition, they had a Krispy Kreme case from which I took the last four chocolate donuts. Watching for cops and carrying two medium coffees on a corrugated cardboard tray, I made my way back to the Deluxe Inn.

Rose was still sleeping so I set down my purchases and scanned the local ads. Lots of farm equipment. Winter was on the way and many of these guys wouldn't be starting up again in the spring. I wondered how some of the larger items would be paid for? Did people keep seventy grand around the house? I searched for cars. Funny thing about cars. A guy doesn't want a car he doesn't like, even with no other choice. There was nothing listed amounting to a choice. This was Texas and if you didn't go for a Ford Focus or a Chevy Lumina, you were out of luck. Not entirely. There were a couple of nifty BMWs. But we weren't in the market for an high-end car so I looked at trucks. Not much there except—fucking al-leluia! A one owner, 1964 Ford, three quarter-ton pickup, six cylinder, three speed, red and white, with 67,000 original miles—always garaged. Impossible! Some poor sap, probably a farmer, forced to sell his pride and joy for \$5000. I called. I was the only

one who'd called. Who would even tell you that? If I were to buy it, he wanted to know, how would I pay? He'd come with it in an hour. Was I really interested because, if I was, his wife would follow him?

"The gods took Gwen," I said. "But they want me to have this truck!" I fell into a chair. The truck was in no way going to take care of what I was feeling.

"When's he coming?"

"Eleven. Hour and a half."

"Did you see a newspaper when you were out?"

I hadn't thought of it. I went the office and they didn't have any. The convenience store was the closest. I left my Longhorn cap in the room. If they were looking for me, they might be looking for the hat. Since I already knew how to get to the store, I cut inland a block and approached it from the back. There were no *Observers* in the rack out front and no *USA Today*. Inside, there were a few, of which I took two. \$10. I put one back. Five bucks for the paper—not even the Sunday paper. On the way out, there was a rack of ball caps, from which I picked a garish red, white, and blue, machine-embroidered, USA cap. It was so cool I didn't even have to turn it backwards.

Back at the room, we divvied up the paper. Tats got the front page and the entertainment section. I took the sports, the money, and the editorials. We read, sometimes to each other. At one point, Rose said my new hat was beyond bad taste.

One editorial was from Brook Davids, who not long ago was advocating for an invasion and occupation of Syria. Now he was certain that any good future for the dollar depended on militarization—saving the dollar and our country through non-defensive war—a position supported by most Americans. Nonsupporting opinions were un-American.

Leisure and travel were now things of the past, though it wasn't long ago I was taking motorcycle trips to the Little Big Horn or the headwaters of the Mississippi. And I had hoped to ride the Pony Express trail across Utah, but road trips for Americans were now limited to a drive to the poorhouse.

The last editorial was by Chris Hedges, who not long ago was persona non grata on the talk shows. Now, the economic collapse beckoned diverse opinions, maybe just long enough to get those writers into the cross hairs. Chris's article was entitled: *Should We Bomb Them or Should We Bomb Them and Put Boots on the Ground? Narcissism with Minor Differences*. The article was right on, leaving little doubt that a special place was being prepared for the author.

It's three or four hours from Fort Stockton to El Paso—much faster to stay on the interstate. Besides, I was feeling secure in my red and white Ford with my red, white, and blue cap. Interstate 10, north of Marfa and Alpine, passed through towns that would have long ago dried up except for the interstate, along which we drove through a windless day of blue sky and terrain, begging the question, whether it qualified as deprived cattle country, or desert.

Then came El Paso. I used to like El Paso. Decades ago. Now it was a series of Tony Lama outlets, and expensive motels with adjacent Starbucks. I watched the exits for Highway 9, which we took, and continued west on a two lane road, paralleling the Mexican border. Something of a crap shoot because continuing west on 10 would involve more traffic and cops, but 9 would throw us in with the Border Patrol. The first hour was uneventful, but maybe five miles past Columbus we were overtaken quickly by one of those green and white Blazer looking things with lights flashing (they couldn't be blazers—they don't make those anymore). We pulled off the road onto the rocky shoulder.

The patrolman was alone. I expected two of them but with radios, they have effective backup. Fort Knox and all those classes I did about cops. Here was my chance to show my stuff. What a laugh? As soon as he ran us, we were done.

"Stay blossomed, Rose. Our chances of driving away from this are slim, so let's do our best." The patrolman approached my window, which I had rolled down.

"Nice truck." A good omen? "Thanks."

“License and registration please.” I handed him one of the business cards I had made up at the Fort. On quality paper—highly professional. One of the good legacies from Zoe.

“What’s this?”

“I’m a Fourth Amendment advisor for the American Civil Liberties Union. I do volunteer work across the southern states, in the schools with police chiefs, showing kids how to stay out of the criminal justice system. Bisbee tonight—Yuma tomorrow.”

“I asked for your license and registration, sir.”

“Until you tell me why I’m being detained, I’m not required to produce ID.”

“I stopped you because you were exceeding the speed limit and weaving in your lane.”

“You’ll have to do better than that officer. As soon as I saw you coming, I videoed my speedometer with you in the rear view mirror. No speeding, no weaving. My phone streamed the video to a third party. Along with this conversation.”

“Sir, it’s against the law to video an officer operating in an official capacity. You’re driving impaired and I’ll need to make a search of your vehicle. Please stay in the car until the canine unit arrives.” Rose gave me a look of grief and I played the last card.

“You had no probable cause or reasonable suspicion to stop us. You need to give me a valid reason for this detention or we’re leaving.”

His eyes were hard. “Please step out of the car, sir.”

“Not without your probable cause. Keep in mind, you’re going to be canned for what you’re doing. To demand I get out of my car without probable cause makes you a common criminal.” With that, I signaled left, rolled up my window, in a door that was already locked, and drove away.

“Way to go,” exclaimed Rose.

“Don’t celebrate. Cops don’t like to look bad. This guy may bust our heads.”

But he didn’t and by the time we headed south for Douglass on Highway 80, I started to calm down. Then again, he was Border

Patrol, and we saw one of their cars every few minutes. As it became late afternoon, I began to feel uneasy—there's more that can happen at night. Coming into Bisbee, I wanted Tats to see one of the world's huge copper mines, just a hundred feet from the food coop to a chain link fence and look down into a crater, an amphitheater so large, as to have been created by the god. And at the bottom, layered seats for giants, around some kind of a small, black tar lake.

We gassed up and headed north. I'd take my chances with the interstate, first there was one more town, Tombstone. Whistle me up a memory, whistle me back where I want to be, whistle a tune that'll carry me to Tombstone Territory. There's nothing more old west than Tombstone. Many of the names we remember, Wyatt Earp, Doc Holliday, Ike Clanton—all drawn here by copper, gold, silver, card sharking, marshaling, and a legacy most of us know, the O.K. Corral.

There was just enough daylight for a quick walk around. This time the place reminded me of Skagway, where one catches the Alaska ferry south to Bellingham. Both Tombstone and Skagway are fake. Skagway is too clean, too many jewelry stores for the cruise ship victims. Tombstone is faux western, exacting as many fees as possible for the privilege of being at the the site of the O.K. Corral. From what I remember, there's some dispute as to whether the Earps and Doc Holliday were the good guys in the fight, but in 1931, a fictionalized account lionized the Earps, especially Wyatt, who went on to be arrested nine times.

Soon we were on the interstate for Tucson and the last Waffle House heading west. Everything about the Ford felt real, from the bench seat to the sound of the lifters. Cars are better now but these classics are more real. Modern cars are made to confer an experience of non-existence—a virtual now. Everything about this truck was the now. This truck would not drive itself. It needed to be driven.

I weighed, once again, what had I done? Would events tire of me and forget, allowing some boredom and peace? Not likely. I was more of a John Dillinger type, to be found in his own blood on

a sidewalk. Meanwhile, I had no plan beyond drifting west into a hazy future. But for now, we took the exit for the Waffle House.

Having been in the south for almost a year, I'd seen many Waffle Houses, my favorite eatery, the southern equivalent of a Denny's, but a diner. The fare is somewhat the same. Makes you think of breakfast, but the feel of these southern diners is more like the Ford pickup. What the country used to be.

We sat at the counter and ordered breakfast. Something not on the menu and something not present in the diner told the story of why this would be the last one heading west. No grits. Folks around here wouldn't know what they are. And no blacks. In the south, most of the waitresses and cooks are black. Here, they were Mexicans and more subdued. Black waitresses are prone to banter, with a natural rhythm they bring to work. I know, it sounds racist—Blacks are no different from whites. Except for the rhythm.

Here there was no *USA Today's* but they had the *Los Angeles Times*, which, for its long history, has been a pretty good rag. In Del Rio, the news had to do with the collapse and me. It still did. But the Times had the melodrama as sidebars for feature articles on the consequences of the collapse.

The banner headline had to do with lawlessness and death. Every major city in the country was experiencing its third consecutive night of rioting and looting, brought on by the FDIC having gone bankrupt and depositor's money being used to bail-in defunct banks. But worse, were the empty shelves in supermarkets. With the suspension of food stamps, there was no food to buy and nothing to buy it with. This was a Minsky moment where, we had fallen, at first, in an orderly fashion, and now we were in free fall. Whatever we were holding as a store of value, cash, stocks, bonds, had fallen, along with us, headlong into Alice's rabbit-hole, where there was no light and nothing to grab onto.

Americans were at cross-purposes with themselves. This was neither 1930 nor the Second World War. We were no longer one people. We were unfriendly factions. Texas had passed legislation to control its borders and travel to and from that state—in defiance

of a federal order to cease and desist. We were becoming like Europe, which no longer allowed free travel between Euro countries. Ours was a world of immigration checkpoints.

But, this was worse than Europe. We have 350 million of the most entitled, well armed, and ill-read people in the industrial world. With us, many things were possible—most of them bad. Especially when cars were factored in. With a car for every person, it wasn't long before rioting and looting had taken to the road. Those who lived on any highway corridor, especially an interstate, had best stay hidden and well armed. *The Times* estimated that more than a million individuals had taken to the roads in search of food and valuables. Not a good time to be driving. Adding to the problem, most municipalities, counties, and states, had let go of at least half of their police force. Some of the wealth and food vigilantes were former cops.

