

Booksluts and Other Bibliophiles

a novel by 44

Booksluts and Other Bibliophiles: a novel by 44
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@44theWriter

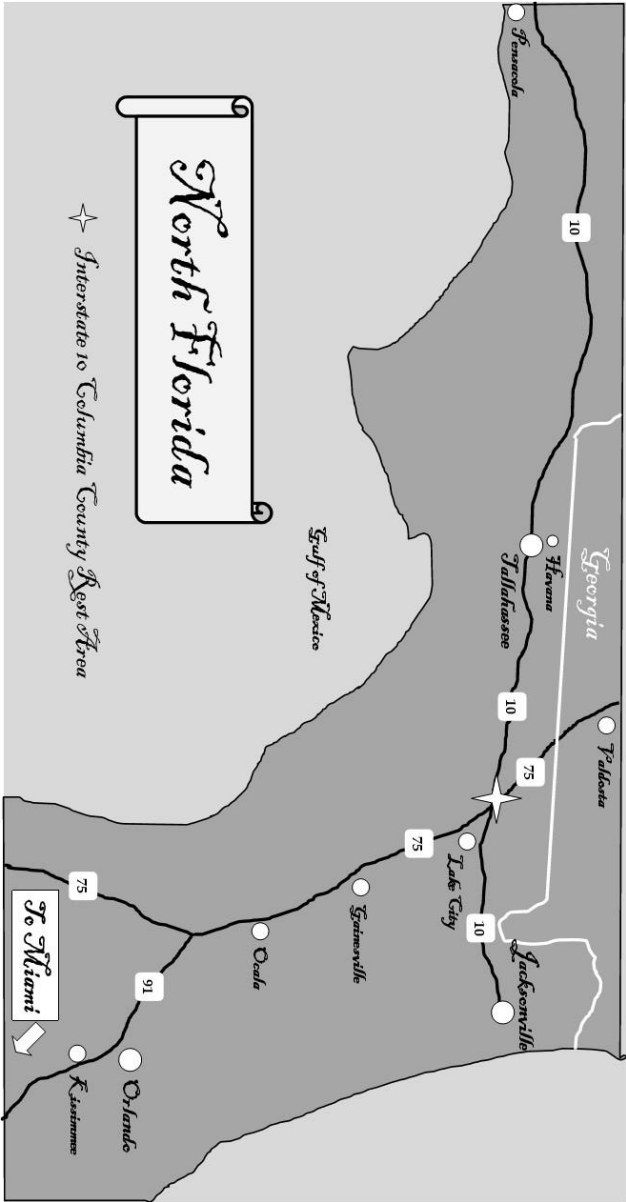
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For Christopher John,
my saint and north star since June of '78

“Only when the last tree has died
and the last river been poisoned
and the last fish been caught
will we realize we cannot eat money.”
- Cree saying, attributed to Chief Seattle,
Suquamish and Duwamish leader, circa 1854

“Beardless Harry, what a waste
Couldn't even get, say, a small-town taste
Rode the trolleys down to forty-seven
Figured he was good to get himself to Heaven
'Cause he had to run, run, run, run, run
Take a drag or two
Run, run, run, run, run
Gypsy Death and you
Tell you whatcha do”
- The Velvet Underground, 'Run Run Run'
The Velvet Underground and Nico, 1967



Chapters

1. Black Swan
2. Lighten Up
3. You Are A Runner And I Am My Father's Son
4. Miami
5. Never Gonna Sleep
6. Wanting To Kill
7. Florida Man
8. The Geeks Were Right
9. Everything Hits At Once
10. It's Not You, It's The E Talking
11. There Goes My Gun
12. The Book Of Love
13. Last Day Of Magic

prologue

Stockholm, Sweden
December 8th, 2004

Hours before sunrise on a silent and frigid Wednesday morning the public/private emergency switchboard company SOS Alarm Sverige AB suddenly received a barrage of calls reporting a massive explosion in the center of the city.

Four different fire departments responded with a dozen trucks, and some sixteen police patrol cars cordoned off a four-block radius around the scene. Nearly sixty people had to be evacuated from the area and twelve people were seriously injured by the blast.

After four days of searching for survivors and the removal of debris, rescue workers came upon the body of prominent intellectual and former head of the manuscript department at the National Library of Sweden, Anders Burius.

It had recently been discovered by the authorities and the public that Mr. Burius had been stealing and selling valuable rare books from his globally prestigious workplace. Upon a brief release from pre-court custody, he'd decided to end it all by slitting his wrist. Ever thorough in his actions, Burius had added the precautionary measure of cutting the gas line in his apartment to ensure his desired outcome, which also had the (presumably) unintended effect of blowing up half the building.

Even with help from the American Federal Bureau of Investigation, it would take another ten years for some of the stolen treasures to be found and returned to Sweden. Yet many of Burius's thefts remain missing to this day.

1.

Black Swan

“What will grow crooked, you can't make straight
It's the price that you've gotta pay
Do yourself a favour and pack your bags
Buy a ticket and get on the train
Buy a ticket and get on the train”
- Thom Yorke, 'Black Swan'
The Eraser, 2006

“Rara avis in terris, nigroque simillima cygno!”
- Juvenal, from 'The Satires', circa 100 CE

Havana, Florida

Saturday, March 12th, 2005, 7:28pm

Run.

She had to run.

That's all she knew. They were coming for her, and her only option was to get away. Campus police were circulating fliers with her photo and a description of her car throughout Tallahassee so there was no going back through the city.

And there was no turning back from what she'd done, either. She just hadn't expected to be intercepted, or to incur such a heavy response. Now that lunatic preacher politician and his horde of psychotic followers were coming in a caravan along Interstate 10 from Pensacola, complete with a media circus and a twenty-thousand-dollar bounty on her head. She'd found out the hard way that state troopers were looking for her at the border and at the area ports. This was not at all how she had planned it.

Breathe.

The only way out was to make the thirty-mile journey to Miccosukee, where she could hide for a few days at her cousins' house and figure it all out. They were not on her contact list at the university and their last names were nothing alike. She would have to go on foot, in the dark of the night and through the swamps between the big lakes. She could get some rest a couple of hours near dawn and make it to their house by around seven or eight, while the preteens would be sleeping late on a Sunday and Kanti would be

downstairs alone with Grandmother Nadie. Kanti's husband worked seven days a week.

What would she tell them? The truth might be too shameful. Or maybe they would understand. But she had to get there first.

This apartment she was in now belonged to her boyfriend, like her finishing up his doctorate. He was a really good guy and she didn't want to get him mixed up in this mess but she also didn't want to disappear without an explanation. As a gesture toward getting serious in their relationship, he'd given her a spare key months ago "just in case" she ever wanted to escape her two roommates and the cramped little apartment in a sketchy downtown neighborhood. This was the first time she'd used it.

He should have been home by now, though, and he hadn't answered any of her voice messages. She'd been pacing back and forth in the large living room for nearly two hours.

The house phone shrilled loudly and she nearly jumped out of her skin. He had Caller ID, she remembered. It was the Gadsden County Sheriff's Office.

Damn! He wouldn't turn me in, would he?

Then she heard the sirens in the distance. In a town this small, that was a rare occurrence and even then, only for a car wreck on highway 27. They were getting louder.

Time to move. Grabbing the bookbag she'd packed in a rush this morning and the canvas satchel containing her hefty illicit prizes, she bolted out the door and down the back stairs of the condominium to the resident parking lot. Heading swiftly north on 4th Street she came to 11th Avenue East, which brought her to the little-used Iron Bridge Road.

After more than an hour of walking in the dark she found Orchard Pond Parkway, which was the only road between Lake Iamonia and Lake Jackson and which would take her all the way to the next town, Bradfordville.

But by now her legs were already beginning to throb, the bags seemed to get heavier and the mosquitoes wouldn't let her rest for a minute. About every fifteen minutes or so she would have to jump into the mucky underbrush off the side of the road, ducking down to avoid the oncoming headlights. She might have to rethink this whole walking thing.

At the edge of that regional expanse of oak groves after a lifetime, she saw up ahead what looked to be a well-lit athletic field. As she drew closer, it revealed itself to be the golf course where she worked her first two years of college. There wasn't night lighting then, that she could recall. In the distance some male voices carried on the wind, loud laughter.

She was walking on an upward incline of a manicured hill when they came into view some forty yards below her near a sand trap. Four of them, out exercising their privilege of nighttime shenanigans at the very selective establishment. Pastel polos, big bellies, long white or khaki shorts. Only one of them had a bag of clubs and he was using one to lean on as he pontificated about something enthralling to the other three who were just standing around yessing. All of them had long silver beer cans in hand. At the top of the small hill she was climbing there was a golf cart.

They stopped talking amongst themselves when they noticed her passing nearby, illuminated by the overhead spotlights. One of them called out to her.

"Hey, there, señorita! You a little lost? This here's private property."

She ignored him and kept walking; she could leave the property at the next residential street ending.

Another one gave it a try. "Hey, pretty lady! Need a ride somewheres? Ah ken defininely give you a ride." Haw, haw, haw, it was a laugh riot.

A third joined in, "Come on down here, *mamasita*, we need a caddy!" They yukked it up.

Jerks! Don't respond, you'll only get them riled up.

As she passed the golf cart, she noticed the key in the starter and a bunch of cellphones and car keys in a front holding compartment.

"Last chance, girlie!" the first one resumed. "You don't wanna be wandering around in the dark all alone out here. We can take the scenic route, nice and slow, sweetie!"

Okay, she thought, you're a wanted criminal now, anyway. The hell with it... She turned back a few paces toward the small electric vehicle, threw her bags onto the little floor below the front seat and slid in behind the steering wheel to start the engine. She knew this golf course well. The clubhouse was way on the either side and it

would take them at least twenty minutes to walk there, even if they had been healthy walkers.

When it dawned on them that she was taking their only transportation the all-night golfers began running after her shouting all manner of obscenities. These higher end carts can hit maximum speeds of 25mph on paved asphalt.

At the parking lot for the club were three luxury cars. Two were stick-shift sportsters, which might presented a problem, but the third was a large, comfortable automatic coupe.

"Yeah, I need a Caddy, too, jackass," she said to the crisp night air. She pressed the unlock button on the key fob, took her stuff and upgraded from the golf cart. Built into the front console was one of those fancy new GPS units. As she started the car a sultry female voice filled the interior.

"Where to, big boy?" cooed the sexy robot entity.

The woman shook her head a little and leaned into the dashboard closer than she needed to.

"Miccosukee!" she said to the digital display as some folks do to mute persons who are not deaf.

"Okay, Miccosukee," the car replied breathlessly as it began giving her directions for the twelve miles she needed to put behind her. According to the omniscient automobile the trip would take seventeen minutes. Those guys would be getting to the clubhouse in about that time and immediately calling the police. She needed to cut the driving time some and the audible directions would help in the dark. She kept the headlights low as she zoomed and zipped through the back roads in an area made up mostly of horse farms and a few small churches.

When she hit Moccasin Gap Road, she knew she was close. Soon she saw the sign she was looking for. At the northeastern end of Sanders Hammock Pond, a dirt road hugs the waterside with intermittent boat launches. After the first two of these she turned onto one and slowly drove over just to the water's edge and stepped down on the emergency brake. She opened her door, grabbed her bags and placed them on the ground outside. Releasing the brake, she jumped out of the car and rolled once as the heavy car submissively descended into its watery grave with barely a sound.

She heaved herself up quickly and rushed with her bags to the tree line away from the pond and the inroad. She hadn't walked more

than a few steps when her eyes adjusted to the darkness and she jumped when she saw behind a five-foot wood post fence the giant darkened shape of the horse that had been watching her act of disposal. She'd forgotten about the equine hospital on this side of the small lake.

After the initial small shock of seeing the large beast in the shadows, she could make out a palomino mare.

"Well, you won't tell on me, will you, lady?" she asked the horse.

The answer was a snort and a mane toss.

"Good."

She climbed over the fence to begin the last leg of her journey. She could avoid the road and save a little time by cutting through the expansive medical facility. The horse started trotting leisurely alongside her. About a hundred yards on she came to a gate in the fencing where two saddles were hanging by hooks.

There were still four miles to go and she was thoroughly exhausted. She looked up at the star-filled night sky and didn't know whether to offer her ancients apologies for what she was about to do, or thanks for the assist.

She did neither. She merely grabbed one of the saddles, strapped it onto the horse and off they went, galloping softly on the moist grass as the symphony of cicadas and frogs muffled the cadence of hoof beats. The horse seemed to have needed to stretch her legs and glided freely under the practiced rider. What would have taken her more than an hour of walking, the pair covered in less than fifteen minutes.

At the Miccosukee Cemetery, near the end of Moccasin Gap Road, she slowed down to a trot. Avoiding the three main streets of the tiny town, she made a beeline to her cousin's small ranch-style home on Blake Street.

She dismounted and walked the horse quietly through the driveway to the backyard where she tied the reins to a fence post. Then she made her way back to the front door. It was one-thirty in the morning.

Kanti's big bear of a husband, Menawa, answered the door groggily in a white wifebeater undershirt and gray cut-off sweatpants, momentarily confused, unsure if it was really his wife's

nerdy first cousin, whom he also had grown up with, standing there before him in that wild, muddy and disheveled state.

“Damn, ‘cuz, you look awful! What happened?”

*

Jersey City, New Jersey
Sunday, March 13th, approximately 11:30am

Finishing the last words of the last chapter of a book that had appropriated many hours of sleep from him in the past weeks, he clapped the heavy hardcover shut, tossed it emphatically onto the large wooden desk across from him, nearly dislodging one of numerous incongruous piles of other books, and exhaled heavily as though from physical exertion. And yet he’d done nothing more than turn pages for the last three hours, half a carrot dangling from his lips like a cigar, slumped in a padded arm chair, night robe draped over the wings, his legs splayed out before him still in pajama pants, one foot out of its slipper, while Mahler’s Symphony No. 3 performed by the Radio Philharmonic Orchestra of the Netherlands concluded none too quietly in the large attic he had transformed into his hitherto neatly organized library in this old house he’d been renting the past six months.

It had rained all night and into the day with steady menaces of thunderclaps and lightning flashes. Only now somewhere toward noon was the sun making timid inquiries from behind a heavy grey curtain of angrily retreating clouds.

He sat for a while longer, pondering all he’d been reading recently at the quiet end of the darkest winter of his life. A sense of dissatisfaction gnawed at him, this reserved-for-last book, like the others, having failed to deliver against unreasonable expectations, leaving him once again bereft of the answers to life’s big questions.

Thus had proceeded his quixotic staycation quest to once and for all solve the riddles of the universe, while licking a few wounds and catching up on his eternally evolving reading list as the wicked northeast cold had its way with the city. But he’d found no absolutism, no redemption and no acceptable explanation nor excuse for his immeasurable tininess in the vast cosmos.

So, he rubbed the shrubbery covering his jaw and thought about lunch. Did he have it in him today to wash and chop some vegetables and boil some liquids? Or would he just go rummaging through the cupboards and freezer again for instant nourishment only to return hastily to his hibernation? And where the hell did this new extraneous little layer of flesh that had developed over his once armor-plate abs come from?

He thought for a moment of resuming his daily run but it was already so late in the day, must be one o'clock already, and so cold out there. A good long healthy walk was in order instead, then. Perhaps in the warmer midafternoon, he assured himself. Perhaps, perhaps, perhaps.

Passing the pets' room he saw Mathilda, the adoring, hopelessly stupid slob of an oversized pit bull, raise her head slightly from her queenly repose just to make sure it was him walking around and not some burglars who'd already made it to the second floor. Fritz the cat must have been outside doing his thing or he'd already be following him downstairs to demand a snack.

It was when he reached the chilly kitchen and autopiloted over to his favorite cabinet shelf that he made the horrific discovery that there was no coffee left. None. He double-checked for any forgotten almost-but-not-quite-empty refrigerated foil bags as well as the emergency counter drawer for those little tubes of instant powder he kept around, for just such an emergency, but there was nothing. Beginning to despair, he looked to the coffee machine for any leftover brew or undisposed grinds, but the filter tray was neatly placed atop the water tank and the pot was clean and shiny, smiling upside down in the dish drying rack.

He was slightly devastated and leaned back heavily against the sink. This meant going out into the world again.

Too soon! he protested to himself. He clearly remembered having to trek through some six inches of snow recently with four large bags of groceries, including the biggest can of coffee grounds he could find. And what day was it today, anyway?

He decided he would scan the headlines before heading out the door. As he didn't own a television, he fired up the desktop computer in the dining room that doubled as his home office and ran up to his bedroom on the second floor to throw on some street clothes. There he noticed the urgently blinking little red light on his

answering machine indicating numerous messages. How long had *that* been going on, he wondered. No matter, it would have to wait a little longer till he got back from the store.

Returning to his makeshift workstation he quickly checked on all the usual suspects in the media, from conservative to liberal, and learned that a temp job computer technician, enraged by a church sermon two weeks prior, had shot and killed seven members of his own congregation, including the minister and his son, at the Living Church of God in Brookfield, Wisconsin, before turning his 9mm Beretta handgun on himself.

Goddamned religious fanatics at it again, he tut-tutted in his mind. Also, he saw, that morning the wonderful singer and indisputably most-sampled female musician of all time Lyn Collins had passed away in California at the young age of 56. *Way too soon*, he lamented.

In her honor, he initiated on his portable music player a song mix based on her best-known song, 'Think (About It)', written and produced by James Brown, then trudged out stoically to face a frozen gray day. Walking down a stretch of Harrison Street that had devolved into a wide auto garage back alley, he passed Super Fly Auto Sales where the smiling owner, as always, waved a hearty greeting to him even though the two had never exchanged a single word. Turning left onto Monticello Avenue he walked past a beauty supply store that had been there since the sixties, before crossing the corner at Brinkerhoff Street to the independently owned food mart which, to his dismay, was jam-packed with a global assortment of Sunday shoppers and all their children and their friends and their neighbors, and it seemed they were all having a lovely time inside the market and all he wanted was some coffee. He decided to continue onward to see what was available at the bodega on the next corner at Astor Street.

There he found it occupied only by Zaheeda, the fearless small elder Pakistani woman who owned it, and her off-white, selectively talkative cat.

"Holey moley!" the proprietress exclaimed. "Look who it is, Jack! It's you buddy!"

The cat jumped onto the glass counter that displayed everything from underarm deodorant to fake leather wallets and

strutted over mirthfully to greet one of the few humans in the neighborhood that he allowed near him.

"Where you been, stranger?" she asked her long lost customer in choppy Middle Eastern English. Before the receding winter he used to stop in regularly for packs of incense she imported from India and other items he couldn't find elsewhere. Until a few years ago when she moved her business and residence to Jersey City, her store had been located on MacDougal in Manhattan and when she wasn't busy they would often talk leisurely about his hometown.

"When you start growing beard?"

"I'm not. I've just... been taking it easy."

Cocking her head slightly, she examined him a little more closely. She considered him a friend and felt comfortable enough to speak freely without offending him.

"You look like shit, man! You are wearing your pajamas under that shirt, yeah? Is everything okay? You normally in suit and tie, man!..."

He laughed. "Everything's fine, Z. I took a long vacation, at home."

Yes, she advised, one has to take some time off now and then, even though she herself worked seven days a week and hadn't taken more than an occasional day off in years. She had been robbed at gunpoint twice just in the last six months that he had been in the neighborhood.

He had to content himself with a jar of name brand instant coffee but was nonetheless rewarded with a compensation prize of the former restaurateur's delicious spinach turnovers, which she had pulled fresh out of the oven in the little kitchen at the back of the store. Like a child with a bag of sweetcakes, he meandered his way back home taking a different route than usual while munching on the warm pastries, oblivious to the whiplash weather.

Once back inside his spartan bedroom with a cup of some hot makeshift espresso he sat to listen to his voice messages. There were six total, three each from two of the very few people who had his home number; his attorney and his agency's office manager.

Sophie, his manager, sounded a bit frustrated.

"Hiya, honcho! This is you're loyal aide-de-camp again... I'm starting to get a little worried, now, hon', so when you can give me a holler, please. It's Saturday afternoon now. I'll be home all day today

and tomorrow. Weather's kinda sucky so Teague and I are doing a classic movie couch weekend.

"Anyway, I don't know if you got my messages from earlier this week but the new client's attorney arrived this morning for Monday's meet. I can handle it, of course, just wanted to remind you in case you wanted to be there. We're at the signing stage already, by the way.

"Okay, I'm going to assume you're enjoying your exteeended vacation but I do need to hear from you, boss man. I sent you an info sheet about the new case as well as some related stuff. And I scheduled the lawyer for one o'clock Monday."

His own, normally upbeat lawyer, Matthew, was grave.

"It's me again, bud. Today is Friday the eleventh, three... fifteen in the afternoon. I didn't want to tell you this over the phone but since you haven't returned my calls all week, I'm obligated to at least leave a message.

"Listen: Anne has filed papers seeking a court order requiring you to submit to a psychological examination before you can continue visiting with your son. After last year's... thing at the airport and the events around it, she's claiming you might present a danger to your son, either directly or indirectly. I probably don't have to tell you that it was her father who suggested this move and paid for the firm that submitted the motion.

"One more thing, man. The other attorneys paid me the professional courtesy of letting me know that she also had them draft a preliminary set of divorce papers. I'm sorry, brother, I swung by your office so we could talk but Sophie said you were MIA. Call me whenever you get this."

The other four messages were the previous attempts at reaching him. With the wind gone out of his sails, he sat still on the bed for a long while. When the swirl of anger and exasperation had calmed some, he picked up the phone's handset. It was almost one o'clock. Matt was a lifelong Catholic and with his family attended the ten o'clock Mass every week. They were just getting in from a pizzeria lunch when he called.

Apart from their client-attorney relationship, he and Matt were also old friends and the lawyer wasn't considering his fees when he agreed to accompany his earliest patron the next day to south

Jersey, where the latter intended to exercise his father's rights and see his only son.

The new case that Sophie was referring to was still just a distant memory of an initial inquiry about six weeks ago. Apparently, they'd made the final decision to hire him. He pulled up the email with the data sheets she'd sent so he could review the particulars and refresh his memory about it.

The job was in Miami, the only other metropolitan area that he included in his business territory. The client was a commercial research-and-development lab focused on alternative structural materials. They were concerned about the possibility of infiltration and interference at their facility.

Sophie picked up after a couple of rings and expressed a sincere relief at hearing from him. He assured her everything was copacetic and that he'd had just enough time off to recharge mind, body and spirit. He asked her where the clients' attorney was staying and told her she would not be seeing him until Tuesday but to go ahead with the signing.

Facing himself in the mirror for the first time in days he noticed he was pale as a ghost. Showing up like that down in Miami would make him stick out like an albino rabbit in a field of leopards. He'd have to address that.

And his hair had grown long. Long for him, at least.

"That was fast," he said to the mirror. Grabbing his buzz clippers, he attached the guard for his regular tight trim and almost ran the usual ten-minute routine. Then he hesitated. It occurred to him that he'd had the same haircut for nearly fifteen years now. On a whim, he switched the guard for one that would leave his hair not so short this time, just for a change.

After a long hot shower and a long overdue shave, he suited up for what had always been the first day of his week, albeit a few hours later than normal. Once again, it was time to get back to work, and back to life.

Miccosukee, Florida

2:09pm

She'd slept nearly eleven hours after last night's journey. Upon letting her in, Menawa had gone upstairs to tell his wife who

had arrived and her cousin Kanti had gotten out of bed. They talked for a while in the kitchen so as to not wake anyone. At first, Kanti was annoyed that her cousin wouldn't tell her what kind of trouble she'd gotten herself into but they were as close as sisters so she had to trust her when she said that the less the family knew, the better. Menawa retrieved some linens and a pillow and apologized that the only spare bedroom was at the moment occupied by an aunt and uncle heading north for the summer and she would have to sleep on the sofa in the living room.

"Are you kidding me? That sounds like heaven to me right now. I just really need to use the shower downstairs in the den, please."

They gave her another couple of hugs and went upstairs to bed. After twenty minutes of hot water and steam she lay on the couch and tried to calm the tempest in her head. How did it all go wrong? Why had the little red-haired man come back a week early to ruin everything? She would never have gotten caught had it not been for him.

Roswell, the large family Rottweiler, had come downstairs and given her a warm welcome then lay down on the rug below the couch to fall fast asleep within minutes, rumbling softly. The sound of the dog's breathing calmed her and soon she too drifted off to the dreamland.

The next day, disoriented by waking in the afternoon, it sounded to her like everyone had gone out. When she ambled over to the kitchen Grandmother Nadie was sitting at the table waiting for her. The old woman's face lit up when she saw her smart and sassy granddaughter who made her so proud. But the young woman was so ashamed in front of her beloved elder that she immediately began crying. Grandmother simply pulled her close and held her without saying a word.

After a while the young woman gathered up the courage to begin speaking.

"Grandmother, I have done something that will be causing me a lot of trouble and I can't tell you what it is."

"You don't have to tell me, child. Whatever it is, I know you have your reasons for your actions, you always do. I only care that you are safe and whole."

"I didn't want to bring my problem to the family but this is the only safe place I have right now."

"Of course, girl. Now what do you need us to do?"

A loud rumble of multiple motorcycles and volume ten headbanger rock music interrupted their conversation as it arrived in the driveway. That could only mean one thing.

In through the kitchen door blew her other cousin, Kinhagee, Kanti's rambling, long-haired younger brother, who had an apartment above the garage and who right now reeked of smoke and gasoline. He had three friends with him, one woman and two men. Heading straight to the fridge without even glancing over at the table he called out, "Hi, Grammy! We're gonna eat, okay? I'll refill the fridge later today."

To put it mildly, he was a big boy, naturally muscular and augmented by weightlifting. It wasn't until he turned around with his arms full of foodstuffs that he saw they had a visitor.

"Ho ho! No way! Cousin! Whatta you doing here?! Where the hell you been?!" he exclaimed as he stomped gleefully over to the table in his welder's boots.

Don't do it. Please don't do it. He's gonna do it, she knew.

Dropping the sundries on the table he took her head in his massive left arm and with the knuckles of his right hand began giving her a noogie.

"Who's a tiny little thing now, huh?" he teased.

"Stop, Kinhagee, please," she pleaded feebly.

"Nooooo, ho, ho, you're not the boss of me anymore, cousin..." he laughed.

"Kinhagee Yahola!" shouted Grandmother Nadie. "Now is not the time."

He froze and released his older cousin.

"I'm sorry, Grandmother," he said quietly. Penitent, he stepped over and gave his Grammy a peck on the cheek, mumbling "Good morning."

Like a poorly trained Greek chorus, his three companions all greeted the elder woman somewhat in unison with "Good morning, Grandmother Nadie."

The chastised young man turned to apologize to his cousin when he saw that she'd been crying.

“What happened?! Did that white man hurt you? I will ride over to campus town right now and-”

“-No, he didn’t do anything, relax. It’s... it’s something else. I can’t talk about it right now, okay?”

The impetuous young man realized it was an adulting moment and jutted his chin forward.

“Any way I can help?” he asked.

“Well,” she considered, “you think you can give me a ride into Lloyd tomorrow? I need to stop by their post office when they open.”

The post office in Miccosukee was actually just a six-by-six shack with a flagpole, and it operated only as a pick-up and drop-off point for the carriers. There was no lobby service.

Kanti and Menawa came back with the three tweens, who were all over their beloved auntie, and a load of food and barbecue supplies. Kinhagee’s two male friends rode over to the ABC store and picked up some cases of beer and soda. The weather in north Florida in March is crisp and pleasant and this was an exemplary day. The big barrel grill roared, the bikers shifted to classic rock mode to be more accommodating, and the children cajoled the adults into participating in their games. The traveling relatives had a guitar and tambourine with them and everyone was able to join in with the songs on the radio. She spent the afternoon and evening enjoying the company of her closest family and trying not to worry too much.

Along with a couple dozen other cousins who’d since scattered to nearby towns, she’d grown up around here. Of their group she had been the oldest and maturing quickly so she had been their default leader whenever they undertook their childhood expeditions and adventures. It had been she who’d taught them all never to fight amongst themselves but to stand united those times when the racist white teens and adults drove by shouting all kinds of horrible insults at the Native children.

Kanti, a year younger, outrageously bold, hilariously sarcastic, and ever loyal, had been her second-in-command. Kinhagee had always looked up to his fiercely intelligent first cousin as a leader and basically adored her. Except, of course, for that one time when he was seven and she had had to put him in a headlock because he was throwing a temper tantrum that had gotten out of control.

Growing up as a Native kid in the sticks would have been truly unbearable without them all and they had stuck together

through thick and thin. That was until her parents had suddenly decided to move to South Dakota right after her sixteenth birthday and ruined her already angst-filled teenage life. As soon as high school hell in the cruel north had finally finished and she was free to go to college, she had immediately returned to Florida, enrolling at the university closest to what she considered home.

At some point in the early evening Grandmother Nadie walked over to her holding something she hadn't seen in a very long while and she couldn't help gasping surprise. With those band patches straight outta the eighties and the chain mail armor of protest buttons, her olive-green patrol jacket from her senior year of high school looked like she had worn it just last week. The cousins and friends immediately recognized it and they all had a good laugh over it.

"It was a very powerful year for you, granddaughter," she said as she gave her the jacket.

"I didn't know you had kept it."

"I didn't keep it for myself," said Nadie with a sly grin.

She hadn't been over here to visit her family since early January when school had started up for everyone again and this being her final year. It wasn't meant to last, she knew, but for the moment she was at peace, and with loved ones.

Exchange Place, Jersey City

5:08pm

The sun was calling it a day over on the west side of town but not before setting the Manhattan skyline ablaze with a strong glare that made it seem like a fantastic dream city. Reconstruction had not yet begun on the new World Trade Center and the downed twins were still conspicuous by their absence.

The attorney's name was Benjamin Koehler, a tall, sturdily built and handsome country boy in a slick blue city suit cut out of the magazines, which he'd bought just for this trip, complete with requisite distressed brown leather loafers.

When the man he'd come to see unexpectedly rang him up in his waterfront hotel room in the middle of the afternoon he'd been laid up in his wonderfully oversized luxury bed in his boxers, socks

and an undershirt, snacking on an assortment of room service desserts while he binge-watched cable TV movies about New York.

Since the meeting wasn't until tomorrow, he had planned to spend today sightseeing. But for someone from South Florida, forty-one degrees Fahrenheit is friggin' freezing. And those were damn near hurricane winds out there when he stepped outside onto the balcony for a looksee! Yesterday when he arrived it had been even colder. It was already mid-March, for cryin' out loud. It should be warmer than this. No, sir, he could wait until after the signing to go exploring since it was supposed to be a lot nicer tomorrow. The movies were almost as good, anyway, and he especially loved the ones from the 80's.

Then the contractor had called out of nowhere sounding like a gravelly voiced orthodontist, polite and precise. Would he care to meet late this afternoon, he had asked, inviting him to an early dinner where they could wrap up the paperwork a little ahead of schedule. A little unusual, Koehler thought to himself, but he'd already been advised that the contractor had unorthodox methodologies.

Deciding he might as well meet with him since he wasn't really doing anything else, the attorney had suggested the hotel restaurant, but the other man had insisted they should "hop over to Manhattan". As it so happened, the newly minted lawyer from Pompano Beach had come with a list of things to do in the Big Apple while he was in town and a visit to Katz's Deli was one of them. He acquiesced despite the cold. Remembering that there was a shopping mall near his hotel, he saw that he had two hours to find a coat. On his way out, he dropped into the hotel bar and quickly downed a double whiskey sour to steel himself against this awful northeast weather.

At quarter of five he was at the waterfront again getting out of a cab by the pier at Exchange Place light rail station and, momentarily taken aback, he noticed the giant statue of the bound and blindfolded military officer with a bayonet thrust through his back. Reading the plaque on its granite base informed him that it was the Katyn Memorial by Polish American sculptor Andrzej Pitynski, dedicated to the victims of the Soviet massacre in that town in Poland in 1940.

The contractor had instructed him to walk south from the hotel along the boardwalk until he reached the 9/11 Memorial. As he

went, he marveled at the fiery beauty of New York City at sunset. When he got to the grotesquely twisted steel beams and the double-checking bronze businessman of September 11th, the contractor was already there, a man wearing black-framed eyeglasses, a black canvas briefcase hanging from his shoulder, and with his hands in the pockets of a long black wool overcoat, staring across the river in some kind of reverie. Turning his head like an elongated owl, he sort of half-smiled politely as the attorney walked over.

"Thank you for coming out to meet me, Mr. Koehler," he said, stepping down to extend his hand. "The ferry will be here in about five minutes," pointing out over the water with his chin to the boat headed toward them from the piers in Battery Park.

They hurried down the boardwalk and onto the pier and bought tickets from the machines just in time to board. On the second floor the young lawyer was delighted to find the snack bar open and serving beer and clams on the half shell.

"Appetizers!" he explained boyishly. "Don't you want any?" he asked the contractor.

"Enjoy. I have them all the time."

They took a table near a forward-facing window and had to almost shout over the passenger boat's engine and rudders. The out-of-towner couldn't take his eyes off Manhattan's looming skyscrapers. What the contractor did not tell him was that he'd insisted on coming into the city as the fastest and surest way to ascertain whether or not he was being followed by anyone. When large amounts of money are involved in a situation, as it was now, there is always a multitude of interested parties.

"Well," said Koehler, as he took a long pull of his beer mug, "All the paperwork's done, really. Your office manager, Sophie, is pretty awesome. I'm just here to witness your signature and sign for my client. And to make a good faith deposit on payment for your services, of course."

"Yeah, she's kind of amazing. Thing is, Mr. Koehler--"

"-Please, call me Ben. Mr. Koehler is still my dad," the lawyer joked.

"Thanks, Ben. I sincerely appreciate your flying up here to close the deal. Sophie could've taken care of it all without me and with faxes and the internet, but I actually had some questions I needed to ask in person, so I'm happy you're here."

“No problem. I have full authorization to speak for my client in this matter and I was thoroughly briefed. In fact, we had a few small questions, too. Just logistics stuff for when we get started.”

“Of course, but let’s wait till we get to Katz’s or we’ll both have sore throats by the time we get there.”

Koehler agreed with a laughing nod as he sucked another clam down his gullet. It’s an eight-minute ride on the ferry to the twenty-four-dollar island side and they were in a cab within another few, cutting through a quiet Sunday evening downtown. Between the pothole jumps and taxi jockeying the younger man kept his head craned upward against the partially opened window, marveling at the lights and massive skyscrapers. Up Broadway and coasting east along Houston they arrived quickly at the Bowery.

Inside the landmark restaurant they found it comfortably devoid of the tourist crowds. From the looks and sounds of it, the few tables that were occupied were seating locals. The contractor suggested a window table on the Ludlow Street side of the dining room.

Koehler ordered the 2-person sandwich package for himself so he wouldn’t have to choose between the pastrami and the Reuben. The contractor asked for a plate of potato latkes and a matzoh ball soup. Since they didn’t serve beer, the attorney walked across Houston to a bodega where he grabbed a couple large bottles of Grolsch. The contractor opted for the house seltzer.

