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BY VILE MEANS

by

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The case of Top Ramen Dad bestowed ran out seven days ago or maybe eleven. In my weakened state, I lost track. My literary life now waited on dear Phyllis.

Everyday at this time, she struggled to open the wall in our little lobby, her keys blindly crashing against aluminum.

Nutrient depleted dizzy, I clutched both handrails of our stairwell and climbed to my daily rendezvous. Like Shelob ascending her feast, dear Phyllis' reverberations tingled handrails all the way from our dank lobby above. I clutched rails knowing full well a faint heart never won a fair maid.

While I climbed stained stairs, her key crashing stopped, obviously finding the keyhole on a lucky strike. She let the whole box row clatter open again scintillating sticky handrails.

I relied on the cube of dear Phyllis, on her blue uniform shorts over black Spandex tree stump calves, on her comfort boots, on her holiday adorned side satchel, on how she relentlessly splashed her keys far above her head until finally, blindly unlocking our bank of Bommer boxes.

With her trough now open, as I've witnessed many times while waiting, she would began her flailing in earnest.

Dragging my boney frame to the surface, I closed my eyes to see dear Phyllis pulling from mail bag tiny fists of miscellaneous mail and shove unsorted letters haphazardly into gaping boxes above her.

As consequence, there were zero secrets in our building. Possibly this was her Christ-like sacrifice: forging subsidized tenants into Community as we rallied against our common antagonist. Possibly. I lean a light heart towards naiveté.

As I arrived in our lilliputian lobby, I saw dear Phyllis followed her form My stomach rumbled loudly behind her because I majored in both creative writing and theater.

Without looking back, she asked, "You Theo?"

"A rose by any other name...?" I stretched my eyebrows as high as I could to show dear Phyllis I smiled behind my mask affably at my oblique quote. I lean that way too.

She stopped, turned and nailed my shoulders to the back wall with her stare.

I watered.

I hastened, “Yes, Theo. That’s my name: Thee-oh.” Summoning courage, “...Is my fortune come, Maiden of My Dreams?”

Here I forced a light hearted guffaw to show I was indeed smiling inside.

Back to stuffing, she mask-mumbled, “Only Theo on the route. Might as will go to you as in the hole.” ‘Hole,’ I assumed meant, “The hole of someone else’s mailbox.” It did not. Her connotation was closer to ‘sepulcher.’

I stealthily stepped close behind her, hoping to read my name in her fist.

Phyllis stopped her stretch and stuff and spoke slowly, “Are you my family?” She drew up her shoulders and turned back to leer.

Her angry bird eyebrows gave me pause. “...No.”

“Shoulder blades against that wall.” She pointed at the wall three feet behind me.

I obeyed.

Wrapped tightly across her wide jaw she wore a doctor’s mask ambered beneath her uncovered nose. Rubber bands strained both ears nearly closed leaving nose unencumbered by pesky whims of our Center for Disease Control and Prevention.

Phyllis pulled from her coat pocket a yellowed envelope and tossed it at me. “Here.” She turned back to her calisthenics.

The envelope hung in frame then fluttered and flung to the floor. Again behind her, I raised my eyebrows to show I joked, “It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.”

Her witty retort never came.

I picked the envelope up, anticipating food and warm socks.

But the paper was crisp.

Indeed, it was addressed to someone named Theo but the rest of the address was indistinguishable foreign scratches which had long ago blossomed into paper fibers making haloed words illegible. The return address was a solitary: Vincent Willem, or something of the sort.

I saw at once this was not my poem royalty.

“This can’t be mine,” I cautioned. “I don’t know this language. It has a one cent postage stamp of a woman with grapes in her hair.”

I held it out to her, eyebrows furrowed above mask to prove I could be smiling.

“Congratulations,” she said turning again. With a tightly rolled *Quarantine Weekly* magazine, she pushed my hand back to me. “As a duly appointed officer of the federal government I do hereby deliver said correspondence to the only Thee-OH on my Federally determined rout.” Dear Phyllis may have possibly used less floral language. More’s the pity.