We read and ate breakfast in the early evening, then we headed west. Had I committed another blunder in my life of self-importance, this time resulting in chaos and death? I could have taken a new job at the Fort and worked with young people. I could have courted Gwen.

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America—Have your forgotten the soothsayer, the prophet, the card reader, the tarot woman? She's been waiting for you along Highway 99—where she set up shop in 1971. She has something to tell you.

There were new things to think about. Fewer police on the roads was in our favor. Marauding bands were not. But that didn't change anything. We kept moving west. There was nothing for us along this road.

“Do you have a love you think back on?” Rose asked, as I merged with the interstate. “Do you have one that shouldn’t have gotten away?” I told her I did.

“You wanna hear mine?” she asked. I did.

“Your gonna think this is crazy cause it all happened over a glance, one late evening when I was with my first boyfriend, at Surf Liquor, in Huntington Beach. We were in his car, pulling out, and I saw this guy. He was in a long coat with longish hair and for just a moment our eyes met. I knew him—as well as anyone knows anything. I could have guessed his name. But I was eighteen and there was nothing I could do. There hasn’t been one day when I haven’t thought about him. If I had gone back, he’d be with me now. Do you think that’s possible?”

I nodded. Rose’s memory, and her attachment to it, was like the Mexican woman, the one I danced with in Kansas City. Some one thing that happened way back when—something by which everything since is measured.

“You want to hear mine?” I asked. She did.

“I’d just gotten married, in spite of the fact I didn’t love her and because she began to show interest in one of my friends. We drove to Reno and did it. It only lasted a couple of months, during which time I had to go north to Eugene. I was on the mall one night and there was a young woman talking with several guys. I listened to her deft banter and parrying. I didn’t say much but I was caught up. There’s only a few times in life where you get absolutely chosen. Without my realizing she even knew I was there, she asked, ‘You wanna go out with me tonight?’ Which made the guys disperse. Before we went out I had to meet her sister and her sister’s husband. She was staying with them. I met them, told some lies—I couldn’t say I was recently married. We went out and we were having fun. I don’t remember what we did but I can feel the summer night on my skin and I can feel her as if it were tonight. She was beautiful, though not in any classic way. Her hair was short, she was tallish and trim. Maybe a bit tomboyish, but one of the most beautiful things I’d ever seen.”

“Sounds like a gift from the gods?” said Rose, with some sarcasm, although my story was similar to the one she recalled.

“It probably was, but I made sure to give it right back. Around midnight I tried to move things along to my motel room. 'Aren't we having fun?' she asked. 'Aren't we just starting out? Let's keep playing. We have nothing but time.'

"She was right, but I was married and I only had the one night. Six weeks later, I was on my own, but not in a good place to go looking for her. But I still think about her. If she's still alive, she's an old woman now. But for me she hasn't aged at all. If I'm called upon to account to the gods for letting her go, I'll be in trouble, because, when the gods finally send you someone they love, you're supposed to accept their gift.”

I saw the sign for Gila Bend, remembering Alex and Tara had spent the night there, before they went to Baja. I tried to remember the name of the the motel where they stayed but I couldn't. We drove into Gila Bend and cruised the main street until I spotted it—*The Yucca*. Rose stayed with the truck while I went in for a room. I mentioned to the clerk that *The Yucca* had some notoriety because it's in a book, *The Ride*. He knew about it. Did he know which room they'd rented. He did—and I rented it.

44

Somehow the thought abides that we can perpetuate the same fraud endlessly—without consequence. But, deep in our most hidden recesses, we know differently.

Complacency set in whenever a day passed without incident, even though a simple police stop could end our freedom, or worse, a band of marauders could end our lives. Even waking up in Tara

and Alex's motel room didn't raise my level of anxiety. They were my friends. I could call them right now, but life had become surreal to the point where I thought of them as characters in the novel. And for whatever reason, I saw our situation the same way—too bizarre to be real. They'd had one person hunting them, with support from the police state, while we had an entire country searching for us. They had a single individual between them and their former lives while we lived in a world that was collapsing around us, for which I had responsibility, and from which there was no reprieve. Any former life for me was just that.

Which reminded me—it was time for Rose to go. She had the possibility of a different life, one without me. I would leave an audio message on her phone that she'd done what she did under threat from me. She had advised me to turn myself in. If she went to the authorities the same day I cut her loose, she might walk. I didn't say anything to her but today was going to be the day.

We left Gila Bend on the interstate heading for Yuma.

"My dad would take us on driving trips, from Los Angeles, sometimes as far as Gila Bend."

"You speak so badly of your parents," she said. "I don't get it? How could he have been drunk and violent, but take you on road trips?" The highway separated sparse, low winter desert paralleling the Gila River between here and Yuma. The road on the Mexican side was where my friends had almost lost their lives.

"My parents were complicated," I said. "They drank every night. Sometimes there were beatings but sometimes life was good. Here's the kind of talk that would go on between them: 'You've always been no good, Stan! Right from the beginning. You never stopped with Nicki Bateman—not for a minute. And you never stopped drinking. And don't think I don't know you were next door with that filthy little Jewess, while fat Bob was at work. I bet that little bitch has hair between her legs like throw rug. But that wouldn't stop you, would it Stan? Or next door on the other side—Drilling's wife—I bet some drilling got done over there? And that night Pucket broke into the house. Where were you? Drunk! But

that didn't stop you driving to the liquor store. You're the worst kind of drunk, Stanley. You couldn't stock-up on your first trip to the liquor store because that would make you look like the sloosh you are. So, you risked people's lives for another quart of beer and a pint of vodka! Because of you, my daughter and I were nearly killed by a madman. I would never have become a drinker without you making my life miserable. You were never any good Stanley! Your father was right!'

"And if I were there, she might look at me: 'And you, you're just like your father—no damn good. You'll never amount to anything!' "

"What would your father say?"

"Not much. He was used to it and he was just as bad in his appraisals. Sometimes, the only way to resolve one of these nights, when things had gone too far, was for them to turn their anger on me."

Coming into Yuma, we hadn't eaten, and it was now early afternoon. I dropped her out front of a truck stop while I gassed the truck because the last four or five stations had been closed. This place wasn't what I was used to. The pumps were padlocked and the attendant came out to unlock them. Regular was now a flat \$10 a gallon, with a sign—cash or silver only.

"How long have you been locking the pumps?"

"Since yesterday. Twice, cars drove off without paying. Never had it twice the same day. And both those cars headed east—nothing out there for a 100 miles. They're either desperate or not worried because there's no cops and when there are cops they're not bothering with idiots that don't pay for gas. Two nights ago we were robbed inside—at gunpoint. Now, nobody works here who isn't armed, and women don't work behind the counter without a man back there."

Over breakfast, I told Rose what I had heard. But I didn't tell her about finding her a new home. Looking around, it was obvious how poorly stocked the place was—most of the shelves were bare. Paying was another problem. With no currency that's trusted, what

do you do? My cash and silver wasn't going to last forever. And where would I exchange gold for silver? I had to quit moving and find a place.

"Let's go tour the prison," I said.

"Let's what?"

"The Yuma Territorial Prison—they won't think of looking for us there."

I'd been here before and one thing was different right off. There was no one selling tickets, but the main gate was open, and we had the place all to ourselves. The first occupants had built the prison in the late 1880's, mostly from concrete and rocks—iron straps for bars. Six convicts per cell in two sets of bunk beds with one bucket to do your business. If you had to be in prison, this place wasn't bad, not counting the snakes, lice, and tuberculosis. But it was humane. There were pardons and twenty-some prisoners escaped. There was a library and classes. What the authorities had in store for the two of us would make Yuma Territorial look pretty good.

People were sent here for an array of crimes. Polygamy—nobody's business. Adultery—nobody's business. Then the crimes that are somebody's business. What about me? I'd conducted an audit of something that wasn't there. Who's business was that? Was it the business of the American people to know the truth or was it the business of the government to keep us all safe and secure with their lies?

It was early afternoon when we passed through El Centro. I thought about a girl, visiting from there at my all-night senior party. We danced, then kissed in a booth at the bowling alley. I wondered how it had gone for her?

What insanity our world has become—with each of us trying to find a seat in the theater of the absurd. It was the Romans who invented credit. The word came from the Latin—trust. Credit has to be backed with something and we'd made a mockery of that. Why is it every householder has to settle up with their creditors at the end of each month while the government gets to avoid its obligations? Who the hell do they think they are?

I read this morning that one quarter of Mississippi was auctioned off in one day. Corn, wheat, and cotton had all rotted because there were no buyers. That's the problem. That's what happened with Lehman Brothers. When they had to sell, there were no buyers, so what they had, went for a nickel on the dollar. Now our country was going on the block for a penny on the dollar, and the bidders would not be Americans.

"We'll head up 86 along the Salton Sea, then maybe we'll see how the rich are doing in Palm Desert and Palm Springs."

"Palm Springs? That's where I wanted to go. How long to Palm Springs?"

"I dunno—maybe two, three hours."

Rose, realizing we would soon be at her destination, made for a long silence in the cab, in the midst of which I turned on the radio. Tuning up and down the AM band for a song I could sing, I found news at the top of the hour. The banks were to re-open in the morning. Not the banks they used to be, but as IMF—International Monetary Fund Banks—the monetary propaganda arm for western imperialism. I smiled, remembering Paul Wolfowitz, made famous by Michael Moore for putting an entire black, Ace comb in his mouth, wetting it, to comb his hair during 911. Of course, he is lesser known for the doctrine that bears his name, wherein, all countries, are and will remain vassals to the United States.

The news could not have been more absurd—the entire broadcast could have been news from *The Onion*. The proposed solutions from the Fed to shore up the economy was like a suggestion to find warmth on a very cold day by peeing your pants—there would be some icy crotches before this was over. What the commentator said, and this was NPR, was nothing more than talking points from the government. Nothing was questioned. There was not a shred of investigative journalism. Instead, that saccharine, liberal, hypnotic tone, persuading the listener to continue dozing.

It wouldn't work and I'd been sure they wouldn't do it, but they were finally calling in the cash, with no mention of what this would do to more than a billion people around the world with no bank accounts, who live in a shadow economy where paper dollars

had been king. Without the dollar they have nothing but barter. They were being re-assigned as outcasts in a medieval caste system—to starve.