“There are at least a dozen world-class security firms in Miami,” the contractor began. “And they all charge almost half of what I do. Why pick a solo flyer from the northeast?”

“You know, I asked them the same thing myself. No offense, I thought it would have been more cost effective to hire a local service. But the client’s husband is a construction guy and when the gentleman who referred you to him explained that they’d actually be saving money by getting the job done right the first time, and quickly, they were sold.

“Sides, the money’s not really an issue, they’ve got that covered. The client specifically wanted someone from outside the Miami area. She’s originally from Brooklyn.”

“And you’re related to the client how?” asked the contractor.

“Ah, you caught that. I’m her nephew, actually. I see you do your homework.”

"She's been in the news a lot lately. You're also not the company's attorney of record."

"No... Debrah, my aunt, wants to keep this as quiet as possible. The firm that represents her lab is little more than a patent attorney and they would have made too much of a fuss about anything outside that scope. I'm a personal injury lawyer but this is something I can do for a family member."

As the contractor considered this, a trio of young women turned the corner and stopped with their backs turned in front of their window to evaluate and discuss the strip of trendy bars across Ludlow, with one of them pointing to the nearest place with a small crowd out front. Another of them, a pink haired woman with matching lip gloss, turned behind her to check her look in the window's reflection and didn't immediately notice the two men at the table a few feet within. When she did, after puckering her lips and batting her eyelashes at herself, she burst into laughter and shared her faux pas with her two friends who turned around to wave at the men. One of them, a dark-haired woman with bangs, took an obvious interest in Koehler, gave him a wink and blew him a kiss as the trio dashed off in a warm mist of laughter to the lights of the tavern. She looked back at him once and all he could do was feebly wave his hand in simultaneous greeting and farewell.

The contractor, amused, waited until the attorney recovered his bearings.

"Wow," drawled Koehler, "they were hot!"

"Indeed."

"Not shy, neither."

"No, New York City women are not shrinking violets."

The lawyer's gaze lingered at the bar the women had entered.

"So," the contractor resumed, "why not also change out the in-house security system that's already there?"

"That's the thing," Koehler said, facing the contractor with the crux of the matter, "there isn't any. Not any kind to speak of, anyway. You would think that with the size of the operation, my aunt would have installed a full-fledged team of some sort. They've got one security guard on duty at all times, from a service out in Doral that seems to only hire retirees, which was fine until now. Her IT department is a recent university graduate who specializes in designing video games.

"I've tried to tell her she should beef up security, but my aunt has always resisted what she calls 'the paranoid corporate culture'. And now, look, someone's trying to mess with her company."

"But there's no actual hard evidence that someone is directly causing interference..." interjected the contractor.

"At this point, that's all that's missing. I'll let her tell you about it, but from what she describes it sounds like someone out there might be trying to get access the company's internal computer network and/or disrupt operations. It's just too many coincidences for her to ignore, you know?"

The contractor nodded and continued.

"The lab doesn't exactly have a whole lot of competitors. There aren't too many companies exploring these new products and they're all small, single-item outfits. Nor does the lab create a lot of revenue in its niche market. The operation, mainly research and development, is almost entirely privately funded except for a couple federal grants. So why would anyone want to attack or infiltrate it?"

"With all due respect," the attorney grinned, "that's what we're hiring you to find out. Debrah is a biochemist, her husband, my uncle Tommy, is an engineer with his own company to run, and they have two teenagers headed to college soon. They're not cut out for this type of thing. When her husband mentioned his dilemma to your mutual friend, the man suggested your agency as the fastest way to 'get the rat out the kitchen', as he put it."

"I was just curious if maybe your aunt had any personal enemies from other parts of her life, like maybe some industry people openly opposed to her work or envious relatives, anything like that."

"I doubt it, she probably would have mentioned it, but you'll have to ask her."

"You said there were a couple of questions on your end..." said the newly titled ratcatcher.

"Oh, yeah. Are you going to need some kind of company identity and or access to the lab and the computers at any time?"

"Yes, to both, but not in my real name. I'll have all that figured out by this weekend."

"Understood. Well, that brings me to the second question. Will there be an official record?"

"It's necessary. Especially if we have to bring criminal charges against anyone or file anything having to do with insurance. Since

you'll be the attorney of record in this matter, you'll get copies of everything I give the client, from reports to evidence."

"That's a relief. I was hoping it wasn't going to be all cloak-and-dagger like."

The contractor only smiled. "There is one other thing, though," he said. "I visited the lab's website but didn't see a directory. Who handles the public relations and sales functions?"

"That would be one and the same person: Sharon Arsenault. She handles everything from marketing to press releases to grant writing. No actual sales or PR departments, though, just a handful of online and telephone customer service people. Debrah used to handle all the sales calls when she first got started."

"Thank you. I'm just trying to get an idea of the lab's outward-looking presence. It's still an emerging field they're in, both the science and the business side."

"Exactly. There's no telling who might have it out for my aunt Debra and she's only trying to do good things."

"Alright, then, it's a done deal," the contractor concluded and clinked his soda fountain glass against Koehler's beer bottle. "You can let your aunt and uncle know that I'll be down in Miami by Thursday night, and we can all meet Friday morning."

"Cheers," said the attorney.

"Sophie's also a notary so she can bang everything out in five minutes tomorrow and you'll have the whole rest of the day to yourself to enjoy the city without any boring meetings. The weather's going to be unseasonably warm for the next few days."

"Well, they did give me until Wednesday to get you to sign, in case there were... delays of any kind."

"That's great. Well, mission accomplished. Now you should definitely take a day or two to see New York."

"That would be kinda nice..." he murmured as his gaze returned to the bar where the women were.

"You know," said the contractor, "Sunday nights are actually the best night for meeting women in Manhattan."

"You don't say..."

"Sure. There's no bridge-and-tunnel crowds tonight. The locals like to go out on Thursdays and Sundays to avoid them and the tourists."

"Bridge-and-tunnel crowds?..."

“From Jersey and the other boroughs...”

“Ah,” said Koehler pretending to understand. “So, uh, you wanna come have a drink across the street?”

The contractor chuckled and shook his head slowly. “I’m afraid I’ll have to pass. I have one more appointment tonight. But you’ll be fine. It’ll work in your favor that you’re only in town for a few days. Just tell them your wingman bailed on you.”

“Yeah?”

“Guaranteed. You’ll be okay to get back to your hotel, right?”

“Aw, shit yeah!” He was almost out of his seat already. “Listen, you can bill the food to the lab and-“

“Not at all, it’s on me. I made you come out into what I know is not an ideal temperature for you tonight.”

“You know what? I think things are about to heat up nicely...” said the young attorney with a devilish grin.

“I’d have to agree,” agreed the contractor. “See you Friday in Miami, Ben.”

The lawyer threw on his new coat, pulled out a few bills from his wallet and placed them on the table to cover the tip. Then shaking the contractor’s hand, he turned and did a sort of speed walking thing out of the restaurant and across the street to the Gold Lion Bar & Grill.

The man still at the table asked for a slice of cheesecake and waited about fifteen minutes watching the entrance to the bar. Then he paid the check and made his way out to the street. Going up Avenue A he took his time walking through his one-time neighborhood of Loisaida. These old streets in the East Village never failed to evoke wistful memories of his restless youth and all its accompanying wonderful misadventures. At 14th Street, his favorite in all of New York, he strolled west a couple blocks before taking a last long look around and descending into the subway station at 3rd Avenue. He hopped on a westbound L and transferred on the west side to a PATH train that took him back into Jersey City.

7:55pm

Near the southern end of Pacific Avenue, at Forrest Street, tucked into a large warehouse building is a modest rehearsal and recording complex legendary in the New Jersey musician underground. Countless successful rockers and rappers and local

favorites had worked out their songs in these rooms yet the rates had always remained reasonable and the location a best kept secret. There is only a small sign at the otherwise unnoticeable door.

Long past his rock star dreams and the numerous short-lived bands of his teens and early twenties, these days he only came by to keep his hinges oiled and to work out any stress he might be feeling. On weekends you can find a wide variety of tomorrow's darlings hanging around outside in the parking lot packing or unpacking their gear or just smoking cigarettes, or in the hallways waiting for their booked rooms and networking with other musicians. But on Sunday nights the place was invariably quiet and almost always he was the only customer after sundown.

He'd been coming here for almost fifteen years now and was friendly with the owner, Jim, who ten years ago had bought a house a few blocks away. Even if it was only this one customer tonight, it was no bother for him to open up for a couple hours.

"Hey, stranger! How ya been? I thought maybe you hit the big time and went on tour with somebody."

"Ha. Too late for that, I've been domesticated. Good to see you, Jim. Thanks for squeezing me in."

"Anytime. Hey, check it out," said the long-haired survivor of the glam metal era as he walked around the desk counter to a small beverage station against the wall. From a little wicker basket he pulled out a square paper envelope.

"Green tea! Your favorite. Everybody's doing it these days, man. I'm gonna keep it on hand, brings in a nice little bit of extra cash. Who knew? I got all kinds of flavors, too. Look, even honey and lemon for the singers."

"Nice. Now I don't have to bring my own when I come."

"Zackly. Anyway, now you know. And you know where everything else is, too. 'Ain't nobody else coming in tonight. I'm gonna go home and watch the rest of the game, come back around quarter ta nine, that alright?"

"Perfect. I'll be wrapping it up by then. And thanks again, Doc."

In each of the larger studios there is always a full drum kit set up. Cymbals are available for a small fee but he always brought a practice set with him. Once everything was in place, he stretched a little and tested all the skins and brass and pedals to make sure

everything was as tight as it needed to be. Then he picked out one of his burned CDs, popped it into the player behind him, and put on the sound-blocking headphones with the extra-long cord.

Starting out with Blakey, Rich, Roach and the Joneses, he immersed himself in the world of the jazz legends and tried to keep up. After about forty minutes he took a short break and had some tea. Then he switched the compact disc and rocked out with Ringo, Melvin Parker, Charlie Watts, Bonzo, Stewart Copeland, Larry Mullen Jr., and Stephen Perkins. After another break he spent most of his last hour fooling around and experimenting with and against electronic beats in genres from drum n' bass to house and jungle. These faster, often complex, and sudden-stop rhythms tested his precision, endurance, and adaptability.

By the end of his allotted two hours he was as sweaty as if he'd been in the gym. Making sure to tidy up after himself, he walked out into the hallway to find Jim straightening items in the lobby, which he only did when his mood had fouled.

"I'm sorry they lost, Doc," said the occasional drummer to the almost famous guitarist.

"Lousy Knickerbockers... One a' these days they're gonna make me move to Boston and become a Celtics fan. Anyway, it was nice to see you again, kid."

Strangely enough, the cool night air did make him feel like a kid again, ready to take on the world just after band practice. He drove home with the windows open and The Cult's 'Electric Ocean' sounding louder than it actually was on the deserted echoing streets in the Bergen-Lafayette neighborhood.

2.

Lighten Up

"Fear not for the future, weep not for the past"
- Percy Bysshe Shelley, 'Queen Mab', 1813

Tampa, Florida
9:30pm

While it is certain that there have been innumerable ignoble book thieves throughout the ages, and too often there were also many unsung honorable liberators of looted or endangered books, to properly appraise the modern era of criminal bibliophilia we would have to begin by looking at the end of the twentieth century and the start of the twenty-first.

With his spectacular suicide in '04, Anders Burius had proceeded to his reserved place in the pantheon of infamous bibliomanes, joining a very exclusive club that lists millionaires, murderers, and madmen.

Most recently, in May of 2002 a former executive accountant at oil giant Shell UK named William Simon Jacques, christened 'The Tome Raider' by the British press, had been sentenced to four years in prison for the thefts of one million English pounds worth of rare books from Cambridge University Library, the London Library and the British Library. He was also subsequently officially banned from all libraries in the United Kingdom.

Using simple disguises Jacques had been stealing early and first editions of works such as Galileo's 'Sidereus Nuncias' (1610) and Copernicus's 'Astronomia Instaurate' (1617), and selling them through auction houses in London, Munich and other European cities. Evidence and testimony at his trial indicated that he'd also made a number of expert forgeries and that he had been engaged in all these illegal activities since at least 1992. Many of the originals he'd lifted were never recovered.

Upon his release in April 2004, Jacques promptly paid a visit to the British Library sporting a full beard, long hair and eyeglasses

but was nonetheless immediately recognized by the staff and escorted to the exit.

Undaunted, he managed to satisfy his impulses by stealing books from the library of the Royal Horticultural Society in Pimlico using the alias 'Victor Santoro' until the thefts were discovered after an inventory was taken in June.

The Tome Raider is credited with necessitating the implementation of CCTV and security passes at Cambridge and London Library.

Then there is lifelong hardened convict, serial killer, and self-educated antiquities expert Gary Charles Evans, who began his criminal career in 1962 at the tender age of eight by stealing \$1,000 worth of jewelry. As a boy he especially enjoyed stealing expensive rare books and first-run comics for himself and separately shoplifted easily sold luxury items.

By the time he was twenty-eight years old he'd already done time in all of New York state's worst penitentiaries including Comstock, Clinton and Attica, the last of these being where he got to hang and work out with 'Son of Sam' David Berkowitz, all the while reading up on the qualities and values of antiques, fine art and rare books.

By age thirty-five he'd killed two antique dealers he had robbed, as well as killed and dismembered two of his three closest associates. Despite constantly being in and out of jails from New York to California and Florida, Evans was never suspected or charged in any of the four murders.

Late in 1991, after killing shop owner Gregory Jouben, Evans determined to give up his life of crime and go straight. That lasted about a year and two months during which time he worked as a day laborer in the Albany area. In January 1993 he was arrested for looting and vandalism for having dismantled, stolen and sold a 500kg marble tombstone from the cemetery where he had hidden the gun used in the '91 murder. He served one month in the county jail.

Upon his release he decided to move to Vermont and live the life of a survivalist in a tent. There he broke into the Norman Williams Library in Woodstock and stole a rare first edition of John James Audubon's 'The Birds of America' (1827). After a few unsuccessful months of trying to find a buyer in the very rural state, Evans was

turned in by informants and captured in June of 1994. Facing a life sentence because of his extensive record and the value of the stolen book, he simply revealed the whereabouts of the volume and received a reduced sentence of twenty-four months.

Paroled almost exactly two years later, Evans returned directly to New York and immediately reunited with his third most trusted partner in crime, then shortly afterward killed and dismembered him.

Had he not eventually been overcome with guilt and walked into the St. Johnsbury, Vermont, police station on May 27th, 1998, to confess to his killings, Evans would have gotten away with all of them.

Later that year, on August 14th, two days after being arraigned on three of the murders, he was being transported to another of a slew of pending court dates. Using a small key he had stuffed up his nose, Evans freed himself from his chains and manacles. When the prisoner transport van was passing over the Menands Bridge in upstate New York, he kicked out the rear window and made a run for it. But the corrections officers quickly caught up to and surrounded him. Rather than being taken alive, Evans ran to the walkway fence, jumped over it and leapt into the Hudson River where he smashed his head on the shallow rocks. Under the circumstances, his death was ruled a suicide.

But if a catalytic point in time can be determined for the start of the golden age of bibliomania it would have to be the March 20th, 1990, arrest of that OG of rare book thieves, the Grand Poobah of bibliophiles, Stephen Carrie Blumberg, who doggedly sought, earned, and still retains the somewhat estimable title of 'The Book Bandit'.

At that time, the US Justice Department and FBI had determined that this small, quiet man had stolen more than 23,500 rare, valuable, and important other books from 268 universities and museums in 45 states, 2 Canadian provinces, and the capitol District of Columbia. Originally the total value of his grand larceny was put at about twenty million US dollars, but that was later adjusted (because of poor bookkeeping) to \$5.3 million, still the largest book theft in United States history.

Having been born to a very wealthy family, young Stephen had begun collecting books and antiques at an early age, preferring solitude to interaction with his peers. Far more interested in the

forgotten grandeur of the Victorian homes he passed on the way to school than what was being taught in the classrooms he was required to appear in, he began secret explorations of the lost histories in those abandoned houses whenever school was not in session.

Beginning with salvaging items like stained-glass windows and antique doorknobs that had been left behind in homes scheduled for demolition, Blumberg concurrently began perusing and purloining required reference books from libraries, such as the one at the University of Michigan, where he first realized the monetary and aesthetic values of these materials themselves. As an added plus to his blossoming life's vocation, the necessity of often having to sneak into these once-grand treasure troves of antique collectibles undetected by neighbors, construction workers or passersby at all different hours of the day and night, Blumberg became a highly skilled cat burglar, able to easily maneuver around the outdated alarm systems and negligible security precautions of unprepared institutions. He was quick to acquire a lock-picking set and other burglary tools.

Entering adulthood with a \$72,000 annual trust fund account, Blumberg was free to roam North America contentedly indulging his bibliokleptomaniacisms. Though he had money to spare, he took his meals at soup kitchens where he could find them and bought his second-hand clothing at Salvation Army and Goodwill thrift stores. Where he enjoyed his purchasing power was at rare book shops across the continent and soon he became well known among the dealers, instantly recognizable in his shabby clothing and driving an old, beat-up luxury model car hauling a small camping trailer. Blumberg always bought, but never sold.

Whenever he came across a book he wanted but could not buy or easily steal, he would don disguises and aliases to get to it. Such as the time at the University of California where he presented himself as psychology professor Matthew McGue when a custodian caught him in the special collections department at a quarter to midnight and the library had closed at five. It was this night that began the domino tumble of cases involving unexplained disappearances of rare books and manuscripts from university and special libraries across the country.

Ultimately, it was his close friend, roommate and routine accomplice whom Blumberg had known since the 1970's who cashed

in on the \$56,000 reward the FBI had posted for information about his buddy Stephen's whereabouts.

Although the second floor of the two-story house in Ottumwa, Iowa, was filled ceiling to floor with incunabula and valuable other books, it was all but a portion of what Blumberg had stolen and hidden in storage facilities and other locations around the country and about which he has forever held his peace.

Sentenced to seventy-one months in federal prison and a two-hundred thousand dollar fine, Blumberg (all five feet, two inches and hundred and fifteen pounds of him) served the four and a half years among career thieves and killers without incident, paid the levy, and scarcely missing a beat immediately resumed "collecting" again when he was released on December 29, 1995. He was in and out of jail constantly afterwards for a seemingly uncontrollable inclination toward the thievery of rare books and antiques.

At Blumberg's trial in 1991, the director of the Law and Psychiatry Department at the Menninger Clinic, Dr. William S. Logan, also a recognized authority on forensic psychiatry, testified that Blumberg had throughout his lifetime been undergoing treatment for schizophrenia. Beginning early in his adolescence he'd been hospitalized repeatedly for schizophrenic delusions and tendencies, and no less than a dozen psychiatrists had diagnosed him variously as schizophrenic, delusional, paranoid, and/or compulsive. Dr. Logan also stated that there existed a history of psychiatric illness in Blumberg's family and that it was after escaping from a treatment facility that Stephen began breaking into houses and libraries to steal.

As described in Dr. Logan's reports, Blumberg had appointed himself the protector and rescuer of the works he stole, guarding them from what he was convinced was an intentional destruction. Blumberg claimed the government had plotted to keep ordinary citizens from having access to rare books and unique historical materials, and so sought to liberate them in active resistance to the grand governmental plot. He stated he one day planned to return all of the books to "their rightful owners."

But it was that one big bust of his crimes that had triggered the enactment of state and federal laws in the US placing larcenies in excess of \$50,000 squarely under federal jurisdiction. Before The Book Bandit, thefts valued at under that amount were handled at the local level and the FBI only got involved when interstate commerce was

involved. Now they were to be called in any time any high-ticket items were stolen in any of the fifty states.

Which was why Special Agent Mary Grace Weiland was working late on a Sunday night, instead of wrapping up a romantic dinner with her significant other at that new sushi place downtown, which had been the evening's original itinerary until the call came in from headquarters that afternoon.

Someone had stolen fifty-three thousand dollars' worth of rare books scheduled for auction at a university in western Florida. The prime suspect was a marine biologist less than six weeks away from receiving her doctoral degree who suddenly vanished into thin air. This individual worked part-time as an assistant in the library where the books were stolen.

Who would throw away their entire career like that? Nine times out of ten, the rare book thieves were all about the money and 50K was not really a lot these days, considering she would get considerably less on the black market. The other ten percent of this lot were just book freaks. So, which was it? Or was it both?

From what little information was available, she was an unlikely suspect, but then again, they often are; an exceptional student, with a good number of scholarships, grants, and other awards; membership in various student organizations throughout her college years; no priors or any kind of trouble with the law. Except... she'd been a teenage runaway. Twice. At sixteen took her time running from her parents in South Dakota to an aunt in Florida; at seventeen she ran off with a boy and was missing in New York City for nearly two months. This was from the initial missing persons reports filed with the police by the parents and there were very few details. Juvenile records are sealed but there was a final disposition report filed by the juvenile services bureau on the reservation in South Dakota which simply listed a counseled resolution with her parents as the final resolution in both cases.

And so, Agent Weiland had to be on the road by sunrise to drive over to the crime scene in Tallahassee to gather what evidence had not already been stomped on by the local authorities, who would inevitably resent her upon arrival, when she had to immediately take over the scene and the case. The only lead they had was a boyfriend

in nearby Havana. Then she was supposed to have something to present to her superiors by a lunchtime debriefing.

Despite the immediacy, though, this case did not seem important enough to merit a helicopter ride for the 450-mile trek. With another cup of coffee at hand, she resigned herself to reviewing the files again and imprinting in her mind all the details of the suspect and the four stolen books.

*

Monday, March 14th, 4:14am (London time)
phone call between Frankfurt, Germany and London, England

London: "Hullo?" asked a man awakened by his phone.

Frankfurt: "Edward! Edward is that you?" whisper-shouted the woman who'd been waiting hours to call.

"Emme? Yes, of course, it's me, who else would it be? And it's also... four in the morning..."

"I could not wait any more. You will understand. The auction is in three days."

"Auction?"

"A charity auction for a university library in the United States."

"And I care why, then?"

"They have the herbal."

Not fully awake yet, the Brit had no idea what she was talking about.

"Herbal... What blessed herbal, please, my dear?"

"The Darwin herbal."

There was a long pause on the London end.

"Impossible..." he said slowly. "That's only a myth."

"Oh? Well, that myth, complete with leaf pressings and hand drawings and notes in a verified handwriting, is being sold alongside a first edition of Percy Shelley's 'St. Irvyne', a journal by an eighteenth-century French priest, and one of the Zamarano Eighty. They're grouped in a lot being offered for a starting bid of just fifty-three thousand US dollars."

He bolted upright. Now he was completely awake.

"Holy fuck."

"Yes, exactly."

"They don't know what they have, do they?"

"It would seem that way."

"How did you find out?"

"How else? Madame called me from Copenhagen late last night. She already has buyers for the journal and the novel. Obviously, she will want to negotiate for the other two but everyone in the world will want to buy them from us."

"What about the Zamarano item? Which one is it?"

"Number thirty-five, the Monterey expedition in California, first edition 1770."

"Crikey! So where in the states, then?"

"Florida, west coast. The airport is Tallahassee International."

"Bloody hell. The boondocks."

"I am scheduled for a flight in a few hours."

"Alright. I'll start packing. I'll see you when I get there."

"Excellent."

"Emmeline?..." he said in a softer tone.

"Hmmm... yes, Edward?"

"I can't wait to see you."

"Nor I..."

*

Jacksonville, Florida

5:01am

To make up for lost time in having been notified late, the FBI went public on Monday morning with a bulletin about the theft and a \$20,000 reward for information leading to the primary suspect's capture, matching a reward posted privately by a US congressman.

Electronic and fax notifications went out simultaneously to all police agencies and media outlets within a fifty-mile radius from Tallahassee. The theft had taken place sometime between Friday morning, the last time the missing books had been accounted for, and Saturday noontime, when library staff had reported the theft to university police, who had not notified the feds until they'd figured out what to do by the end of first shift at three o'clock.

Miccosukee, Florida

6:12am

“Get up,” said Grandmother Nadie’s voice in the void.

There was an icky haze from those three beers last night. She remembered why she didn’t drink beer much anymore.

“My child, you have to get up. They’re coming for you.”

That did the trick. She jumped up from the couch.

“Where? Who? Are they here?!” she asked panicked.

“Calm down. They’re not here yet, but they’re on their way. You’ll need a head start.”

There were no televisions in this house and she only listened to the radio on occasions like yesterday’s impromptu gathering so something else had told Grandmother her granddaughter’s enemies were approaching. Only for a second she thought of asking her elder how she knew.

“What direction are they coming from?” the young woman asked.

“They are coming from all directions, beloved.”

The old woman handed her a small leather bag tied with leather string, and a No. 10 envelope holding what felt like a small stack of cash.

“Take this, it should help some. You must get going, though, take all of your things. Your cousin is already in the kitchen waiting to take you to Lloyd. I made breakfast for the two of you to take with you.”

Lloyd, Florida

7:03am

The widowed Geraldine Margaret Burns, as she did every weekday, was enjoying her morning mug of General Foods International Coffees Suisse Mocha and Stella D’Oro biscotti while watching TV on the local infotainment affiliate’s ‘Breakfast Briefs’. The feature story warned the area public about a fugitive from justice possibly hiding out in the vicinity of the Tallahassee suburbs. On the screen was a picture of a bespectacled and very angry-looking young woman with dark skin and hair, a raised fist and silently shouting probably some rabble-rouser slogan or other profanity. The image

sent a shiver down Geraldine's spine. *So angry these young immigrants*, she shuddered to herself. With that foreign-sounding name she was probably one of those Islamist radicals. That the image of the suspect, taken at a reproductive rights demonstration two years ago, had been digitally altered to make her skin darker and her facial features more menacing and vicious looking might not have mattered much to Geraldine, but it had its effect. She wondered if there might already be one of those wanted posters hung up at the post office she had to visit this morning and made a mental note to check the bulletin board.

Dollar Planet, Gamble Road, Lloyd
7:45am

With Tallahassee less than twenty miles and only a couple towns away she was taking a big risk coming into this town, but it had to be done. The dollar store plaza had seen various incarnations and renovations in the past fifteen years and yet that faithful old yellow payphone had never once budged. And it still sounded as clear as it did when they used to use it to make prank calls to their classmates and their classmates' parents. She said a little prayer that it still showed up as 'Unknown' on Caller ID.

Her boyfriend had an inflexible schedule during the week and a strict morning routine. Right about now he would be painstakingly preparing his nutrient-calculated, well-balanced breakfast comprised of carefully selected representatives from all the four food groups.

He picked up right away.

"Hello?!" He sounded frantic.

"Hi, it's me," she almost whispered.

"Babe, *where are you?!"*

"It's better I don't tell you. Are you okay?"

"Yes, I'm fine, but what in the hell is going on with you? They're saying you stole those books from the library!"

"I'm sorry I didn't prepare you, I wasn't completely sure I would go through with it. I owe you an explanation but I'm afraid it's going to have to wait."

"Sweetie, I know you told me you were angry at what was going on with the university and that... that congressman but don't you think you've taken this whole thing a little too far?"

Sweetie? Since when did he start calling me that? She chalked it up to his nervousness in the circumstances.

"I had to do something, I couldn't just stand back and watch them get away with it."

"Okay, you've made your point and you've got everyone's attention. But, come on, is it really worth throwing your whole life away?"

"I'm not--"

"-Listen," he cut her off, "you still have a chance to make this right."

"What do you mean?"

"The university is taking into consideration your otherwise unblemished student record and the years you've worked at the library, and they just want the books back. They're willing to work out a deal where they don't press charges and you get to keep most of your credits toward the doctorate. You'll have to do this last year over again somewhere else, though."

"And you know this how?"

"They've asked me to convey this to you if you called."

"You've been talking to them?"

"What did you expect? Everyone knows we're dating."

"And the police? Did they come to you, too?"

"Of course."

"What did you tell them?"

"What *could* I tell them? All I knew was that you were upset about how the congressman was planning to use the books being auctioned off, mixing religion with government and everything."

In the Havana apartment, Special Agent Weiland, sitting on a love seat across from the young man on the phone, made gestures to him to keep the caller talking as long as possible, and pointed at her watch.

"What else did you tell them?" asked the caller.

"Not much, nothing they didn't already know. I realized I didn't actually know as much about you as I thought I did other than that you have some family out in Miccosukee."

"Oh, my god, how could you?!"

"Babe, they were threatening to kick me out of the doctoral program if I didn't cooperate. It would have taken me another two years to get back to where I am right now."

The reality of his betrayal fell on her like a massive boulder.

"So I don't actually matter more to you than anything, do I?" she asked rhetorically.

He was at a loss for words. But the agent walking in with breakfast for all the other agents anxiously standing around the room was not, and he filled the gap as he popped into the room.

"They didn't have any goddammed strawberry jelly packets!" he complained loudly, then saw that he would not be able to put the sounds of his talking back into his mouth.

"Who was that?" asked the caller.

There was a long three seconds of frozen silence until the young man regrouped.

"I ordered breakfast... I was too preoccupied to do it myself today. Honey, please, be reasonable. There's still time to fix all of this. Look on the bright side. You'll avoid jail time and still salvage your career."

Honey. Sweetie. He knew better than to talk to her like that. And he was a bona fide germophobe; he never ordered food he could not see being prepared.

"Goodbye," she said quietly as she placed the handset back on its cradle.

In Havana, Agent Weiland shouted desperately into the air.

"Did we get it?!"

"We got it!" somebody answered.

Agent Weiland looked at the agent who had slipped up, pointed a heavy hand at him and gave him a face which telegraphed that were it not for their having clinched the trace on the phone call she would be all over him. The embarrassed agent merely looked at the floor, mentally self-flagellating.

"Alright, let's go, let's go, let's go!" shouted Weiland. The town of Lloyd, Florida, was about a half hour from there.

Lloyd **8:08am**

Housed in the original train station for the town, the United States Post Office in Lloyd can hold four people comfortably, including the window clerk. Everyone else has to stand on line outside. On the first day of the week, it's usually a long line.

The plan had been to ship the books to herself in Miami and let them sit for a while as she worked out a long-term strategy. For now she just wanted to unload them from her person as she hustled her way down there. Kinhagee had agreed to take her all the way to Lake City where she could hop on a bus, although he'd insisted on taking her all the way to Miami. Acting a bit pouty, he'd gone off to see if there was a store open where he could buy a pack of cigarettes while she waited to mail her parcel. They'd already gotten a few sideways glances from the regular postal customers when they rode in on the loud motorcycle but the Lloydsters must have figured it was just another local Native couple come into town from nearby.

There were six people ahead of her spaced along the handicapped ramp leading to the entrance, three more inside. An elderly woman walked out of the closet-sized lobby and began greeting the waiting people, one by one, like a royal dignitary at a formal reception.

The fugitive knew the old woman would immediately know she wasn't 'from 'round here'. She started to get nervous. If Kinhagee would just come back already she could skip this place and mail the bundle from Lake City. He was nowhere in sight.

Sure enough, when the widow Burns had reached the last of the patrons she knew, she came to the fidgety young woman with long hair and tan skin and froze.

"Oh, hello," she was barely able to utter to the stranger.

The fugitive smiled as pleasantly and innocently as she possibly could.

"Good morning," she pleaded.

Then Geraldine turned away and, as calm as the good Lord would give her the strength to do, forced her confused legs to walk the forty-three steps to her Buick in the parking lot. Once in her car, she took a long breath and thanked her Creator that the criminal hadn't killed her then and there. And suddenly she realized that she must have been spared a grisly death for a reason, and a higher purpose. She looked in the rearview mirror and saw that the girl had turned her back to her. Proof positive it was her on the news.

No one else had seemed to recognize the fugitive from justice so it was clear that it was up to her to do her citizen's duty. As smoothly as any of those daytime television detectives, she

nonchalantly rolled down her window, beeped her horn three times and waved to her friends and neighbors as she drove away.

She went straight to the Hoagie House a few blocks away and commandeered the two stoned teenagers prepping the counter to call the sheriff, there's a wanted terrorist at the post office.

Meanwhile, at the US outpost the waiting line moved along comfortably on country time as the clerk caught up on all the news and gossip from her regulars. There were now only three people ahead of her now but the fugitive no longer felt safe. The old woman had given her the heebie jeebies.

At the crossroads of Gamble Road and Old Lloyd Road, where the post office is located, one can look clear down the town's four principal roads, which include the only two that lead to and from Interstate 10.

The town of Lloyd, Florida, is actually unincorporated and technically just a census-designated place. It has no police department of its own but depends for its public safety on the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office, headquartered in Monticello, twelve miles away.

She heard the sirens coming from two different directions, east and west.

It's done, it's over, she thought.

She walked slowly down the accessibility ramp and out to the intersection to meet her fate.

She looked to her left and about five hundred feet down the road outside a cluster of stores she saw Kinhagee throwing his helmet on and running to his motorcycle which was parked on the sidewalk. As he jumped on his bike and throttled the engine, he saw her standing stricken at the curb. He raised his right hand pointing upward and shouted something in Mikasuki then raced toward her.

She prepared herself to jump on the bike behind him. To the north, coming off the highway exit ramp, she saw a line of black SUVs and sedans with red sirens zooming straight towards her. To her right, farther in the distance she saw a stream of police cars speeding in from the direction of Monticello.

Kinhagee slowed down just enough to catch her and revved it up again. She put on her helmet. He was going directly toward the police cars.

In a sudden game of chicken, the fugitive and her cousin both realized the deputies quite possibly might not hesitate to turn them into roadkill. But they didn't slow down.

The deputies, however, did not know how the fugitive was traveling and simply parted enough to let the speeding motorcycle pass through. Someone must have recognized her, though, because right before they reached the town all of the cars screeched to a stop enough to turn around and start chasing after them.

At the same time, the feds poured into the normally very quiet heart of town like a pack of hungry wolves who'd caught the scent of an injured deer. It only took a moment before they were chasing behind the sheriff's deputies.

Because they'd caught a bead on their target, Agent Weiland had gotten authorization for helicopter support. But the remoteness of their location had served to the fugitive's benefit, as the closest unit and pilot had had to scramble out of Tallahassee. The helicopter team was just now catching up to the convoy of Crown Vic's and Navigators. Weiland rode in the lead car wishing she was in the whirlybird hovering above her. Nobody higher up the food chain had yet bothered to remember that she knew how to fly one.

"They're on a motorcycle heading east on ten!" she radioed to them with a yell. The chopper lurched forward and took off after the prey.

As they approached the entrance to the interstate, Kinhagee looked behind him and saw the helicopter rising in the distance. They had two options and only one chance. Odds were good that the cops would all assume the fugitives would jump on the highway to achieve maximum speed and distance to get away. But Kinhagee, who knew these roads like a map on his palm, just kept right on going north on Old Lloyd Road over the interstate and toward the miniature town of Lois.

"Just like old times, huh, 'cuz?!" he shouted behind him joyously.

"Not exactly!" she yelled back, not as thrilled by the situation as he was.