Speaking of which, I still believe her use of the word ‘rout’ to be a bit diminutive. I would’ve preferred “rounds” or better still, “appointed rounds.” Yes, anything to delineate Character and Setting. Feds gota flaunt.

Handing the envelope back I raised my eyebrows again, cautiously, and lightly protested, “It looks infectious, Phyllis.”

Stabbing it back to my midsection with her magazine dirk and holding it there she used her breathy Harry Calahan voice, though thinking on it now, I believe she meant no such character channeling. Nevertheless, breathless she spoke, “Looks like your name to me, Punk.”

Ever wanting this documentary to be a thoroughly truthful retelling of facts, I may have included her final noun.

I chuckled.

Phyllis did not.

I imagined she smiled affably behind her tight mask because in those days I still sought the best from those along my path.

In early April, Phyllis’ festive Christmas ornaments still dangled from overstuffed mail bag. They were bold cans of Russian and Venezuelan pepper spray. Her weapons were also the antagonists in countless legends around our building. Squaring off with me now, like a gunslinging gnome, dear Phyllis began to fondle an oily can.

“It can’t be legal,” I warned her, “just handing out undeliverable mail,” voicing chuckles loudly through mask.

“As the only Federal Agent in said vicinity...” here she pretended to scan our cramped vestibule. Fastening her eyes back on me she finished, “legal is my call.”

Stubby fingers found a full can inked with black and red skulls. Her thumb clicked its plastic top open.

I probably thanked her assiduousness and kept the letter. Facts are a bit murky here.

With eyes narrowed, she stared at me, clacked the cap shut and slowly revolved back to sloshing arbitrary sheafs high into slots she could not reach.

I examined my new relic.

There was no cancellation mark, just ink scratched across the grape adorned lady. The envelope paper was thin, crisp, freckled with age spots. Holding it up to buzzing florescence, I saw several minuscule holes running through, shining like constellations. A deep, earthy scent clung which tingled anticipation.

I was certain Federal Police could somehow see what I did next.

Gently, I tore along envelope's end and blew inside. This infuriated a cloud of filaments as fragile as King Tut's linen which buzzed about my face. Using middle and index fingers as tweezers, I withdrew three yellow pages folded and flaking. Cracking them open aroused more shards.

Dear Phyllis finished locking the boxes back in place and turned to faced me again, sweetly anticipating my news, I'm sure.

"Look," I reasoned. "I never get letters, Dear Phyl... Phyllis. And I never, never get letters written in a foreign language." I spoke directly yet affably, careful not to agitate her trigger thumb.

"Easy Peezy," she wheezed.

Rummaging under her satchel, she withdrew her phone inside a Zip-Loc bag. "Modern miracle," she mumbled.

She brought up an app and held it in front of my face. Seeing my ancient letter through her phone's camera, hand written scrimshaw magically transformed into typed English.

Times New Roman, of course.

"Astonishing," I whispered. Technology and I had parted company after graduation.

I knelt and carefully laid each page on the floor. Holding her phone I began to read aloud the quintessence of not so dusty future:

My Dearest Theo,

I once had a life and people who loved me. Now, scorned and mocked, I only have you, Dear Brother. But even you, my Hero, cannot sell my commitment to bold stroke and vivid color.

Before I explain what compelled me to take matters into my own hands, you must swear on our parent's lives to forgive me, Dear Brother...

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I sat stunned, unworthy.

Dear Phyllis had perched atop her mail satchel like a mischievous tomten. She, the Rock of Gibraltar in Spandex, silently sobbed. Her cheek tops glistened above mask, chest convulsed.

In that moment I realized two things. First: I also cheerfully wept. Second: through some mystical ancient-letter-incantation, dear Phyllis, Christmas ornaments and all, had become the most beautiful human on earth.

Evidently I now lean that way.

We sat unashamedly draining our stale reservoirs, between bursts of giggles.

Our giddy romance turned to hapless helplessness which slid into forlorn silence and eventually waned into boredom.

She yawned.

I watched.

Atop her federal throne, dear Phyllis extended a hand, wiggling her fingers in front of my face.

Not at all certain, I peeled down my mask, bent slowly forward and lightly kissed her knuckles.