Although China had backed the yuan with gold, the price of which had now risen to more than \$10,000 an ounce, the United States government had changed its dollar peg for gold, from \$42, to \$900 an ounce, and no gold, held by U.S. citizens, could be sold to any entity other than the United States Treasury, under penalty of law, and, it was now illegal to transport gold out of the country, or across state lines. The price of silver was set at \$20 and could be exchanged for IMF notes.

Tats was furious. She knew what was happening.

“There's nothing we can do about it!”

“Don't be so sure,” I said. “Just because it's a law, doesn't make it legal.”

“You mean the Supreme Court?” she asked. “You think they'll strike it down?”

“They might, but I wouldn't count on it. What I'm thinking about is natural law. They can't ostracize a quarter of the world's population into untouchability without a fight. Like when the liberals wanted to round up the guns and the red states took a stand. Remember the ads? *Democracy is a political system, but liberalism is a cultural phenomena.*”

In the end, the government couldn't get support for confiscating the AR15, because those are weapons we need, to keep a rapacious government at bay. Guns were the first confrontation the government lost—hopefully, cash and gold would be next.

Like some people, the dollar turns out to be a political construct, and not a store of value.

Off to our right, we could see the Salton Sea, which had some success as a resort area during the late 50's. Celebrities hung out here. I recall being here one weekend and getting a ride back to SoCal to get my BSA 250 so I could impress the girls. Thanks to English workmanship, I made it back with no kickstand or my rear-view mirror, which had fallen off, somewhere along the road. As it turned out, I was much too shy to impress any girls. The bike had been my only hope, but they didn't seem to notice.

After the 60's, settlements along the Salton Sea shrank, and were gradually abandoned due to high salinity and pollution that killed most of the fish. The rank smell of the sea, combined with the stench of decaying fish along the beaches, destroyed the tourist industry.

If one looks at the 50's and 60's as our heyday, America is now like the Salton Sea at the end of that era. Rose didn't ask about the sea or suggest we stop. With the top down, we had to keep the windows up to not smell it, but it was out there—just beyond the windows.

Soon, we cut off 86 and headed for Palm Desert, which has become a more wealthy place than Palm Springs, with lavish developments fanning out east along the mountains. The area still looked prosperous but there was less traffic than I remembered. The ten or fifteen miles between the two cities is indiscernible now as one long affluent strip mall. But something was different. There were vacant buildings, and not just stores and markets. I couldn't remember which brands they sold, but several former car dealerships were now empty buildings and lots. When did they go out of business? As things fall apart and buyers stay home, businesses dry

up fast. Now, it wasn't just the poor and middle class who were being affected. It was also the rich.

For so long, the markets had one trend—up, up, up. When one pushed a button it was usually the buy button. Buying was relentless. Now it was sell, sell, sell. Which was equally relentless. Except now, there was no one on the other end of the trade. Now, many would-be sellers were the formerly complacent rich, the same ones who had neither bought gold nor silver because they cared less because the Fed would always be there to bail them out. They were trust-fund babies. Only now their default parents were dead. And they wouldn't be buying that new Mercedes!

Rose hadn't been here before and she had the starry-eyed reaction to boulevards and streets named after Sinatra and Bob Hope. On the left, just before the sharp right turn into downtown, is one of the early Motel 6's. Built back in the day when there was room to spare, this place is expansive, with palm trees, and an older, quiet clientele. The first time I came here, a room at the hotel across the street was exactly ten times the \$39.99 I paid.

By the time we'd checked in, it was getting dark. Rose wanted to go to her friend's bar where they served food. While she was getting her best look on, I called to see what they had to eat, which was very little. We could eat before going there. The bar would be open late. What we needed was a walk. From our motel to a good restaurant and on to the bar was less than a mile. Tomorrow we could hike in the mountains—go up and see the cable car. Maybe Rose would like to ride up. But I can't. That would involve trusting my fellow man with keeping me safe—hundreds of feet above the ground—on a couple of cables. I had seen the Jack Palance movie from the 50's. That was enough for me.

We walked to a place called Red's, famous for soft fish tacos. Sometimes there's no wait if you don't mind sitting at the bar. I mentioned we might hike in the morning and she could ride the cable car. "No way," she said. "That would scare the shit out of me!" Like the caverns, I let it pass.

The service was brisk. Nothing better than fish tacos with a bottle of cold Pacifico. Afterwards, we sauntered over to the main drag and headed away from the downtown. Palm Springs is a one-way street into town and another one-way out. Streets lined with high-end shops and bars sporting music venues. And gays. Palm Springs may be the gay capital of the world.

When we found her friend's bar, Rose went in while I opted to walk around town. I passed a hotel where I stayed with my friend Emory one New Year's Eve. My plan had been to stay at the Motel 6, but I should have known better. He was here for one thing—women. And for that we needed an upscale place. He offered to pay but I knew I'd never hear the end of it. The place we got was in the downtown and I'm sure he paid \$300 a night. There were two queen beds in the same room and he insisted we haul one of them out to the living room so he'd have privacy when he brought a woman back to the room.

Palm Springs had been busy. We'd gone to Red's for tacos, then made the rounds—the Hard Rock and more. Emory was unhappy because there weren't many single women.

"Everybody's gay," he said. There were many gay couples but not everyone was gay. I think the problem has to do with Emory getting older, and picking up women, for him, has become subject to the law of diminishing returns. Plus, there weren't many single women out on the town. Being New Year's, most women out, were out on a date. As the evening wore on, Emory became morose and went back to the room. I stayed out, talking to people in bars until the small hours. For one of us, the weekend had been an expensive bust, which became his theme for the ride home.

Maybe it was finally being alone in a beautiful night. Maybe it had to do with Tats arriving at her destination, but whatever the reason, for the first time since I'd been with Rose, I saw my life and my future as something solo.

An hour passed and I kept walking. All the way out of town past the Denny's, then back, all the way to the Motel 6. I made some stops. There's a couple of vintage car places. They were closed but

they were open visually. In one showroom, there was an early Porsche Speedster with that aluminum finish. When you know these cars, it takes no more than the count of three to know if it's original or a reproduction. The guys with the fakes, when you ask if its original, they invariably apologize for the car. The second place had a pale yellow and black Camaro. One of the good years, with a 350 and a four speed. A beautiful ride.

My walk was interrupted as Rose's friend's bar came into view, with those same recognizable vehicles, black Chevrolet SUV's with too much window tint. A quick left took me towards the hills and the mountain backdrop.

After ten minutes of hard walking I had lost my bearings. I was south or west of downtown, in the first rise of the hills. I could see the town below. I made my way in the general direction of town, towards the Motel 6, and away from the bar. Had I told anyone where I was staying? No. And I hadn't registered using my name and identification. Nice thing about an economic collapse—you get around protocol more easily. They make the rules more draconian but they haven't the where-with-all to enforce even the old rules. That will change soon. Just as soon as the tyranny catches up. Another good reason to get situated off the road.

I'd be safer at the Motel 6. I'd have to be identified from a photo and they'd need to check every place in town. And Palm Springs has so many hotels and motels. The guy who'd checked us in was likely off shift, and my pickup, which they probably didn't know about, wasn't in the lot but on an adjacent street.

I stopped into the first hotel I came to and asked for rates. I used the office phone and phone book to call my wife, at Emilio's, before registering. I hoped Rose would pick up. She didn't. And neither did either of the other gals. It was a guy asking if he could help me? I didn't ask for Rose. Instead, I became inebriated and asked what time they closed?

"We're closing soon. If you want to be here for last call, you've got fifteen minutes." I looked up at the clock. It was one.

“Emilio’s never closes this early,” I said. “Hey, I didn’t know they had a guy working there. Shoot me a selfie. Make it worth my while to come down.” He hung up.

Staying to the alleys, or one street back from the drag, I walked to the 6. What a waste of money and manpower to put this kind of effort into finding me. What I had done, was done. It wasn’t as if something else was coming. I wasn’t in touch with news organizations. There was no denying the gold was gone. It was over. Yeah, over except for retribution. The bigger the exposed lie, the bigger the retribution.

I was hungry and there was an Elmer’s pancake house down from the 6, but I couldn’t risk it. I needed to write a couple of letters, one to the local newspaper and one to the police—both describing how Rose had nothing to do with anything.

I did a walkabout around the motel, hanging in the shadows, looking for anything out of the ordinary. There was nothing. At the snack machine, I got a bag of baked Lay’s potato chips and a bag of Famous Amos chocolate chip cookies. Upstairs, I turned on the TV to Fox News and wrote my letters—looking up from my work when my name was mentioned. Thousands of people in Palm Springs and elsewhere were looking at my photograph and those same thousands of people had been offered a million dollars for information leading to my arrest. Not my capture and prosecution—just my capture. I hoped the guy who checked us in had turned in early.

I slept well and I slept late. Right up until the cleaner knocked. Didn’t much matter, I had no particular place to go. I showered and got ready to leave. Outside, a cleaning woman had parked her cart and was working in the room next to mine. A young woman approached in street clothes—her daughter. I showed her the two letters and asked if she would take them to the post office and overnight them for me? Her English was good. She was Mexican but spoke like a seventeen-year old, born into this culture. Could I trust she’d do it? I thought she would. I told her it was important. I gave her enough money for the mailing and another \$20. I offered

\$20 to her mother also. Neither of them wanted the money. I said it was for helping me and for cleaning the room. They took the money.

I was heading for the coast but I wasn't going through town. Instead, I headed east, the way we'd come in. A fast food Mexican place, on my side of the street, advertised breakfast burritos and I was hungry. I got two with sausage and eggs—and salsa, which I ate whenever I wasn't having to shift gears and stop for the many red lights along the road to Palm Desert. Soon, the burritos had dulled my edge, the morning sun had warmed the cab, and I made the right turn for Highway 74.

You can pick up 74 by going west but that involves driving back through town. Besides, winding up into the mountains from Palm Desert, through a series of ascending switchbacks, lends a beautiful vista of the desert city below. I know this road from motorcycles. Whenever I'd go to SoCal, I make the trip without using the freeways, down 89 to Susanville, then Reno, Reno to Las Vegas through Tonopah and Goldfield, to a couple of nights of camping in Death Valley. 74 was a true find, a little traveled road that deposited me on the Coast Highway, in San Juan Capistrano. Just a couple of miles from where my friends live.