About a quarter mile up he swung off onto Rabon Road heading due east for just another quarter mile then veered north again onto Route 259, Waukeenah Highway. As he had hoped, their

pursuers had continued east along the interstate. It wouldn't be long before they realized their error, though, and started backtracking.

They pulled over to the side of the road underneath a copse of trees near the White House Vineyards and Winery to catch their breath and reconnoiter. They only had a few minutes before the helicopter would begin the wide circles searching for them.

"Take me to Monticello," she said. "And then you have to disappear. I know you can do that."

"You should let me take you all the way, cousin," he started up again. "It's not safe for you to be running alone."

She took his big, thick-skulled head in both of her small hands and kissed his forehead.

"I know, my guardian angel. And I swear to you, Kinhagee, I wish I could take you with me. But this is mine to handle alone, I don't want anyone in my family getting hurt by it. Let's get out of here, they'll be coming around this way soon."

Monticello, Florida

8:52am

"Woman, are you out of your mind?!" Kinhagee asked her forcefully, realizing he had delivered her right into the lion's den. "This is the belly of the beast! Where do you think all those cops were coming from?!"

"Calm down, I know what I'm doing. Sort of. I know this town. I'll be able to blend in easier. And they've got buses going toward Lake City."

"Alright, you know what you're doing. Sort of."

They were standing outside of a gas station next to one of the Wilderness Coast Public Libraries. In the station restroom she had put away the eyeglasses that she always wore and put on some make-up, which she seldom wore. She had tied her hair in a ponytail and bought a baseball cap in the station store.

"Look, I know you don't like guns but you're going to need a weapon," he told her. "It's just not safe for a woman traveling alone and you know it."

He glanced around casually from side to side to check that there were no watching eyes then pulled out a very large, sheathed

hunting knife with a Black Ironwood handle from underneath his shirt.

"I've never had to use it. One look and it makes the tough guys faint. She'll even protect you without having to be seen, it was handed down to me from Mahihkan."

Upon hearing the revered elder's name, she couldn't say no.

"I'll bring her back to you, I promise. Whatever happens, hakatayompi."

"Hakatayompi," he answered and gave her a strong embrace."

"Thank you, Kinhagee. Now get out of here," she commanded as she pulled her bags out of the saddle sides.

He looked to the sky for a moment then quickly rode north through the back roads toward Thomasville, where he had some friends he could hide out with until it got dark. She started walking east down the main road, Washington Highway, toward the center of town. The library they had stopped in front of was too little for her to be inconspicuous, but she remembered that there was a large county library in the historic district less than a mile away where she was eventually able to sit in a corner near a window and duck behind a large book for a couple of hours.

Ocean County, New Jersey

He had waited until ten, after the morning's commuter waves had ebbed and the inevitable Monday traffic mayhem had hopefully subsided some, before heading down the coast. He had called his ex-wife to let her know he was coming but, as usual, he received her voicemail so left a message. His attorney had been dropped off in a cab a half hour prior and was doing his best to be as chipper as possible.

Matthew had known him since they were in their mid-twenties and he knew when the client he called friend felt like talking even less than usual, so he took the time to go over some paperwork. The drive would be at least an hour and a half with light traffic and he also knew the driver had a lead foot but was an expert at it.

For his part, as he drove, the preoccupied client was running through various scenarios in his head whereby he could hopefully put an end to all this foolishness that was hindering his relationship with his son. Matthew was actually a civil defense attorney, but his firm

had a family law specialist and they had been able to help him secure an equitable custody agreement at the time of the breakup.

But when he and his wife had separated, he naturally became the villain to her family, a dangerously negligent louse. Her father had seized upon the moment to secure more authority over his grandson, whom he regarded as the son he'd never been able to produce, and to punish his disappointing son-in-law for leaving his daughter. And out of spite Anne contentedly let her daddy turn the screws for her.

A highly intelligent and very attractive woman, she could have had any man she wanted but had settled for this ambiguous New York City transplant when she became pregnant with his child. They had only been dating about four months and had had to get to know each other in a hurry. Sophisticated and intellectually inquisitive, she could also be astoundingly petty and cruelly vindictive over the smallest perceived slight. And she knew exactly how to push his buttons.

His soon-to-be-ex-wife had discovered early in their marriage that he seemed to be more jealous of the books she read and didn't discuss with him than he was of any past lovers or the men who flirted with her when they were out in public together. And it was true. He wasn't the least concerned with anyone before him and not the slightest bit worried by any of the hot-blooded hounds at the parties and on the street because he knew her well enough. But he really, really didn't like it when she was more intimate with a book than she ever was with him. The quirk had its roots in a brief moment back when they were first dating in their late twenties. Outside the music store where they'd first met, he once happened upon her reading a book of spells. When she noticed that he'd glanced at the title she quickly tried to hide it on her lap. He'd thought the book was cool-looking, but she'd wanted to keep it secret from him.

In the first couple years of their stormy union they occasionally made attempts at book discussions and eventually both came to realize that they were at opposite ends of the spectrum when it came to the printed word. Hers was true literature and poetry and his was all the boring other stuff. Art, music, film, fine food, theatre, cinema and the outdoors they enjoyed together all the time but somehow when it came to books, they could find no common ground.

And so, they learned to accept that they were two very different types of book lovers and to avoid the subject altogether.

But whenever they were truly at odds over something and not speaking to one another she would exact her revenge with the one sure-fire weapon that could irritate her otherwise unflappable husband. At around the time their infant son was already asleep in his room and they usually went to bed together, she simply slipped on one of those shimmery little negligees instead of her regular plain cotton nightgown or the flower print pajamas, then demonstratively embraced whichever of those large hardcovers she'd set aside in advance, and stretched out to make him suffer for an hour or so as she rolled around with whichever Leo, Guy or Walker it was these days. It was always worse when it was a writer he'd never even heard of. And when she was really pissed off at him, from the middle drawer of her dresser she would pull out those goddamned lace panties and bras that drove him wild, bring up a bottle of wine to the bedroom, and then giggle and cavort heartily and laugh throatily with Madame Bovary's suitors or Lady Chatterley's lover as he grumpily flipped pages of any trade magazine or legal reference work back and forth like a twenty-eight-year-old septuagenarian.

When she was at last satisfied, she would let out a dramatic sigh, allow her literary Lothario to fall to the floor and ceremoniously turn out her night light. He would immediately do the same, turning off his light as well and then huffily turning on his side away from her to ruminate in the darkness until he fell asleep, angry, cuckolded by fictional characters and long dead writers.

Once off the parkway they had to crawl along a slow stretch of Route 9, the area's one main drag tracing the coastline past a slew of chain restaurants, pharmacies and supermarkets.

After a few tiny towns with seaside-themed names they pulled into a small village tucked into the lower first half of the Jersey shore. It was quiet, sleepy and safe to raise children. He could not help feeling guilty for not living closer to be more of a part of his son's life.

Drawing up to the 70's duplex where his ex's parents had chosen to enjoy their retirement, they came upon, as he had expected, a police car parked outside waiting for them. He took the time to carefully park directly in front of the house, in front of the patrol vehicle.

The restrictive court order his ex and her family were seeking hadn't even been heard yet, but they were acting as though it were *fait accompli*. Matt stepped out of the car to politely introduce himself and inform the officers that he could have them working as security guards at any crappy strip mall nearby within a week if they interfered with his client's custodial visit. They called into headquarters to see if this might actually be possible and promptly drove off to find a place for lunch.

Had he not brought along his attorney, they would have likely obstructed the visit with his child. He got out of the car and walked up the front steps.

"Thank you, Matt," he murmured as they passed each other. Anne's father, Larry, a former mortgage banker, came to the door and, silently resigned to defeat, held it open wide.

"Pop Pop!" announced the boy as he came bounding down the hall steps. He'd just turned five, a little lion. In kindergarten, but Sol had given them a courtesy call as well to keep his son home from school.

Burnished bronze curls and painting-worthy angelic features, he was the light that burned in his immense darkness. The child squeezed his father's head as if trying to burst it and the father loved every second of it.

"Let's go for a ride, dragon rider."

"Uhventcha toime!"

"Exactly. Adventure time."

Matthew had already moved to the back of the car and the child was not surprised to see him.

"Hi, mithta Matt! Coming for the ride?" the boy invited as he strapped on his seatbelt. He no longer had to ride in the baby seat.

"Hi, soldier! I just wanted to make sure I said hello to you when your Pop Pop told me he was coming down here. I'll be driving back from Toms River. What's going on with you?"

"I'm dwiving, too."

"Are you now? Is that legal for a five-year-old to be on the road already?"

"On the sidewalk it is, silly! Grampa bought me a mizzureety."

"I'm sure you're an excellent driver, then," Matthew obliged graciously. Instinctively, he changed the subject. "So, you two

adventurers are going to drop me off at the nearest place with fancy names for coffee so I can make some calls and get some stuff done and I will catch up with you shortly.”

“Big law stuff?”

“Big law stuff.”

In downtown Toms River Matthew was able to quickly hire a car to head back north. Father and son continued on to nearby Seaside Heights. It was a little chilly near the ocean and still early enough in the season that a lot of the boardwalk amusement booths and snack bars weren't open yet. They went instead to one of the large indoor arcade pavilions with the game lanes and machines and a variety of food counters.

After almost two hours of mechanical horses, simulated car races, miniature golf and prize booths they decided to take a break and see how much of a mess they could make at one of the tables with fish and chips and cotton candy.

He had never baby talked to his son. Well, maybe a little when he was a newborn. He figured it was best to get him up to speed on the English language as early as possible and the boy had always understood him perfectly. While he still had a come-and-go bit of the infant's lisp, the child's intellect was maturing rapidly and lately he had started asking the more pointed questions, having advanced from the why-why-whys of locomotives and the color of the sky.

“You know I am very sorry I haven't been around lately, son. I got a little banged up on the last job like I told you on the phone at Christmastime.”

“I know. I saw it on the teevee,” the child said absentmindedly, more concerned with his plateful of food.

“You did?” he asked, caught off-guard. He did not remember having been on television.

“Uh huh. Your face and your shirt were all black and your eyes looked so big and there was smoke coming out of your hair! It was funny! Like in the cartoons when something goes BOOM!”

“Yeah, ha, ha,” he laughed it off weakly. “That *was* kinda funny, right?...” He wasn't sure if he was more annoyed by his son's mother and grandparents letting the boy see his father in such a debacle or that they let him watch cartoons with characters boomed by explosions. He was now hesitant to say what he needed to.

"Well, um, the thing is, I have to take a short trip down to Miami, you know, where Grandma Eleni lives. It's for work and it's just for a little while but I was thinking that as soon as I get back, like right around May when it starts warming up, we could have ourselves a nice *big* adventure. We can go fishing and camping for a few days. What do you think?"

"Yay! Are we bringing Frith the cat and Mathilda Wuhmwood?"

"Of course! They've been asking about you."

The boy giggled. "They listen to me more than you," he gloated.

"This is true. They really just tell me what to do. So we're okay for camping in a few weeks?"

"Yeth! You promith, right?"

"I promise."

After another hour of play they made their way back to his ex's parents' house. Her car was parked in the driveway. Checking his watch, he surmised that she must have left work early after getting a phone call from her father.

Undoubtedly, she had come racing down from her teaching job in Middlesex County not wanting to miss the now rare opportunity to berate and belittle him one more time. When they lived together she used to like to unwind and relieve the stress of five days of wrangling high schoolers by finding any excuse to antagonize him and draw him into a weekly session of lop-sided arguments that she once cheerfully referred to as Friday Night Fights.

As they got out of his car the front door of the house swung open and Anne made a dramatic display of hurrying down the steps in her designer heels and hot teacher skirt to rescue her beloved child from his evil and dastardly father.

"Mommy! You're home!"

"Hi, baby!" she said as she embraced him and shot a look at his father like she'd been ready to report a kidnapping. "Oh, my goodness! What is that blue stuff all over your face?"

"Uhlantic Ocean Thwirl!" the boy proclaimed.

"You're supposed to schedule your visits!" she snapped at her ex-husband.

"I tried calling you twice and left messages. But you know I can see him any time I want."

"Sure, you just magically appear after not being around for months and nearly getting yourself blown to smithereens. That's great. Exactly what he needs." Turning to their son she softened her tone. "Honey, why don't you go inside and wash up, you're a mess. Mommy and... *your father* are going to have a little chat."

"Okay, Mommy," the boy said, running over to give his Pop Pop one last head squeeze.

"I love you very much, dragon rider."

"I wuv you, too, Pop Pop!"

Just before going inside, he turned to look at his father.

"Tanks for taking me to the arcade, Pop Pop! Don't forget what you promised!"

"I won't!" his father called back.

To her credit, she at least waited until the door closed before starting in.

"Why do you even bother, really? Whatever you promised you'll probably forget or try to do it late."

Ignoring her, he went straight to the only thing he wanted to discuss with her.

"Anne, what is this nonsense about a psychological exam? You know damn well I would never hurt my own son or put him in danger. Why are you doing this?"

"Because, actually, Mr. Airport Avenger, I *don't* know that you won't put my son in danger. I mean, c'mon, you're like a *magnet* for danger! What the hell *was* all that anyway? You're chasing terrorists in *Newark* of all places, for God's sake?!"

"I didn't bring them, Anne, they were already there. Somebody had to stop them."

"A normal person would have let the proper authorities handle it."

"They didn't believe me."

"Right..."

"Look, whatever, you don't have to believe me, either. All that's done and over with and there's nothing wrong with me. Why don't you just stop making things difficult again, save your father some money, save us both a lot of aggravation and we can all just get on with our lives? How about that?"

“Too late, buddy. I don’t even know who you are anymore, if I ever did at all. I think I want an expert to tell me. Why can’t you just be an accountant or a lawyer or something respectable like that?”

He was not going to let her spoil his day.

“You’re wasting everybody’s time. Again,” he told her before turning and getting in his car.

Water off a duck’s behind, he told himself on the highway. The time he spent with his son meant more to him than anything else. It made him almost impervious.

Monticello, Florida

2:33pm

After leaving the library she took her time carefully meandering through the old town. There was no police activity out of the ordinary, just the occasional single cruiser making the rounds with the deputy greeting familiar faces like any other day. She was careful to stay in motion with her face turned toward the storefront windows.

Known as the most haunted town in the South and one of the most haunted places in America, Monticello boasts over forty buildings in the historic district dating back to the nineteenth century. Locals say at least one out of three of those structures contains the wandering souls of the sleepless deceased.

With Indian mounds, an opera house where glowing orbs are reported, a blacksmith shop shuttered long ago but still echoing the clang of anvil and hammer, and a hanging tree outside the courthouse where mob justice was regularly meted out, the only city in Jefferson County enjoys a steady stream of tourist business.

She needed to find a ticket agent or booth for the tour buses or some kind of tourism office. At the Old Jail Museum she was dismayed to learn that while in-town tours on the trolley ran until four-thirty, the first of the group tour buses that come in from Greenville arrived by nine and the last left by one o’clock.

The only other bus line serving Monticello operated out of Tallahassee.

**Tallahassee International Airport, Capital Circle SW
Tallahassee, Florida
3:37pm**

For an entirely pleasurable long moment he saw nothing and no one else in the airport lobby except her as he descended the escalator. There might as well have been spotlights on the tall, gorgeous German. From far away he could see the smile she could not hide when she saw him.

She knew what she was doing. It was warm enough that she could tempt him immediately with her choice of a sleeveless white tunic, an executive's black skirt and thigh high black boots. She was wearing her hair in jet-black bangs, had the Jackie O sunglasses on and the bright blood-red lipstick he wanted smothered all over him.

Always such an effortlessly sexy man, she congratulated herself. Gallant and tailor-cut, the Englishman had the body of a champion swimmer, a mind like a bank vault and an unforgiving aristocratic attitude. He was dressed for sport in a copper blazer, off-white linen button down, tan slacks and dark brown hybrid walking/hiking shoes. A lifetime member of the Man-Boy Club, his unruly chestnut brown hair and dusky facial features made her want to do all kinds of unprofessional things with him, and to him.

He immediately dropped his bags when he reached her and they kissed like two freed hostages given water. He couldn't help himself but had to have a squeeze of that delicious ass of hers. She bit his lip firmly then slapped him.

"How many times do I have to tell you not to do that in public?!" she scolded.

"Forgive me, my love, I honestly forgot where we are. Where is the hotel?"

"Nearby, boutique, next to museum. There is a lake, you will love it."

"And gun shops?"

"Everywhere. They are like candy stores all over this town. And they all open early in the morning."

"Absolutely lovely thing about America, that.... More guns than anyone could ever need."

Monticello

8:49pm

It was dark now. She had not anticipated needing and not being able to find a place to sleep. There were no vacancies at any of the five motels or two hotels in this tourist trap.

And over the course of just a few hours the dynamic of the police presence had completely changed for the worse. Kinhagee wasn't exaggerating when he said this place would have no shortage of cops anywhere in the town. Now there was a police car driving along every few minutes. There was nowhere she could go without sticking out like someone who shouldn't be there. Every second she stayed in the commercial district she increased the chances of police contact and immediate arrest. It was getting late and the streets were thinning out. She had to force herself not to become paranoid or panicky. She would have to head to the outskirts to find a place to hide until the morning.

Walking north on Jefferson Avenue she came upon what was obviously a very popular local eatery, with a giant roadside billboard announcing Guido's Pizza and the indoor dining room and the outside tables all filled to capacity on a Monday night. Along the sidewalk at the first table closest to her were four sheriff's deputies enjoying their dinner break.

Before she got any closer she quickly did an about-face to the corner she'd just passed and crossed the street. She walked a couple blocks then turned right to continue northward. With the amenable evening air some residents were on their porches or in their driveways chatting with neighbors and she was tired.

Abruptly the houses thinned out and she came to a semi-wooded area. Under the dim light of a scimitar moon she continued walking a little farther on until she entered a large cemetery spread out over a small cluster of low hills, the central and largest of which held an old house with a wraparound porch. There were no lights on and no vehicles to be seen anywhere.

She approached cautiously with all her senses on high alert. It had to have been the caretaker's house at some point in time but as she got closer it looked to her like no one had lived here for a long time. Sprinting to the turkey oak about fifty feet from the front porch, she peered around its side to scan every inch of the place she could

see. She listened intently for any type of human noise emanating from the place. Nothing.

Keeping a good distance, she walked around to the back. An overturned wheelbarrow, some rusted yard tools and antique rusted gasoline can were the only evidence that people ever came here. Tiptoeing up to the porch steps she climbed each one with the utmost care not to cause any creaking. Looking inside through the nearest window she saw nothing but darkness.

She sat down with her back against the wall and exhaled a deep breath. Looking around on the porch she saw the trappings of an era long since passed. A couple of handmade chairs were set across a wicker lunch table from one another. A large pitchfork leaned against the wall near a window. A set of antique windchimes hung from one of the porch roof banisters.

She could crash here safely for the night and catch the first of those Greenville buses in the morning. Some people could not imagine sleeping in a graveyard. She didn't give it a second thought. It was not the dead she feared, but the living.

With some space to breathe she took stock of her situation and returned to the questions that had been nagging her at the library.

Who was in those black cars that had come in such a force off the interstate? She figured it must have been some kind of state investigative bureau since it was a state university involved. Maybe if she just got out of the state of Florida, she could get away clean.

And how had she gotten herself in this mess to begin with? It had all started with the little red-haired man. He had simply appeared one day out of nowhere, with his fancy clothing, expensive purple sunglasses and a turkey buzzard feather in his antiquated hat that had probably been sold to him as owl.

In the four years she'd worked at the library, which included three previous book auctions, she had never once seen him step into the library. Then two months before the auction, he'd come in three times in one week asking about the books for this year's auction, had the list been compiled yet he wanted to know.

A month ago, he had started coming in every few days asking circuitous questions about these four particular books. Somehow, he had known they were coming before everyone else did, before the staff had even started working on the auction catalogue.

Though he acted strangely, she didn't think much of it. The university library had its share of oddballs, and it included those moneyed and peculiarly mannered book collectors.

But the day he showed up to the library with the reverend Rollins practically glued to his side and the two of them demanding to see the four books in Lot 19 was the day she knew something was not right.

Lake City, Florida

9:50pm

Because of a number of false tips called in from towns located on a straight line between Tallahassee and the coast, and because so far it was certainly the sustained direction the suspect was traveling, Agent Weiland had become convinced the book thief was making her way due east to hide out in Jacksonville, by area the second largest city in contiguous America and the most populous city in Florida. Assuming the suspect and her accomplice wouldn't be stupid enough to try to hide out in the county seat of Monticello, Weiland had immediately after their encounter in Lloyd set up a gauntlet of roadblocks connecting an arc of towns from Jasper at the north border to Green Cove Springs at the two-mile wide St. John's River, just below Jacksonville in the east. The motorcycle with the two long-haired riders had gone off the radar, though.

After spending the better part of the morning in Lloyd talking to the sheriff and his officers, interviewing witnesses, and canvassing the immediate area around the post office, Weiland and her team had hustled out to Lake City to set up a temporary base of operations at one of the larger motels.

The suspect had been seen holding a large package that looked ready for shipping, but hadn't been able to get it out, according to the mail clerk. It had to be the books. She was trying to get rid of them, Weiland surmised. But to where? And to who?

Monticello

Tuesday, March 15th, 7:10am

It was the wind chimes that woke her, a brief but loud tingling. Yet when she gathered her senses there was no discernible

breeze. What there was, however, was the clunking and coughing of an approaching automobile. She quickly crawled to the edge of the house and peeked around to see an old brown station wagon making its way up the hill to the house. Once again, she had to fling her bags across her shoulders and start running. She slipped into the copse of woods behind the cemetery and made a swift roundabout walk through the still waking neighborhood until she returned to North Jefferson Street and joined the first risers of the morning grabbing their coffee and donuts along the commercial strip.

She killed the hour and a half of waiting time easily. Downtown Monticello is already bustling by eight. There is an abundance of cafes, the tourists are getting an early start on their precisely planned out vacation day, and the local students and workers are all making the usual noises of their daily routines.

At nine-thirty, in front of the Monticello Opera House and armed with a brand-new pair of Ray Ban knockoffs, a floppy straw hat, a large half-empty bag of Poltergeist Popcorn and a new t-shirt declaring that she had survived the most haunted city in the south, she boarded a charter bus from a company owned by the same family for the past hundred years for the seemingly eons-long twenty-minute ride.

Greenville, Florida

Just before ten the bus unloaded its three passengers in front of City Hall. The instant she disembarked she caught the scents of toasted bread, fried eggs, grilled peppers and onions, and strong coffee before she visually located Cousin Charlie's Kitchen at the far corner of the plaza. Her stomach shouted for attention. So worried about getting on the first ride out of town, she'd forgotten all about that thing called breakfast.

The town itself was tiny and she had to keep a low profile. There were also no bus lines to get her closer to Lake City. She would have to hustle a ride as far east as she could get. The country café might be her only opportunity.

Scanning the flyers in the restaurant's windows she found everything from handyman services to nurseries but nothing mentioning transportation of any sort. Treating herself to a big country breakfast complete with southern spiced home fries and

freshly baked biscuits, she inquired of the large angelic woman who had surprised her with a complimentary slice of sweet potato pie (with a sinfully large dollop of whipped cream) about the town's available lodgings.

"Naw, there ain't no hotels or motels in town, baby," she considered, "but there is a bed n' breakfast just down the road. Owner's name is Rita. Her sons run the place during the day."

Watchung Mountains, New Jersey

11:11am

When it's all boiled down to the bones, there are really only three types of people in this modern world. Firstly, because they are usually the Head-Person-In-Charge-of-Things-Around-Here, there are those of us who simply do not like to read.

Secondly, there are the multitudes who have been deprived of this empowerment and wondrous pleasure by the circumstances and people of their upbringing.

And then there are the rest of us, the kind of persons who must compulsively read every posted or fallen sign, notice, billboard, advertisement, magazine cover or subculture sticker that passes before our eyes; who surreptitiously sneak glances at the covers of books being read or carried by strangers on trains and buses; who at mealtimes read ingredient labels on food packaging a hundred times over if there is no other reading material handy; and who read yesterday's newspaper just in case they might've missed something. It is also this latter type of human that does not simply keep walking or driving past any independent bookstore they have never seen before but must stop everything they might have thought they were involved in and summon all of their intellectual capacities and spirits to explore and examine this newfound land.

Such it was the day he was to embark for the South, when it was necessary to pick up some last-minute equipment and supplies, and for which it was necessary to venture out to the mild green slopes of western Jersey.

In the foothills of the Watchung Mountains, where the suburbs begin to surrender some space to wilderness, in a town the size of a neighborhood, there is a camera specialty store that sells bodies and attachments not available anywhere else in the state and for which he

would have to pay double or triple if he were to buy in Manhattan or Miami. Without traffic it's a twenty-minute drive, his speed, from Jersey City taking Interstate 78 to Exit 43. The owner had shrewdly picked a prime location in north central New Jersey at a crossroads of nature preserves and little America that netted weekend adventurers, professional nature photographers and crisscrossing international tourists from New York and Pennsylvania. That she herself was an award-winning photojournalist was something only long-time regulars ever found out about.

Having enjoyed an informative conversation with the proprietress and procured almost all of the items on his list, he started heading back to Hudson County. But at the entrance ramp to the highway, not even a quarter mile from the exit where he had come in, he found a construction crew directing traffic to a detour. Out here, that meant having to wind your way through the woods.

Today is not the day, he complained to the gods in vain.

Despite his entreaty he was forced to join a procession of cars taking an unscheduled tour of the Watchung Reservation, with some of the passengers ahead of him taking the time to stick their heads out of their windows and snap pictures of the emerging greenery while they were there.

After crawling along for ten minutes he saw one of those old wooden post arrow signs indicating a road leading to a town he seemed to recall offered a connection to 22, a county road that ran parallel to the interstate he was being denied access to.

As soon as he spotted the outlet, he veered away from the convoy of scenery appreciating drivers and zipped forward to try to make up for lost time.

Suddenly exiting the woods into full sunshine on a back road, he was hit with a succession of oversized street signs imploring him to slow down, save a life, get to know Jesus, click it or ticket, dine like a king at Arthur's, and to prepare for traffic pattern changes.

The speed limit instantly became a sedate 15 mph as the road morphed into a tree-lined street that served as one of two entrances to a clean and quiet little downtown right out of a Rockwell.

In the hour before lunchtime there was not much foot traffic and less cars. He was allowed to cruise along at a max speed that a fast dog could beat, when out of the side of his eye he saw something he thought he might have imagined, reflexively stomped on the

brakes, and screeched to a halt. Had he really seen a sign that read 'The Book Brothel'?

Looking around and seeing no one close by on the shaded sidewalks, and risking the wrath of the local constable, he quickly backed up and made a reverse right turn to drive in backwards and park a half block up from the bookstore.

The shop was housed in a modest, two-story red brick building. The second floor looked like it could be either offices or a residence. With its green awning and all-glass facade, it could have been any kind of store in small town America, notwithstanding the large oval sign with the teasingly suggestive name. In the left display window was a random assortment of stated staff picks, and in the right side was a curated selection of works by women, presumably in celebration of Women's History Month although there was no such pronouncement shown.

Inside, the place was a world of its own. Along the left wall, the way he entered, was a wide inventory of international authors organized in sections by continents, archipelagos and diasporas. On the stand-alone shelf walls in the store's interior and in no discernible order were sections for world history, mythology, gardening, art, political science, comics and graphic novels, women's studies, African American studies, economics, cooking, biology, children's books, young adult books, pulp fiction, new fiction, non-fiction, science fiction, pet care, psychology, travel, books of sheet music, 'zines and even a corner display area for local authors. He was gratified to see that there was no space set aside for bestsellers, pseudoscience self-help gurus or books about religion.

He could have gotten lost in there for hours. Like a gift from the heavens, he came across a mass-market paperback (the kind you used to find in supermarkets) that he'd never finished and had been trying to find for years. Pure revenge fantasy literary junk food about an immigrant soldier building an American business empire from nothing, the fat little book, ghost-written for a wealthy French financier, was nonetheless a secret little personal triumph and guilty pleasure for him. He rewarded himself doubly with an oversized and illustrated, presumably outdated, manual for wrought iron fence restoration from the DIY section.

Checking the time, he realized he'd already been in there for nearly thirty minutes and had to force himself to start making his way

out. At the sales counter a young woman sat atop a wooden stool wearing brunette bangs and a dark rust turtleneck, engrossed in a large hardcover. So captivated was she by what she was reading, she didn't immediately notice him approaching the register. She let out an abrupt hearty laugh at some grand revelation by the author and only then noticed the customer standing in front of her. When she saw that said customer was trying to eye the title of her book, she politely set it to the side on a counter behind her.

"Hi! Sorry 'bout that," she apologized smiling, knowing it was unnecessary. "What did you find?" she asked.

"Something I've been looking for for some time and something unexpected that I didn't know I was looking for."

"Excellent! A double hitter," joked the reader-cashier as she rang up his purchase.

"What a wonderful place you have. It was such a pleasant surprise. I was just driving by."

"Thank you so much", she said with an appreciative smile. "Actually, that's the owner over there," she indicated with a nod of her head toward the front of the store while counting out his change.

As he started walking toward the door, he caught the owner's eye as she looked up from her knitting, the beginnings of a colorful baby sweater it looked like. She gave him a warm smile and he was reminded of the goddesses floating in mid-air painted by the Renaissance masters, just with clothing on. He wondered if the red scarf she wore was for fashion or for revolutionary ardor.

She watched him as he approached and just as he was about to remark about what a great bookstore she had, she preempted him.

"Would you like your fortune told?" she asked in a way no mere mortal could resist.

Disarmed, he stopped in his tracks. It was then that he noticed a deck of tarot cards on the coffee table between hers and another armchair. So much for small talk.

"How much?" he asked.

"Twenty-five dollars."

"Alright, I'm game. Why not? It can't get much worse than it's been going."

"Oh, lighten up. It can't be that bad if you're browsing a bookstore. Besides, you can always take the world off your shoulders any time you like and maybe take some time to take care of you."

"I suppose that's true."

"Or we can do a love reading for fifty dollars."

He harrumphed softly.

"Yeah, no, that won't be necessary. Love and marriage are the last things on my mind."

"Got it. Hey, who needs chattel, anyway, amiright?"

This annoyed him a bit, she saw.

"Maybe not every man sees it that way," he sort of squeezed out between his teeth.

"Then why not just use the word 'partner'?"

His face softened a fraction of a degree.

"Because it makes life difficult for the divorce attorneys and they'd rather not."

She was about to answer that in full when she realized he was being sarcastic.

"A look to the future, then," she smiled.

She set her knitting on a small antique end table beside her and extended her hand in a practiced grace.

"My friends call me CJ. Everyone else in town calls me all kinds of other things."

He snorted out a suppressed laugh. She was beautiful, unselfconscious, and she owned a bookstore. He sighed inside knowing he would likely never pass this way again, then took his seat across from her. He told her his name, then pulled out a twenty and a five from his wallet and placed it on the end table next to the knitting.

"Thank you. Shuffle the deck a few times, keeping the faces down, please," she commanded gently as she handed him the stack of large, thick cards.

He did so and allowed for some evidence of handiness.

"You're a card player, that's good," she said.

"Not really," he replied.

After three full shuffles he gave her back the cards. She returned the deck to their place on the otherwise bare coffee table.

"So, I like to tell people that these readings of the tarot should be used in a creative manner, toward making the most of our lives. Yours today will be a sort of checking of the headwinds, making sure your ship is steady as she goes, so to speak. We'll pull ten cards that will look at your life from the outside.

"We'll start with where you are right now in your journey."

She turned over a card and placed it about six inches parallel to the stack. It was The Hermit.

"Hmmm," she purred, "The Hermit. So maybe you actually have been taking some time for yourself?"

Only slightly impressed, he merely nodded, pursing his lower lip.

"That's good, then." She made arm movements like a theatre major, but naturally, unlike the robotic politicians at press conferences. "People forget that it's healthy to get away from the cacophony of the world sometimes, that it's often good to spend time alone, and to move in their own pathway.

"Except that this card is in reverse, so on the flipside it needs to be said that there is such a thing as spending too much time alone. And maybe, just maybe, it's time for you to kick your legs about, get some fresh air, visit new places, you know what I mean?"

"Well, I've never been to *this* town," he considered. "And this afternoon I'm headed out to Miami for a few weeks..."

"Fantastic! Now let's look at some possibilities and some potential challenges."

She flipped another card and placed it horizontally on top of the first.

"Oh, shit!" She jumped back a little and even startled him.

"What?!" he asked, starting to worry. The card was The Devil.

"I'm sorry, no, it's cool, it's cool. The Devil is not as bad a card as it seems, and in fact there are actually no bad cards in the tarot. It's just that I've never seen it pop out so quickly, I mean, it just doesn't often appear so early in the reading.

"Anyway, it does signify something or someone in your life that may be affecting you in a negative manner. A lot of the times it can mean drug or alcohol abuse or a toxic relationship."

"I don't drink or take drugs," he said flatly.

"Well, it also doesn't have to refer to romantic or marital relationships, it could have something to do with work or outside work, some other part of your life, so just keep that in mind.

"And knowing what might be blocking your life path will help you to remove that barrier and get back to your purpose and your goals. The next card will advise you on what it is you should be focusing on."

She turned over the next card to place it in a space below the first two.

"Huh." She remained looking at the card for an extra second, then looked up at him again. "Justice."

His face seemed to harden a little more than it already was, she thought.

"This card is one of only a few that is what it sounds like, the seeking of karma and justice. Your card is upright so there is no ambiguity or mystery about the message. The only thing is, justice is not always fair and it takes a level head to understand this. Moreover, sometimes justice is bigger than ourselves and about more than the balancing of scales."

Her smile returned.

"Because so often we have unresolved issues from our past, and because so much of who we are as individuals is shaped by our past, it's necessary to look back and take inventory of what our past means to us now."

The fourth card she turned over and set in the space between the two coupled cards and the stack. Her eyes popped open a little and the smile disappeared. It was the Death card.

"...aaaanndd it's reversed, because of course," she murmured slightly under her breath. And she looked at him for just a second too long.

"No, it's not meant to be taken literally, it's not referring to any actual deaths in your family or anything like that," she began explaining. "But it is most definitely an ending. And because we are talking about the past and the card is in reverse, it cannot be any clearer. In order for you to move forward in your life it's likely necessary for you to completely break away from whatever it is in the past that's adding drag to your momentum. Does any of this make sense to you at all so far?"

"More than I care to admit, but it's interesting."

"Very good. Hopefully your mission is starting to come into focus. Let's look at your strengths, which you'll need, of course, to see you through."

The next card, the fifth, she flipped and placed above the initial two.

"Ah! Excellent!" she said with a noticeable measure of odd relief. "The Knight of Wands."

“Now you’re on fire, for real. The knight is aligned with fire and the suit of wands represents fire. The card is upright and that means you are straightforward and unafraid in your approach. That said, the danger with fire of course is that it can get out of control if not used properly, and then it will consume us. Bravery can easily slip into recklessness or arrogance.