“No!” She directed, “Up. Up!”

I grabbed her greasy wrist and leaned myself far, far back to raise dear Phyllis to her full four and a half feet, carefully protecting my new ancient pillar of human provenance.

While she lathered her blacksmith forearms with a small bottle of sanitizer, I felt something still stuck inside the stained bottom of my envelope.

I tipped it upside down over the papers in my hand and out tumbled a twist of greased newspaper showing its date: “23 décembre 1888.”

Phyllis peered over pages at prize within prize.

Surprisingly dexterous sausage fingers gingerly reached up and in. She pulled newspaper ends apart, opening the twist. Out slid a wonderful sight, a gruesomely wonderful sight.

We stared.

I stood, dumbfounded. Ecstatic thoughts ricocheted inside my skull.



I heard every whisper, every moan and vibration in our beleaguered building, from murmurs of love two stories above to basement pipes gurgling below.

She whispered, “Now, who would wrap a lobe of grizzle in a old French newspaper?”

“If I told you Phyllis, you wouldn’t care to believe.”

We took turns touching this saintly pepperoni.

Taking a chance, I asked, “...You don’t have any other hard to deliver parcels, do you?  
...Phyllis?”

Her eyes rose to caress mine. They squinted into smiles I’m sure. With her index finger, she beckoned, “With me, Sonny Jim...”

She had a light and delicate way, dancing out the door.

Dear Phyllis led me to her government van double parked on the street. The early April sun was bright but still Tacoma Avenue cold.

From somewhere beneath her mail bag she pulled a cigarette and lighter. Sliding the cigarette through a thin hole in the stretch folds of her mask, she lit it. Inhaling like a newborn, dear Phyllis blew columns of brown amber out unbridled nose.

Once recomposed, she lifted the rear roll door of her van. She shoulder pushed giant duffel bags of undelivered work aside to reveal a battered wooden crate.

As she spoke, her cigarette bobbed in time to her words like a conductor’s baton: “If those scrawny arms,” here her eyes lovingly scrutinized my elbows, suspicious of bony joints,

“can, ya know... lift it outa here, it’s yours.” She pinched her mask above her mouth, coughed out for all and let drip a fluorescent yellow glob onto the pavement.

I was giddy.

Scratched on top of the wooden crate in black ink reflecting blue in long light was “Anne Hathaway - Stratford upon Avon - Safeguard!” I loosed a slat and read some of its contents, “Love's Labour’s Won - The Two Noble Kinsmen - The History of Cardenio.”

Scanning about me, unsure I was not in my own laborious fiction, I saw no Federal Agents about to swoop and discredit me.

Proving I did listen to my Elizabethan English professor, I said calmly, “Yes! ...Yes, Phyllis, I can lift this. Anne lives here! ...We were worried.”

“You know this Anne Haiawatha?”

“...Yes. Of course I do! Yes, yes, yes. ...Quite funny, this.” I chuckled to show it was chuckling time. “Anne often stays here. With me! Fact is Anne’s due here this very night.”

Behind my mask I smiled at her, breathless, squinting my eyes as proof. Dear God did I squint my proof!

A pizza delivery bicycle sped past us wafting a wake of objective correlative so delicious my stomach loudly recriminated me. “We’ll soon afford 10,000 of those, Bosom Buddy,” I consoled.

“Leave it here, Phyllis,” I suggested. “With me. ...I’ll see that Anne, I mean Ann, gets it. We were worried.”

More chuckling.

“What about this sculpture thing: ‘Studia Pie Tà’ from a Mrs. Angelo? Mrs. Michelle Angelo?”

Summoning six semesters of failed improv, I shrugged. I waved my hand nonchalantly. I lilted, “I can lift that too, Dear.”

“Well Rich Boy,” she mask-murmured, ash flailing. “Can’t bury these in the backyard hole no more. Can’t throw ‘em away. Can’t even burn ‘em!” She laughed looking up to me, her eyes shining sweetly behind yellow smoke, “...What’s this world coming to?”

“Remember Shakespeare’s tenacious lie, Dear Phyllis,” I consoled. “Poor and content is rich enough.”

THE END.