It's two or three hours, a bit slower today, because a Ford F150 isn't the same in the windings as a bike. Maybe an hour into the drive, I came across some beautiful classic motorcycles—English bikes. There were four of them. Three triumphs and a BSA. Except for the BSA, they looked to be brand new. The guy came out. He was a restorer of English bikes. I asked about the prices. They were each around eighteen thousand dollars. The BSA was an original from World War 2, faded green, with a sidecar. The other three were Bonneville's, circa 1965 to 1969. We went back to his shop. The guy was an artist—probably one of a few who could still do this. Ironically, another English bike aficionado lives a few blocks from me (if I live anywhere anymore?). These guys may be without peer. But today wasn't a day I would be buying a motorcycle.

At Hemet, I was hungry again and went through the drive-in line at In-N-Out for a double, no cheese, no dressing, but mustard, ketchup, and onions. I wanted to go in but I thought I best not.

What would I do at the coast? I knew people there. Friends. But did I want to put them at risk? One guy was older and skeptical of the government. He'd appreciate what I'd done but he wouldn't want me there. With him it's all about family—all about blood. Another guy had been my closest friend for decades, but lately, I'd been keeping some distance. A few months back I had asked his wife why she'd been selfish while he's been sick. I'd hit a sore spot. She might relish some small way of getting back at me, say the rest of my life in Guantanamo. Maybe something more final? The reward money to ease her pain? That left two friends, who were housemates in Capistrano. That's where I was going.

But, I'd left Palm Springs late in the day (I hadn't made the hike I'd intended with Rose), then spent time with the English bikes. It seemed okay to show up at my friends after dark, so I got back on 74 West, then thought better of it and pulled into the parking lot of yet another Motel 6.

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One revolts, finally, not for what one can achieve, but for what it allows them to become.

What do they say? Motel 6 will give you a clean, comfortable room for less than other chains—"We'll leave the light on for you." The fact is, you'll be in luck if the rooms on either side of you are not functioning as brothels. That said, I like Motel 6. I get an upstairs, nonsmoking room, where I strip the bedspread immediately (I watched this program where they used infra-red in motel rooms, looking for semen—which was everywhere), then I lay out a light-

weight down sleeping bag, which I sleep under. But now I don't have a sleeping bag. Before going up to a room, I check with the desk about WiFi, and if it works well, I get it. Now the question is whether WiFi works at all.

There's two ways I end up in motels. I drive until two in the morning, or like today, I check in early, which gives me time to go online and to get in a good walk before dinner. When I was a kid, Hemet was the boonies, with excruciatingly hot summers. One time I shingled some sheds out here for an old woman, Elsie. Now, I suppose, people live here and work as far south as San Diego or the beach cities. I meant to say they used to. With oil closing in on two hundred dollars a barrel and a crashed economy, the days of driving sixty miles to work are gone.

I went on-line and checked out things of interest in the Hemet area. This was the headquarters for Scientology. Then I went to alternative news sites: KingWorldNews was down. Eric King and Gerald Celente were probably in jail. RT News, the only news organization sponsored by a sovereign state that's worth listening to, was blocked. RT is Russia Today, which is viewed by Europeans as the best news source, but our boys have to block it and call it propaganda because we might hear from the likes of Paul Craig Roberts and David Stockman, who might possibly undermine our belief in the system. But ZeroHedge was up—my default news source.

I read an article about Sallie-May/Freddie-Mac, student loans, car loans, and all the other government-backed loans. When someone defaults on a student loan because the only job she can get is an unpaid internship, the taxpayers pick up her loan. Same with mortgage guarantees. Reminds me of the math where velocity times mass equal momentum. An interesting way to look at our huge debt, which is the *mass*, then comes the collapse, which is the *velocity*, and taken together, they are the *momentum*. So where we find ourselves now, isn't where we'll end up? We're like a boulder rolling down a mountainside. We've no idea how far down the slope and into the canyon we'll fall?

I'd had enough news, but I did a quick read about Warren Buffett and his uncanny ability to convince the general public he's a kind, grandfatherly figure, when, according to ZeroHedge, he's a ruthless old loan shark who preys on the poor, especially blacks, through his company, Clayton Homes. Too bad, I like it that he still lives in the same house he bought in the 50's, and I like seeing him in the cheap seats whenever Terence Crawford fights in Omaha.

I was done, but the next article made me rigid. How could this be article three in the line-up? The United States had preemptively launched a nuclear strike against Russia? There were no details—stay tuned. I searched the internet. There was agreement it had happened but a complete news blackout. This was the ultimate in collectivism. We were in a nuclear war with Russia—with a news blackout. Only pathologic demagogues were privy to the news. They'd already crashed the economy. Now they were crashing the world.

I used to listen to more music, but these past years I need to know what's going on. Not tonight though, it's a one mile walk along 74 to Applebees, just past the In/N/Out, and I wanted a sit-down dinner. Along the way, I listened to jazz I'd bought on iTunes after watching Ken Burns—*Jazz*. Intermittently, I thought about what I had done. I could scarcely believe I'd done it. Sometimes, I get an idea, then I chicken out. I'd wanted to start a YouTube channel, but I got caught up in the worry I'd end up on some surveillance lists. I'm obviously not worrying about that anymore. I passed In/N/Out. I was hungry.

Traffic inside Applebees was mild—there were seats at the bar and one small booth. I asked for the booth. There were two couples in the booth next to me. I gave them a quick look as I sat down. One guy was an open-chested shade of red, a big guy in a Hawaiian shirt done up with coconuts and palms. He had a readable face with a personality that pushed through from the inside. His girl was dressed in island nonchalant. Maybe they were from Hawaii? Maybe not. The other two, of whom I caught just a glimpse, were

dressed more formally. Where I sat, the formal woman's back was six inches from mine.

When the waitress came over, I knew what I wanted. A seven ounce sirloin with salad, bread, and a glass of red wine. Medium well on the steak. A guy with a restaurant told me that if you order well done they give you the least desirable piece of meat.

"So where do you think she is?" asked the woman against my back. I listened closely.

"Audrey knows more than I do," said Big Red. "They worked together more than a year."

"I don't know where she is," said Audrey, "but she didn't just leave. What the church says is bullshit!"

"Tell me why you think it's bullshit?"

"Because Kelly didn't leave on her own," said Audrey. "Miscarriage is a tyrant. When I watched the documentary and his creeped-out, Howdy Doody face, I thought I would throw up. And little Tom Overdrive—what an asshole! People don't disappear for a decade! When Doug, in *House of Cards*, lets Rachel go, then turns the van around to go back for her. When I saw that shovelful of dirt hit her face, that's when I knew what happened to Kelly!"

The woman leaning against me asked, "Do you really know, Audrey, or do you just suspect?"

"I can't prove it, but I really know. I saw the tirades Miscarriage heaped on her—he's insane—he's a Nazi. A missing person report was put out on her, but the police considered it unfounded and did nothing. Now the investigating officer shows up for Miscarriage functions. Miscarriage is above the law!"

"What makes you so sure she didn't leave on her own?"

"Think about it. If your self-loathing is bad enough to marry Miscarriage, how could you do anything on your own. What she got was a shovelful of dirt on her face."

"But why would he kill her when he could just put her somewhere out of the way?"

"Because he's insane. Maybe she was like one of those wives of Henry the 8th. Maybe she was in the way."

"Of his freely pursuing women?"

"Maybe, but that would make too much sense. More like an angry mob boss—who just can't stop!"

"You're worked up about this? Will you be okay if my story brings out your feelings and your speculations about what happened to Kelly? You know these people are serious?"

"Yeah, but the depression changes everything. Their goons are like a coked-up pack of Mormon missionaries. It's harassment and take you to court shit. They sit across the street and stare at you, or they come to your door. Urban cowboys! I got a posse who think like me. A few who would relish blowing those fuckers away! This is the old west again and harassing those bastards is fair game. You get to shoot five a month before the authorities send someone out!"

I couldn't help myself. I shifted and twisted my body in the booth to where I was looking between the man and woman with their backs to me, to where I was looking at Audrey and Big Red.

"You know what I like about authoritative religious systems?" I said without waiting for an answer. "The head guy, even if he's a twerp, gets to administer beatings and other abuses on the flock he's entrusted to protect, most of whom could kick his ass—bloody. Makes me think about this woman in Minnesota who endured endless abuse from her husband, until there came a particularly severe, winter blizzard, when he had to make his way to the barn through a howling snowstorm to feed the stock, the only thing between him and certain death, a climbing rope tied around his waist, which his wife meted out as his lifeline between the barn and the house. One night, when she'd finally had enough, she let go of the rope. Good fortune for Miscarriage he hadn't had a run-in with her."

As they were getting up to leave, I asked the reporter if she might stay a moment. She told the couple and the guy who was with her that she would like to talk with me. To everyone's surprise.

When, finally, you spot your flower, you can't let anything get in the way.

She gave me her card, Gwen Forbes, *Los Angeles Times*. She sat across from me in the smaller booth with the more subdued light where I could sit facing the door.

"Assume," she began, "a good reporter figures things out faster than the average bear, but don't let that be a cause for concern for you. What I want is a good story no one else has."

"Did you recognize me?" I asked.

"I thought, maybe, but the way you insinuated yourself into the conversation put it together for me."

Our waitress came by and asked if we wanted to order something? I ordered a cup of coffee with a shot of Baileys. I had this feeling I'd be up for a while. She ordered the same.

"What do you think about sharing your story with me?" I liked how direct she was and how she said the right things. I told her I was considering it.

"What do you want to know?" I asked.

"Every story about you has to do with how you did it. I want to come at why you did it? What you saw happening—and why gold? Especially why gold? And I want to know about the marine. Who is she, and what happened between you two?"

"That would get her into a mess," I said. "Even if she denies what I say, the damage to her reputation would be over the top."

"She already hung you out."

"Yeah, but you don't know what made her do that. I need to talk to her alone before I'll know."

"Hope springs eternal," she said.

"No, you're talking about faith. I'm talking about evidence. You can't judge someone by hearsay. If I can't talk to her, it's hearsay."

"Point made," she said. I liked this woman. She was smart, closing in on fifty. She looked good. Earlier, I had made the observation about her and the guy being formal. The guy was; she was just classy. Her short hair, her dress, her willingness to reassess something she'd said. Classy.