“And charging forward,” she said, charging forward, “we’ll take a sneak peek at the near future.”

With a bit of a flourish, she turned over the next card to place it in the last open space next to the centered couple. A Mona Lisa smile formed slowly over her bright red lips. She looked at him seemingly pleased.

“The High Priestess,” she said triumphantly.

“Bear in mind this card is about feminine energy, not gender. There’s no sexy oracle in a flowing white gown about to appear in a moonlight mist to solve all of your mind’s questions. The tarot has no gender.

“Rather, this card is about wisdom and knowledge, about secrets and intuition. And since it’s come out in one of the more active positions, that would indicate you’ll likely need to draw on all of these attributes soon.

“I’m sure you’re aware we all have both feminine and masculine energies. You’re entering a time when you’ll need the powers of the High Priestess. You’ll need to both look inside yourself as well as open yourself up to the mysteries you’ll encounter.”

The man’s face was a blank page. He was either a skeptic scoffing silently, or he was starting to take her seriously.

“After a glimpse of what’s on the horizon,” she continued, “the tarot offers some counsel and a possible approach with the next card.”

Said card she revealed and began a row from the bottom to the side of the cross formed by the first six cards. It was the King of Swords.

“Wow. You’re going all in. The swords are all about truth, and intellect, logic and discipline. The King of Swords embodies leadership, solutions and ideas.

“It’s this path that the tarot is counseling, someone who keeps his emotions in check and is guided by reason and scientific principles. And although the card is not in a reverse position there

always exists the danger that the king's detachment will isolate him. Just remember that The King of Swords is a bringer of light, not a withholder."

There was a glint of incredulity in his eye. Was it for himself or for the world at large?

"What you need to know is next," she said as she pulled another card and placed it above the last one.

"And there it is: The Wheel Of Fortune!" she declared with a bit of theatricality. "It seems what you need to know is that things can go in any direction at this time. That no matter how hard we strive to determine the outcomes of our actions, there are always some things that are completely beyond our control."

"So basically, I'm headed for chaos and uncertainty, is that it? Business as usual, then," he said wryly.

"Not entirely," she countered. "This card is about fate, and fortune, both good and bad. But it's in an upright position so I daresay it signifies a positive change is in the air for you. Perhaps a cycle of bad times ending, a surprise promotion at work, an unexpected windfall, things like that.

"In any case, what matters is that however the wheel spins, it's up to you to channel your energy toward creative solutions and not a form of destructiveness."

Lamentably, he'd never considered himself a creator of any sort, except perhaps for having made a baby and registering a small business. Other than that, the tarot's admonitions and revelations meant very little to him.

"The ninth card," she resumed, "speaks to your hopes and fears. It will help us better understand where you'd like to be and what may be holding you back."

When she placed it in the row she was forming and flipped it over it was the Judgment card, in the reverse position.

"I see," she nearly whispered without looking up. "Well, captain, it seems it's time to settle your tab." Then she looked him in the eye and gave him a sympathetic smile.

"In order for you to move forward you'll have to remove the obstacle blocking your way, and that obstacle is you.

"The Judgment card serves to remind us that sooner or later there comes a time for a reckoning, for all of us. We're past the

concepts of sin, and heaven and hell, in this day and age, but the allegory still works.

“Again, it may not necessarily pertain to your personal life, it could have something to do with your work or some other endeavor. But there is an accounting taking place, wherein the only solution is atonement. For your errors, anyone you may have wronged, for the damage you’ve done.

“And because the card is reversed, it means it is your doubts, or your self-doubt, and your need for clarity that are at the crux of the matter.

“There is a suggestion of rebirth with this card, a life after death, if you will. But in order to be reborn, one has to die first.”

One of his eyebrows was arched and his lips pursed again, as if in bemusement, but it was a futile ruse. She knew he knew what she was talking about. It was time to close out the reading, there was only one card left to turn.

“This last card,” she said as she reached for it, “will reveal your potential future.”

She laid it at the top of the row of four and completed a shape that looked to him like a tipped over Charlie Brown Christmas tree.

“The Hanged Man...” she mused.

“This is one of the most complex cards in the tarot. Not as morbid as it might seem, it’s based on the Norse myth of Odin, the all-powerful god who hung himself upside down from the Tree of Life in his quest for knowledge.

“After nine days, he was able to understand the runes that had been carved into the tree by The Fates and thus achieved enlightenment. But his newly acquired wisdom and power came at a price: he’d had to pierce himself with a spear and bleed to the point where he entered that limbo between life and death.”

“That’s not morbid?” he muttered.

“It’s symbolism,” she answered. “It represents a higher level of knowing, but through a sacrifice.

“It means maybe having to turn your world upside down to see things in a new way, distancing yourself from a situation instead of trying to control it, and maybe having to wait until the truth is revealed to you before taking action.”

He chewed on that for a minute, then threw the proverbial grain of salt over his shoulder.

"Well, CJ, this was definitely a new experience for me and even a little fun, but I have to tell you I'm really not the superstitious type. My world's already been turned upside down a few times recently and I'm no closer to figuring out my life any more than when it was half-way normal. I'm starting to think there's really nothing at all to figure out. You just gotta play the hand you're given."

"If it were that simple, you wouldn't have been curious," she suggested.

"And I am one hundred percent satisfied. I'm just glad you didn't pull the one card I really did not want to see."

"Which was?"

"The Fool."

"It still might not have meant what you thought," she grinned. "And I'm sure you know better than most that we can always completely change the cards we're dealt."

"Copy that," he half-smiled, as he pushed open the door. "I did want to tell you that I really enjoyed my visit to your shop. What a refreshing change from the corporate warehouse showrooms."

She gave him that enchanting smile one last time and waved goodbye.

Stepping outside he noticed a police cruiser pulling away from his car and making an illegal left onto the main street. When he reached the driver's door he found three traffic tickets slipped under the windshield wiper: reckless driving; illegal turn; failure to signal.

What the hell!?! But there hadn't been anyone around!

These tickets would never hold up in court, but the obviously otherwise idle officer probably knew that and issued them anyway, knowing also that out-of-towners usually just call or mail in payment to avoid coming back to the town for a court date.

It was as he pulled up to the corner, a demonstrable full stop for any cameras or wily cops, that he saw a small, thin, prim-looking woman, tight hair bun, tighter eyes, standing in the display window of the storefront opposite him.

He hadn't noticed it when he drove in, but it, too, was a bookstore; a Christian bookstore as proclaimed by the window sign. As the woman stared laser beams at him with obvious disapproval of his choice in reading materials, he lingered for a moment and it dawned on him that she must have called the cops on his reverse driving maneuver. Her flatliner lips suddenly twisted into a

gruesome smile of satisfaction. A flurry of traffic tickets inflicted on a lawless heathen had made her day.

He fought the instinct to stick his arm out the window and flip her the bird because surely in a town this pious it would be a capital offense to impugn the propriety of such a good and decent lady and he might get struck by lightning. It was best to get out of this nasty little speed trap hamlet as quickly as possible lest the crimes of his mere presence multiply upon themselves.

But before he did, he looked at the woman again and pulled out his cell phone. Still looking directly at her, he pretended to call someone and have a conversation.

“Watermelon cantaloupe watermelon cantaloupe watermelon cantaloupe,” he said to the handset.

Nodding slowly and gravely, he retrieved a notepad from one of his jacket pockets, pretended to write something down, and closed the flip phone.

With a slow, sinister nod he gave one last, long look to the religious sentinel, whose eyes had by now grown as large as discuses.

Let her think about that for a couple of days, he cackled inside himself, and drove off.

Newark, New Jersey
Newark Liberty International Airport
2:10pm

Sophie had insisted that he at least have lunch with her and her architect husband Teague before leaving town since he would be missing their annual St. Patty’s Day dinner party tomorrow night which, surprisingly enough, he’d attended last year and appeared to enjoy. They met up at the office in Journal Square, where they went over last-minute details about the job. Then she drove them to the house in Lyndhurst.

Teague worked from home, where he was able to take care of their three-year old girl and he and Sol had become good friends over the year and a half that Sophie had been keeping the office under control through the roller coaster past eighteen months.

The furry ones went on extended holiday to visit friends who had a large place in the Heights near Leonard Gordon Park and a small zoo of their own. His travel bags had been packed the night

before. The cameras and other equipment all fit into one sturdy case. They lived about fifteen minutes from the airport. Teague volunteered to drop him off and they talked about buildings during the ride.

"I'm just really tired of all the cookie cutter rat box towers," Teague was griping. "The lack of imagination is despairing." He had already donned a sparkly green party bowler hat over his fiery orange curls in anticipation of starting his favorite holiday after this one last errand of adult responsibility.

"I know what you mean. Craftsmanship is no longer a thing," his passenger agreed.

"Give me some Zaha Hadid any day."

"Who?"

"Iraqi British uhmaaazing architect. Unafraid. She just won the Pritzker Prize last year. And matter of fact, she's planning a building there in Miami where you're going."

"Really..."

"Oh, yeah, you must check out her work. Her new project is *guaranteed* to be mind blowing."

"Huh. Sounds interesting."

"Sophie said your new client develops alternative building materials. I don't know much about it, but that also sounds interesting."

"It is. I'm kind of taking a crash course. To tell you the truth, I didn't know these products existed."

When they entered the swirl of airport traffic, he directed them to the front of Terminal C and didn't let Teague get out of the car. Retrieving his bags, he closed the trunk and gave it a double tap. The eternally jovial young visionary stuck his head all the way out the driver's window and gave him that mystical smile of his.

"Hurry back! I can't wait to hear about what you learn down there!" he shouted as the car salmon jumped back into the stream of airport traffic.

It only felt strange for a moment, being back at the scene of all that madness just a few months ago. But he'd used this airport so many times before it was stupid to dwell on one bad experience, catastrophic as it was.

It was a normally busy day with yellow cabs, buses, private livery, and slightly panicked suburbanites here to pick up family all jockeying for position in the three lanes under the terminal. Outside

on the entrance apron a dozen arrivals waited for their rides outside at the passenger loading zone. Inside there was the usual assortment of travelers spread out among those torturously uncomfortable plastic 1960's seats in the waiting area.

Walking past the ticket desks and the fast-food restaurants with lines of hungry people he mounted the escalator to the second level and found the entrance for the Air Train that connected the three terminals to the train station on the other side of the noodle soup of highways at the airport's western edge. The station was a stop for two New Jersey Transit commuter lines as well as Amtrak's Northeast Regional line, whose 'Silver Meteor' train to Miami was scheduled to arrive within the next twenty minutes. He sat in one of the vestibules to wait and from his carry-on bag pulled out the old paperback he'd brought for the ride.

Heavenly Grace Bed & Breakfast
Greenville, Florida
3:15pm

"Gawdamn, girl! Is that all you? Yo, you need to back that thing up, right over this way!" proclaimed the twentysomething with bloodshot eyes splayed out on a lounge chair in the entrance lobby.

"How charming," she retorted, *"You must be the concierge."*

"Nah, baby, I'm secuhrrity..."

From behind the reception desk a door was flung open and another, much neater dressed young man of equal age came rushing forth wringing his hands with a paper towel.

"Get out!" he commanded the other youth. *"Go sit outside and... and stare at your phone or something!"*

Turning to the prospective guest with a look of dismay, he apologized, *"I am so sorry about that, miss! Are you here about a room?"*

"Yo, watch how you talk to me, punk boy. I'm 'a go get me some mo' sizzurp," the lounge announced as he got up. Looking lewdly at the new lodger he slurred, *"I'll be around if you need me, sweetheart."* Then he gave her a wink and blew an air kiss as he did a sailor walk out the door with one hand holding his drink and the other holding up his sagging pants.

“Girl, don’t mind him,” the other young man dismissed with flailed wrist, “he’ll be passed out somewhere in the next hour. Someone left him on our doorstep as a baby.”

But it was obvious they were twin brothers.

Philadelphia, Pennsylvania

3:36pm

He remembered that he had to change trains in Philly but must not have noticed that there was a ninety-minute layover. Not wanting to hang around 30th Street Station on a relatively nice day, he wandered into University City strolling Chestnut and Market Streets, nibbling on a pretzel and roasted cashews, recalling his adventures in the city of brotherly love until it was time to board again.

As he had calculated, there were not many people headed south on a Wednesday afternoon and he had the entire back half of the rail car to himself. He stretched out along his two seats and delved back into the New York immigrant’s tall tale as the rest of the thirteen colonies and major northeast cities passed by in the window and the sun slowly walked into the arms of the night.

In Baltimore he recalled a weekend adventure in the Fell’s Point waterfront neighborhood when he had filled in for the east coast leg of a touring national act. Wonderful people in Balto.

In DC, he revisited an almost completely pleasant summer vacation with his former little family.

In northern Virginia he remembered less than pleasant experiences in his life lessons.

At last, out in the countryside sometime in the evening he became sleepy and dozed off. As planned, he’d be well rested when he awakened in the South.

Cousin Charlie’s Kitchen, Greenville, Florida

6:10pm

Seated at a table to herself, she had to try to stretch out her time to maximize her chances of scoring a ride. As it turned out, she wouldn’t have to wait long at all.

Seeing that the young woman was traveling alone and noticing that the nearby table of bad boys were acting like a bunch of

horn dogs, Carolyn Hawkins vetoed her husband's reasonable objections and walked over to her table before the food arrived.

"Hey, sugar! I hope you don't get offended, but I just came over to invite you to enjoy your dinner with us, me and my husband there. My name's Carolyn, by the way. He says I'm a busybody, but this is the South, honey, and we don't like to see people having dinner alone."

She had a smile like a close relative that hadn't seen you in years.

"I'm from the South, too," beamed the fugitive. "That is very neighborly of you, thank you. I could definitely use the company."

She collected her bags and moved to the friendly woman's table. Carolyn introduced her to her husband Bo, who went and got their new guest's chair for her. She retrieved her table setting and the plate of rolls she'd been getting to know.

"You guys are traveling, too?" she checked immediately.

"Girl, we have just returned from Nawrlins and *oo wee* did we have a good time! Didn't we, baby?"

"Heh heh heh," the man chuckled happily. Gazing out the window as if replaying their adventure in the Big Easy on his mind's movie screen, he murmured wistfully, "*Laissez les bon temps rouler...*" Then he snapped himself out of it and returned his attention to his plate.

They, too, happened to be staying the night in the only lodging in town.

"The last of our babies started college this past September," Carolyn elaborated. "Now I can ride with my Bo on his truck routes. We delivered a load from Pensacola to Metairie, then picked up a load in Mobile for delivery to Live Oak. The two loads paid for our whole vacation! We live in Macon. Georgia, you know. Where are you headed, beloved?"

Heavenly Grace Bed and Breakfast

8:40pm

The enormous bed was unbelievably comfortable. She just lay there like a starfish, thinking of nothing else except how incredibly soft this bed was. Perhaps she should... just stay here... in this town... in this room... for a while...

And then the image of the roaring reverend's angry red face flew into her mindscape and ruined her peace. How this man had become the bane of her existence she still could not fathom. It was more than three years now since they first encountered each other at the big lawn on campus in front of the student center.

She used to like taking her lunch at the same little gazebo every day where she could read peaceably. A small group of undergraduates had started a quiet weekly poetry reading on a nearby patch of grass.

One day the reverend, tall and admittedly rather handsome with cleft chin and strong jaw, perfectly styled hair, showed up on campus elegantly dressed all in white with a group of burly men in maroon blazers and tan slacks handing out little pamphlets threatening eternal damnation. The preacher's entourage consisted of sheriff's officers from around the state representing an organization called Sheriffs for Christ.

Somehow the proselytizing troop seemed to be on a predetermined collision course with the poetry troupe. On a quiet day in late April, they approached the reading and interrupted one of the poets with their proclamations of salvation and the reader responded by shouting his poem to completion. She had watched, shocked, as the sheriffs and the preacher surrounded the students, taking turns shouting back Biblical psalms and proverbs. The poets abandoned their little patch of grass to get away from the law enforcing missionaries.

The following week the poets brought along a dozen of their friends and the sheriffs a few extra officers. The two groups immediately became confrontational to the point where it was becoming physical as the officers were generously offering small shoves and shoulder bumps to the poets who had started dancing around them reciting poetry and singing songs. The young, decidedly unathletic students were no match for the beefy, martially trained officers. It was unclear who had contacted the local news outlet, but a small camera crew had arrived on the scene.

It wasn't usually her style, she preferred orderly forms of protest, it was that the anger had welled up in her and she found herself stepping in between them. Her direct recrimination to the reverend erupted into a shouting match with a man who was well accustomed to yelling at others. They got in each other's face and a

campus police officer had to separate them. One of the sheriffs, thinner than the others, veiny and with his eyes bulging out aghast at her temerity, stepped up shouting, "Young lady! Do you know who you're disrespecting this way? This is the right reverend Rory Rollins!"

Suddenly aware that she had a captive television audience, she looked directly into the camera, cocked her head sideways and made a face like a quizzical puppy.

"Ruh ruh ruh ruh ruh?" she uttered. "Ruh roh!"

The people gathered around them, except for the sheriffs, broke out in laughter. As she and the reverend found out later that day, so had the watchers at home.

And then she laid into him, on live television and recorded for all posterity.

"Mister, I wouldn't care if you were the Archbishop of Canterbury. This is a public university, not a Christian seminary school! People come here to learn, not to be indoctrinated! You need to leave these kids alone!"

After that day the university administration had to step in to protect the students. The reverend and the sheriff's group were invited to table their literature and message in an area inside the student center reserved for vendors and prospective employers, but they were prohibited from canvassing the campus. They did not return. The reverend did not forgive nor forget.

Over the next three years she would encounter him in more and more places in and around Tallahassee, always at opposing angles, and it became something horribly personal. She soon learned that aside from being a fire and brimstone preacher with a Florida megachurch, Rollins was also a US Congressman about to launch his bid for governor.

Two weeks ago, he had shown up outside the library with a camera crew of his own. The library staff didn't know what to make of it but after he'd made what sounded like a small speech on the lawn he made his way inside, filming along the way. She was at the information desk.

"And herein is where the Devil's tongue holds sway!" he declaimed as his entourage entered. In a TV actor's way, he pranced around the large reading room denouncing the corrupting malevolence of all those useless secular volumes on the shelves.

When the library director came out of her office to put a stop to the unauthorized filming, the reverend had the last word.

"No need to panic, Ma'am," he smiled broadly. "We are leaving. I needed only to show my flock from whence originates the tinder that will light the holy flame to announce the arrival of our citadel!" Then he aimed and shot his chosen nemesis at the desk a quick look of loathing.

"For after we have concluded our business with this so-called place of learning, we shall be *erecting* a big, looong cathedral tower to glorify His name, and His truth, indeed, an entire holy fortress built upon the ashes of the words of His enemies!"

The director recognized him and had to yield to his status as a state politician. Two campus officers appeared and there was some hubbub as everything was explained away and everyone had to defer to the congressman.

He eased over and leaned close to her, just enough so that only she could hear what he said.

"Do you see now how perfect is God's justice?" he sneered. "Not only will you be forced to participate in the procession of His Majesty properly as a lowly servant girl, but your own people will be offering up your land for it to take place upon." A wide, sinister smile formed on his lips.

"And there's *nothing* you can do about it!" he hissed.

Richmond, Virginia

9:45pm

A group of young people crashed aboard carrying paper and plastic bags full of beer and liquor and foodstuffs and made enough noise that he was forced awake. According to the conversation, they had just made the closing of the liquor stores. There was plenty of space in the car and the rest of the train but apparently, they figured it would be cool to make camp right next to the one guy sleeping in the corner seat all the way in the back by himself. Because of course.

He listened to their boisterous talk because he had no choice, ascertained that they were headed to an all-night party in Petersburg, and he hoped he might get some sleep after they left.

Petersburg, Virginia

10:21pm

Upon the train's arrival in Petersburg, the Richmond crew took off but were immediately replaced by a swarm of more college students with Himalaya backpacks and large brown and white paper bags filled with beer, pizza and fried chicken. The smell alone of potent marijuana was enough to give anyone a contact high.

Taking a slow, unhappy trip to the restroom, he thought of asking a conductor for a seat change but soon saw that there was no point; the train was now filled.

He returned to his seat and found he now had a companion next to him, a young man who had crash-landed into the first available seat apparently, as long legs and arms splayed all the way out and the bit of drool that was forming on the side of his mouth would attest. He stepped over him, crawled into a fetal position in his seat and attempted again to return to the wonderful world of sleep.

Rocky Mount, North Carolina

11:52pm

At midnight there was again a general tumult as seats were forgotten, exchanged, confused, argued over, returned and eventually reorganized again by the night shift conductors. He merely pretended to be an inanimate object and was ignored by everyone.

Kingstree, South Carolina

3:53am

In the longest stretch of the route without a station stop at some point everyone fell asleep. One out of three people snore in their sleep. On a passenger train, that percentage increases to one out of two when alcohol and other intoxicants are mixed into the equation.

Somewhere along the way he, too, succumbed to the soft machine's natural shutdown mechanisms. But three hours felt like three seconds when suddenly the next stop was announced and it roused the party campaigners.

From what he could discern, everyone in the miniscule town of Kingstree was a surfer, the bars had just let out and all the

townsfolk had decided to jump on the train together and head to the shore for a group swim. Or something like that, because a swarm of drunken wave riders had come aboard, with boards.

And they were excited. Boy, were they excited! A half hour of this excitement elicited from him a half-shouted gripe.

“For fuck’s sake! Am I the only one trying to get any sleep around here?!”

“Dude, chill! It’s spring break, bro,” somebody said.

Charleston, South Carolina

4:48am

He felt like he was drunk, too, along with everyone else, so bleary eyed and disoriented was he by the stop-and-go sleep.

Having arrived at the coastline, there was a mass exodus from the train. Waiting to feel it pull out again he dared to hope and squinted one eye open to see that the car had emptied.

He heaved a sigh of relief, stretched out his legs, fluffed up his rolled-up sweater pillow and prepared for a couple of hours of catch-up sleep.

But his small joy was premature, as a large family of large people began making their way toward his end of the train compartment, complete with babies and grandparents and beach balls in tow, as they loudly debated the merits of the different seating areas. Once more, the group consensus was to encamp where there was only one other passenger.

As they played musical chairs for just the right seating arrangement there was some bickering about who would sit by the window and who needed to be close to the aisle in case they had to run to the restroom but when they were finally settled they attuned themselves to the journey ahead of them and everyone was super thrilled about their Florida vacation.

In his delirium, the lone traveler across the aisle from them briefly entertained the notion of reaching up into the overhead compartment to retrieve his gun and placing the barrel in his mouth to call it a wrap.

Savannah, Georgia

6:43am

When at last he heard the announcement that the train was entering Savannah he cried a silent hallelujah. Only one more hour of this hell ride. Then the overhead PA system announced that there would be a half-hour delay in Savannah due to a mechanical issue, which turned into an hour's delay.

Live Oak, Florida

8:15am

They'd all enjoyed a lovingly extravagant early breakfast created by Hattie, Heavenly Grace's chef, and hit the road at quarter to seven.

"You like the blues, honey?" Carolyn asked the passenger.

"Do I! I carry them in my pocket."

"Aww, I'm sorry, baby..."

"No, I mean this," announced the passenger as she pulled out a harmonica from her right jacket pocket. "Whenever I have to let the blues out, I use Miss Smith here."

They had a good laugh and the hitcher played a few riffs along with the song that was playing on the station they were listening to.

The drive was forty-five minutes, most of which they spent talking about water. She had not felt the need to lie to them about the kind of work she did but had managed to avoid naming the university. Bo was an avid fisherman, both salt and freshwater he was quick to point out, and he professed that he and Carolyn spent half their time out on a lake or the ocean. Carolyn said she was an Aquarius who had always felt the need to live near a big river. Before they'd scarcely finished the conversation, they were already approaching the vast army of giant eponymous trees surrounding the small town founded just before the breakout of the Civil War. In the parking lot of a big box store, Bo found an isolated space underneath a shade tree.

"Listen, girl," Carolyn said. "I know you've still got some traveling to do so we thought we'd make a little donation toward your adventure so you can stay safe and--"

"-Oh, no, Carolyn, I can't! You're already helping me out immensely by getting me here," the passenger protested.

"Now, don't fuss, it ain't all that much. I just want you to know we're wishing you the best on your journey, okay?"

"Okay," she acquiesced. "I can't tell you how grateful I am, Carolyn. Thank you, Bo."

"Shoot, girl," he laughed. "Twenty years ago, we'd 'a been ridin' right alongside you. You be safe out there, young lady, it's a much different world now."

Carolyn handed her a small leather-bound book and clasped her passenger's hands in hers.

"Okay, Godspeed, girl."

They let her out at the intersection of 10 and 51, the center of town, where the fugitive began walking north on Ohio Avenue.

"You really don't think we should have told her we saw her on the news last night?" Carolyn asked Bo as they merged onto 51.

"Naahh... The cops all think she's headed to Jacksonville or already there. She's doin' fine' without us makin' it weird for her."

"Those must have been some pretty important books she's supposed to have taken..."

"Baby, you know nobody cares what's inside them old books anymore. They're just concerned with how much money they're worth."

"I suppose you're right. But you know what? Something tells me that girl ain't do it for no money."

"I know. I got the same feeling. That's why I didn't call in for the twenty-thousand-dollar reward."

She looked at him in astonishment.

"I'm kidding, baby, I'm kidding!" he reassured her. "The girl seems to know what she's doing."

"I hope so," she murmured as she turned away to look out the window toward where they'd left the fugitive they had befriended.

"Run, girl, run," she whispered.

Peejus, Georgia

8:23am

The town was even smaller than he'd expected. The train station was just a ticket booth in a waiting room. There were no taxis out front.

He'd printed out a map for the route from the train station to Salem Drive and the one car rental agency he'd found online. The listing said they opened at eight-thirty. He was still on schedule. Loading himself up with all his bags he hurried out to the main road in the already warm southern mist.

There must have been some kind of mistake, though. When he got to the number on the street he was looking for he found not Andy's Rental Agency but Fred's Feed & Seed. He walked up and down in both directions on both sides of the street thinking it must have been a typo but there were few businesses around at all and none of them had anything to do with automobiles. He decided to walk into 1313 to see if the feed and seed doubled as a car rental.

The front of the large wooden building was a reception area and store for small wares with a wide and tall doorless entrance to a large hall in the rear. He set his bags just inside the storefront door and out of the way. There was hay all over the wood floor. A clearly curious thin, older man in faded blue overalls and round spectacles had brought his left hand to the side of his balding head as he processed the sight of the luggage-bearing stranger.

The visitor made his way to the counter and mustered what friendliness he could.

"Fred?" he asked with one-fourth of a smile.

"No, I'm Bud. Fred's at the other store. Is there something maybe I can help you with?" Bud asked, glancing at the travel bags.

"Actually, I'm looking for Andy. Andy's Rental Agency, to be precise. It's supposed to be a franchise of Intrepid Rent-A-Car. This is the address I have for it. I need to rent a car."

"Andy died."

"What? When?"

"Goin' on two years now. All them cigarettes all them years done caught up to 'im."

In some disbelief the traveler uttered, "But the listing online said it was open six days a week..."

"Well, there you go, see? You cain't buhlieve e'rything you read on the innernet."

"I called and got an answering machine." He hadn't wanted to leave a message or make any reservations or transactions over the internet.

"What can I tell you, sir? The man ain't have no family to close up his affairs. He did have a whole lotta debt, though, on account 'a all them medical bills. Fred bought this building for a song over a year ago."

Fine. What can you do? It occurred to him that not all small businesses had yet taken to mastering cyberspace.

"Any chance there's other car rental agencies in town?"

"Nope. Savannah's got some, though."

The traveler had also specifically not wanted to rent a car in Savannah. And now he had no choice. He thanked Bud for his time and like a first-round draft pick that didn't get picked collected his bags and headed back to the train station.

"There's only one train a day that goes to Savannah. It leaves at 6:35 tonight, arrives at 7:35," stated the ticket agent when he got there.

He had to be in Valdosta by four. Going back to Savannah wasn't going to work. He rented three of the twelve lockers at the station hut and took off into the street again, determined to buy the first cheap used car he came across.

Walking around the commercial parts of the town in desperation and without direction he couldn't find a single used car dealer. When at last he decided to ask a man in his sixties who was standing in front of Wayne Memorial Hospital he found out why.

"Aw, we ain't had one a' them since Roy's Chevrolet on Kennedy Ave back in '87. Town council outlawed 'em 'cause a' all them drug dealers coming up from Miami buyin' up cars with dirty money to use as mules for transportin' their product up north. They was making some of the locals in town rich an' then people started fightin' over the money an' territory an' stuff. Ol' Roy was mad bull mad when the town told him he had to pack it up. Tried to fight it, lost e'rything, lost his big house and that gold diggin' wife 'a his."

"So... I can't buy a used car in this town?"

"Oh, you kin buy a used car, folks sell 'em all the time. You just gotta look fer one 'a them signs in the window."

"I don't suppose you know of anyone selling a car?"

"'Fraid not, son. Town ain't but so big, though. I'm sure you'll find something."

He thanked the elder man for his time and advice and turned back the way he'd come, to stick to the commercial areas. After two

hours of crisscrossing the entire town, he was drained and despairing. He'd seen tractors, ATV's, dirt bikes, lawnmowers and a dump truck being offered up on lawns, driveways and in parking lots but no cars. He decided he had no alternative but to retreat to Savannah in the evening. He began heading back to the one-room train station to wait for five hours.

Not wanting to repeat Cherry Street for a third time, he walked along a curve entering the parallel Pine Street for the nine or so blocks back to Broad Street. Passing North Bamboo Street he came to a dirt alley where there were no houses but only a couple of barren fields on either side, and on the corner one mammoth, misshapen bush with pale green leaves and a shortened street sign that actually read 'Dirt Alley'.

Amused, he only stopped for a second to wearily chuckle at it and resumed his trek. Hiding behind the blobby bush, though, in this empty lot, he discovered an odd little rust orange automobile that had to be over twenty years old with "one 'a them" black, red and white 'FOR SALE' signs:

'78 AMC Gremlin
Runs great, needs paint job
Call 912-530-6335

He called.

"Burroughs residence," said a raspy, old man's voice.

"Good afternoon, I'm calling about the car for sale out here on Pine Street and, uh, Dirt Alley."

"Yup."

"Well, I have a bit of an emergency and I need a car to get me to Gainesville."

"Uh huh."

"The sign says it runs great, but it *is* pretty old..."

"Ain't never had to use it much. I let my grandkids use it whenever they come visit, take it to over to Sam's place every year for a tune up an' such."

"Okay. How much do you want for it?"

"You a Yankee? You sound like a Yankee."

He rolled his eyes and took a deep breath. "I'm from New Jersey."

"Two hunnerd bucks."

That's it? Alright, well, we are in the south... he figured. "Sure, I have two hundred dollars."

"An' a carton 'a Winstons."

"I'm sorry, you mean a carton of cigarettes?"

"Unfiltered. They sell 'em fer cheap right around the corner at the Dollar Major. Bring me one 'a those an' the cash an' I'll give you the keys an' the title."

"Are you nearby?"

"Down the street, number one twenty-six."

"Down Dirt Alley?" he asked, not seeing any houses down that way.

"Other way, Palm Street. Ain't nothin' down that dirt road, case you ain't notice."

"Right, yeah, I hadn't looked. I'll call you back in a few minutes when I get there."

"Yup."

He immediately jogged back the way he came and over to the strip mall on the main drag. Rushing to the front counter at the supersized dollar store he bought two cartons of the requested tobacco and afterward used the ATM machine to withdraw a few hundred dollars. He hurried to meet the seller of the one vehicle that could get him out of this town.

On the porch of 126 Palm Street sat a long-legged sharp-eyed man somewhere in his seventies wearing a crisp cocoa brown linen suit, white cotton shirt with a tidy black string tie. He did not wave or stand but merely watched the would-be car buyer as he made his way up the steps. On a patio table in front of him sat two tall iced tea glasses and a fishbowl glass pitcher filled with a honey-colored liquid, ice cubes and fresh cut lemon slices. Also on the table was a .45 Colt revolver.

"Mr. Burroughs?"

"Howdy. Have a seat, please."

"Thank you," he huffed, a little out of breath as he sat down. "Got a couple of cartons for you, there was a 2-for-1 special."

"Yep, that special's been goin' on for about three years now. 'Preciate the gesture, though. This here's some peach lemonade if'n you wanna help yourself to some."

He had not noticed how thirsty he was.

"Thank you very much, I would love some," as he poured a glass. It was a delicious elixir.

"So, you want the car?"

"I, uh, I need the car. Alright if I take it for a quick spin? Just to make sure everything's working okay, you know? Here's the two hundred." He laid two bills on the table next to the gun. "I just need to make sure it gets me to Gainesville."

The old man reached into his pants pocket and retrieved a key ring with three keys; two duplicates and a smaller one.

"Little one's for the window in the back," Mr. Burroughs informed him. "You mighta noticed it's a solid frame and there ain't no hatchback."

"I did. Not a big deal," he said taking the keys. "Thanks. I'll be back in about ten minutes."

Briskly walking back to the little auto sitting patiently in the motley patch of brown grass, he gave it a once over and did the whole tire kicking routine. Above the rear bumper were a plastic Star of David icon, a 'No Nukes' sticker and a sticker reading 'War Is Over (if you want it)'. He popped the hood and saw a clean, if dated, engine and relatively new hoses. So far so good. He squeezed in and smelled nothing but the absence of human use. It was cramped even with the seat pushed back but he would survive. In the console between the seats were about a dozen cassette tapes that all looked to be artists from the '70's. Time had stopped for this car after that decade.

He cranked it up and the thing sounded pretty healthy. He slow rolled it out around the lot listening for any clicking or clanking, heard none, pulled onto the street and revved it up to Railroad Avenue where he was able to race up and down the isolated street to reach a highway speed. The little orange car would get him to where he needed to go.

Back at the seller's house the old man already had the title in his hand.

"Everythin' everythin'?" he asked the young northerner.

"You're a life saver, sir. I'll take it and leave you to the rest of your day."

"Got yer license?"

"Yeah, of course, here you go."

"You mighta noticed there's Georgia plates on it now. They're good through September 'a next year," Mr. Burroughs said as he

briefly inspected the card, copied the name and New Jersey DMV ID number onto the back of the title certificate, then added the date, the amount of the sale, and his own printed and signed name.

Sir, I don't even plan to have this car at this time tomorrow, the buyer was thinking.

"Right," was all he said.

"Alrighty, then. Pleasure doin' business with you," Mr. Burroughs said, handing over the title. "You have a safe trip, now."

"Thank you so much, Mr. Burroughs. Just out of curiosity, was this your car?"

"Don't be ridiculous, son. I drive a man's car. My Chevy's in the back a' the house. That little critter" he pointed at with his chin, "was left behind a long time ago by a gal come down from New York like you. Said she was 'experiencin' America' an' such. Stayed for a few months, we had some fun, thought she might actually stay. Then one day she up and took off with some long-haired singer in one 'a them hippie bands that had come into town one weekend, left the car behind. 'Been tryin' 'a get rid of that damned thing for twenty years now."

"It must have been waiting for me, then."

"Musta been..."

They shook hands and the buyer smushed himself back into the antiquated compact and hightailed it to the highway.

1:37pm

Exile On Main Street, The Rolling Stones, 1972

He had to stay in the middle lane and not go over 70mph or the little car began to tremble. Fortunately, there were few other cars out here on this stretch of 84 at this time of day and no large trucks. The tape player and car speakers worked just fine, though, and the street fighting poor boys of London made it an endurable road trip.

It was inevitable that at some point during the ride, hunched over at the little steering wheel in what amounted to a kiddie car, he would question his planning skills. But how the hell was he supposed to have known that the defunct car rental's website and digital voicemail were only ephemeral?

It was mission critical that he get to Valdosta before Miami and Amtrak did not go there. He'd made this drive nearly a dozen

times already, just always in a real car. Granted, he had always rented it in Savannah after flying in from Jersey, but the one time he thought it might be nice to do it differently for a change, things went haywire. Anyway, he was rolling with the punches now, that's all and that's it.

It had been a few years since the last time he visited, though, and he'd definitely had a number of life-changing events since then. How much would he share with the old friends he was headed to?

Old Statenville Road, Valdosta, Georgia

3:50pm

The couple he was visiting owned a small ranch-like property on the city's outskirts off 84. A dirt road led through strawberry fields to a modest colonial style house surrounded by nearly two dozen monolithic clay sculptures ranging in size from five to eight feet high encompassed by a landscaping theme of assorted exotic and native bushes and large outdoor plants and small trees.

She was in gardening gear, pruning the sentinels on the sides of the porch, he was barefoot in mauve clay-splattered cargo shorts and flag-emblazoned t-shirt squatted in front of the potter's wheel with a three-foot emerging formation.

Before there was a South Korea and a North Korea, there was only Korea. That's where she was born and what she would answer when asked. That she had originally been ordered to assassinate her husband of forty plus years only served to cement their union. How else would they have met?

He'd been born right here in blessed Valdosta, and this was exactly where they were gonna hafta plant his carcass to feed the tree. They'd bought the property in the mid-eighties and had lived a comfortable quiet for twenty years except for the steady rise in property taxes and the occasional consulting call from his former employers. An American veteran until they had to coax him into semi-retirement, he'd been a singularly reluctant mentor to Sol at a turbulent time for both of them, and the three of them together had been a formidable unit during events that officially did not occur.

"Baby, what year is it?" Robert Herndon and his Southern gentleman's bushy white goatee asked his wife.

"It's still 2005, Robert, why are you being silly?"

"Are you sure?" he chuckled.

"Now, Rob-" she stopped herself when she turned around to see what he was looking at.

"Oh. Is that him? In that... time capsule?"

"Must be, cause he's right on time. Maybe it's some kinda joke."

She looked at her partner of more than four decades with a knowing reprimand.

"Yeah, I know," he drawled. "There'll be some boring rational explanation."

The dust-trailed arrival had managed to pick up a bouquet of white roses and a bottle of Kentucky bourbon at a roadside quick mart so as to not show up empty-handed. Neither Joo Hyun, trim and bright eyed, nor Herndon, still nimble though now in his late sixties, ever seemed to age much. After embraces they had to rib him about the car.

"Gotta keep the gods amused, I suppose" was his best answer. "I'm getting rid of it in Gainesville."

He'd made it exactly in time for high tea, an old tradition and an inside joke with them. It was to be an early supper. Joo Hyun went upstairs to bathe and upon her return ordered her mate to do the same before he'd even emptied his glass and finished jocularities with his former acolyte.

While Rob was upstairs, Joo Hyun, like a conspiratorial schoolgirl, dragged her young old friend into the kitchen, bubbling over with some as yet undisclosed mirth.

"C'mon, Sol, I have to show you this before Sir Talksalot comes back and I can't tell you everything.

"Sit," she commanded as she handed him a large legal-size manila envelope. "Here, this is what you asked for. Robert is going to give you the third degree about how much trouble he had to go through to get it for you, but it really wasn't that hard at all, so you can ignore that stuff.

"But *this*, my adventurous friend, is my personal gift to you," she declared as she handed him a wide, flat rectangular box.

"They have completely surpassed the quality control examinations," she certified.

It was a box of bugs. Not insects, but the type of bug you slip into a target's upper coat pocket or affix to the inside of a telephone

handset. There were buttons, safety pins, pen caps, coins, a fake Rolex, plain little magnetic buds, and even a pair of dice.

"And these," she announced, "are my latest masterpieces!" as she handed him a tie box. "Merry Christmas."

"Can I open it nine months early?"

"Please do."

Inside were three sprigs of those tiny pink and white flowers called Baby's Breadth. They, too, were reproductions.

"They're beautiful, Joo Hyun. Thank you so much."

"You need a magnifying glass to see the lenses. They have both cameras and microphones, and they can transmit over radio, Bluetooth or Wi-Fi."

"Whoah. A triple play."

"No, Sol, it's a homerun. They also record digitally."

The old spook noisily made his way down the stairs declaring hunger and an official end to the day's sobriety.

"I see you got your new toys. But let me tell you about the strings I had to pull to get that little information request of yours. You have no idea how many favors I had to call in..."

Live Oak, Florida

6:20pm

There were scores of motels in this town, which was at the entrance to vacationland, but the busy season had started, and she had no reservation. After an entire afternoon of tries at motor lodges around the approach to Interstate 10 she finally found an available single room at a fleabag next to the freight rail lines.

In the musky room she pulled out from her backpack the little satchel Grandmother Nadie had given her and the collection of psalms from her kind deliverers. In the booklet were two crisp hundred-dollar bills and a short note:

'They will soar on wings like eagles; they will run
and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint.'

Opening the pouch from her mother's mother she found a small assortment of talismans and dried herbs. She knew what to do with them and reached out to her ancients for a little bit of technical assistance in her mission.

Valdosta 7:13pm

There is a neighborhood in southeast Valdosta called Little Miami right outside Robert and Joo Hyun's suburban faux pastoral enclave. It got its nickname back in the 1920's when local realtors tried to fashion and market the area after the then booming South Florida region. In the early 2000's it was a predominantly poor Black neighborhood.

To avoid the unnecessary retread through the downtown area he had cut through here many times in the past to get back onto the highway. A quick left and a quick right puts you on 94 where there is a super cheap gas station. Then swing around the fast-food joints and the super-size liquor store and you're on Madison Highway which lets you slip onto 75 smoothly behind the airport.

Only this time, it felt like this little pumpkin-mobile was asking for oil with a light sputtering. He kicked himself for not having checked during the initial inspection. He pulled over on New Hudson Street near South Troup to dip the stick. There had barely been any left. He was amazed this go cart had made it this far and for a second wondered if it would make it to Gainesville where he could grab a room and get rid of the hunk of junk in the morning. For the moment he would get a bottle of oil at that gas station along with a gas fill.

As he turned right onto Griffin Avenue he heard the abrupt alarming blare of sirens nearby. Not for a second imagining that they might have anything to do with him he didn't even bother to look in the rearview mirror. It wasn't until he was entering the gas station that the flashing lights filled the interior of the Gremlin, and he realized the sirens were for him.

There were two unmarked police cars nearly on top of him. He pulled up to the air machine but didn't get out.

From one of the car's loudspeakers he heard, "Keep your hands on the steering wheel and slowly exit the automobile."

What?!

"Ah mean, keep your hands in the air and slowly get out the car!" the speaker corrected himself.

Out of a newly acquired habit, he was wearing his shoulder holster with his gun strapped in. Despite the syntax error it would appear they wanted him to get out of the car. He quickly pulled the

keys and showing his hands he slowly used his right to unlock the driver's door and his left to then lock it and simultaneously ease it open. He stepped out and firmly locked the door shut behind him.

"Place your hands on your head," the police car said.

When he did so and his jacket lifted, one of the car doors flew open and a husky, mustachioed plainclothes officer jumped out pointing a gun at him, yelling,

"Gun! He's got a gun!"

And then six more doors opened and there were seven undercover cops pointing guns at him as they rushed him, simultaneously shouting orders and questions and insults as they threw him to the ground.

When they had calmed down it became clear that they thought he had been buying drugs in Little Miami. A K-9 unit had shown up and, despite his credentials, they had done the walk around the car and the drug-sniffing dog sat down near the trunk, indicating a presence of narcotics. They asked him if they could "take a look around" inside and when he explained that he couldn't let them do so because he'd only purchased the car a few hours ago, one of them, a short, genuinely porky individual, gave life to the phrase 'hopping mad', literally jumping up and down shouting to his colleagues that he knew for sure there were drugs in the car.

When the detained driver continued to refuse access to the car they made him wait against one of their vehicles with the two biggest of them looming over him as the other two pointlessly ran his name through the Georgia state computers. Eventually, the small one came over to inform him that he was under arrest for "*suspicion of drug possession and possession of an unregistered firearm*", and turn around and place your hands behind your back.

"Well, you ain't a law enforcement officer," the small one answered to his protests, "so it's not like ah ken call your police department and ask if you're one 'a theirs. Ain't no way I can check out this here *special* investigator's license 'a yers until tomorrow morning.

"Furthamer, seein' as how you're supposed to be from New Jersey, but you're ridin' in a car with Georgia plates headed to Florida, well, that's just rather suspicious to me. An' since that fancy-lookin' gun permit 'a yers ain't *issued* from the great state of Georgia neither, well, I can't rightly honor it, sooo... it looks like you'll just

have to stay with us here in our fine city this evening till we get e'rythin' sorted."

"This is bullshit, and you know it!" Sol recriminated angrily. "I haven't committed any crime, that's an interstate gun permit I have, and you've got prepubescent kids running around out here with assault rifles and no ID whatsoever."

"Preview-what's-en?"

"Nevermind..."

They put him handcuffed into the back of a summoned cruiser, which took him to the police station, where he was placed in a holding cell with the town drunks and a fiending drug addict who wouldn't stop talking to himself.

3.

You Are a Runner and I Am My Father's Son

“But I was a hero
Early in the morning
I ain't no hero
In the night
I am my father's son
And I'll build a house inside of you
I'll go in through the mouth
I'll draw three figures on your heart
One of them will be me as a boy
And one of them will be me
And one of them will be me watching you run
Watching you run
Into the high noon sun
Watching you run
Farther than guns will go”
- Wolf Parade, 'You Are a Runner and I Am My Father's Son'
Wolf Parade, 2005

Valdosta

Thursday, March 17th

St. Patrick's Day

“Hey, you! Mister Izzy... Icy... whatever-that-name-is. Git up,” said a voice in the darkness.

Had he slept? He must have, he was laying sideways on a metal bench, the clock on the wall said it was four-twenty, still a night sky in the windows. He was alone in the holding cell now, and it was a different deputy at the desk, head down going through a set of papers, young, freckled guy, crop cut, late twenties.

“Are you letting me go?” asked the prisoner.

“Yup.”

“Did you all get everything cleared up?”

“Nope.”

The officer signed off on a last sheet and stood up. He fished for a set of keys in his pocket then walked over to the holding cell to open it.

“First shift'll be here in a coupla hours,” the deputy said by way of explanation. “Gotta start gittin' ready for the parade. They

ain't gonna wanna be bothered with you an' I don't wanna hear their bitchin' an' moanin'. Do me a favor and wait over by that desk right there."

"Where are the guys that arrested me?"

"Home asleep, I s'pose. They left hours ago."

The deputy went into an adjacent room and came back a few minutes later with the befuddled and angry traveler's gun and removed cartridge in a large Ziploc bag, and another one with his other personal items. Placing the bags on a corner of the desk he spread out three sheets of paper from the set he'd been reviewing.

"Sign and date here, here, and here where the x's are. First one's fer yer wallet, keys and phone. Second one's fer yer gun. Third one's what's called a hold harmless agreement, confirming it was all just a big misunnerstandin'."

"What?! And if I don't sign the third one?"

"Welp, you can go right back on in there to the waiting room and deal with first shift when they come in at seven but they ain't gonna be none too happy to see you first thing an' all. My paperwork's done for this shift. I'm a take me a little nap."

Unbelievable. No, it was actually quite believable. This was Georgia. He didn't want to find out what else they might have in store for him in a few hours.

"How do I get back to my car, please?" he asked as he quickly signed the three papers.

"When you walk out, make a left. That'll take you to Madison Highway, then you make a right and you'll hit the Piggly Wiggly®. From there you can see the gas station across the highway. Yer car's still there, we don't tow it until a full twenty-four hours after you been arrested."

Outside, the air was sweet and damp, delicious after a whole night of that musty holding cell. The Lowndes County Sheriff's office and jail is quaintly located on Prison Farm Road. It took him a half hour to walk back to the three-highway crossroads where the overzealous DEA auditioners had decided to interrupt his journey.

He thought of backtracking to Rob's place for a few hours of real sleep but he didn't want to wake them. *Just get back on the road and the hell out of Georgia!* he chided himself. The Gremlin agreed and growled to life when he found it intact in the gas station lot. No one wanted any part of a car this ugly.

It was only a couple hours to Gainesville, where he could get a normal car and make up for lost time. Trying not to think about his ordeal thus far, he determined to make the best of the day. He ran through his timelines again in his head and figured he was more or less still on schedule. After a half hour of cursing his luck and those dimwit detectives he inserted Jimmy Cliff's Jamaican crime film soundtrack and promised himself that he would jump in the ocean the minute he reached the coastline.

4:57am

The Harder They Come, Jimmy Cliff, 1972

Once he crossed the state line he immediately began to feel and breathe better. Georgia had never really liked him much, except for Atlanta. Still, two nights of little sleep had him more than irritable.

Thankfully, he had set aside today as a cushion for the trip, specifically for unexpected eventualities, just not the type he was experiencing. After tomorrow's meeting with the client, he was expected for dinner with his very first commanding officer. His mother would probably spend today meticulously planning out exactly how long and to what extent she would be stretching him out over the racks for not having come to see her in almost three years, further evidence for her to press the case that he, the middle child naturally, was the most ungrateful of all her kids and completely detached from the family as a whole.

And although he certainly didn't need her to, she would be reminding him that his father's birthday as well as the twentieth anniversary of his murder would be coming up, both having occurred in the month of April, and what would the saintly man think looking down from Heaven at his wayward son?

A born cynic, he once again surmised that even if there *were* such a thing as a heaven in the sky, his do-gooder father had no right to criticize anyone, having gotten himself killed in a foolish manner before even reaching forty years. So his mother could keep all her judgements to herself, as well. The truth was he could not care a whit about what people's personal opinions of him were, much less a dead man. It was always trying to help people and please them that had earned his father an early grave, he reminded himself. Worse, it had been the man's own people who had betrayed and ambushed him,

men who were supposed to be upholding the values of society, living by a code of honor and some other such bullshit.

He was about an hour or so away from Gainesville now and realized he should have grabbed some coffee and something to eat back in downtown Valdosta before having hit the highway.

**Regal Inn, Ohio Avenue North, Live Oak
5:15am**

The phone ripped her out of a pleasant dream she'd been having and it took her a moment to remember where she was. She'd been tossing and turning all night and had just reached an almost fully relaxed state when abruptly the requested wake-up call came in and it was time for her to start moving again.

A long, hot shower renewed her and she was back in action. Nothing stirred in the parking lot as she made her way down to the office to turn in the room key. She looked for any kind of livery cab or delivery truck that might be starting up to head east but saw that she would have to venture a little further for a more promising location closer to the interstate. There was a chill in the air, but the walk would warm her up.

She passed a tractor supply store, a Lowe's hardware and a supermarket, but none of them would be open for another couple hours and the parking lots were empty. Not wanting to be just standing out in the open doing nothing, she kept walking north on Ohio Avenue toward Route 10.

After a cluster of motels and some fast-food restaurants that were also closed, she came upon a 24-hour gas station next to a 24-hour Waffle Hut, with the entrance to the highway just a few hundred feet farther up. Bingo. There was activity at both places. She thought she'd have better luck at the breakfast place and could grab something for herself while she was at it. There were some cars, trucks and work vans in the parking lot.

Her story was that her car had broken down just outside of town as she was driving to Lake City yesterday afternoon and that the mechanic that the emergency roadside guy had towed her to had told her it would take a few days to fix what was wrong with it. She hoped no one would ask her the name of the garage or what the supposed problem with her car was.

How to handle this... Desperate times, of course, call for desperate measures and an actress she was not. From the windows as she neared the entrance she could see that the concentration of people was mostly at the long counter where one of the three visible servers, a pretty woman somewhere in her forties, was apparently holding court with a small group of devotees.

The desperada put on her best flustered and frustrated face and a little bit of a valley girl accent.

"Hiii... Good morning, everybody!" she greeted much louder than was her custom. "I'm so sorry to bug y'all so early but my car, like, broke down last night and I really, really need to get to Lake City. Can anybody offer a girl a ride? I have money for gas."

To her surprise, not a single person offered to take her even a little ways eastward. She heard apologies of "Sorry, sugar, we're going south" and "I'm on my way to work in town". A woman quickly instructed her dumbly staring husband to go start the car as she took care of the bill, and kept this hussy at bay.

A little embarrassed, the luckless hitcher found a stool midway down the counter. The waitress made her way over and with a smile asked if there was anything she could get for her. Realizing she would now have to do the whole thumbing thing out on the highway, the fugitive glumly ordered a breakfast sandwich, a fruit salad and a large black coffee to go.

"You know, hon," the waitress offered "a lot of the city police officers and Suwanee County sheriff's people start coming in here for breakfast in about an hour or so. I'm sure somebody will be happy to give you a ride at least to Wellborn, which is halfway there to Lake City. It's not like they got a whole lot else to do around these parts. You're welcome to wait around an' give it a shot."

Splendid.

The fugitive pretended to consider this option.

"Hmmm, well, I guess if I don't have any luck in that time I'll come back and see. But Lake City's not that far away and I really need to get moving. Might just have to flash a little leg on the side of the road," she joked halfheartedly.

"You go, girl," the waitress laughed.

"But thank you for the information," said the sincerely grateful fugitive. She certainly couldn't hang around here, so resigned herself to a four-hour walk to the little town of Wellborn where she

might just have some luck for the last miserable fifteen miles to the Greyhound station.

Unknown to her, though, she had caught someone else's attention, a man she hadn't noticed in her entrance. He'd already paid his bill and was just hanging around in one of the booths, quietly observing the young woman describing her plight. When her order came up and she left, he waited a few minutes then discreetly followed her outside. At the corner of the building near the parking lot exit she was taking a last look around and sipping her coffee to warm herself up.

"Hey, there, little lady!" he called out, tottering his massive bulk over to her with a big, goofy grin on his face. Had to be a farmer or trucker in that stereotypical plaid shirt and ubiquitous baseball cap with a bulldog on it.

"Heard you were having a little bit of car trouble. Where'd ya leave it?" he asked. "Maybe I can get it running, I'm somethin' of a mechanic. My name's Bill, by the way."

Shit.

"Oh, uh, I, uh... it's down there, in town. Somewhere. In a garage. They put it. I couldn't even tell you the name, I had to make a bunch of turns just to find the highway walking over here. They gave me a business card, but I put it in my purse, don't really feel like digging it out right now. And... and I can't come back for it till next week anyway. They said it'll take something like eight hundred bucks to fix it."

"Uh huh."

"Yeah... so I'm really just trying to get... to get going."

"To Lake City..."

"Yes."

Bill gave it some thought and seemed to have come up with a solution.

"Welp... I'm on my way home to White Springs but I suppose I could sorta slingshot ya into Lake City if'n I grab forty-one north over in Five Points. 'Fraid I can't take you much farther'n that, though. Otherwise, I'll get bogged down in that traffic and the missus'll have my hide."

There was no missus. He did not live in White Springs, and his name was not Bill. He was just making it up as they went along, just like she was, he guessed.

"Wow," she said with obvious relief. "That would be so awesome. Thank you so much, Bill! I can give you twenty bucks for gas money. You'd be saving my life."

"I'm okay on gas but thank you kindly. That's me over in that silver pick-up. S'pose we should get goin' to make time."

'Bill' talked a lot, about everything. In the first five minutes of the ride he'd covered the recent county election, the disappointing season for the Florida State Seminoles, an unusually long streak of mild weather, and how this country was going to hell in a handbasket. He also asked a lot of questions that she had to deflect like tennis swings. No, she didn't have family in the area. No, she didn't have a boyfriend at the moment, when he asked in a roundabout way. Yes, she travels between Lake City and Tallahassee all the time.

It was in that stretch of Route 10 right after crossing county road 137, where there were no houses or commercial strips, that he decided to make his move. He had lied about the town he lived in, but he did live in the area, and he knew it very well.

"You know what? Hell with it, I'll just go ahead and take you all the way into town."

And then he put his massive paw on her thigh.

"I'm thinkin' maybe you an' I can even spend a little time together today. Sorta like a Pocahontas and Captain Smith kinda thing. I got plenty 'a money. Whatta ya say?"

These are the moments every girl and woman fears.

"Buddy, you can shove your stupid little racist fantasy 'cause I got a big ole' poke-a -honky knife right here that I'm gonna stick in your belly if you don't get your goddamned hand offa me right now."

Did that really just come out of my mouth?

"Whoah, honey!" he exclaimed as he snapped his hand back to the steering wheel. "Calm down, baby, it ain't that serious! Just seems like you're in a little bit 'a trouble and I figgered maybe I can help."

"I'm not your baby, I'm not your honey and I don't need your help with anything anymore." She spotted a rest stop sign. "I *am* going to need you to drop me off right there at that rest stop up there, though."

“Aw, shoot, girl, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to get you all upset. Sure, sure, I can let you out, no problem. But you ain’t gotta take it like that. I can still drop you off in Lake City.”

“No, thank you. I’ll find my way.”

“Okay, okay...”

When they reached the as-yet unfinished rest area he pulled in, making the necessary roundabout and stopping as far into the lot as he could, next to the restroom building. She said nothing more as she grabbed her bags and got out of the truck. She took a quick look around and began walking back toward the better-lit roadside where she could try to wave down the first car that came by.

‘Bill’ casually retrieved his hunting rifle from behind the seatback and placed it where his passenger had just been sitting. Then he, too, exited the vehicle, walked around its front and began following after her.

“Come on now, little lady, I can’t just leave you all alone out here. I promise to behave and leave you right inside Lake City.”

She turned and pointed a menacing finger at him.

“I won’t tell you again. You’d better go away and leave me alone!”

Interstate 10 Columbia County Rest Area between Tiger Bay and Turkey Prairie, Florida

6:03am

Had it not been for the two stranded light poles illuminating a development site with a bungalow type building and not much else, he might not have spotted the would-be rest area that had not yet been completed. The early morning north Florida air had its particular sharp cool and he threw on his jacket as he approached.

Pulling slowly in onto a circular track, he could feel the loose rocks and gravel crunching beneath the tires. Upon first glance, having come right off the highway and into the backwoods, it could have been anything.

A man and a woman some twelve feet away from a large pickup truck having some kind of dispute at a highway rest stop first thing in the morning. Him, a huge, barrel-chested and ruddy oaf with straw-like hair, dressed in the farmer’s attire of plaid shirt and cuffed jeans, work boots; her, a stunningly beautiful creature with naturally

deep tan skin, high round cheeks, an exquisitely fit body wearing pink-and-white running shoes, faded jeans and a light olive patrol jacket over a Ramones t-shirt, long black hair in a ponytail. She was pointing an accusing hand and yelling something at him. A lover's quarrel? Hillbilly husband and wife fight? What such a divine woman was doing with a chump like that confounded him, but he'd seen odder matchups.

Wonderful. Just what I need right now, he groaned to himself.

Having to make the curve toward the exit, he drew up about ten feet ahead of them and lowered his window.

"Everything alright, miss?" he asked the woman, whose intense black eyes said everything was not alright.

"Listen, Jew boy, whynchu mind yer own business, turn your little tangerine car around an' continya on yer way, heh?" The genius country squire had spotted the Star of David on the back of the car.

He was about to reply that he wasn't Jewish but instantly decided that this morning he would be. With a short sigh he got out of the car.

That he looked more like a hungover bank manager than a dashing warrior prince was of no consequence to her. He could have been a peg-legged leprechaun come jumping along on a pogo stick and she would have seen a savior in him. But what got out of that odd little car was a solidly built six-foot angry northerner, four-eyes or no four-eyes.

She watched silently as the man in the slightly rumpled suit walked up to the considerably larger man and stopped within inches of his face.

"I wasn't talking to you."

"So, whatcha gonna do, Jewb-"

Smack! The guy in the glasses slapped the hick dude so hard with his open hand that 'Bill' fell back a few steps and emitted a small effeminate sound. Then the middle-management-looking guy also took a few steps back, crouched slightly and lifted his arms halfway up to his sides, opening his hands like scorpion pincers.

In seeming disbelief, the country guy lifted the fingers of his left hand to his burning cheek with the bright red hand imprint on it that he felt but could not see.

"Did you just?... Motherrr... fuckerrr...!" he howled. Then as best as he could with his belly in the way he took a few running steps

and charged at the smaller man, who at the last second before the other grabbed him ducked down further and lunged forward to meet his opponent at the waistline, like a football tackle, then dropped a little and suddenly heaved upward with a sharp grunt, lifting and flipping the country dude up into the air and over his head to drop him thumping heavily flat onto his back, as he himself twisted his torso enough to land on his hands.

"Aaaaaggghhh!!!..." came the sound from the country guy's lumpen form.

"Oh, damn!" the woman blurted out.

The rumpled suit guy exhaled with a whoosh and bent over to pick up his glasses which had fallen off his face. *First time those stupid squats ever came in useful*, he marveled to himself as he paused momentarily, hoping his left knee wasn't really actually twitching and that the woman wouldn't see it.

"Uunnnhhh... Ahm gonna fuckin' kill you, Jewboy!" shouted the country guy who could not seem to get up.

The glasses dude walked over to him, hunched down on his knees and with his left hand slapped the other side of the country guy's face with a loud, wet sound.

"Fuck! Stop that!" screamed the panicked local.

"Stay down," said the glasses guy, then turned to walk over to the stunned woman.

"Miss, are you going to have to press any charges against this man for anything?"

The country dude was starting to get to his feet.

"What? I don't-" she started to say something but wasn't looking at him. She pointed behind him to the country guy who was rambling like a drunk grizzly toward them.

The glasses guy turned to face him and easily dodged a couple wide swipes by the country dude then stepped around and behind him. With both hands, glasses guy grabbed the country dude's belt at the base of his spine and began to swing him around in a circle.

"What the fuck are you doing?!?!)" yelled the country dude as he was being spun.

After three rounds the country guy's belt snapped and he went flying to the ground near his truck. Glasses guy caught his breath, walked over to him, pulled him halfway up with his left hand

and with his right slapped him three more times in rapid succession to drive his point home. His palm was burning now.

"Okay, okay, ah quit!" gasped the country dude with his pants hanging half off him. "I give up, you win," he heaved. Then he slumped over onto his hands and knees and began to vomit. She had to look away.

Glasses guy walked over to her again, with a quick glance behind him to make sure his opponent was still prostrate.

"Miss, I need to know if you're going to want to file a police report."

"He's going to his truck..." she said.

In one motion, the guy with the glasses suddenly turned around pulling out a black gun from the back of his pants and pointing it at the country dude.

"Don't do it! I *will* put a bullet in your ass," he told the defeated man, who slowly looked behind to him to see the semiautomatic pistol pointed squarely at his sizeable bulk. He would not make it to his rifle in time.

"Aw, shit, man! She's just a hooker! What the hell you hasslin' me for? I picked her up at the waffle place. 'Aint you never heard of a lot 'gator?!"

"Bullshit!" the woman shouted. "I just needed a ride!"

"Put your hands behind your head," the glasses guy said calmly.

"I ain't done nothin'!" the country dude shouted.

"I'm not gonna tell you again."

The country guy thought about it a second too long and the glasses guy fired a shot over his head, making him and the woman jump from the bang.

"Fuuuck!" exclaimed the country guy as he put his hands on his head. Glasses guy walked over and used his foot to push his captive down to the ground face first. Keeping the gun pointed, he used his left hand to pull out a couple of large black zip ties from his outer right jacket pocket. He pulled the country guy's arms behind his back, tucked the gun in his waist and used one of the ties to bind the country guy's wrists together. Then he pulled him up, first to his knees, then to his feet, and walked him the last two feet to his truck, where he used another two zip ties to attach the country guy by his wrists to the frame of the driver's side open window. Looking inside

the cab he noticed that the guy had a rifle placed on the passenger seat.

"You can't arrest me! I ain't done nothin', I said! You hit me first! I told you, I picked her up 'cuz she said she needed a ride and then she tried to sell me her... her services! I told her no but she ain't wanna get out the truck without I give her some money!"

"Liar!!" the woman screamed.

"I'm tellin' you, officer, she was sayin' I owed her money just for picking her up!"

"I don't believe you," said the glasses guy, now tired of the situation. "Shut up, already." Then he dusted himself off a little more and walked determinedly over to the maintenance yard hut that was falsely advertised as a rest area. Taking his time in front of the only two vending machines, he pulled out a few bills and selected four colas, a bag of popcorn and a pack of cheese crackers. He popped open one of the soda cans, took a long swig and made a loud sound of his relish. The crackers and popcorn bag he dropped into a jacket pocket each.

With the unopened cans cradled in his left arm and the open can in his right hand, he walked back over to the other two, who had not moved or spoken watching him conduct his automat operation and waiting to see what he would do next.

"Now, miss, one last time," he said as serenely as a Buddhist monk, "are you going to need to call the police?"

"Aren't *you* the police?" she asked, confused. The way he took the other guy down made her assume glasses guy was a cop, as did the zip-tied guy apparently.

"No, I'm not. We'd need to call 9-1-1."

The police were the last thing she needed and the last thing he wanted to see again right now.

"Well, I, he... I just needed a ride and I think he was going to try to do something to me, so I made him pull over and let me out. But I don't know if that's enough to call the police for."

"Alright, so you don't want to call the cops. No problem. That's fine by me." He did not even need to know why, maybe she had drugs on her, maybe some outstanding traffic tickets, who knows, who cares, none of his business. And as far as he was concerned, she didn't need to know that this piece of human garbage with the rifle was most definitely going to try to do something to her.

He walked over to where he'd been standing when he fired the warning shot, found the spent shell which had cooled by then and tucked it into his pants pocket. Then he began walking to his small orange automobile.

Is he really about to just leave me here?! she asked herself, alarmed and astonished.

"Hey!" she called as she ran up to him. "Hey! Listen, thanks a lot for your help, man, I really appreciate it. But I still need a ride. You think you can give me a lift out of here?"

Realizing he hadn't thought to ask, he was embarrassed.

"Miss, there's nothing out here but farmland and highway. Where were you trying to get?"

"Well, *this pig,*" she pointed at country guy, "was supposed to get me to Lake City where there's a Greyhound station. I'm trying to get to West Palm Beach. I... my aunt is very sick."

Unlike himself, she was not a very good liar. He doubted there was a sick aunt. Whatever, West Palm was about five hours from there and on the way to Miami.

"I'm headed to Fort Lauderdale, I can drop you off," he said as he popped open the back window. Then he stopped suddenly, turning to face her.

"Please don't take this personally, but you don't have drugs on you, do you?"

"No, I don't have drugs on me!" she exclaimed.

Do I look like a drug addict to you, moron?! she screamed inside.

She was insulted he saw.

"I'm sorry I offended you. I just can't afford any trouble. Please, you can throw your bags back here."

"Thank you!" she exhaled loudly and indignantly. "I can give you money for gas."

"I appreciate it, but you can keep it. I'm here on an expense account."

And this odd little orange antique is what you chose to drive? She noticed a couple of travel bags and a hard-shell case he'd moved to a pile on the left side of the undersized trunk and threw her two bags alongside them. She didn't say it, of course, but she figured this must be a very limited expense account. None of her business. She would have ridden on the back of his bicycle if that was all he had to get her out of there.

6:24am

More Songs About Buildings And Food
Talking Heads, 1978

He checked his watch. Getting back onto the interstate as the morning traffic began to percolate, he had to stay in the slow lane to not be in the way chugging along in the little engine that could. The sun was rising over the eastern horizon to their left. It was still quiet on the highway and cool enough that they could ride with the windows halfway down. He did not want to find out whether the air conditioning worked or not.

To shake off some of the hillbilly dust he'd gathered in the last twenty-four hours, he popped in some good old-fashioned New York City art punk and tried to reorganize his focus to the task at hand. The first thing he had to do was to get rid of this kiddie car and get something that could go over seventy miles an hour without falling apart. He would keep the cassettes, though.

After fifteen minutes of driving along without a word between them she realized he wasn't the talkative kind. Neither was she when it came to strange men, but the hitchhiker's guide to the universe dictated that the rider must do their best to put, and keep, the driver at ease by maintaining pleasant conversation so that they don't think you're the highway killer. At least, that's how she remembered it from those disappeared days when it was halfway safe to hitch or give a ride. Of course, it wasn't like he had anything to worry about from her but maybe it was just the polite thing to do.

"So, you're not a cop..." she volleyed.

"I am not a cop," he affirmed, as if insulted, it seemed to her. He thought about it for a moment then reached into his lapel for his wallet. With a careful motion he opened it and placed it face up on the dashboard.

"That's my ID and my gun license," he told her.

Without hesitation she grabbed and examined the credentials but could not make heads nor tails of his last name. It didn't sound Jewish, could he be Italian? Or was he a damned Spaniard? She gave him a side glance and briefly studied his profile. Looked like he'd been working on his tan, in a booth or a bed. He could be a Spaniard. And he was some kind of investigator in New Jersey, but he was

definitely not any kind of Florida police officer. She put the wallet back on the dashboard and he calmly returned it to his jacket.

After another ten minutes or so it also dawned on her that he wasn't even about to ask her name, so she told it to him anyway.

"My name's Aly," she informed him. "So that you don't have to call me 'miss' anymore."

"Just Aly?"

"You wouldn't be able to pronounce my full name, it's not in English, so yeah, just Aly."

Being something of a polyglot he was a little bit offended but said nothing. She had the tiniest trace of an accent he'd never heard before even in New York City or abroad and he sensed a piercing intellect. She smelled of rose water and lavender, she was painfully beautiful, and she was running from something.

Outside Alachua Approximately 7am

When the city and noise of Alachua were in the rearview mirror, they began passing through a picturesque area comprised of state parks, natural springs and nature preserves. To enjoy the quiet, he had turned off the radio after the second side of the tape had clicked to its end. Though she was looking away from him he could tell by her relaxed body that she, too, was enjoying the scenery. It was such an idyllic moment that he suddenly got the ridiculous notion to pull over for a minute to smell the wildflowers before they got to the cities again.

It was at that very instant that the blaring of last summer's top pop bubblegum single came speeding up behind them. A navy-blue convertible Mustang, decorated with a hand painted 'Spring Break Or Bust' canvas banner and carrying four young passengers materialized and quickly caught up to them. There were two women and two men. The two young women were both in the right-hand seats.