She asked me what I was thinking? I told her I was trying to decide whether she was beautiful or handsome?

"You think any woman wants to hear she's handsome?"

"She should. Good bone structure will serve her well and long."

"Never thought of it like that," she said. I hadn't either.

"What do you do about the marine? she asked. "There's some chance you'll never see her again, and if you do, there's reason to believe she sold you out to cover herself."

"Yeah, but as with all good things, you give it some time."

"Back to the hope thing?" she asked."

"In matters of the heart, we tend to block someone's phone number too quickly. Love needs to play out. Like in that movie, *Adaptation*, where Meryl Streep says, "I came to understand that change is not a choice." I think she meant that some things happen on their own."

"I liked that movie," she said.

"Me too. I think it's the one where the guy says he loves Sarah Marsh. The love is his—he owns it. And they don't have the right to take it away. Even Sarah can't take it away though she thinks he's pathetic. That's her business not his. You are what you love, not what loves you."

"You remember it, line by line." I shrugged.

"You're quite the romantic."

"I suppose, but a practical romantic. I know most of the time it isn't going to work out—going in."

"That doesn't stop you?"

"It stops me from going in, hoping. You know, like Paul Simon saying he's no fool for love songs."

"Do you write love songs?" she asked.

"Poems," I said.

"I enjoy your attitude," she said. "Tonight, when I thought you might be you, I reckoned you could get Kelly out of that compound. You made me think about *Another Roadside Attraction*, when the guy breaks into the Vatican and carries off the corpse of Jesus. Find a dead Jesus and there's no resurrection. When I read that book, I was a young girl and I thought it might be the end for Christianity—at least in the counterculture. Little did I know the power of the imaginary world. But I'm talking instead of asking questions. Probably three cups of coffee talking on an empty stomach. I need to eat. I'll go find our waitress. She walked off and she was quite a flower. I looked again at her card. She advertised herself as Ms. But she didn't necessarily want that.

"I want to understand your process for deciding to go to Fort Knox." she said.

"I had two choices: do something against the odds—a Beau Geste kind of play. Cross the line to do something that needs done, from where, most likely, I might not get back. Or, do nothing. Enjoy life—hope everything holds together. I opted for the first, and that the gods might have something to amuse themselves with, they sent me someone they love."

We talked for most of an hour until the coffee was losing its meaning. We agreed to get together for breakfast. I declined a ride to the 6. I wanted the walk to clear my head. She suggested I do something about my hair. The black dye job was greying along the base, giving my head the appearance of a pair of two-tone shoes—on a homeless guy.

Walking back to my motel, I thought about the last three presidents, beginning with Clinton, each, cardboard-cutout spokesmen for a rabid pack of neocons. Sordid troublemakers. As a consequence, we find ourselves, again, at the holocaust brink with Russia. Decade after decade, we worked with Russia to avoid nuclear war. I wasn't easy but we did it. Now, these goddamn fools have pushed it past the point of no return. They even have a plan for winning a nuclear exchange? This is *Dr. Strangelove*, with Charlie

Manson in the Peter Sellers role. How fucking stupid do you have to be to go after Putin, who grew up in Leningrad where he learned that if a fight is unavoidable, you throw the first punch!

The Russians, the same people who turned back Napoleon and Hitler. On ZeroHedge, sometime back, there was a piece assessing the likely outcome of a war in the Middle East, without nuclear weapons. We'd have our asses handed to us. And the same thing was brewing in the South China Sea.

Maybe a block from the motel, a police cruiser, on the other side of the median, slowed to a crawl, to have look at me. They were far too interested, then they moved quickly towards the signal (thank god for curbs too high for a Dodge Charger), and I increased my pace towards the motel. When they could no longer see me, I ran. The thought of going to my room didn't inspire, so I did the next best thing, I climbed a tree.

During WW2, it was discovered that flyers could identify enemy aircraft, flashed on a screen for a fraction of a second. Same with us fugitives. We're able to determine if the canopy of a tree is a dense enough ball in which to hide, and if that canopy can be reached faster than a Dodge Charger can cover the quarter mile. I went up that tree like a two year-old black bear, praying the rustling limbs and leaves would quell before someone looked my way.

The night had quieted into high desert stillness. The tree, which I first identified as something from the ash family, soon showed itself to be from the pepper family, complicating things. I wanted to sneeze, but more than that I needed to keep still as two cops, who could have benefited from gym memberships, paddled about leaving their car unattended, the motor running, with both front doors wide open, not twenty feet from where my arms and legs wrapped around and held on. I worked at becoming one with my host, betraying no movement. Soon, we were joined by two more cars and more athletic officers.

The fates decided, an hour later, that the first car would be the one left as a stakeout. By now, from the police radio, I knew everything going on in Hemet tonight. A house break-in and a fight at

Taco Bell (maybe someone finally had enough of three ingredients making sixteen menu items), and me. I had been last seen, adjacent a strip mall, in the vicinity of the Motel 6. Maybe that explained why they hadn't done a room-to-room search? It was an, in the vicinity, kind of thing? They described me as a known fugitive, armed and dangerous, in a ball cap, dark clothes, with black and white hair. Police were not to take unnecessary chances. Great!

My body, especially my back, began to feel as if I were back in Kansas City holding onto a skyscraper when one of the boys came and moved the cruiser out front to the office, from where they could not see my tree. My first opportunity for an unnoticed sneeze. There was something I did notice. Whoever planted this row of trees, had either laid them out perfectly, or too close together, because there was no more than three feet between the canopies. I appraised the distance, cold and old-man stiff, assessing the pros and cons of climbing down and up the next tree, or jumping for it. When I was a teenager, jumping from tree to tree would have been a lark. Now it was a formidable challenge, but one that mattered.

Could I climb down and make a run for it? Maybe, but there was less light another twenty feet from the street. Looking into the next canopy, I could make out a space between two branches, a possible jump on a good day, so I jumped and made it. The trees shook, then settled. My face felt scratched up. This was stupid! I looked around, sized up the next one and did it again. This time, I made it, barely, and within a few seconds, one of my adversaries walked past, maybe forty feet away, at about my height, along the second floor walkway. I'd had enough of the X Games, so when he rounded the corner, I dropped out of the tree and headed into the darkness, thankful I'd moved the pickup out of the lot before I walked to dinner, and left nothing in the room.

Anyone who willingly gets into the trunk of their car at gunpoint has no future.

Stiff and cold. Sleeping on a leatherette bench seat was about the same as sleeping on two bus seats, except buses are heated. Over a long night, this late in the year, Hemet is not. Twice, with some trepidation, I sat up and ran the engine to heat the cab. Parked across from an unoccupied Catholic church seemed safe enough, but it's a small town.

When I woke up, I was cranky—it was almost time for my breakfast meeting. As the cab had warmed in sunlight, I must have drifted deeper into sleep. I drove to Applebees and parked out back, doubting the wisdom of returning to a place where I had been seen the night before. Gwen was already in a booth waiting for me, facing the entrance.

"You look chipper," she said. I asked if she'd order for me and I'd be back as soon as I could. At the super market, between the truck stop and the restaurant, I quickly found black hair dye and a small pair of scissors, along with a few bathroom essentials. Out the door. I had been gone six minutes. To the truck stop where there was a shower available—\$12. I cut my hair close with the use of a small comb. It didn't look too bad. I shaved, brushed my teeth and took a shower, toweling off with two luxurious white towels that were part of the rental. As was the shampoo and soap. I filled the basin and dyed my hair—midnight ink. With one smallish towel, which was more black than white when I finished, I dried my head, then combed through what was left. I had been gone from the restaurant thirty-two minutes. I felt bad for making her wait. I felt bad for giving a reporter the scoop of her career?

She was drinking coffee, she hadn't ordered. She wanted me to enjoy my breakfast.

She queried, "You did all that in a half hour?"

"I did, how does it look?"

Nearly laughing, she said, "I'd be seen with you, but I know you." We ordered. I thought back to see if I'd been eating too many eggs. I couldn't remember so I got a big breakfast.

"I don't suppose you've heard the news?" She read aloud: "Because of unfair financial practices taken by the Chinese and the Russian governments, as well as difficulties associated with money laundering from drug traffickers and terrorists, along with growing health concerns about the handling of money, the U.S. government is forced to take extraordinary but necessary steps to provide for the security and welfare of Americans, without disrupting the free flow of commerce." I looked up from my coffee, briefly.

She kept reading: "By the fifteenth of the month, all cash (Federal Reserve Notes) is to be deposited with a bank. Past that date, Federal Reserve Notes will cease to be a medium of exchange and will have no value. Every American will be accommodated with a bank account, at a bank of their choosing.

"Also, long-range risk to American retirees, based on poor performance from pension fund management, has forced the Department of the Treasury to take over the administration of all pension funds."

"They wrecked the whole economy," I said, "by keeping interest rates at zero, year after year, and controlling prices through a mountain of disinformation, making it impossible for the poor stooges running pension funds to make anywhere near the seven percent interest needed to keep them viable. But no worries, the bank boys are going to fix it. Bullshit! They're out of money and they have to steal more from the savers and from our kid's futures to keep the balls in motion a bit longer!"

"I'm not done," she said. "Bitcoin and all crypto-currencies will, as of the fifteenth of this month, become subject to criminal penalties... ." I stopped her.

"I'm not done, she said."

"Gwen, I know this stuff. They're backed into the corner of a snake pit. If they don't control everything, they control nothing. If they can't control cash, bank deposits, pensions, Bitcoin, and gold

and silver—they're snake-bit. Eliminating the cash option and pushing interest rates negative are theft. Before, when we didn't like what they were doing, we could take our ball and go home. Now there's no exit and nothing you can buy that's out of their control. They no longer have to inspire confidence—we've arrived at fascism. A fascist Ponzi scheme requiring more and more money to keep it going. But Ponzi schemes fail when the money runs out, or in this case, when the fascist monster grows so large it tears itself to pieces in a horror of self-cannibalism."

"I didn't mean to work you up," she said.

"I calmed myself with deep breaths then worked into my sausage patty and scrambled eggs. I downed my coffee and the waitress was right there with a refill.

I needed to wrap this up. "For 5000 years, maybe more, gold was the only recognized money—durable, convenient, divisible, consistent, intrinsically valuable, fungible, and rare. The Chinese character for gold is the same as for money. Gold's a bet on the likelihood of monetary disorder.

"Now, they can finally do whatever they want! And when that bank of your choice, which retains no more than one percent of deposits, pardon me, investments, needs to be bailed-in, the money will be right there, for an electronic dip-in. They won't even have to ask. But the real issue is liberty. It's none of their fucking business what we spend our money on, or where and how we store it. It's a power grab and they're criminals—every fucking one of them!"

She asked, "Without what you did, would we have faced the same outcome? Were there things that could have been done to put things right?"

"Earlier, yeah, but it got too late. Our gold had migrated East, where it wasn't for sale at any price. Re-valuing gold, when we had it, would have reflatd our economy. The Fed calls what they do reflatd but they do it by acquiring debt when the only possible reflatd is gold. The only logical, mathematical way to set things straight. The price of gold depended on how long they waited and they waited way too long."

She still seemed confused. "Is the gold market small, could we have bought what we needed?"

"For sure! We could have re-priced gold and wiped our debt clean.

She reached across the table and took both of my hands in hers.

"There's cops by the door. Two are going into the bar area, and the other two are heading this way." I didn't turn around to look. "They're stopping at each table. At some they just look. At one they're asking something." In the direction I was facing there were no possibilities, no doors, no exits, nothing.

"Squeeze my hands when they reach the table behind ours." I said.

I worked at being devastated (not all that difficult), trying to bring tears to my eyes, becoming shrunken and shaky. Gwen maintained a matter-of-fact demeanor. She squeezed my hands and continued to hold them. One cop came into my side view and I could make out the second, along the row of tables across from us. I moaned.

"Why him? It could have been anyone. Why my friend?" I broke down and cried, choking, wounded. I turned a contorted face towards the cops then back to her. She remained placid, unimpeachable. I turned to the officer, and as fortune would have it, my nose began to run. I pulled my hands away and raised them, palms up. I said nothing and for a few seconds. Neither did the cop.

"You two have a good day," he said. We sat until she was certain all three cars were gone.

I blathered on about the average person's struggle as compared to the sociopath. If you don't have a conscience, you can't buy one. You can't grow one. With no idea they should feel differently than they do, psychopaths don't empathize with anyone, and they don't care about the possibilities for wiping the debt slate clean and starting over. Because it all belongs to them.

Gwen suggested I stay the night and we continue our conversation, but we both knew. She asked if I had any remorse for what I had done? I had remorse, for everyone who was suffering, but I

didn't feel responsible. I was the messenger. Any deep regret and shame I felt was for my country. But I had a new friend.

49

Lovers of wind chimes hate the wind.

Those places where the land meets the ocean are singular—a source of silent, constant beauty. As a kid, I lived in an inland Canadian Provence. Lots of lakes with tiny waves along dirt shores, from motorboats. Later, a beach in Sicily, on the Mediterranean, vast, without an opposite shoreline. Later still, the Sea of Cortez. Seas connected to oceans, but without the power that oceans bring. Here, the sun was beginning to set and a few surfers were cutting on five foot waves—walls of orange glass. There was a time when I lived ten blocks from the water in Huntington Beach. At night I often closed the windows because the crashing surf kept me awake.

Sunsets along the beach pull at us as lemmings, where we wait and watch, atop ancient breakwaters, or straddling rusty one speed bikes, with cruiser bars and fat tires. We linger, over refracted color from thin sheets of salt water along wet sand.

I couldn't call, so I just showed up? I pulled up across the street from Spade's house. His truck wasn't there and neither was Matt's TDI, but on my phone I had the four-digit code for the key pad beside the garage door. Inside, the downstairs had been remodeled. I liked it—more open. I sat in an armchair and felt conspicuous. Matt would be okay finding me here but what about Spade? Spade and I got on well, but his neighborhood friends who came over to watch the King's games, or football, were another matter. One of them, Chucky, went almost ballistic when I'd been critical of our foreign policy and Obama. Then again, Spade's girlfriend,

Monique, likes me. I think it stems from a time when Spade wasn't toeing the monogamy line and she and I talked about it. Having her support, if I had it, might not matter because they don't live together. I might not even see her.

In the midst of these thoughts, there came the sound of a key in the front door lock, and Matt came in.

"Holy shit!" was all he said.

"Is that good or bad?" I asked.

"It's both, brother. I'm not saying you shouldn't be here but it makes me think maybe I shouldn't. I gotta admit you don't look like you. What's your plan?"

"Don't have one. Until today it was the same plan as the Stampers in *Sometimes a Great Notion*—head west. But that ended this afternoon. This is the only place I feel safe but I'll go if either of you say so."

"Already thought about it. There was no surprise in what you did. I wouldn't have done it but it needed done. Guess that makes you a hero?" He laughed. Matt could make an instant conversion from serious to humor. "I can deal with you being here. Spade might be another matter. I heard some shit from Chucky about you. And he's not the only one!"

"I can imagine. I'm prepared to be out of here at a moment."

Before long, we'd lapsed into our usual—sitting on the couch watching reruns of *Rectify*. Around ten, Spade came in with Monique and a smallish, older woman I didn't know. They'd been out to dinner and they'd obviously been drinking. He lit up when he saw me, which soon changed to a look of befuddlement. Monique was accommodating but I could sense she wouldn't choose for me to be here. The older woman was more or less out of it. I asked Spade if we could talk, upstairs, in the office?

Spade's not a listener, he's a talker, and he doesn't hold back.

"It's good to see you brother! I mean it. Maybe you shouldn't be here? You're not here. When we get downstairs I'm going to say I don't want you here, in front of everyone. That puts it on Matt. But I don't care if you stay. If anybody comes over, and tomorrow they will, you're busted. Lots of people see you as a traitor. They say

you're the reason everything fell apart! Matt and I talked about it. I wouldn't say this to most people but I support what you did, maybe even more than Matt."

Back downstairs, Monique asked if I had eaten. I was famished. She sent Spade out to her car for their doggy-bags from a Chinese restaurant. I saw Matt eyeing the grub so I offered to share it.

"You need to sing for your supper," said Monique. The last time I was here I played the guitar and we sang songs into the night. The older woman said they should go and Monique offered for her to take her car. She would get a ride with Spade in the morning. I asked the woman if she was okay to drive?

"It's only Newport Beach, hon." Newport Beach was a good thirty minutes on the freeway and she was drunk. But away she went anyway. Monique said she would be fine. I don't drink hard liquor, but Spade brought out an unopened bottle of good Tequila, cut up a lime and some onions, and on the same cutting board, poured out a small mound of salt.

"What's the onions for?" I asked.

"For the chips and salsa," he said, pouring chips into a brightly painted bowl, then back to the fridge for a tub of salsa."

Matt had one pull right from the bottle, dipped a couple of chips, and went to bed. Matt's into music, but society—not so much.

50

Enthusiasm—from the Greek—"filled with god".

I had been awake ten minutes when there was a knock on the door. Just a knock—nothing peremptory. I looked through the peephole to find a regular-looking Mexican guy in a button-down shirt. I unlocked the door knowing there's many ways to die. He asked if I

was me, handed me an envelope, and walked away. I stayed in the doorway and opened it. It was handwritten three pages from Rose.

I don't know how'd she figured I'd be here. I don't recall giving her enough information. But Rose is smart—way outside the box. She began with the usual, hoped I was safe and the letter would find me. Then an admonition to destroy it immediately. She'd been arrested, then my letter showed up, describing how she had been coerced into helping me. My letter, along with her ex-boyfriend's lawyer who got her out without charges. She'd agreed to assist law-enforcement in my capture. I found myself hoping Gwen had made the same arrangement?

Reading the last page, reality shifted. Gwen had gotten in touch with Rose when she saw her on the news. How those two came to talk was so unlikely, but Gwen was driving to meet me. This was news I neither expected nor deserved. The when and where we would meet was specific. She'd only been to Los Angeles once, right out of boot camp, when she and her girlfriends had visited the Queen Mary. She didn't know where that was but she'd find it. She'd meet me there on the 12th, at 12:30 am. The 12th—that was tomorrow.

I went into San Clemente to the *Zebra*, a coffee shop I like, where I got a Glorious muffin and a medium dark roast with room for half and half. While I waited for my friend Rodney, who was playing a gig at an Alzheimer's center. He goes in for an hour and gets \$75 as a one-man band, sometimes a singalong, mixing Creedence Clearwater and "I'm Looking Over a Four-Leaf Clover". I was listening to my young friend Josh, through earbuds. He'd lived in LA and recently moved to Nashville where he and his buddy were trying to make it.

Rodney came in and went to order. Behind him, a maddeningly attractive woman, maybe thirty-five, walked past and sat down a couple of tables over and began looking at her laptop. I went over.

"Will you listen to something? Do you mind hearing it through my earbuds?" She didn't mind. I went up to the counter with Rodney just as Matt came in.

“He called,” said Rodney, “And though I don’t want to hear more Obama conspiracy theories or more on the ongoing homosexual agenda in the film industry, I thought I had better invite him along. This got a laugh from one of the two young girls behind the counter.

“You guys are a band right?” asked one of them. “You guys are famous?” I wished we were. Rodney did his gigs and Matt had a working band for twenty years, but we weren’t famous. I take that back—I’m the most famous person alive. Over coffee and muffins we did what we always do, talk music. Beginning with jazz through now—something we know about.

I had all but forgotten about my phone when she brought it back. My table-mates were incredulous that I knew her?

“What did you think?” I asked.

“I loved it. I went to iTunes and bought four songs. That’s what took so long. Sorry.”

We watched her walk across the parking lot. A thing of beauty.

“You just walked up to her and gave her your phone?” asked Matt. “Then again,” he said. “I’d give her anything.”

We sat for another hour and talked. Rodney left. Matt got another coffee and I got a small one. Matt drinks more coffee than anyone I know. Doesn’t seem to hurt him. I read somewhere it takes sixty cups over a day to poison you.

“Rodney say anything to you about your situation?”

“No, I wondered why not?”

“He told me he doesn’t watch the tube or read the papers, so he could just plead ignorance.”

“Good luck with that,” I said. It’s easy for me to talk with Matt. He’s a true outsider, his own guy. He doesn’t follow events as closely as I do but he has an intuitive sense. Some people just get it. I’ll be explaining something to him, and he just gets it.