"Hey, grandpa!" one of the women shouted loudly at him. "Why so serious?"

When he looked over, offended at their choice of nomenclature, the two women lifted their shirts and flashed their boobies at him, breaking out into hysterical laughter. Ordinarily, he might have been much more appreciative of this spontaneous display

of nature's wondrous beauty, but as he was accompanied at present, he thought it best to return his gaze to the road ahead and act as if it simply hadn't happened.

His traveling companion, on the other hand, hooted uproariously and greeted the other young women with a loud "Woop woop!" and collegial laughter.

The Mustang sped forward with all of its occupants laughing joyously. Then just when it looked like they would be disappearing into the distance they slowed down. From a hundred yards behind them he could see the driver recklessly changing seats with the front passenger with only one hand on the steering wheel.

What the hell are they doing? he grumbled inside. Then the rear passengers also switched seats. Then the convertible slowed down enough to fall smoothly into place alongside him again and he knew exactly what they were doing.

He pressed the pedal to the metal and tried to speed forward, but it was futile; the new pretty blonde driver of the Mustang, with a big smile on her face, calmly kept pace with the whining Gremlin which barely broke 80 mph, shaking.

"Aw, no, man, no, no, no, don't do it!," he pleaded loudly to himself in the little hatchback.

"Hey, grampapa!" came the familiar call, this time from a male voice. "Why so serious?"

When he wouldn't look over and only stared straight ahead, the Mustang eased forward a little so that he couldn't drive without keeping at least one eye on the road and out of the side of that one eye he saw the wagging motions of a double full moon delivered by those rascally young men. His own passenger shrieked with mock horror and the car full of spring breakers erupted again in uproarious laughter at the nerdy guy in the nerdy car who looked like his head was about to explode. Augmented by the recent tanning sessions, his face and neck had turned the bright red of an overheated metal pipe. The college students finally zoomed away to seek their next victim.

Twenty minutes later he still had not turned his head, or spoken, or made any other motion other than the slight maneuverings on the steering wheel. The color on his face had subsided some.

"They were just kids blowing off steam," she ameliorated, trying to be helpful but still laughing inside.

"I have to get rid of this car," he finally stated. "I forgot to tell you. We have to make a quick stop in Gainesville. It won't take more than twenty minutes. There's a bunch of rental places here."

"But what are you going to do with this car?"

"Donate it to a good cause. They can pick it up right where I park it."

Within a few minutes they were taking the exit for Newberry Road.

The Indomitable Carrot
Gainesville, Florida
7:40am

It didn't take long before they found a rental agency at West 8th Street and University Avenue, but it wouldn't open for almost another hour. Across the street was a sidewalk café just opening up for the day. He apologized again for slowing them down but assured her they would easily make up the time with a better car. With a secure ride to the coast now in hand, she, unlike him, was no longer in a rush and so was also not concerned with the delay.

"No problem, but you have to at least let me pay for breakfast if you won't let me give you gas money," she insisted.

"As you wish, but it's unnecessary."

"Humor me, I would feel better."

He parked the Gremlin directly in front of the café and they took an outside table next to it so as to not miss the opening of the rental agency.

A fair-haired young woman in Birkenstock sandals, a black kitchen apron over a long light-colored flower print summer dress and faerie princess braids floated over with an order pad and a beatific smile. Sticking the pad in an apron pocket she pressed her palms and fingers together in classic prayer form and facing each of her two new customers in turn gave them a half bow and said, "Namaste". Then she poised her pen and pad. "I am Butterfly Girl. I'll be your waitress this morning. Can I start you off with some fresh-pressed carrot juice, perhaps?"

"Can I get some other fruit juice mixed in there as well?" Aly asked.

"Absolutely! You name it, we've got it."

“Perfect. Just a tall mix with OJ and apple juice would be great. And a large fruit salad with cottage cheese, please.”

Butterfly Girl turned to the gentleman.

“Coffee, please, Butterfly Girl. The largest one you’ve got. And two of those grilled carrot dogs with fresh onions and peppers, please. Mustard, not ketchup.”

“We only have one-size mugs, sir, but the coffee’s unlimited” she announced happily, “and I can even make sure you have a fresh, hot cup to go in a paper cup when you’re ready.”

Then the butterfly girl gave the table a half bow and flitted away to the kitchen. Aly, who was not familiar with the Sanskrit greeting, looked at him quizzically.

“She thinks we’re Hindu. I get it all the time in Jersey City,” he remarked indifferently, his gaze fixed on the stores across the street. “Just not with all the ceremony.”

She blurted out a laugh. “Well, that’s a new one for *me!* People usually think I’m South American.”

“I get South American a lot, too.”

She was about to ask him exactly what his ethnicity was but stopped herself. He seemed to avoid looking at her directly. Nothing more was said until the waitress returned with the coffee and juice and informed them that she’d be right back with the food.

It had been bothering her and she needed to get it off her chest.

“You know I’m not what that guy said I was...”

Then he did look at her directly, and she caught a glimpse of the chasms past his glasses and behind his black eyes. “I know,” churned his idling motor voice. “You’re not the type.”

“I mean, it’s not like there’s anything wrong with sex work, everybody has to make a living.”

“I agree. If prostitution were legal, we wouldn’t have so many sexually repressed sociopaths walking around like your boy Bubba back there,” he gestured with his thumb.

“Exactly,” she chuckled. But she was not done. How could she call herself a true feminist if she didn’t stand up for women wherever and whenever necessary?

“But,” she poked, “what if I had been a... a...”

“A hooker?”

“A prostitute.”

"If you'd a been a hooker I would have dropped you off at the first town we came to."

"Why?!" she demanded.

"Because hookers talk too much. And they're nothing but trouble."

My hero... she thought sarcastically. So, he doesn't like to hear women talk too much? He must have read her mind because he clarified his statement.

"They, prostitutes, just always want to talk about things I have no interest in," he added as a disclaimer.

And just why would he have so much experience with... prostitutes, she asked herself. She was considering how and whether to pursue the matter but instead changed the subject.

"What do you think's going to happen to him, that A-hole we left in the middle of nowhere?" she posited.

"Who knows, who cares? More than likely a state trooper or a local deputy will find him and let's see him try to explain himself as the victim when nothing was taken from him. Except maybe for some of his so-called manhood."

"You could have really messed him up," she remarked.

She seemed, sounded, disappointed somehow.

"I'm practicing non-violence," he claimed.

"But you slapped the living... daylights out of him!"

"That was only to awaken his inner benevolent self."

She looked at him with sheer incredulity, but he was looking down at his plate. Then she saw the slightest smirk form at the corner of his mouth, and he flashed her a guilty caterpillar look.

Whatta ya know, he's human after all, she marveled. Apparently, that had been an attempt at humor on his part. He seemed a small degree more relaxed now.

When the food arrived in generous portions and with thoughtful little sides like lemon wedges, cinnamon sticks and in-house stoneground mustard, the travelers took their time to appreciate it with polite little tableside comments.

In the way a stream meanders, their conversation led from backyard gardens to urban farming to small country farmers to Big Agriculture to the toll that human agronomy had taken on the planet.

They talked at length about the most pressing ecological crises and possible solutions. Sol was no slouch in this arena. He'd done his

homework and in his spare time, as anti-social as he was, volunteered for clean-ups, attended public hearings and did what he could to support local and global environmental organizations.

"Did you see that movie last year about the ice apocalypse?" she asked as she crunched a celery stick. He nodded with a mouthful of food.

"Well, that's Hollywood," she postulated after a pensive swallow. "But the disastrous reality is the exact opposite. Global warming will cook the planet to the point where some places will be flooded over, and others will be burned dry."

When he could speak again he referred to the window of time that scientists had determined still existed for humans to avert utter cataclysm. She scoffed.

"You know how some days the weather forecasters call for rain and the sun stays out all day? Or how, conversely, they'll announce a sunny day and a flash storm will appear out of nowhere? Nature doesn't observe human schedules or predictions, nor is she bound by human timelines. People seem to think we have all the time in the world to work against catastrophe, but she can change everything in an instant."

"I would like to think there is still time to act."

"We all would. Have you ever noticed that big storms, heat waves and cold fronts often arrive about a day sooner than expected? There is time, but only if everyone realizes the situation and stops swallowing the propaganda that the fossil fuel companies and their PR people keep spewing out along with the toxic waste."

He was about to speculate on the chances of the general populace sacrificing their luxuries or attention spans when a loud and rambunctious group of club kids rounded the corner, looking, laughing, and acting like they'd been out partying all night. They couldn't be older than college sophomores.

"Whoah, dude, check it out," one of them remarked as they neared the café and they saw the weird automobile.

"Cool car, dude!" said a kid with neon yellow nightclub sunglasses and a sideways white leather cap, and clearly the leader of the pack. He *had* to be addressing the owners as there were no other cars or people nearby.

"You like it?" asked the man who despised the innocent compact.

“Uh, *yeah!*... It’s dope!”

“You want it?”

“Do I... you mean do I wanna buy it, dude? I mean, I *could* use a car but I don’t really have a lot of money right now ‘cuz I’m kinda in between jobs and I still have to go to class, you know what I mean?”

“I do.”

“Plus, I got a new girlfriend...” the young stud added as he pointed rather awkwardly with his tilted head to the young blonde woman next to him, who had silver sparkles in every item of her clothing from her space boots to a sparkly short short skirt, sparkles in her pullover and hair ties, and even sparkle dust in her lipstick and around her eyes.

“How much do you have on you?” asked the seller.

“Uh...”

The new girlfriend whispered a little too loudly into her new boyfriend’s ear that she had fifty dollars in her purse if it would help.

“Relax, babe,” said the young man, puffing out his chest a little. “I got this.”

Pulling off the sunglasses to reveal his glossy green blue eyes and show that he was all business now, the kid leaned forward to look the used car seller squarely in the eye and tell him,

“I can walk across the street to that ATM right there and pull out three hundred dollars right this minute. Take it or leave it.”

“Well, boss,” considered the seller, “seeing as how I have a bit of a situation at the moment, I’d say you’ve got the upper hand. I’ll take the three hundred.”

The young man straightened, looked behind him to confirm a consensus of approval from his nodding friends, then swaggered like a gunfighter over to the cash machine. Upon his return, he laid out two hundreds and two fifties.

“Don’t you want to see how it runs?” the seller asked, holding out the key ring.

“Um, yeah, I was just gonna suggest that,” the kid said.

The young man looked to his girlfriend and signaled with his eyes for her to accompany him on the test drive. His friends stationed themselves at one of the café tables to wait.

Some fifteen minutes later the pair reappeared in a cloud of weed smoke billowing out from the car windows. They got out

giggling and laughing and then remembered they hadn't quite sealed the deal yet.

"We'll take it!" declared the young man.

"Excellent. What's your name, boss?"

"Everybody calls me Till. What's yours?"

"I mean your full name, please, to put on the title of ownership," the seller pointed to the document on the table.

"Oh, right."

Handing him the title, the seller indicated that his own information was already there and that the new owner could fill out the remaining details at his leisure. Then he returned one of the hundred dollar bills the kid had given him.

"You'll need this for gas and registration fees," he reminded him.

The kid looked at the title, then at the seller and a broad smile formed on his lips.

"Righteous, dude," the young man decreed, then turned to his tribe. "Let's blow this taco stand, party people!"

As only young people and other contortionists can do, they squeezed the six or seven of themselves into the 1978 relic and gone was the Gremlin. It was getting close to eight-thirty and the two now carless travelers made small talk waiting.

When at long last an unhurried man arrived at the rental place an excruciating ten minutes later than advertised the exasperated contractor let out a long whoosh, leapt over the café railing and cut New York-style through the traffic exclaiming "Good morning!" to the surprise of the still sleepy rental agent. "I need a car, please!"

The prematurely bald man in the tropical shirt and white chinos examined the stranger and suspired,

"Okay, you gotta give me a minute, though."

Seven minutes later, his eyes much wider and his motions quicker, the agent opened the door for the renter.

"Was there anything in particular you were looking for? I have this hot little number right here, huh?" he gestured to a candy apple red two-seater hot rod. "Or this classy baby, all leather interior," he offered with his other hand, like a game show host, a bulky champagne-colored luxury class coupe.

"Do you have anything with a cassette player?"

The rental man guffawed.

"Yeah, right. What is this, 1986? Be serious, sir, haven't you heard of compact discs?"

He had a good laugh, cracked himself up even. Then suddenly he seemed to think of something that made him stop laughing.

"Hold it now..." he said to the invisible lightbulb that had turned on above his forehead. "I just remembered something." He walked off as if in a daze. "I'll be right back."

A few minutes later there was the loud honking of a car horn on the street outside. Turning to look he saw the rental agent outside in a black 1986 Pontiac Trans Am convertible with the top down waving his arm for him to come outside. There was a gold phoenix on the hood.

I'm pretty sure they were still installing cassette players in cars in the year 2000, he griped to himself, slightly amazed.

"C'mon, man, *really?!'*", he complained to the agent when he came outside.

"You asked for a tape player. This is all I got. Those things are ancient already. Car's been here since the owner opened this spot in 1990."

"Of course, it has. Okay, fine. No problem. I will take it. Tell me it will get me to Miami, please."

"It drives like a charm. The mechanic keeps it in shape and we use it for beer runs 'cause we never have to record the mileage."

"Great. Wonderful. Fantastic. You can leave it right there, then. Here's my driver's license and credit card. Let's go sign some papers, please."

Inside the office the rental guy couldn't stop chuckling to himself. The renter was not nearly as amused.

"Yep, the original owner had it in stock when we took over, but it was ten years older than all the others and the only one not listed on the books."

"You must be very happy to be getting it out of here."

"Oh, it's more than that. Mister, you just made me a hundred bucks on a standing bet."

"Oh, yeah? What was the bet? That you'd never find a sucker to rent it to?"

"No. The bet was that that poor fella out there would never ride the highway again. We were joking, but we done shook on it. Oh, musta been three years ago now. Me an' Ronnie, he works the night

shift. I mighta been a little drunk at the time but I said that one day someone's gonna walk in here and ask for a throwback Trans Am. This is close enough. He ain't never gonna believe me till I show him the papers an' the video."

"So, no problem turning it in to your place in Miami?"

"None at all. I'm sure they'll get a kick out of it when you get there."

"I'll bet..."

They finished up and the renter thanked the agent for his help. He hurried across the street to the café table where Aly had been watching with rapt attention.

"Ready?" he asked her.

"Ready."

Gainesville to Ocala, 9:02am

Led Zeppelin III, 1970

Using Old Archer Road he was able to slice through the southern bottom of the university and get back onto 75. She was pensive as she looked at all the passing campus buildings and students with suitcases happily rushing to their holiday in the sun. Feeling a bit heshier in the Trans Am, he decided to get the led out. His mood had improved slightly now that he could drive fast again.

That was to be short lived, though, as after only about an hour the breeze was so soothing, the lack of sleep was catching up to him, the coffee overload was backfiring and he started getting sleepy, and that was taking the joy out of the ride. He didn't want to put them in danger, and he wouldn't make the remaining five hours of the haul to Miami without at least a power nap somewhere. And the sooner the better, he reasoned.

On the way out of Ocala he got off the highway at the city limit and pulled into a defunct drive-in movie theater. Had he been alone, he would have slept right then and there in the car or even gotten a short stay at one of the two motels he saw across the road. As it was, they both needed to get somewhere and keep moving.

"Do you have a driver's license?" he asked tiredly.

"What do you mean?" she replied somewhat tersely. "I'm an excellent driver!" she protested needlessly. He couldn't acknowledge

it, but she became nervous now that she thought he all of a sudden wanted to see her ID.

"That's not what I asked you," he replied, equally terse. "I didn't list anyone else on the rental agreement and I don't want to be liable for allowing an unlicensed driver to get behind the wheel. I didn't get much sleep last night and it's not a good idea for me to keep driving. I need to rest for just a little while, about an hour or so. Would you mind driving?"

"Oh... yeah... sure.... no problem."

"Thank you. We just have to stay on 75 until you see the exit for 91, which will be at Wildwood and that will take us all the way to West Palm Beach. You can wake me up the minute we get to Orlando. It takes a little over an hour to get there and I'll be ready to go again."

"Gotcha." She'd made the trip a few times already but let his assumption slide.

They stretched their legs for a minute and had a look around. When they were ready, he sort of stretched out in the back and she got in behind the wheel.

"I appreciate it, Aly, it was a rough night. Just please don't get us pulled over."

"Why would we get pulled over?" she asked a little too apprehensively.

"If you drive too fast or too slow."

"Right, no, I know. I got this."

She wasn't about to tell him, a complete stranger, about the fire engine red Trans Am that one of her best friends in high school had and often let her drive. This was an older model and looked like the one in those 80's 'Smokey and the Bandit' movies but it would do just fine for the occasion. She got comfortable in the driver's seat, adjusted the mirrors, seat and back to fit her height, and inspected the driving console. Seeing that everything was in order, she strapped her seat belt on and revved the motor.

Alright, then. Let's see what this firebird can do, she grinned to herself as she peeled out of the parking lot and onto the highway. Only for a second, he wondered if he might have made a poor decision by placing his life in her hands, but he was too exhausted to worry about it. And anyway, if it was his time to go at least he would die in his sleep, which was more than anyone could ever hope to expect.

Ocala to Winter Haven

10:13am

Pearl - Janis Joplin, 1971

They hadn't been on the road a full ten minutes and he was out like a light. His mouth hung partly open, and his limbs were all twisted up like a pretzel in a back seat designed as a two-seater with a metal hump separator.

Well, at least he doesn't snore, she couldn't help thinking. And I bet he won't even mind if me an' the electric Texas blues girl sing a few songs together, either.

Indeed, he slept right through her subdued but impassioned challenge to the world to take another little piece of her heart.

But her mind and her soul she was keeping intact, and hopefully her freedom as well if she could find a way. It was a longshot, but what if the original donor simply accepted the return of the books once they were informed of the reverend's and the little red-haired man's intentions? The only way to find out who that donor was, though, was to see the dealer who received them in Miami.

According to sleep experts, when a full night's sleep is or has been unavailable, the human body can temporarily compensate and restore near full operating capacity with a thirty-minute nap. His body, however, would hear of nothing less than a full ninety-minute rest in those times of deprivation, as he had learned over the course of their thirty-plus years of working together. She had let him rest for nearly two hours.

After about a half hour of no progress in the traffic jam something seemed to register in his subconscious, signaling that the car had stopped moving.

"Where are we, please," he murmured as his eyes readjusted.

"We've *been* just outside of Winter Garden for almost a half hour. Nothing's moving, it's either a roadblock or an accident. How are you feeling?"

"I'm human again. Thank you, I owe you one."

"No prob. I was going to wake up you soon anyway, but you looked like you were enjoying the rest."

He sat up and rotated his neck some.

"I'll be right back," he grunted as he lumbered out of the back of the car. Walking eastward along the side of the road he tried to get a look at whatever it was that was holding things up. He checked his watch. Not even noon yet. Whatever it was, it couldn't be good.

He took a look around hoping for a road sign that would help him get his exact bearings. There was a mile marker another forty yards up but that wouldn't help right now. On the other side of the highway, though, there was a full set of signage and one of them indicated a U-turn for the connection to 429, which meant the accident or whatever was at the entrance to Orlando, which they did not need to get any closer to. They could reconnect with 91 by taking a roundabout through the lake towns. He made his way back to the Trans Am and leaned down to the driver's window.

"Let's switch. We're outta here. It's lunchtime."

Yes! She had started getting nervous with the possibility that there was a special reception party just for her up ahead and didn't know what to do. It was actually an Orange County overkill early St. Patrick's Day DUI checkpoint on the approach to Disneyworld, but the idea never occurred to either of them.

"Yeah, sure," she said coolly.

Morningstar Luncheon & Malt Shop
Beulah, Florida
12:15pm

In a four-block downtown they were awarded an old-fashioned eatery replete with chrome and red leather seating and bits of Americana like the slightly rusted Breyer's Ice Cream sign above the doorway. The tables were filled so they took two seats next to each other at the lunch counter.

"I do believe I'll have me some pie," he announced with a murmured fake Southern accent. "'An' a root beer float."

He seemed almost giddy, or what would pass for it with someone like him, as he looked around.

"This time lunch is on me," he told her.

Did he almost just smile? she noticed.

When he insisted she get a "real meal" she ordered a pasta primavera, and he asked for a catfish platter. It was only for an instant, but she caught his leg swinging under the stool, the way a kid

does. Was he thawing out as he got closer to his destination or was that only when he was around food?

"I miss these old places," he answered to her unspoken question, and then retreated into his silence again. Almost. She wasn't about to let him.

"How can you be nostalgic for a period in time that took place before you were even born?" she posed.

Then he turned to her, his head stooped a little over another coffee, and though his mouth might not be able to do it, his eyes softened and smiled.

"When I was a child I caught a fleeting glimpse."

And for one brief instant she saw that child and in that same moment she felt like a child herself and then the moment was gone, and he became that solemn man again.

It was a strange sensation, and now, suddenly curious about this guy and with nothing better to ask, she inquired,

"Where did you learn to fight like that?"

"Eighth grade. New kid in town."

"Seriously?"

"Seriously. Everything afterward was just practice."

"Must have been a rough neighborhood..."

"Could've been anywhere, really. You'll find bullies everywhere in life, I've learned."

"So, you've been fighting your whole life basically."

"Basically. And except for the ring not a single time was by choice. Idiots always want to fight for the stupidest reasons. And then, sometimes it's just necessary. But there are always a hundred better things to be doing."

"I guess maybe it's just important to remember what we fight for," she suggested.

"Personally, I, for one, will be a very happy man when women finally take over again."

It seemed an odd comment coming from someone with such an obvious abundance of testosterone, yet it sounded sincere. He just kept scarfing away at his meal, appeased.

For dessert she had a strawberry milkshake and angel food cake, he had a slice of homemade pecan pie and that root beer float. There was no hurry and they stopped talking while sucking on their straws plunged in super-size soda fountain glasses.

1:11pm

Raw Power, Iggy and The Stooges, 1973

Renewed and inspired, he took off with the godfather of punk leading the charge and him cruising the Trans Am this way and that way as if he'd driven these streets a thousand times before and yet the highway failed to materialize.

After seeing a large white house with a columned portico that she thought they might have already passed once, she abruptly asked him the one question that is verboten to a macho driver.

"Are you lost?"

It took him a moment to answer.

"No... I am not lost," he drawled out. "I just have to pick up my point again."

"Pick up your point again..."

"Yes. It'll only take me a minute."

Fifteen minutes later, he picked up his point again.

"There, see?" he pointed out the windshield to a sign that read 'To 91'. "To 91, just like I said it would be."

"Just like you said it would be..."

She knew he had a cell phone, and it had to have GPS, and yet...

Orlando area to Port St. Lucie

Loaded - Velvet Underground, 1970

2:04pm

Back on the open road with the intoxicating guitar jangles of the downtown art junkies they each drifted off into their own mindscapes, he already planning out the rest of his weekend, she trying to come up with a plan to save herself.

Amid the jumbled haze of her thoughts in the afternoon sunlight and a creeping sleepiness she found herself thinking about this quiet man next to her who had appeared out of nowhere to deliver her to safety after executing a move she would have thought could only be possible on TV wrestling. Obviously, he worked out a lot but was he a gym rat in his off time? Did he wear those godawful pro wrestler unitards? Did he only associate with other body

builders? She pictured him with a group of other gym rats thin shaming a novice.

"Do you even lift, bro?" she accidentally thought out loud in her best musclehead voice.

"Say what now?" he asked.

"What? No. Nothing. I didn't say anything."

Did she just call me bro? He'd heard it, he was sure. Maybe she was making fun of him in her mind, he supposed. Well, it was better that than if she were uncomfortable with him. Who knows what she might already have been through, he concluded. It looked like she was now the one trying to fight off sleep and she was fading fast.

They weren't out of the Orlando metro area before she reflexively lowered the seat back a couple of notches and turned over slightly on her side. The ride was quiet again for a while until they reached the honking horns of traffic at the intersection with state 191 and she stirred.

"Where are we now?" she mumbled.

"Kissimmee."

She stiffened and her eyes popped open.

"Excuse me?" she asked, frozen.

"Kiss-IM-mee, Florida," he enunciated. "Near St. Cloud."

"Ah, right, no, yeah, that's what I thought you said. For a second, I thought you said... Daytona."

A little embarrassed, she snuck a look over at him to see if there had been a reaction to her little faux pas, but he might as well have been a robot driver, eyes fixed on the road.

In her time, she'd met plenty of unhappy people, some truly miserable individuals and tons of just plain grumpy sorts. And maybe he was just having a bad day that had started with an early morning brawl, but this man seemed neither bitter, nor hateful, nor sad or particularly disappointed in life, nor did he give off any kind of negative energy that was anything more than a mild surliness and yet... she'd never met anyone so... *taciturn*. She could think of no other suitable word for it.

He was fascinated by her and ruefully wondering what it was he'd done in a past life to merit such cruel torment that he'd had to meet her in this way, under these circumstances. What was the name of that Greek goddess of mischief again? And was she behind this

unjust taunting? How could he possibly hope to see this remarkable woman again?

So, uh, I know I just offered you a ride after engaging in animalistic behavior with another stupid man this morning and you seem to be escaping something, but, uh, you wanna have dinner with me some time? Yeah, no, that wouldn't work.

After the open-faced sandwich of Kissimmee and St. Cloud there are no more towns as Route 91 runs its southeasterly trajectory for a hundred-mile stretch through a series of wildlife management areas until it reaches the coastline and merges with Interstate 95 to head due south. They rode without any more conversation.

Whatever her mission was, he had a strong sensation that this woman was going to change the world. Just in the few hours he'd spent with her she had already changed his.

Port St. Lucie to West Palm Beach

Parallel Lines - Blondie, 1978

3:32pm

The shoreline was less than a mile away from this part of 91, traffic was light, and he had a moral dilemma.

He had promised himself a dip in the ocean upon arrival and with the list of tasks he'd already compiled for himself he didn't know when he might get another chance.

She was out for the count. He said her name a few times and didn't even get so much as a twitch.

He turned off the music and told her he wanted to take a swim and wouldn't be very long at all. He had to look closely to see her slight heaving breath. Then he grabbed the left onto 716, SE Port St. Lucie Boulevard, and headed directly toward the beach.

He quickly found a parking spot where he could keep an eye on the car from the water and pulled his swim trunks and a towel from his bags. Almost running, he undressed as he walked until he was close to the splashing waves then used the towel for cover as he slipped into his shorts. Throwing everything onto the sand in a bundle, he frog-ran into the water and dove in like it was the very fountain of youth, which, for him, it was.

A coterie of older women happened to be patrolling along on the sidewalk of the sparsely peopled beach and noticed the young woman passed out in the outdated sports car. One of them raised the specter of a drug overdose and after some discussion they decided to do a wellness check.

She was awakened by the tapping at the window.

"Are you okay, honey?" a muffled voice asked.

There was a half dozen wrinkly and white-haired heads staring in at her. She gathered she was in a parking lot at the beach, the owner of the car had vanished, and a senior citizen swim club had found her. She lowered her window.

"Is that yer boyfriend out there jumpin' an' divin' an' splashin' like that?" asked one of the more consternated elder ladies. "Did he really just leave you all alone in the car like that to go and have fun by juss by hisself?"

She couldn't see the water from her position, so she made her way out of the car. Then she saw only a pair of legs as he did a porpoise jump to disappear underwater.

"No, he's not my boyfriend," she told the senior group. "But I do appreciate your concern, ladies. Thank you. I'll take it from here."

Standing at the edge of sand and sidewalk she saw him emerge from the water like a seaborne deity, muscular and glistening in the late afternoon sunlight. Not too He-Man like the neckless 'roid ragers and not too thin like the halfhearted pseudo athletes, she had to admit to herself that he had a pretty rockin' bod. He had a real smile on his face and seemed to be laughing to himself as he trudged over the wave crashes. Then he looked toward the parked car and saw her standing there and the smile disappeared, and his face turned to stone again.

Way to make a girl feel good about herself, bud, she reproached him in her head.

Shit, she's pissed, he was thinking. *That was stupid of me to be so selfish.* He hurried toward her, all apologies.

"I just needed to refresh myself a little. I was coming right back. I'm so sorry. I hope you weren't startled. I had the car in sight the whole time."

"It's okay, relax. Where are we?"

"Port St. Lucie. We'd better get going, rush hour's about to start."

He made a show of rushing to get back to the car but she merely strolled leisurely behind him enjoying the fact that he was feeling awkward having been caught in his shorts.

"I'm just gonna change real quick!" he called out to ward her off when he reached the car and she was still some twenty yards away. She found it amusing that he was not so arrogant when not fully clothed.

Inside the car he dressed hurriedly then opened the driver's door instead of just bringing down the window to shout out, "Okay! I'm done!" and started the car before he had tied his shoes.

She had to bite her upper lip and pretend to wipe her nose to not laugh at his nervousness as she got back into the passenger side. Pretending to admire the vista she kept her face away from him.

"It does look nice out there," she said, to help him out a little. "I don't blame you for jumping in."

"Yeah, it was nice," he replied.

They said nothing more as he navigated away from the water. Because he'd been guided solely by the smell and the call of the ocean, he hadn't noticed that the beach he'd found was in a town called Eden. It took nearly half an hour to get to a south entrance for Route 91 during which they were each lost in their own thoughts.

"It's just one more hour to West Palm Beach," he stated quietly as they entered the on-ramp.

"Okay, thanks," she answered softly.

They rode for about another fifteen minutes with nothing said and then it was as if they wanted to fill their last hour together with talk about anything, even inanities.

"I had a friend that lived out here once," he announced, "in West Palm. Good guy. I wonder if he's still around."

"Oh, yeah?"

"Yeah, we did a deal with a Chinese airline for some planes and parts and stuff. Hey, this is some expensive real estate in this town, you know."

"Super expensive... But my aunt and uncle got here when it was still affordable... Fort Lauderdale's not cheap anymore either, you know."

"Oh, yeah... Good thing I have no interest in living there..."

"No?"

"Nah. Too small."

And on it went, jittery chatter about nothing. Soon enough they approached the exit for 704, Okeechobee Boulevard, and their time together had come to an end.

“You said downtown, right?”

“Yeah, I’ll have my uncle come pick me up at the train station.”

She’d gotten a bit better at lying throughout the day. He was battling fiercely within himself, wanting to tell her he’d lied to her first and it was okay, he understood she was in some kind of situation, and maybe he could help somehow and he wanted to give her his contact information in Miami, but he had a job to do and at this point in his life he couldn’t afford any trouble and she probably had no interest in someone like him anyway and so he did nothing.

Irrationally and against her nature, she was actually hoping he might try to extend their connection, maybe ask for her number or something. It was unrealistic to expect this self-possessed man to be interested about anything other than this job he was in such a hurry to get to. As she predicted, he didn’t make a move but just drove like a damned automaton until they arrived at the Tri-Rail Station.

He didn’t see any signs for a passenger drop-off area so pulled over at the head of the bus lanes where there was an entrance to the ticket station. He jumped out and almost went to her door to help her out but swung back around to the trunk of the car to grab her bags.

On the sidewalk there were two seconds of awkwardness that went on forever.

“Thanks, you didn’t have to do that,” she said.

“Of course, I did, what kind of hack do you think I am?” he managed almost a full smile.

“And thank you so much for the ride. You’re a lifesaver, literally” she said with a small laugh and a smile that hurt him somewhere in his chest, then extended her hand. They shook.

“I’ll see you around, Sol.”

“Take care of yourself, Aly,” he said, meaning it more than he could say.

She looked as if she were about to say something, then abruptly turned and walked off toward the station. “Drive safe!” she called behind her.

Except now, all of a sudden, he wasn’t in such a rush to drive off. But he did.

*

Imperium Auction House
South Monroe Street, Tallahassee, Florida
5:50pm

The Zamorano Eighty refers to a famous list of rare books compiled in 1945 by a group of Los Angeles bibliophiles calling themselves the Zamorano Club, named after and founded in 1928 by Agustín Vicente Zamorano, California's first printer. The list was meant to represent the most important early books published about the history of California. Completing a full collection of first edition prints of all the works listed in the eighty has become something of a holy grail for many serious book collectors. Only four people and one institution, the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University, have accomplished this feat, however.

The rarest book listed is number sixty-four, a dime store novel by John Rollin Ridge using the pseudonym "Yellow Bird" and entitled 'The Life and Adventures of Joaquin Murieta.' There are only two first-editions in existence, and they are the most highly sought of all the eighty Zamaranos. So coveted was this book by the infamous bibliomane Stephen Blumberg in his quest to become the fifth collector to achieve the Zamarano Eighty, that he and some cohorts prepared, but eventually abandoned, a plan to burglarize the home of one of the two holders at the time.

Number thirty-five on the list is the second-oldest published and one of only three not indexed alphabetically. It is an official pamphlet produced by the government of New Spain in 1770 containing an account of the Portola expedition in Monterey. The full title reads: 'Estracto de noticias del Puerto de Monterrey, de la Mission, y Presidio que se han establecido en el con la denominacion de San Carlos, y del suceso de las dos Expediciones de Mar, y Tierra que à este fin se despacharon en el año proximo anterior de 1769'. A copy of one of these was among the books that had gone missing from the university but had not yet been identified as such.

News of an available first edition of this work had spread quickly through the rarefied world of rare book dealers and buyers. It brought out a wide assortment of eclectic and peculiar wealthy individuals from all over the world to this not-yet-fully-cosmopolitan

college town in the Florida panhandle. The ten bookstores in the area had never seen so many visitors in one day. Even the 50-cents racks at the Goodwill Bookshop out on Lafayette Place had been pored over by numerous uniquely well-dressed first-time visitors.

Agent Weiland had held off on specifying the stolen items until the night of the auction, in the public bulletins describing the lot simply as 'state property in excess of \$50,000'. The expected attendees had not been directly notified of the theft. She had gotten gussied up for the occasion and wore a modestly stylish slate grey evening gown.

When the jazz band closed out its set, a black-clad hostess loudly clinked a champagne glass and announced that the auction would begin in about ten minutes. A number of bottles popped. The guests began polishing off their hors d'oeuvres, finishing their conversations, and trading in their flutes. There was an audible buzz in the crowd; in attendance was the prominent reverend congressman from the state capitol accompanied by one of those movie-director types and a contingent of assistants and bodyguards.

Interacting with the other attendees as little as necessary, Emmeline and Edward had easily become just another well-to-do couple there to do some shopping for the finer things. Tonight, it was to be rare books.

It had been a simple plan: identify the ultimate buyer of Lot 19, determine the delivery destination of the books, and then discreetly, or politely, relieve the collector of their temporary acquisitions.

The auctioneer, one Felix Butterfield, had been flown in from Philadelphia to add some prestige to the event. So accustomed to these routine events was he that he'd only performed a cursory review of the catalogue before flying down. He, too, had not been notified of the misappropriated volumes until that evening, when he was asked to make a short announcement about their removal from the night's list of auctioned books. As part of the bulletin the auctioneer was required to include a description of the deleted items.