“Everybody’s looking for someone else to blame,” he said. “It’s as if we woke up in hell.”

“I know. As long as people could rationalize their lives as somewhat like they used to be, peace was maintainable. But when

the mortgage doesn't get paid or you can't feed the kids, the illusion's over.”

“But, it happened so fast,” he said. “Two months ago, the banks were too big to fail, and the politicians had total control?”

“It takes a long time to bankrupt a wealthy nation, but when debtors are forced to sell and no buyer comes forward, they sell whatever they have. There's an observable practice that happens in an economic collapse—*people sell their assets to support their liabilities*. And when they have nothing left to sell, it brings a sudden and precipitous free-fall, at the same moment when everybody wants out.

“Then what?” he asked.

“In *The Republic* of Plato, Socrates outlines the degeneration of a democracy into anarchy, and finally, into tyranny—when the tyrant presents himself as a friend of the democracy. We're there now. We've got the anarchy, which will test the moral fiber of the nation. If we wake up, we put things on a better footing. If not, we get the tyrant.”

“Enough,” said Matt. “Probably all true, but I want to catch some waves while there's a bit of afternoon left.”

51

The difference between an adventure and a suicide is a margin for escape.

Matt was right, it was true. He could just forget about it and catch some waves. Back at the house, he and his long board were gone. I sat out back in the winter sun where Spade had planted trees, avocado and orange, fruit trees. I didn't want to think about anything so I watered, keeping in mind this whole area is a drought. Afterwards, I sat in a chair, facing into the late afternoon sun. When Spade came home I was asleep.

“This is what you do while I work?” I asked if it was okay that I had watered?

“I still water two times a week and it’s due. You hungry?”

Around ten, after chicken burritos and beer, along with two episodes of Fargo, Spade went up to bed. I thought on how he let me stay here. Not everyone would. It’s a holdover from the hippie culture or his surfing culture, where the authorities ain’t worth a shit.

I wasn’t tired so I drove down the coast highway into San Clemente where I parked at the top of Del Mar and walked down towards the pier. The bars were open and that was all. Some were loud. Soon, the town became houses and apartments, then green grass and parking for the beach. It was a good night, more still than it had been. I crossed the tracks and headed out on the pier. The restaurant was open. A few patrons were sitting outside under the heat lamps. I remembered they served a good apple pie.

The pier is old and long. Tonight there were just a few people walking. There were more fishermen, short, dark Mexicans and Asians. Some were couples. I stopped to watch one bring in a smallish fish. Until I saw him take out the hook and drop it into a bucket of fresh water, I wondered if the fish was bait.

At the end of the pier, I leaned against the railing, watching the ocean conjuring up waves, building over a few hundred feet until they broke halfway back down the pier. At times, I could see nothing in the dark beyond, then the beginning of a swell. With maybe half a moon, I could just make out the outline of Catalina Island, twenty six miles across the sea. I lingered until I felt cold, then headed back. The restaurant was empty except for one couple outside and I wanted a piece of that apple pie. I asked at the bar. They were closed but if I could eat it in ten minutes. . . .

It was comfortable under the kerosene heater and the quiet night. The bartender brought my pie and water. I got it cold—never liked warm pie. Tomorrow, I would walk along the beach from the train stop. I had the whole day. I could get coffee whenever I woke up. There’s a good place adjacent the train station. *Leilani’s*? The

first bite of cold apple pie is the best. A good sugar rush. Really don't need the rest.

I looked at my phone, 12:03—the 12th. Damn! Tonight was the 12th. Now was the 12th, not tomorrow! We were already three minutes in and I was an hour away from the Queen Mary, in fortuitous traffic. And maybe a mile from my truck! I ran off the pier and across the tracks. A surfer, leaning against an old station wagon with two boards on top, was eating pizza. I showed him a silver American Eagle for a ride to El Camino. He dropped his slice in the trash. Just past the grassy area that housed the city buildings, everything went dark—I mean everything. No lights in stores, no streetlights, no traffic signals. I thought those were on a different grid, an emergency grid? We pulled up next to my truck.

“You have a phone.” I asked. He did.

“Try going online.” There was nothing.

“Whatta you think?” he asked

“Cyberterrorism. That's all it can be. Someone has knocked out everything.”

Heading north on El Camino Real, there were no lights, except headlights, and not many of them. Both sides of the road were strewn with cars and trucks that had simply stopped running and coasted to where they came to rest in haphazard fashion with drivers milling about. And what about the digital world? Was it done in? What about all those bank deposits that are nothing more than digital entries? Gone forever? What about nuclear plants? Dams? Aircraft in flight? Our defense system? Nuclear arms? I could deal with all that, but how was it going to affect traffic to Long Beach. That's what mattered. Or is it San Pedro?

I had covered maybe five miles of freeway, meandering through packs of computer-equipped vehicles that had coasted to a fixed location. It being late, there were hundreds rather than thousands of dead in the water vehicles, most of which had coasted out of the center lanes and rolled to a stop alongside the road. It was eerie to be on the LA Freeway with no cars driving in either direction. Not quite true, old cars like they have in Cuba, without computers or

electronics, there were a few of those, like my Ford and the surfer's wagon. Twice I had to exit the freeway, picking my way through the detritus of an automobile graveyard, to get back on beyond a bottleneck.

There was nothing on the FM dial but static. Almost the same on the AM band except for one low power, talk radio station, that came and went. With your host, Bob somebody, Bob who had most likely been talking about the coming economic collapse for years. He referred to the blackout as CB—cyber-terrorism.

LA has so many stations, sports, Spanish-speaking, music, and conservative Christian, but Bob was the only one who had survived and I knew why? Bob was old school with no frills. Microphones and threadbare office carpet. Guys who still remembered Jerry Lee, waiting at the end of the road. Not much to go wrong. Bob was broadcasting from a low-rent room with equipment that functioned like a manual transmission in a car. All the rest of them, relying on satellites and computers, had gone bye, bye.

I covered miles as fast as I could, slowly making my way through Huntington Beach, to Bob saying this was an important night—so important he had driven down to the studio (I wanted him to tell us what he was driving). Bob, of course, had no more information than the listeners. He had no internet. He, like the rest of us, was without an update from a tele-prompting, Homeland Security spokesman. Nevertheless, Bob had something to say:

“My friends what we have here is a failure to communicate.”

Priceless! It's what the warden (Strother Martin) says about Paul Newman's disdain for the rules in *Cool Hand Luke*. Bob went on to say his analysis lacked hard evidence, but he would bet big money this had been done by the Russians, or by the Russians and the Chinese. I turned up the volume.

“Like I been saying, Ukraine was in no way our concern. But it had everything to do with Russia, since Catherine the Great. Which takes us back to the 1700's. Ukraine has been a mess its entire history. It's either been part of Russia or a vassal state to Russia. Ukraine is to Putin as Cuba is to the United States. He cannot stand down and see it ripped away by the neocons. Putin took back the

Crimea because Crimea was vital to his country and his presidency. Crimea where the Russians annihilated the British at the *Charge of the Light Brigade*. He had to prevail in Crimea and he did it with an election! Same with Syria. Russia's been invited by the sovereign state of Syria to destroy ISIS, a monster of our making. And to accomplish that, Putin's willing to risk humanity.”

Coming into Long Beach, I wondered if Bob might not be signing his own death warrant. Bob was heroic and he had it right. He said there'd been unofficial word before the blackout, that the United States had launched a pre-emptive nuclear strike against Russia.

Now I was in Long Beach where it was difficult to see street names in the Ford's low-tech beams, which was not made any easier by stranded clumps of abandoned cars with drivers who began to look more like revenge-seeking vigilantes. I made out a street sign for Los Alamitos and headed in the direction of the water until I found Queen's Way and followed it down. Here, surprisingly there were few cars and then none. When the tours had ceased for the day, everyone had driven away.

Over the decades, the area around the ship had become gentrified. These days, white kids stay out of Compton and Bell. Back then we stayed away from parts of Long Beach and most of San Pedro. The last time I was here, the Queen Mary had been brought in, but earlier in my life this area had been run down, with rusted freighters tied up along the docks until the owners could decide how to get rid of them.

I pulled up alongside the Queen. She was like my pickup—vintage. Except she wasn't going anywhere. Not a light, anywhere. Actually, there were a few, but only where there was the sound of a generator in the distance. I got out and walked to where I looked across the water to what I reckoned was the Long Beach Naval Station. There were no lights at a major naval base? If it were true, and we had made a launch against Russia, and they had been able to paralyze us to this degree, we were in trouble. I thought on those B52's out of SAC, in Omaha. They used to be air-born, with nu-

clear payloads, twenty-four hours a day. Did they still do that? Had they all crashed. What about the hydrogen bombs?

All of it was secondary to my concerns for Gwen? I looked at the dash clock. I had done well. It was just coming on one. I put the SIM card into my phone that unexpectedly powered up to the sound of an updating text. It was Gwen:

"Be careful, I was down at the Queen Mary earlier and there was a government vehicle patrolling. I left. I'll wait for you at the Breakers Hotel on East Ocean Avenue in Long Beach. I have my phone disarmed. I think they've been tracking me." I powered down my phone and walked back to the truck as a jarring crack crashed the darkness, sending a tracer into the Ford with the impact of a big round, maybe one of those 50's that shoot from the prone position, using a tripod. In this no moon darkness, somebody had night vision.

Over a mini-second, I gauged whether to run or drive. Drive! I was a sitting duck out here on the parking area. I jumped in the truck through the passenger door, cutting the back of my wrist when I tried to close it because the slug had exploded the metal door panel, inward. In the dash light I could see where it exited through the driver's door—a hole as big as a fist. I burned some rubber and drove evasively! I heard the crack of the 50 again but no sound on metal. Difficult to aim through night vision goggles? There were no lights but my own and I was taking turns whenever I could to avoid being followed. I slowed and turned off the lights and the dash lights too. Things calmed down, then abruptly I was bathed in powerful high beams, from behind.

The old Ford was no match as they overtook and rammed me in the rear, then backed off and again closed fast. I made a quick turn along the water, opened the passenger door and jumped—hoping they wouldn't see me. What'd Butch Cassidy say to the Kid? Something about not having to worry about drowning cause the fall will kill you? I jumped long, pushing off the running board to propel me, which it did, through something hedge-like, then down, into an ungainly somersault. I knew I was dead. Time slowed an eternity, somehow taking me back to one scorching, fall day, when

I had tried out for my high school football team as a running back. A five-eleven, 140 pound running back who couldn't tuck into a somersault. Now was no different. If I wasn't dead, I'd be paralyzed.

I hit the water in an ugly belly flop, unable to breathe from having the wind knocked out of me. When I finally caught some gulping, useless breaths, I began to pass out, causing adrenaline to course through me, but I couldn't move without debilitating pain. So I floated.

In the darkness, I heard footsteps—running. One voice calling out that things would be all right. Was I okay? Where was I? Hank Grey, my Elvis buddy, my railroad tunnel buddy—my Buddy killer. I thought about Buddy and I was no longer afraid. Not of death, and especially not of Hank Grey!

When I no longer heard him, I worked at pulling myself out of the water, which wasn't easy. I was shaky cold and beat up. But I managed to get out and rest against the hedge while I composed myself. I got up and made my way in the direction the truck had gone, where it had bumped to an in-gear stop. The lights were still on. I thought about getting in the truck and taking off, but he'd be right on me, so I kept on past the truck.

I was cold and wet. Hypothermia was setting in on me, but there was nothing I could do. Then I heard him calling out again. This time he was behind me, maybe fifty or sixty feet behind the truck. I passed the hulking shadow of a strange ship tied along the edge of the concrete dock. Odd. They used to do that in the old days with those inflatable rubber fenders to keep a ship from being damaged. But that was rusty freighters? They still tie up sailboats with fenders, but those are small boats. This was a ship.

Each step I took shot pain into my left foot. I had messed up my back. I had to sit down. There was something like a metal telephone pole, a wide one, maybe two feet in diameter, almost right against the ship. No more than two or three feet from it. I sat down between the ship and the pole where I would be difficult to spot. Then all the lights in the world came back on.

Light's an interesting thing. It changes everything you see and how you feel about it. I found myself looking up at Russian lettering. My ship was a submarine! This was the *Scorpion*, a smallish, Soviet era sub that had been a tiny attraction next to the Queen Mary. I'd read about it months back. Since the vilification campaign against Putin, the sub had been moved. Couldn't have those Russians dirtying up the Queen? This is where they moved her and why she was tied up so unprofessionally? Had to be done quickly and a few dents wouldn't matter. She'd soon be scrap.

I heard Hank's vehicle coming my way and my shivering ceased. There was nowhere to go and I knew it. Except for this pole, there was nowhere to hide and he'd soon figure that out. Then I remembered the freighters. When I was a kid, maybe thirteen, we'd ride our bikes to San Pedro from Gardena and an older friend bet me five bucks, and five bucks was real money back then, that he could push one of those rusty freighters away from the dock with his legs. I laughed at him and lost five bucks.

Now I tried it. I straightened my back against the post and positioned my two feet against the sub. The distance was good. If I were able to push it away from the dock, beyond the six inch rubber fenders, I might be able to make a twelve or fourteen inch gap between the sub and the dock. Hank's vehicle came by slowly and I didn't look to see. Instead, I worked at moving the Russian Navy! I pushed with all I had. Twice I gave it my all, but she didn't budge. Maybe I was too old or she was too heavy. I looked at the fore and aft lines that hung loose, making for slack. I made a little joke: Maybe they'd let the lines hang loose to keep any rats that tried to board, off-balance. Then again, on a Russian sub, the rats were already on board. When this is over, maybe I can write press releases for the State Department.

Now, I could hear his truck turning around, maybe two hundred feet past me. He'd see me on the way back. I tried again—push, push, push. Nothing. I had a flash of Jack LaLanne on his 70th birthday towing 70 rowboats with people in some of them, on a mile-long swim in Long Beach Harbor. He pulled them with a rope between his teeth. I went back to work with my whole body push-

ing in an undulating rhythm of four-four time—rock and roll—a stronger push on the 2 and the 4. Slowly, incrementally, she moved. An inch at a time—then more. Now she was going on her own. Eight inches, ten, twelve. A shell glanced off the hull, close to my head. I stood up and dropped into the water, straight as an arrow.

Into water, dark and dirty—oily, I held my breathe and tried to see but the displacement of the submarine blocked most all the light. I took a couple of strokes aft and realized I couldn't hold my breath long enough to get past her. I was terrified to go under her. Were I to come back to the surface, I'd be dead. At the end of my one breath, I found the dock to be dredged underneath, with an air pocket in which I could get the upper part of my torso out of the water.

But I was in a tomb—my tomb? I lay there cold and scared. I hadn't been scared but I was now. This was not how I wanted to die. My eyes adjusted to the light. I could see atop the water, past the nose of the sub. There was just enough light to make things out. If only he hadn't seen me drop, I might have been able to wait him out. Now, he was waiting me out. At least I thought so until I heard lapping water. He was doing the same thing I'd done and the sub was again slowly inching away from the dock. When it was out far enough, he didn't drop in like an arrow—that was a move for someone who had no choice. Instead he lowered himself. I watched his body descend. He'd taken off his shoes but kept on his socks. His knees were visible now below the dock, then I couldn't see him because a craft blocked the light, passing slowly in the channel next to the Scorpion, her wake moving tons of water in our direction, pushing the sub back against the fenders and dock. I couldn't see Hank but I heard him scream, his legs moving like a woman in her first big orgasm.

Now I could see again. The sub was rolling in the wake, Hank lowered himself quickly, but not quickly enough. The second roll caught his head between the sub and the dock, and without the give of an inflatable fender—his skull exploded. Had the fenders been

two inches wider, he'd of made it, but now, the many pieces of his skull and what it contained, sank slowly to the bottom.

I looked away, making my way along the underside of the dock, rolling over and over until I was far enough away to not be sick. Embalmed in thick mud, I thought back to a girl, in Toronto, who would roll to school, along the street, the same way I had rolled under the dock. I wondered what she'd been rolling from? I crabbed back into the water and fought my way onto the dock.

Hank's Suburban was parked between the sub and the truck. The driver's door was open. Someone was on the radio asking for an update. I pressed the talk button and muffled my voice away from the radio:

"I killed him. Going in to get his body out of the water." That's all I said. Whoever it was asked a question but I didn't respond. I knew Hank's voice and what I said was probably close enough. I walked back to my truck. Hank's birth-sign was Scorpio and he had been crushed by the Scorpion. Buddy would have liked that.

I started the truck, thought about going back to the Suburban for a weapon, but no. With many possibilities for tomorrow, I drove in the direction of the Breakers Hotel, and my lover, who waited for me, somewhere, watching for me.

Postscript

"Well, boys, I reckon this is it —nuclear combat toe to toe with the Rooskies. Now look, boys, I ain't much of a hand at makin' speeches, but I got a pretty fair idea that something doggone important is goin' on back there. And I got a fair idea the kinda personal emotions that some of you fellas may be thinkin'. Heck, I reckon you wouldn't even be human bein's if you didn't have some pretty strong personal feelin's about nuclear combat. I want you to remember one thing, the folks back home is a-countin' on you and by golly, we ain't about to let 'em down. I tell you something else, if this thing turns out to be half as important as I figure it just might be, I'd say that you're all in line for some important promotions and personal citations when this thing's over with. That goes for ever' last one of you regardless of your race, color or your creed. Now let's get this thing on the hump - we got some flyin' to do." **Major T. J. "King" Kong—*Dr. Strangelove***

We had destroyed Novosibirsk, Russia's third largest city, after St. Petersburg and Moscow. Hundreds of thousands of Russians were dead. There was nothing left of the city. No more Wikipedia categories for culture, music, no zoo, no notable residents for Novosibirsk. And the war had raged on in the Ukraine. It proved a bad idea to fight Putin in his back yard, where he had resources and moral outrage on his side. But, we continued to listen to the necons insistence that we were the world's preeminent military power, capable of winning even a first-strike nuclear war. What they forgot to tell us was we were broke and incapable of launching a ground war in Eastern Europe. Russia, now on a wartime footing, had come back economically. And to make things worse for the United States, the European Union stood firm in their objection to further sanctions, or the deployment troops in the fight against Russia. There was nothing outside of nuclear armageddon to stop Putin from driving straight to Paris—if he cared to. NATO had been reduced to the United States and Britain.

More ominous still was the military alliance between Russia and China. Any conflict with Russia, on Russian soil, would be regarded as an attack on China. While all the world waited to see how our destruction of Novosibirsk would play out, every nuclear power remained on heightened alert. Putin was in Beijing. For almost a week, more than a half dozen countries with thousands of nuclear weapons did nothing. Putin had invited foreign news teams to come to Russia and to Ukraine, to question and film—without controls. The RT Network (Russia today), aired shows 100 miles from ground zero at Novosibirsk, where the insanity of a first strike was seen for what it was. Insanity.

Then Putin showed up on prime time. He talked for less than ten minutes. "The Russian people," he said, "had spoken." There could be no attack on Mother Russia that would not be re-paid, in kind. After consulting with his Chinese allies, he had come to a decision: The unprovoked attack on Novosibirsk called for non-negotiable conditions and unthinkable justice: First, NATO, and the United States, would begin immediate withdrawal, within seventy-two hours, from all countries formerly part of the Soviet Union, and the withdrawal was to continue with all due haste until completed. Second, the United States would formally declare Crimea to be part of Russia. Third, the United States would formally accept the agreement between Russia and Greece, establishing a Russian navel base at Piraeus. And last, Russia would launch a 20 megaton, nuclear ICBM, destroying a city the size of Novosibirsk, located in the United States. That city would not be named prior to the launch, which would take place within the next 24 hours. This was the will of the Russian people. All nuclear capabilities of the Russian and Chinese federations would remain on the highest alert. Final orders had been given and received. "These decisions are irrevocable. Russia will not act without careful consideration, but without timely acceptance of these terms, the United States will be utterly destroyed. May God show mercy on each of us."

That was two and a half hours ago.

Unable to face who she turned out to be, and the part he played in losing her, he distracts himself with a plan to expose the myth that our country has thousands of tons of unaudited gold stored at Fort Knox. He knows he's the guy who can pull it off, but what he doesn't know is that he'll soon be spending his days with a killer who won't let friendship get in the way, which makes for a road trip with one of the quirkiest, heroic women to ever grace a page.