"Before we begin, then," the reedy, anachronistically attired Butterfield began after introductions, "I've been asked to make a brief announcement regarding Lot 19, originally scheduled for auction this evening. Unfortunately, it seems that all of the items listed for this lot have been withdrawn."

He began reading out the descriptions and listed values for the books but stopped himself at the second item and looked toward the table where the university administrators sat.

"Forgive me, but there must be some sort of typographical errors, yes? Perhaps there's a zero missing here and there? Or two, even?..."

His question was met with complete silence in the room. The university officials were without a response and the audience was flabbergasted, except for a handful of better-informed attendees.

"This is outrageous!" Rollins denounced as he stood. "Are you telling me you haven't caught her yet?!"

The outburst was as much to express his frustration as it was to deflect attention away from the question of monetary values that the auctioneer had inconveniently raised. Inadvertently, he had also tickled Agent Weiland's antennae.

The library director and university president came running up on to the stage and began speaking to Butterfield in hushed tones.

"Yes, but two of these are easily worth ten times what you have them listed for," the indignant expert pointed out, oblivious to his hot mic, "and if that's really the Darwin herbal, well, we're talking upwards of... My what?... Oh, my microphone! Yes, of course, I'll turn it off now."

If you've ever turned the lights on to a family of opossums raiding your trash cans at night, you'll know what these three people looked like at the podium as they turned to face the audience.

One of the bolder book buyers in the crowd, a distinguished looking gentleman, coughed pronouncedly as he stood.

"Hang on, then," he started to say, when a multitude of others jumped out of their seats shouting a multitude of questions, not least loud of which was the preacher politician.

After a minute of clamor, the university president managed to quiet everyone and asked for their attention.

"Regarding Lot 19, at this time the whereabouts of the books are unknown. We have received a very recent update from the FBI, however, and the only thing I am permitted to tell you at this time is that they have reason to believe the suspect is headed to Miami."

At a follow-up visit, the suspect's boyfriend had told Agent Weiland and her people that she had mentioned trying to return the books to the original donor, who had made the transfer arrangements

through a rare book dealer in Miami. With no other viable explanation for the book thief's actions the hunt was being re-routed southward. Weiland had also had to play out the possibility that the thief might try to make contact with someone at the auction.

The little red-haired man could not contain his delight at the news. He turned slightly to his left and murmured, "Why, she's running right into my arms..."

The reverend was seething with rage. "I knew that idiot would get herself jammed up like this at some point. Hoo boy, but she really did it this time!"

*

Miami, Florida

7:45pm

What should have taken no more than two hours had become nearly three with heavy evening traffic. The entire time he could not get her out of his mind as he lashed himself with the remorse whip for not having at least tried to stay in touch with her. He had sensed an opening, however small, and he had not taken it.

Nearing the exit he needed, his howling belly reminded him that there would be no food available where he was going. Fortunately, there was a Winn-Dixie right nearby that would be open for at least another hour. Deciding to get it over with, he walked around lost in the supermarket and lost in his thoughts absentmindedly gathering the first weeks' worth of groceries.

At long last he entered that dark, winding road lined with the massive southern live oaks leaning forward like giant moss-robed druids receiving an initiate. The last house before the 17th Avenue bridge was nearly invisible except for the tall wooden fence that ran along the front yard.

Leaving the Pontiac at the garage door he walked the grocery bags around to the side entrance which was closest to the kitchen. He placed the bags on the counter and took a sniff around. No one had been here in some time. After peeking into all the rooms without turning on the lights, and a quick look outside at the pool area, he made his way in the dark to the inside of the garage. There he turned

on a single lamp at a work bench and nearby he found posted upright under a snug black jacket like a faithful steed, his trusty motorcycle.

A sleek black '02 Kawasaki 950 Ninja, he thought of it as a panther. It could tear screeching through the concrete jungle with amazing speed and agility or, when asked nicely, it could purr quietly as the two of you crept up on your quarry.

10:23pm

She had taken her time in West Palm Beach, for various reasons, killing a few hours in a cineplex and then a mini mall.

The last TriRail train left her near the Miami Metrorail station on NW 79th Street. There is an all-night café just inside a side alley that exists between the two stations. Having never been here before she was a little disoriented in the dark of the night. She headed for the bright yellow building and counter lights where a small group of middle-aged and older Latino men were holding forth in the animated discussions that sound to outsiders like arguments.

She approached cautiously and all at once their discourse ended completely. Just as she was about to ask for directions one of the older men, seated on a cane chair, white hair under a Panama hat, large, tinted eyeglasses and half a cigar hanging out of his gaping mouth, could not restrain himself.

"India! Que belleza!" he bellowed. *"Caiste del cielo, mi angel!"*

"I'm sorry, I don't speak Spanish," she apologized.

"Como?! Well, wherever you are from, beautiful lady, I want to live there. And maybe die there, too, if the women all look like you!"

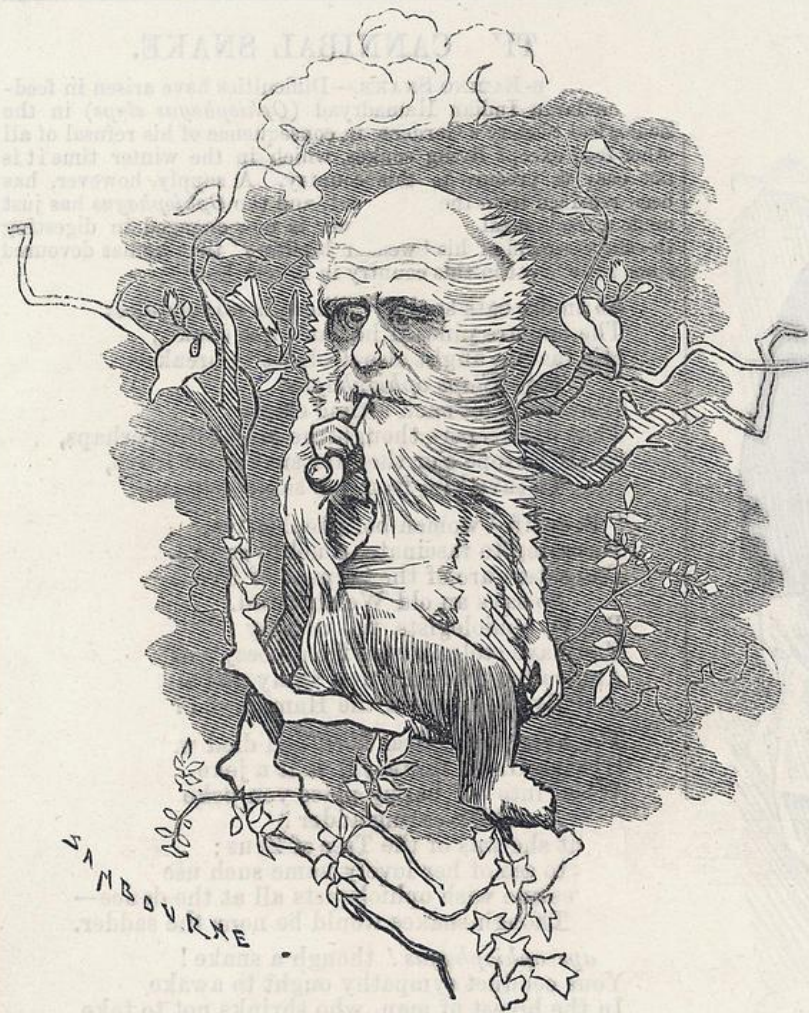
She couldn't help laughing a little, shaking her head at the sappiness.

"That is very sweet of you. Very sweet. Where is the Metrorail, please?"

"That's it right there behind you, señorita, up there," he pointed to the elevated station platform in the distance above the thoroughfare of 79th.

The air had changed from the dry saltiness of West Palm Beach to something more myriad, a breezy mix of tropical fruit, smoke and peril.

Behind her as she walked into the darkness she heard, *"Coño! Pero esa mujer esta de candela!"*



SUGGESTED ILLUSTRATION

FOR "DR. DARWIN'S MOVEMENTS AND HABITS OF CLIMBING PLANTS."

(See Murray's *List of Forthcoming Works.*)

* * We had no notion the Doctor would have been so ready to avow his connection with his quadrumanous ancestors—the tree-climbing Anthropoids—as the title of his work seems to imply.

4.

Miami

“Behind this fortress of an address
Stuck in the passion void
With a little style full and for a while
But you can't turn back time
Dear Miami
You're the first to go
Disappearing
Under melting snow
Each and every one
Turn your critical eye
On the burning sun
And try not to cry
Strictly rolling V.I.P
Strictly rolling V.I.P”
- Roisin Murphy, 'Dear Miami'
Overpowered, 2007

“Love the movies, babe
Love to walk through the movie sets
Get to shoot someone in the foot
Get to smoke some cigarettes
No big deal, I know the score
Just back from the video store
Got the car and the car chase
What's he got inside the case
I want a close up of that face
Here comes the car chase”
- U2, 'Miami'
Pop, 1997

The river house

NW South River Drive

Friday (*Viernes Social*), March 18th, 7:12am

Miami is the only major American city founded by a woman. Julia Tuttle was a wealthy businesswoman from Cleveland, Ohio, who in the early 1890's placed her bets on citrus farming and land speculation with six hundred and forty acres on the north side of the Miami River, a bountiful wilderness originally occupied for two thousand years by the Tequesta tribe before the arrival of Europeans.

Her gamble paid off. The Great Freeze of 1894-95 cemented the region's dominance when it was the only area in all of Florida whose crops survived that winter. Consequentially, Tuttle, with the aid of a bouquet of orange blossoms as proof, it is said, was able to convince oil tycoon, railroad magnate and industrialist Henry Flagler to extend his Florida East Coast Railway to what was once known as "Biscayne Bay Country".

On Tuesday, July 28th, 1896, constituting a general populace of a little over three hundred, which included more than a third of African Americans, Miami was officially incorporated as a city. Though Black labor largely helped to build the new city and many African Americans were by now registered voters they were, of course, relegated to a small section of town. Even there, they were constantly harassed by groups of racist white men with nothing better to do.

After the fizzling of the first Florida land boom in the 1920's, the Miami Hurricane in 1926, and the Great Depression of the 1930's, Miami's momentum slowed until the onset of World War II, when it became a naturally strategic base for American defensive forces and operations. The population exploded and by 1940 there were over 172,000 people calling themselves Miamians. An additional significant influx of residents occurred when Marxist dictator Fidel Castro seized power on nearby Cuba in the 1959 communist revolution and many wealthy Cubans fled or were expelled to Miami.

The city stepped onto the national stage in 1972 when it hosted both the Democratic and Republican conventions for that year's Presidential election and the Miami Dolphins football team completed their legendary undefeated 'Perfect Season', which to this day remains unmatched and is still religiously celebrated and memorialized every year by Florida football fans.

By the fourth quarter of the twentieth century, fueled by waves of tourism, development, immigration, domestic migration and literally tons of drug trade money, Miami emerged as a debutante player in the field of international cultural and financial centers.

And in the new millennium when a bicyclist and an off-duty police officer came upon a naked man, high on a new designer drug, eating another man's face on a bright Saturday afternoon on the MacArthur Causeway, it was generally agreed around the world that

the tropical city, among many other distinctions, would also likely be ground zero for the zombie apocalypse.

For Sol, his connection to this place had been somewhat unlikely and certainly unwanted. But like many of the greatest love affairs, against his will he had come to adore every inch of her. If it was true, as he was strongly starting to suspect, that Manahatta would ever be his only true wife, then Miami was his mistress. And the river was always and at all times silently beckoning, no matter the distance or the season.

It was along the Miami River contours that he usually took his morning run when he was here, either in the northwest part through the Health District and Allapattah or the southeast route toward Little Havana and downtown. But today he wanted to see the bay and the ocean liners and the pelicans. The fastest way was a straight cut along North 11th Street through the historic Black neighborhood of Overtown and the nightclub district until he hit Bicentennial Park.

The sun was already in full control by then, promising to be keeping an eye on you all day long. He cooled off with the breezes coming in off the water and walked along Biscayne Boulevard until he reached American Airlines Arena. Only for a moment he considered running up that hill of steps before scoffing and breaking across NE 8th Street to the Freedom Tower MetroMover station where he cheated his way to Culmer station and had a nice, easy quarter-mile sprint back to the river house.

He went outside to use the shower by the pool, the one under the open sky, and sent a fat iguana scurrying over the back wall. He noted that the entire pool area looked like it had been skipped over by his family this past year. He opened the large wooden Moorish door in the far corner to peer out onto the rear of the property. Another couple of large iguanas jumped off the back stoop and took off at a dash. An annoyed Great Blue heron who'd been hunting quietly in the tall grass voiced a complaint and flew lazily over to the other side of the river. The yard was overgrown and there was a visible layer of green film on the boat cover clothing the communal sixteen-foot motor skiff in one of two slips. The other space was empty, as it always was when it was his turn to be here.

*

Geigerblech Antiquarian Books
North Duval Street, Tallahassee
9:08am

After the whirlwind activity of the past two days, Horace Geigerblech needed at least an hour before opening the store today to sort through all the sales receipts, inquiry slips and business cards that had accumulated in the flurry of visitors. Without question, it had been the best two days of business since he'd first opened up.

As he was separating items on the counter, a couple appeared in the entrance alcove. It was obviously not yet time for the posted store opening of ten o'clock, and the sign clearly said they were closed, yet the two lingered and peered in through the glass.

They were well-dressed, though, and he seemed to remember seeing them at the auction. With a loud sigh he demonstratively slow walked his corpulence to the front of the store to see what they wanted. Another tidy sale from the wave of out-of-town visitors wouldn't hurt at all.

"Good morning, y'all. I'm so sorry but we don't open until ten o'clock. Like the sign says..."

"Quite right, my good man," the tall stranger acknowledged, "and I cannot apologize enough. But you see, we didn't get a chance to steal a word with you at last night's auction, what with the flock of people surrounding you."

"Oh! You *were* there. I thought I recognized you! Yes, that was really something, wasn't it?" Geigerblech chortled.

"It was, and well deserved on your part I'd say. And quite well-handled, I might add, what with the surprises, and all..."

"Yes..." recalled Geigerblech warily. "And how might I be of service to you good folks today?"

"Ah, yes," the Englishman replied, "the reason we had to impose on you an hour ahead of your usual schedule. Well, Mr. Geigerblech, it's rather simple. We have a plane to catch in just a few hours and we were *entirely* disappointed by the auction. As it is, we've still a ton of money to spend and I'm not leaving Florida empty-handed."

Presenting Emmeline with a hand gesture he added, "It was my darling Ingrid who suggested visiting the fortuitous bookshop which had handled those four unique books lifted from the

university. On the odd chance you might have *other* such treasures available, you understand..."

Emmeline gave the man a teasing smile and a little wrinkle of her nose but did not speak. Horace Geigerblech smelled old European money.

"Well, *of course*, I do!" he acknowledged, and stepped back to let them inside. "Now, you must understand we *have* sold numerous volumes these past two days, but as any good vintner does, I always keep select reserves."

"Excellent!" Edward commended. "Perhaps an assistant could show us around while you attend to more important matters," he suggested with an indicative glance at the papers on the counter.

"No, no, I'm afraid this is still a one-person operation," Horace answered, stepping behind the counter again to tuck the papers under the register. "It's no bother 'tall, I can take y'all to the back room where I keep all the really old stuff."

"You are most gracious, Mr. Geigerblech."

"Please, call me Horace."

"Thank you, Horace. I did have one last small question, though. Out of curiosity, this rare book dealer in Miami that was acting on behalf of the generous donor of the stolen books... Is it one of the older houses, possibly?"

"Oh. No, actually. No, I don't believe they are. The truth is I'd never heard of them before they contacted me through my attorney's office. I've got one of their letters with their proper stationery and embossed letterhead right here next to the register. Showed that FBI lady, too, when she came around yesterday afternoon."

"Did you? Well, I suppose that makes sense. One can only imagine the sordid affair this whole thing amounts to..."

"Scandalous! It's all so Hercule Poirot!" he laughed with his whole body. "I sho' do love your accent, though!"

At that, Edward raised a silenced Glock 9mm semiautomatic pistol and shot the man once below the right eye and once in the forehead. Since he'd been standing close enough to the wall there was not that much splatter. He checked to make sure that none had gotten on his clothing.

"God, I hate when they say that to me," the shooter complained.

“I know you do,” his partner commiserated as she pulled down the long sunblind over the glass of the door.

He cleaned up the mess he’d made while she did some shopping in the back room, then they cased the place from the basement to the small apartment above the store, gathering the most expensive valuables. He emptied the dead man’s pockets for his keys and wallet, then dragged the body down into the basement. There was a safe down there, but they had neither the time nor the equipment to get it open.

Collecting the checks and cash from the register, they tidied up and eliminated any trace of their visit. The shop owner had a box of rubber gloves under the counter and Edward used a pair to leave a block-letter note taped to the door: ‘CLOSED FOR VACATION. RETURN APRIL FIRST.’ The bookstore had no video security, and they discreetly made their exit, with numerous large canvas bags filled with old books.

*

In Miami, social and business etiquette have coalesced to establish a tradition, possibly existent in the cultures of other tropical or subtropical metropolises (because in New York City, for example, it would be considered sacrilege), founded upon a single, unspoken yet sacred golden rule reverently observed and humbly respected by all strata of the working, managerial and wealthy classes from the executives to the laborers, as it regards the last day of a long work week. On Fridays, you come in late, and you leave early.

**Prudhomme Foundation Galleries, NW 30th Street
11am**

Almost hidden between the once edgy, now selfie-world streets of the Wynwood Arts District and the luxury stores and Michelin star restaurants of the Design District is a humble little neighborhood that quietly boasts both world class art spaces and tiny little cafes tucked into moss-overhung nooks on dead end side streets. Notwithstanding realtor marketing materials and newly arrived expert student historians, this narrow strip of repurposed warehouses, small industrial buildings and garages has no actual

neighborhood name. It is one of the last places in Miami where you can still find cobblestones and submerged train tracks.

Sol had asked his new clients to meet him here for numerous reasons, but primarily because they would not stand out in the labyrinth of expansive galleries as they strolled along conversing and taking in the art. Also advantageous was that weekday tours at this private institution had to be scheduled at least three days in advance. There would be few other visitors here today, if any.

He waited for them at the top of a flight of steps at the front entrance and spotted them the first time they swung around in a forest green Land Rover. The mister was driving. There was ample parking on the street, but a light traffic flow necessitated their making a second go-round. He waved at them to let them know it was him.

They took a space some sixty yards away. When they reached him, he got the feeling that this little excursion was something of a welcome respite from their work for the both of them. They were dressed for a day of leisure.

She was in an eggshell white sun dress and cream soda Espadrils, with her medium length nutmeg brown hair held back by a rose barrette. On her ankle he noticed a small tribal style tattoo that was popular in the 90's.

He was in crisp, dark blue jeans, black/grey sneakers, and a light blue short-sleeved button down. A black Miami Heat cap tamped down a short mane of copper wire hair. He, too, had a tattoo, larger, some kind of Celtic spear on his right forearm. Sol was sure there were more under the shirt.

An attractive pair, they were both clearly very health conscious and fit and both exuded an envious aura of being at peace with the world. But there was something else. They seemed to move in a graceful unison together, as if one being, in a way he'd only seen before in much older couples.

The man hung back a couple steps behind his wife. This was her business matter, and it was understood by everyone he was there as her support.

Debrah Rae Sullivan nee Koehler greeted him with a mix of childlike delight, necessary sternness and obvious curiosity as she practically skipped up the steps. Light makeup, no jewelry beyond the platinum wedding band and a pair of small twinkling earrings.

“What an adorable little neighborhood! I cannot believe we’ve never been through here.”

She extended her hand. Hazel eyes with nothing to hide, one hundred percent classic Brooklynite.

“It’s easy to miss,” he assured her, receiving an honest and resolute handshake.

Thomas James Sullivan had an easy smile and generous, but casually guarded emerald eyes, lingering trace of a Belfast cadence. His handshake was firm and sincere.

“Please, call me Sully, I was re-christened when I moved to Miami,” he joked when Sol called him Mr. Sullivan.

“Benji is still in New York, actually, and sends his hellos,” she answered when Sol asked about the missing attorney. “He’s visiting with family in Sunset Park and says he’s thinking of moving there.”

“Ah.”

Sol escorted them inside to an isolated table in a café area.

“I would like to start by telling you that I am sincerely flattered and very much appreciate your choosing my agency to help you out. I know you had plenty of options, so I thank you.”

“Thomas’s friend says you’re the one for the job,” Debrah replied.

“I’ll make sure of it. From what I gather you’ve been able to detect a presence before any serious damage occurred.”

“Well, it’s been serious enough,” she corrected. “Shipments have been delayed, the whole computer system has crashed a few times, expensive equipment has malfunctioned three times in the past six months.”

“And you think this is all being done by one person or one group of people?”

“I can’t put my finger on it. Call it a woman’s intuition or whatever you want, but I *know* something’s going on. I can feel it. But I also don’t have the time to go chasing after it, or frankly, the disposition for it. I didn’t want to have to go snooping after my own people. I just want to find out who’s not really on my side and I want them out of my lab. Or, if it’s coming from somewhere else, I want them to go away.”

He’d already read the official account of her company’s origins, but he wanted to hear it directly from her.

"Thomas and I met in ninety-two, the summer Hurricane Andrew hit," was how she started it.

"I had just finished my master's degree in biochemistry and decided I wanted to stay in Miami, but I didn't want to work for any of the large corporations. He had been running his construction company in South Miami for a few years. After the devastation, we both volunteered for rescue work, and then repair work.

"For anyone with eyes to see it was becoming clearer and clearer that the old ways and methods and materials for constructing buildings were becoming obsolete with the increasing destructive power of storms and other effects of global warming. So we started looking for new ways, and new methods, and new materials, but from a plant-based origin.

"Some of the products flopped but some of them, like the piping, the insulation and the light framing materials took off right away and soon we were able to afford an R&D department that works with universities, government agencies and other research labs."

He waited until they were in a gallery showing a group exhibition of works by Chilean exiles before beginning again.

"Alright, roll with me. On Monday, you'll be having two new employees starting work. One is a janitor and the other is an outside sales representative. I'll have the names and covering paperwork for you by Sunday night. The janitor is a distant but important relative of yours by marriage, newly arrived in the states. Because you absolutely adore the cousin he married you will tolerate his antics for a while. He does as he pleases at his family's place of business and shows up when he feels like it.

"The sales rep you will never see anywhere near the facility. He will, however, actually generate and follow sales leads, schedule sales calls, do all the things a salesperson does. Any serious leads requiring real follow-up will be relayed to your sales team for completion. Got me so far?"

"These two people work for you?" she asked.

"They are me. Or rather, they will be."

"Okay..."

"I won't look like me," he explained. "The janitor is the only 'me-that-is-not-me' that your employees will ever see."

They lingered a little longer winding their way through the end of the exhibit. The Sullivans apparently didn't have any questions for him. Right before they approached the glass doors Sol apologized for the rudeness of it but explained that it would be best if they left the building at this time without him and he would follow suit in about ten minutes. They could, of course, come back to see the other excellent exhibitions any time they wished.

The Sullivans had, in all actuality, planned to wander through the foundation's galleries for a while after meeting Sol since they were already there and upon his unexpected shooing away, they together decided to instead see what was going on at the beach museum as it was still early in the day. When they got back in their car, they took a moment to discuss the contractor they'd just hired, just as they would have if he had been a home remodeler or an office supply vendor.

"He's kinda strange," Debrah observed simply. "I mean, he's nice and he's professional and all. Just sort of... strange."

"Yeah..." her husband allowed. "A little bit..."

"Like... eerie almost."

He laughed. Sometimes his wife's imagination got the best of her.

"Stop, Debrah. He's obviously just one of those overly cautious types. Getty swears by him, says the guy always gets the job done right away. That's all we need from the man."

"I know, I know," she conceded as they pulled out toward North Miami Avenue. "I'm just wondering what we're getting ourselves into."

"Love, whatever it is, we've already gotten ourselves into it. This man Sol is a safeguard."

The envelope that Robert Herndon had given Sol in Valdosta contained the information that was not easily obtained through public records searches, such as financials, extended family lineage, political affiliations, and other associations.

Thomas Sullivan's history in the states began with his arrival in Boston as a young man from Northern Ireland in 1989, sponsored by his parents, who had recently become naturalized American citizens. Within a year he had moved to Miami and registered a construction company with local and state agencies and the IRS. He had a different history back home.

Debrah Rae Koehler had been arrested in June of 1991 at a student demonstration against global warming. The charge of unlawful assembly was dropped the following day along with those of the other thirty students arrested. Though her personal arrest record had been expunged, the police reports remained. Other than that, his client's background was mostly uneventful.

It is necessary in this business to know exactly who it is you're working for. Not uncommonly, investigative firms are manipulated by clients into actions, purposes, or scenarios other than what they believed they were hired for.

The Wayfarer Hotel
Biscayne Boulevard at NE 72nd Terrace
2pm

An herbal is in essence a book of magic. It contains all the names and properties of certain plants, including their different powers as sacred medicines, ingredients of rituals and spells, enhancers of food, poisons, the sources of folk lore, potent aromatics, and psychedelic portals.

Herbals were commonly part of the first literature to be produced in ancient China, India, Egypt and Europe, integral to the sharing and preservation of contemporary medical knowledge acquired by the physicians, herbalists, and apothecaries of the day. Originally appearing as manuscripts, they were often illustrated by hand with drawings and paintings. Copies were also made by hand and preserved as codices, loose sheets, or scrolls. China is particularly renowned for its history of producing herbals, and the mythology holds that Emperor Shennong, founder of the country's medicinal herbalism, first scripted the Bencao Jing, or 'Great Herbal', as far back as 2700 BCE, long before an existing copy had been made around 500 CE. It contained passages of one herb for every day of the year.

Herbals were also some of the very first books to be printed in both China and Europe. In Western Europe, herbals were immensely popular for a couple hundred years after the invention of the printing press.

A version of Pliny's 'Historia Naturales' first appeared in 1469 and in 1475 the 'Puch der Natur of Konrad of Megenberg' was

produced as the first printed herbal in Europe with woodcut illustrations.

As historical materials and highly important records, herbals can be found in the most important and famous libraries in the world from the Royal Library in Windsor to the Vatican library in Rome and all the major global libraries. Hildegard von Bingen, Richard Bancke and Otto Brunfels were among many celebrated early herbalists.

Herbalism continues today throughout the world mostly in the forms of agriculture, synthetic medicines and scientifically applied commercial and industrial products. Herbals in their original form no longer exist and were last printed at the end of the European Renaissance.

Until about the 1600's, botany, medicine, and science were one and the same. As they became separate studies, Floras, or "scientific herbals", were produced using a Latin-based binomial nomenclature and non-anthropocentric categorization. Separate collections of dried plant samples became known simply as herbaria.

Charles Darwin, as you'll remember, was the English biologist, geologist and naturalist who authored 'On the Origin of Species' and 'The Descent of Man' during the Victorian era, and who was the central subject of the monkey-to-man controversy.

Contrary to popular assumption, Darwin was not the first to posit the theory of evolution. It had already been proposed and debated by some of his contemporaries and was doubtlessly present in the thought of countless others before then. What he did accomplish with the idea, though, was to present evidence and prove the case so that theorem became accepted science.

The original theory he did conceptualize himself was that of natural selection, whereby organisms and species organically determine their own futures, which to this day is still contested and denied by the Creationists, who believe only a sky god intelligently designs a creature's evolution.

By the time he was forty Darwin had moved past concepts of God and sin and divine laws. After having reached old age, he was once asked by a couple of visiting acclaimed fellow theorists why he had abandoned the ideas of Deism, and Christianity specifically. The world explorer and internationally celebrated thinker answered succinctly, "It is not supported by the evidence."

In September of 1842 Darwin had moved his family to a sizable estate in the quiet Orpington Borough countryside, far from the madding crowds of London. There at Down House he was able to work peaceably and avoid the uproar and fallout that followed the publication of his wildly controversial works, and there he enjoyed a bucolic and contemplative existence for the last forty of his seventy-three allotted years. In those priceless days of working from home, Darwin was able to manage his career and continue his research through correspondence with other people of letters.

At least twice before breakfast and once before lunch, Darwin took a walk along the same general circuitous route on the grounds. Down the little hill he would go, where past the hedgerow he might have stopped to have a smoke behind the shed or putz around in the greenhouse for a few minutes before continuing past the tennis court and the kitchen garden. In the afternoon he might go further afield in the meadows with a dog or bring one or more of his many visitors. But rain or shine, Darwin took his morning walks even into old age.

One can imagine him strolling along the specially designed Sandwalk, his “thinking path” as he called it, examining and pondering everything his voracious mind could absorb. From the snails on the pebbles at the water’s edge, to the buzzing insects and the assortment of plants they hovered above, to the scampering shrews and the flitting birds he shared the land with, it all filled him with wonder. Often, he returned from his walks with an armload of specimens and questions and ideas to examine through the lens of a primitive microscope, early scientific method, and scores of writings by his contemporaries. In the evening the family would gather to listen to Emma Darwin read a novel, usually one that ended with a pretty girl and a happy resolution, as per Charles’s druthers.

Late in life, having satisfied his own inquiries about humans and apes and other animals, Darwin turned his focus entirely to the study of plants. Beginning with ‘Insectivorous Plants’ in 1865, he published four successive and successful works, finishing with ‘The Power of Movement In Plants’ in 1870.

At the very end of his life’s journey, the pioneering scientist’s attention was wholly centered on the lives and workings of that most lowly of all creatures, the common earthworm. Although never stated

in his last published book, 'The Formation of Vegetable Mould through the Action of Worms' (1881), it is possible that Darwin had at least considered that he'd found that ever-elusive origin of all species of bilateral creatures. For soon after the release of that work, an abundance of new research by other biologists indicated that it was indeed the Precambrian ancestor of the humble worm that was the first organism on Earth to have both a mouth and an anus.

Legend has it that during the time his concentration was on plants, Darwin had created an herbal for his own pleasure and purposes and kept it apart from his scientific journals and manuscripts. In that time and up through the late twentieth century, blank personal herbals were available through local printers or a stationer, designed with special wax papers and other parchments for leaf pressings and berry or seed samples, as well as notetaking.

When he died in his wife's arms on the afternoon of Wednesday, April 19th, of 1882, surrounded by his family and a variety of climbing plants including holly and ivy, Darwin left behind a slew of unfinished manuscripts, treatises and experiments that had to be sorted through by his widow and his publishers. Though filled to the last page and ready to be reproduced, the herbal was disregarded as unimportant and as having no commercial value. Thus, it was relegated to the boxes of miscellany items.

As the story goes, it was the children, a girl and a boy, of a disgruntled parlor maid who had found and pilfered the book when they were helping the Darwin family pack for their move to Cambridge after Emma Darwin's death in 1896. From there the book was never heard of again. Until now.

If it was the real thing, the Darwin herbal would be worth millions. That's what made it worth finding out.

The motel had only recently been purchased by a pair of young entrepreneurs; refreshed and restored to all its sixties Mod glory and enhanced by forty years of advances in technology and hospitality management.

Now that their trip had been extended indefinitely, Emmeline and Edward assumed the guise of tourists. Immediately after

checking in, they hopped in a cab and only had to go as far as thirty blocks south on Biscayne Boulevard to the Buena Vista Heights section to find a place where they could take out weekly rentals on a pair of motor scooters, the second-best way to get around in Miami.

Ordinarily they would have been thoroughly enjoying just being in town, the chic décor of the hotel and its bounty of amenities from the massage rooms to the celebrated boutique restaurant and bar. But they were now working against time and against countless variables.

"We're going to have to offset our expenses if we're going to be here for some time," she pointed out to him as she inspected and cleaned a .38 Magnum snub nose at the little round table near the window.

"I know," he answered as he flipped through cable and local news stations looking for anything about the book thief. "I imagine that shouldn't be too hard in a town like this, though."

Miramar, Florida

**F.B.I. Miami Field Office, 2030 SW 145th Avenue
3pm**

Being an officer of a federal agency, and not being from Miami, or even from Florida at all for that matter, Agent Weiland was suitably exempt from the Friday rule. For her, it was just the first half of a very long day. The same went for the rest of the ad hoc response team of seven agents that had been assembled by her superiors. Of her specialized unit that dealt with art and antiquities, she was the only representative. And though she was the nominal lead, a second had been appointed for her.

Plucked from the Interstate Theft department at the bureau's Mobile, Alabama, offices, Jake Rousseau, fit and stern, was a very eager and earnest man just turned twenty-nine, with closely trimmed golden brown hair and a whole lot of energy. He liked to touch his gun a lot, too, it seemed to Weiland.

The team spent the first two nights of operation working the routine motels, hotels and hostels. A call to the book dealer ended at an answering machine that a machine voice said was closed on the weekend and state the reason for your call. Weiland left a message.

The river house

6pm

At the section of his bedroom that would serve as his desk area, Sol was on his hands and knees covered in a tangle of video cables, computer wires and power cords looking like a techno herpetologist.

Without warning there was the throbbing of Miami bass in the air all around him. Because the river house was also close to a major avenue, occasionally groups of young people would park out on the street in front to drink their beers and smoke their weed out of sight of the cops.

As he was making his way to the front of the house to tell those damned kids to get off his lawn, he recognized the hip hop song that was playing a second too late and angrily swung the door open to find his mischief-loving younger brother already laughing at him. Sitting next to him on the hood of a discreet light blue sedan in the driveway was a voluptuous young woman with dark hair and dark eyes who could have been from anywhere.

Sol's brother turned to her still laughing and said, "See, babe, I told you. All he needs is a cardigan sweater and a cane to shake at us..."

She just shook her head in disapproval of his awfulness and waved a shy hello to the butt of the joke.

Further teasing his always overly hypertense senior, Krysto gave a respectful nod to the Trans Am.

"I see you finally got the life size version of your favorite Hot Wheels car."

"Glad you like it. I'll be keeping it out on the front lawn. Bringing out the bench press, too."

Krysto never brought girlfriends to meet his family so this one had to be pretty special, which meant Sol had to be on his best behavior and curb the profanities.

At six feet and nearly two hundred pounds Sol was not a small man. But his little brother dwarfed him. As Sol came in for a normal brotherly embrace Krysto scooped him up off the ground like a rag doll and squeezed the air out of him. There was a snap, crackle,

pop along his spine as it was realigned and the giant little kid announced, "I've missed you, big brova!"

"Me, too," Sol wheezed. "You can put me down, now, please."

"Okay."

"Thank you. I'll go ahead and cancel my next chiropractor appointment."

Krysto had always been very popular with women, and he liked to completely change his appearance every year. Currently he was sporting a bald head and a big, bushy beard which made him look like some kind of merry Shaolin monk in Miami business casual.

"This is Michaela. She's been waiting almost a whole year to meet you."

"And apparently I've been waiting a lifetime to meet her," Sol grinned as he shook hands with her.

"Alright, alright, enough of that, mister smoothie, back off my girl. You can go get ready for dinner. We'll wait out here."

"But I wasn't supposed to be down there for another hour."

"Yes, well, I've come to collect you, actually," Krysto said, assuming an aristocratic snootiness. "Mother is growing rather impatient it seems."

Sol looked at Michaela and said, "She's driving you guys crazy, isn't she?"

The young woman gave a non-incriminating smile and answered brightly, "She's very eager to see you again..."

"Don't worry," he assured her. "I already know... Okay, I'll only be a few minutes."

Sol's mother Eleni had been a real-life beauty queen in her home country for two years at the end of her teens. Though he would never dare say it aloud, Sol had determined that the experience had in large part shaped her entire worldview and led to a preoccupation with outward appearances. Having caught a glimpse of the Cosmo lifestyle from New York visitors and Hollywood films, her eyes were irrevocably bedazzled and she could not get out of her little mountainside hometown fast enough. Sol's father, comfortably ensconced in a landed family and an assured future of his choosing, was entirely skeptical of America but would have followed her into

Hades itself. He had believed she would grow weary of the novelty of living abroad and would soon want to return home.

Immediately upon arrival her new favorite song became 'Native New Yorker' (the Odyssey version, not the Frankie Vallie original) and it played on the big fancy TV/turntable stereo system almost every day for the next five years until she discovered Babs and Fleetwood Mac. Two husbands and two decades later, she did as any proud loyal New Yorker would do and moved to Miami, where she could be absolutely fabulous not only night and day but year-round.

He'd met the new husband, Roland, a few times already and they got along well enough. It had always amazed Sol how such a genuinely devout woman had always had such a penchant for gunslingers, from both sides of the law. Sol gave the man credit for having survived Eleni's mercurial mood swings for as long as he had. After the hellos when he opened the door, Roland immediately disappeared somewhere into the house, which was not a good sign.

Seated on a regal armchair in an inner parlor, she would not look at him directly for at least the first ten minutes but only at the space in front of her. It was her lifelong trademark way of unequivocally expressing her dissatisfaction. She allowed for a hello and a kiss on the cheek and then he had to sit and confess his sins.

"Ma, I've had a really crazy couple of years and I'm truly sorry I haven't been able to come visit."

"Where is my grandson?" was all she wanted to know.

"Anne and I separated in September. They've been living with her parents. I'm working out custody with her right now."

"From Florida?"

"I'm only here for a few weeks, for work."

"I see. Alright, then. We can talk more about it at dinner. And Sol, for God's sake, you're in Miami and you're dressed like a mortician. There's a lot of retirees here, you know, and you're going to make a lot of people uncomfortable. Get rid of the tie, please."

And just like that he was dismissed, for the time being. Krysto and Micaela walked him safely outside where they piled into the sedan and proceeded directly to the chosen restaurant where they could kill some time at the bar.

Four And Twenty Blackbirds
SW 1st Avenue, Brickell
7pm

At the restaurant, popular among hipster locals since the early nineties, their reserved table was on the second floor and tucked in a corner, no doubt at Krysto's seasoned request. Eleni, satisfied that her oldest son and most difficult of all her offspring was still whole and not missing any body parts and not suffering from any ailments other than his usual intellectual conceit, deemed him fit to stand trial. She languorously took a long drink of Burgundy and silently declared court in session.

"So, you came down to make some money and figured why not say hello to the woman who brought you into this world while you were here, is that about right?"

"Better than a phone call, no?"

"A phone call now and then might be nice, too. If it weren't for my beautiful Anne, that poor girl, God bless her, what you've put her through, if it weren't for her, I would never get to talk to my grandson or any pictures or anything."

"We're working it out. I'll take more pictures of him for you. It's nice to see you."

"Hmm. I keep telling you, you could have been rich by now, you know, and not have to be going through all these... these changes all the time. With the looks I gave you, you could have been a famous actor years ago already."

"Maybe I want to get paid for using my mind, Ma."

"Pfffttt! Who's gonna pay you for your mind now, at this age? The headhunters were coming around before you were even out of high school. They were calling *me* when you were playing hide-and-seek through college. And what did you do with two perfectly good degrees? Nothing. Nothing except bury your head deeper in your books after getting it knocked about in the boxing ring for years."

"Well, then it's a good thing you're not the one who had to pay for those wasted degrees, don't you think?"

She pounded her fist on the table.

"And who the hell got you to the point where you could be your own man and have the luxury of dithering about what you

would make of your life?! You, with your superior attitude and lifetime disdain of others!"

Was that about it, he wondered? Not likely.

"And just what is it you're doing now, anyway?" she inquired.

"I... do research, for different types of clients."

"Wow! Now you're an astrophysicist, too!"

"Ma," Krysto interceded. "That's kinda enough don't you think?"

"Not really, no. Considering he's the only one of my kids who ever caused me sleepless nights I'd say I could expect some peace of mind now that he's supposed to be a grown up. But if he doesn't want to tell me what it is he does for a living, that's fine. Whatever pays the bills, right?"

The jury was in, and he'd been found guilty on all counts.

"To think I should have to tell the oldest that he should be more like his younger brother, to be sensible and responsible."

Let's not forget the sentencing.

"Alright. Let's enjoy dinner, then," she adjudicated.

After the grilling and the guilt trip, Sol was invited back to Krysto's former bachelor pad where they all watched a couple of indie flicks and talked late into the night. The critic's couch from the old movie marathons remained intact and once again opened up faithfully as the overnight bed.

Reference Librarians Association of America

Annual Conference 2005

Knight Center, Downtown

Saturday, March 19th, 3:50pm

Dr. Carlos Marin of Colombia's National University in Bogota was giving a lecture on sustainable building in developing countries and was devoting a large segment of his talk to plant-based materials. Sol had seen the event listed in the Miami New Times online edition when he was still doing the prep work back in Jersey.

What he had not expected to be taking place at the convention center, however, was a gathering of that mysterious legion of outwardly ordinary seeming yet secretly all-knowing mages, cleverly disguised and embedded among unsuspecting mortals as humble

servants in libraries all across the world, from grade schools and universities to civic centers, courthouses, prisons and research facilities everywhere.

But seriously, folks, Sol had a serious “thing” for librarians, the way other guys will always fall for nurses or strippers. That there might be a few hundred of these alluring creatures and their congenial colleagues gathered for a big soiree on a Saturday night whispered to his more satirical sensibilities. During the visiting doctor’s talk, informative though it was, Sol’s mind kept wandering to his mental map of nearby bars and night clubs where the celebrating information professionals might continue their festivities after the official ceremonies. *Did the convention center have a bar?* he tried to remember.

As luck would have it, to return to the parking lot on his way out he would again have to pass the conference hall where the librarians were observing their arcane rites and craft. Kismet, no?

Immediately after the lecture and a respectable enough amount of copious notetaking, Sol escaped the auditorium before the crowd began letting out. He could always call or e-mail the good doctor if he had any follow-up questions about the talk.

Sauntering nonchalantly down the long hallway that led toward the librarians, he wondered if he should play it straight and divulge as little about himself as possible or come up with some passably interesting cover story that would play well with the information professionals and not draw too much scrutiny.

Then he heard the abrupt sounds of many people shouting and screaming and the rumble of loud bumps and sharp thuds and he started running toward the conference hall.

Drawing his gun, he rushed into the hall in a crouched position, ready to shoot the bad guys, when he saw a wild spectacle of multiple ordinary people frantically running around the convention hall pushing loaded library book carts as all the others raucously cheered them on. They were engaged in the grueling competition known as the sorting races. There were twenty folding tables lined up in two wide rows in the center of the hall, each labeled with a Dewey Decimal System number range but set out in no particular order. Teams of two representing libraries from around the country racked their brains and burned the rubber of their sensible shoes as they

rushed to and fro trying to empty their stacked carts before the other teams.

Feeling like an idiot, Sol quickly re-holstered the gun and slid into a nearby abandoned seat where three other seated persons did not even take notice of him.

At the end of the games there was a general break and an informal standing awards ceremony for the victors of the filing challenge as the convention center staff reorganized tables and chairs for dinner.

The tropical fruit punch was spiked, as was the lemonade, orangeade and piña colada, but he scored a can of ginger ale and carried it like a cocktail as he mingled and met.

Still helpfully wearing his thermograph Hello, My Name Is sticker ID issued by the security desk, he came up with a cover story on the fly. He was a research librarian for a ground testing engineering firm based in Pittsburgh. It was unexciting enough that anyone would want to talk about anything else except what he did for a living.

When everyone began seating themselves for dinner, he eased his way over to a table of mostly women he learned were from Memphis, Tennessee, and who showered the good-looking and unaccompanied gentleman with flirty attentions.

One of the ladies, a brunette beauty with large green-grey eyes named Robin, was sending the strongest wavelength transmissions. Sol was receiving the signal loud and clear.

During dinner the Memphis librarians, at Robin's insistence, invited him to join them the next day for a couple hours on a fishing charter. They wouldn't be going out too far and only a few people were really planning on doing any fishing. He was game, he could work on his tan.

After the crowd fragmentation that followed the feast, Sol began making his way out. At the entrance to the massive black skyscraper of the Knight brothers, he again bumped into Melissa, a charming and feisty blonde-haired librarian from Rhode Island with whom he'd lingered with while nursing his ginger ale. She dared him to join her and her friends at the waterside restaurant nearby at South Miami Avenue, where the loud music was coming from.

Towards the end of the night, and after two hours of light PDA, a leisurely romantic ride over the river on the elevated neon

MetroMover bridge and a long walk on the riverfront, Melissa and Sol, like two mature, consenting adults, decided to head back to her room at the Hyatt Regency adjacent to the Knight Center, where most of the other conference goers were staying. At the front desk she asked for a bottle of champagne and two slices of chocolate cake to be brought to her room.

They were already half undressed and pawing at each other in the entrance hallway when there was a sharp knocking at the door.

"Wow, that was fast," she said, slipping her blouse back on.

But it was not room service, it was Robin from Memphis, who after too many mimosas could not get her stupid room card to open the stupid lock, because it was the wrong room. She was hoping her hotel roommate had made it back to the room before her.

That was not her roommate who opened the door, though, it was a woman she recognized from the convention, partially undressed, and that man she had sort of made a date with for tomorrow, also half naked. She looked at him for a long moment and her face contorted into a not pleasant snarl.

"Eeeewwwhh!! You're a slut!" she hurled at him.

She began walking away in disgust but stopped abruptly and turned around to take a good, long look at the other woman. She and her fellow librarian stared daggers at each other and he simply did not know what to do but stand there looking like an idiot. There were some hissing sounds and the angry one stormed her way to the elevator. When the car arrived, she let out one last loud exclamation of revulsion.

Can a man be slut shamed? It certainly felt that way. The woman who only minutes ago was making out with him passionately looked him over in a different way now, realizing he'd had some kind of interaction with that other woman.

Calm as a bomb, she dressed and moved to the suite's little lounge area. Without even looking at him she primped her clothing and asked him to leave. Like a thwarted teenage shoplifter, he put his clothes back on and walked out the door.

His hair completely mussed up, the buttons of his shirt misaligned, and missing one sock, he lifted his chin and took the long walk of shame to the safety of the elevator where he could straighten up. The bellhop riding down with him and the depleted dining cart had seen it all already and didn't even blink.

It was just as well, Sol rationalized. He could really use one full night of luxurious sleep before the work began tomorrow. He returned to the river house worn, weary and slightly melancholy.

The neighborhood and the water were quiet until he had thrown off his shoes and lain his head on the pillow to begin the slow process of settling his thoughts and fully undressing for bed.

Then came the baby-can-you-shake-it super loud Latino tropical club mix of the party boat that would be only the first of a long line in the Saturday night tradition on that part of the river, and about which he'd completely forgotten. There was no point in even trying to play some other, quieter music, or white noise or anything; the sound systems on those yachts vibrated the riverbanks every half hour or so until around three o'clock.

5.

Never Gonna Sleep

“Within the world of nature,
experiments and gardens have very limited ends.”
- Matthew Boulter, Darwin’s Garden, 2008

“I change shapes just to hide in this place
But I’m still, I’m still an animal
Nobody knows it but me when I slip, yeah, I slip
I’m still an animal”
- Miike Snow, ‘Animal’
Miike Snow, 2009

A misanthrope knows perfectly well why she, or he, holds their fellow humans in such contempt, even if she’s never had to articulate it or face it.

It is because she knows we are better than this. Or should be.

Ecollaboration Enterprises Sunday, March 20th, 4:45am The first day of Spring

Whereas spying is waiting, Sol preferred a much more proactive approach to a counterintelligence investigation and as such made tailored efforts to help push it along.

Before the subterfuges and surveillance, though, a good deal of reconnaissance is required. Sunday morning, the quietest time of the week in any town, was particularly quiet in a city that was currently competing for the title of party capital of the world. Even the backyard roosters and guard dogs get to sleep late, the crack zombies, dope fiends and nightclub party people downtown have all escaped to their lairs at the first hint of daylight and the first of the diurnal citizens to stir toward the new day are the early Mass churchgoers throughout the city between seven and eight o’clock.

Ecollaboration Enterprises was situated in an oft-overlooked working class neighborhood called Grapeland out by the airport and bordered by the river and highways 9, 112, and 836. At the end of 13th Street and adjacent to the Comfort Canal where there was once a

shipping warehouse, Thomas Sullivan had built, according to his wife's specifications and the design by a well-known Miami-based Italian architect, a state-of-the-art space-efficient laboratory complex on two floors of a subtly graceful pale lime Minimalist masterpiece rendered unobtrusive by the numerous pre-existing palm trees. It was only accessible by that one street.

He came by water on a small, motorized inflatable boat, with a lightly filled backpack and a toolbelt, and found a very convenient boat launch at the rear of the building and no fencing. Nearby on the grass lay a large upside-down dinghy with the company's markings and county registration number. Six ten-foot wooden picnic tables were scattered about.

He took his time walking around the facility. At each of the four corners of the compound he found a security camera, all with about a fifty-foot view and arranged in a clockwork order to capture the entire perimeter, and then one more above the doors at the front entrance.

The closest residences were at least a few hundred feet away and none in direct sightline of the business property. At the spot where the street becomes a private drive for the company there are two utility poles within a hundred feet of the main entrance.

Quickly donning a generic neon orange safety vest and a yellow construction hardhat he nimbly climbed one of the poles. At a height of about thirty feet and tucked just inside one of the transformers he installed a small, high-power camera designed to look like an innocuous and undefined piece of equipment. He aimed it at the front right half of the lab building. Hurrying down the pole he repeated the process on the second pole, this time aiming the camera at the left half of the building front.

Taking a long look down the empty street for any signs of human activity, he returned to the rear of the building. Had there been any early joggers, dog walkers or insomniacs he would have engaged them and asked if they, too, were experiencing electrical outages as the lab was. He was an independent utility contractor responding to an overnight emergency call.

Once at the back of the building again, he was able to use a palm tree to hide a single camera that captured the entire rear façade of the complex.

Monday, March 21st

6:15am

Very often a camera is more powerful than a gun. The best photographs have helped end wars, rescue victims of natural catastrophe and government cruelty, and to prove and illustrate the devastation caused by the carelessness of human activity on the planet as a whole. On more everyday practical terms, in many cases a picture is worth a thousand-page indictment.

Fortunately for him, photography had been one of his main hobbies as a kid and in his freshman year he'd joined the high school photography club, learning to expertly develop and dry his own prints in the darkroom by the time Easter break came around. And when he became a photographer for his high school and college student newspapers it never once bothered him at all to be assigned the most mundane of events or interviews. He had learned long ago the value of patience in waiting for the perfect shot.

By the time these skills became useful in his professional life they were second nature to him. Having grown up in the dawn of the computer age, even the transition to digital photography was seamless for him. The storage, review and distribution of photos had become infinitely easier and faster.

As pedantic as it seems, it was necessary for him to take a picture of each and every single employee that passed through the lab's doors. He had copies of their personnel files, but he needed at least one current live action picture of everybody, which later had to be matched to the photos on file. Slouched in yet another non-descript rental parked a half block from the main entrance, he was able to watch the rank-and-file march in to begin the thirteenth work week of the year as he snapped away at their portraits.

Omni

10:30am

There are an inordinate number of spy shops in Miami, even, or especially, when compared to New York and Los Angeles. There were so many connotations in that one fact that he preferred not to dwell on it. Most were little more than electronics shops or camera installation contractors. More than a few were clown operations

peddling cheap Chinese product. A handful were legit outfitters. The very best ones, though, do not have actual storefronts.

At the northern edge of downtown and a couple blocks west of the Arsht Center for the Performing Arts there is a scattering of small two-story warehouses that were built a hundred years ago and had not yet been devoured by the ravenous maws of development.

Quality oversized equipment like boom mikes and high-powered zoom lenses take up a lot of display, demonstration, and storage space, none of which was cheap downtown anymore. Through an open warehouse floor selling new and used restaurant equipment to a back staircase and up to the second floor, Sol made his way to a non-descript iron loft door that was opened by his old friend, Fu, the Cuban Chinese.

"Dimelo, mi pana Nuyorcino! Que bueno verte!"

Ecollaboration Enterprises lunchroom

11:43am

Giullare Fodario arrived for his first day of work four hours late, blasting Deep Purple's 'Smoke On The Water' on the stereo of his Pontiac Trans Am as he swerved into the parking lot and smelling as though he had bathed in Frangelico as he strolled through the entrance hallway.

Like a time warp escapee from the 70's he strutted in under motorcycle cop sunglasses, with his company overalls opened to the third button to proudly display a manly hairy chest regally adorned by an assortment of gold chains. His hair was perfectly coiffed and his waxed goatee guarded a mouth seemingly frozen in a McKayla Maroney twist.

Most of the employees were present and Debrah was at the far end checking over a table bearing a couple of sheet cakes, cutlery, paper cups and a dozen bottles of seltzer and juices. Naturally, all eyes turned toward the newcomer.

"There you are!" Debrah shouted from across the room.

He took his time sauntering over to her, waving here and there to groups of people at the tables as though he'd known them for years. He made sure to catch the eyes of as many of the women present as could not avert their eyes in time.

“Cosen Debrrrraah! I en sorry I late. I got, eh, lost!” he called out to her halfway through the room.

“Not at all! You’re right on time, I was just cutting the cake.”

She walked up a few steps and opened her arms a little to receive him. An excellent collaborator, he noted.

“Good god,” she whispered as she gave him a light embrace. “Are you-”

“-Relax,” he whispered back. “It’s just cover.”

She turned and presented her cousin to the rest of the company.

“Everyone, this is my cousin-in-law Guillarme!”

“Guillare,” he corrected.

“Guillare!” she re-announced. “Please make him feel at home.”

“Hel-lo, ev-err-ee-body. I en here to helpé,” he assured everybody loudly. And he hung out for the entire lunch hour lounging comfortably in the employee lounge getting to know some of the employees who stopped by his table to introduce themselves. Sol could eat cake all day long, and Debrah had bought gourmet Italian espresso for the occasion, which was delicious.

3:46pm

As the workday wound down, Guillare, in a magnanimous show of solidarity with his fellow maintenance workers, took it upon himself to volunteer for the day’s entire trash detail. He took extra care to keep separate all the papers discarded in the bins of the individual workstations. These he consolidated into one large bag that he tucked off to the side in the loading area and retrieved before he left for the day.

Miramar FBI field office

5:08pm

On the morning of Friday, June 17th, 1729, in the tiny village, or commune, of Étrépigny, Champagne, France, servants of the local church announced that the parish priest, Father Jean Meslier, had passed away peacefully in his sleep.

Discovered in his house were three prominently placed copies of a 633-page *octavo manuscript* (an early form of printing) dedicated to his parishioners and in which the modest and discreet country curate loudly condemns and deconstructs the world's theologies and organized religions, declaring them "castle[s] in the air" and nothing "but ignorance of natural causes reduced to a system".

Though he'd twice been reprimanded by church elders for employing as assistants only young women he was rumored to be sexually active with, none would have guessed that the austere and kindly pastor who donated all of his extra money to charity was also secretly a proponent of free love and an undeclared atheist who questioned Jesus Christ's very sanity, referring to him as a madman and a fanatic. Stating that he had only become a priest to satisfy the wishes of his parents, Meslier argued that despite the lives dedicated to the Christian ethos in the beginning stages of its history, the religion had since become compromised and corrupted by society and government.

It was in this first book of the modern ages explicitly advocating atheism that Meslier also vehemently condemned the cruelty to animals at the hands of humans and cited it as evidence of "the nonexistence, or the malice, of their God."

And it was also in this book that the old priest had urged his parishioners to awaken from an induced slumber to see the truth about their government and religion: that the latter was used by the former to keep the populace ignorant, subservient, and wholly accepting of the rule of tyrants. Meslier's testament is seen by some historians as having foreshadowed both the French Revolution and Karl Marx.

The book thief had stolen one of the earliest print editions of this seminal work. It was the first book in modern history created expressly to espouse the philosophy of atheism.

Agent Weiland wondered if all of this had anything to do with the thief's motivations. It wasn't often, but on occasion religion was a motivating factor in these cases.

The river house

7:30pm

He was going to need the entire garage as a workroom for this job. After a quick dinner he set up the two large folding tables he had stored in there and cleared out all the available floorspace.

On one of the tables, he set up a second computer station with a printer, fax, and other hardware. The other table was reserved for the starter stacks of files, photos and other documentation.

On the floor he poured out all the contents of the trash bag he'd brought home with him. Grabbing a couple pairs of disposable rubber gloves, oversize tweezers, a roll of paper towels and a box of clear small trash bags, he pulled up a folding chair and spent the next few hours sifting through papers and paper beverage cups. Thankfully, eating was not permitted at the lab's workstations.

South Beach

Apex Miami development site, 153 South Pointe Drive

Tuesday, March 22nd, 6:50am

After water, concrete is the second most used substance on the planet and the topmost used building material, measuring twice as much as plastics, aluminum, steel and wood combined, by tonnage. The ready-mix concrete industry, which is the bulk of the concrete market as a whole, is projected to surpass six-hundred billion dollars of revenue by the year 2025.

The process for producing the cement that bonds together the coarse and fine aggregates to make concrete emits such large volumes of greenhouse gases that it accounts for 8% of total global emissions. Additionally, other toxic ingredients are present for exposure to the public; the concrete industry quietly supports illegal sand mining; and every day concrete increasingly contributes to the levels of urban heat island effect and infrastructure surface runoff.

Although the onset of the twenty-first century saw research and experimentation in ways to alter concrete to allow it to perform functions of carbon sequestration and toxic waste absorption, such as introducing raw and recycled materials, the costly, confusing, and risk-bearing changes are anathema to the money-making apparatus already in place.

Watching the sun rise over the Atlantic Ocean from the top of a 42-story tower was something he figured he could probably never get tired of. But since he'd probably never attain the level of wealth required to own one of these luxury residences, an occasional visit to a high-rise building project nearing completion was the second-best thing. The topping off for this place was two weeks away.

Remembering Sol's affinity for this early morning pause, Getty and Russ had taken him up to the roof of one of their development company's latest investments, where they could speak freely. A long time ago, Sol had uncovered a scheme by a criminal organization to defraud their employer of millions of dollars in false insurance claims.

Russ, a buff, clean-cut and handsome concrete superintendent, was about two years younger than Sol and already a rich man. The very first summer out of college in Arkansas he'd taken his civil engineering degree straight to the largest developer he could find in South Florida and never once looked back. He *did* own one of these condos, albeit in a less glamorous zip code and purchased at a steep insider discount. When he wasn't wrestling with "the mud" on the largest skyscrapers up and down the southern East Coast you could usually find him in the water, riding the waves on a surfboard.

Getty, the man who had referred Sol to the Sullivans and the company's chief steel superintendent, had been courted away from a major Chicago firm at a point in his life when he had to start thinking about retirement. At the time, he and his wife had newly become empty-nesters and the package and signing bonus this well-known corporation was offering was irresistible. They bought a house in Pembroke Park, near the company's headquarters in Hollywood, and he was able to oversee many of the company's South Florida operations. Rotund and sublime, Getty was a walking repository of construction knowledge and history.

Up here, it's always windy and in mid-March still chilly this early in the morning. The lunch truck coffees warmed them up as daylight broke out over the horizon.

"Sully's a sub on a lot of our jobs in the Miami area," Getty explained to Sol. "Straight shooter, no games, no nonsense. His crews are the same way, and they all get things done on time."

“The man knows his concrete, too,” added Russ. “I’ve never had to babysit him on pours or worry about blueprint errors, or anything really.”

“So we’ve gotten to know him pretty well,” Getty continued, “and when he mentioned his wife was having problems at her place and was thinking of hiring someone to look into it I figured it was right up your alley.”

“I certainly appreciate it, too,” Sol said. “And it’s great to see you two again. I’m told Mr. Sullivan also works all kinds of other jobs besides skyscrapers. He also does a lot of government contracts, local schools, residential complexes and such.”

“That he does,” Russ confirmed.

“And he uses a lot of his wife’s products,” Sol stated.

Getty smiled like a pleased schoolmaster at an apt pupil.

“Enough that many people have taken notice,” he replied. “Now *this company* may never consider alternative building materials, but there *are* other large operators taking a serious look. As such, the Sullivans can reasonably be considered viable competition to various established industries and companies.”

Brickell

9:45am

The development corporation he was visiting did not yet have permanent offices in Miami and the forward executives, planners, engineers and marketing people were working out of a fifth-story suite at a luxury residential hotel overlooking Brickell Bay. The project site itself was farther south along the water and still in the late pile driving stages.

Alex Hayduke had been granted a ten o’clock audience solely on the strength of the lab’s name recognition. Well-tanned, smartly groomed, clean shaven and fresh dressed in an ivory linen suit, tan boat shoes, a white cotton shirt and marine blue cotton knit tie, he made sure to sufficiently charm the coyly haughty office receptionist, always the gatekeeper of any organization.

Receiving him in one of the hotel’s conference rooms were the company’s vice-president of environmental compliance, the head of the engineering department, the chief operations officer, and the executive vice president of sales.

They wanted to know how Ecollaboration Enterprises could help their project be seen as responsible stewardship of the environment, how they could be seen as leaders in sustainable development, and how they could save money on materials costs.

Employing handouts, a slide presentation, product samples and talking points Debrah herself had provided, Hayduke demonstrated to his audience various scenarios and opportunities for the forward leaning corporation to consider. When he had concluded his pitch, the executives took an extended break in a separate room while the salesman noshed on an assortment of finger foods and his favorite San Pellegrino sparkling water flavor, Blood Orange.

When the real estate people returned, Hayduke had secured a promise for a proposal request to be drafted within three days as well as an invitation to a hoity toity exclusive party the following week for potential investors and unit buyers, which he fully intended to attend.

The purpose of the sales rep cover was to gauge various potential outside factors. Among them was the general climate for Debrah's products and the industry perception of her company. Not to mention feeling out her competition, if any.

By 12:45 Alex Hayduke was in a different hotel parking lot just outside the airport, switching cars and putting on Guillare Fodario's jumpsuit, cheap cologne, sunglasses and glue-on goatee. By one he was garrulously helping to clean up the lunch hour mess in the Ecollaboration cafeteria. Prest-o change-o.

South Miami

Kappa Tau Pi Sorority House, SW 62nd Terrace

7:14pm

Two of Aly's Miami chapter sorority sisters, Alexandra and Francine, had picked her up at the University Station stop on Saturday night. The sorority house kept a few guest rooms readily available for visiting sisters and special guests.

Francine, huntress in the legal world, was a no-nonsense Filipina American from San Francisco, and Alexandra, a leader in the local and national women's movements, was a fiery redhead from Detroit. They were the only friends Aly had in Miami and she felt horribly lousy about having to deceive them by pretending to be running from a mistake in men.

Three days had passed by uneventfully and she was beginning to think she had outdistanced her pursuers and it might be safe enough to start moving around.

Alexandra and Francine came to visit her in the guest room.

"We wanted to tell you about a safe place here in Miami you might want to consider," Alexandra told her. "If you were thinking of staying long term."

There was a one-week limit on the guest rooms.

"We've worked with them for over a year now," Francine seconded. "It's safe and quiet. They work with state agencies but they're private and not publicly listed. Here's the address and phone number. The couple's a little kooky but they're sweethearts."

Walking back to the house after a working dinner at a restaurant on Ponce De Leon Boulevard, the three women hurried under gathering clouds in a reddened twilight.

It was as they were about to cross SW 57th Avenue that Aly caught sight of the two black sedans like the ones in Lloyd, traveling slowly in tandem as they turned left onto 62nd Terrace, fraternity and sorority row.

She was able to clearly see the US GOV license plates now and gasped internally. Feigning a need to run back to the 24-hour pharmacy on the highway she told her companions she would catch up with them at the house.

Within a half hour the sun set and the fat little raindrops started landing. She found a way to creep through the backyards of the loosely secured assemblage of frat houses to the back of her sorority house. She immediately retreated to her room, half drenched. Once in dry clothing she lay still for a couple of hours waiting for a hard knock on the door. Only Francine popped her head in to make sure she'd made it back alright.

At nine o'clock she packed her things, donned a Miami Hurricanes poncho and quietly slipped out again into the heavy curtains of water reversing the path she'd found between the houses.

Afraid the two closest train stations might be under surveillance, she huddled under a bus shelter on SW 56th Street for a half hour until an eastbound bus finally came along.

The river house

9:30pm

Like a Times Square pickpocket, that night a tropical storm brushed up against the southeast Florida coast and lingered through the morning, dumping torrents of rain.

He had printed out and assembled an assortment of computer reports from the lab, including network login trackers, transmission rates and sources, traffic maps, file size ranges, etcetera. Beyond the basic surface data these reports provide, when they are juxtaposed and cross-referenced in various ways, a careful eye can see patterns emerge. And looking even closer, one can spot the anomalies as well.

While he was by no means an amateur at cyber operations, Sol was getting the feeling he might need to ask for a little help with this part of the investigation.

Ec collaboration Enterprises

Wednesday, March 23rd, 10am

A true strawberry blonde is a very rare creature, especially the male specimen. Hundreds of hair color companies have attempted to capture that elusive border zone between a redhead and a blonde, to no avail. For over seventy years what the dye brands have failed to grasp is that not only is the hair color a unique and infrequent occurrence, it is also an exact match to a singular skin type of pale rose, sometimes complemented by slightly darker, almost invisible rose freckles and consistent in balance throughout the body, from lips to fingertips. When it comes to this particular complexion, there is no faking it.

Most people would never notice such an infrequently born person and many have never even heard the term. To someone trained to be especially observant of facial features, however, it makes an individual stand out. The genetics for strawberry blondes occur seldom enough, but only half as much in men as in women.

The young man (looked like late 20's) regularly wore a neat, well-coordinated ensemble of light colors in casual business attire and thick-framed maroon tortoiseshell eyeglasses. He was a low-level data entry clerk with sharply limited intranet permissions. He parted his medium short hair from the left, brought a bag lunch every day and

listened to Bebop at his desk, religiously to Phil Schapp's 'Bird Flight' on WKCR using the internet. He always ate his lunch outside. His name was Keif Rikkhartz.

Allapattah

4:53pm

One of the more distasteful aspects of this kind of work is the occasional necessity of having to surveil your own client. Almost always it is for their own protection and benefit, to determine whether or not someone else might be watching them. At least at first, it is imperative that the client not be aware that you are monitoring their movements and activity as they will invariably become self-conscious and change their habits and routines. Once it's established whether or not there might be other watchers, you either cease that surveillance or you inform the client of the best way to proceed.

Debrah's workday regimen was fairly uncomplicated. She and Sully took early morning runs, even that morning when there was still a heavy drizzle, and then after breakfast took turns dropping the kids off at school. By Wednesday morning, Sol had confirmed that there were no other curious eyes on her routes to and from the lab where she arrived roughly at about quarter to nine. All three days he was checking on her, she took her lunch in the cafeteria, chatting it up with the rest of the faculty.

Then every afternoon at precisely quarter to four she left the complex to drive three miles east to a bohemian type of vegetarian café, where her husband was either there waiting for her or showed up minutes afterward. It was called 'Roots, Shoots, and Leaves'.

They were greeted each time by a man who appeared to be the proprietor, late 50's looked like, long slightly greying brown hair but starting to bald, a different T-shirt every day but always splattered with mud and grease, ditto for a whole shade scale of blue jeans.

The three would sit and talk for about fifteen minutes each time and then the older man would retreat somewhere back into the property. The Sullivans invariably lingered for another ten or fifteen minutes, talking as they finished up their snacks and protein shakes. From there they left in their separate vehicles. Twice Debrah returned to the lab for a couple of hours and Tuesday afternoon she took her turn being the afterschool chauffeur.

While Sol had decided to terminate surveillance of his client, he had become curious about this man that the Sullivans visited with every day.

From his perch on the second-floor outdoor dining area of the technical college across the street he followed him about the property with a zoom lens and boom mike set discreetly mounted inside a gym bag with convenient little holes for the directionals and wires connecting to his laptop, which was at an angle from where no one could see he was not really just another adult student studying.

Though the mike could not penetrate the walls or windows of the café, once the man came outside and began talking on his cellphone Sol was able to listen in on mundane conversations about renting parking spaces and pantry orders.

When he arrived at the garage building, he threw the phone onto a worktable, pulled out a beer can from a dorm fridge underneath, drank half of it, and then cranked up a boombox that was sitting on a wheeled toolchest. Out came the opening guitar riffs of “I Won’t Back Down” by fellow true son of Florida, Tom Petty.

With a loudly yelped “Yeah!” the middle-aged man jerked his limbs about spastically and danced like no one was watching. The song, however, had clearly not been intended as a dance hit.

Ecollaboration Enterprises

8:24pm

Anne was wrong; he was not a magnet for trouble. These days trouble is all around us, at all times. You don’t even have to go looking for it. Trouble finds you. He was simply someone who was incapable of ignoring it and could not walk away from it.

Or maybe she was right.

Shooter.

An alert from the alarm system came in on his phone. Checking the camera links on his laptop, he saw that one of the janitors, the druggie Cuban, Angelo, had used his pass code to enter the main building.

**Development site for New Horizons STEM Charter School
NW 19th Lane, Rainbow Village
Thursday, March 24th, 7:11am**

A Bobcat on a construction site is not a lost lynx wandered onto the project but a mini bulldozer, or, if you want to be technical about it, a compact loader. As one of the two leading makers of these ubiquitous and indispensable construction machines, its name became synonymous with a vehicle you will find everywhere in the United States from backyard renovations to major infrastructure project sites. With a lifting capacity up to two tons, sixty to one hundred horsepower, 360° turn capacity and all-terrain track wheels, it is a militarily designed machine that could enable one person to colonize a terrestrial satellite.

It is on one of these small rolling and jumping tank cars that came toward the loose assembly of construction workers a loud, heavy voice shouting obscenities in Spanish.

“Vamos, hijos de la gran puta que se tarda el dia!” the man inside the riding compartment yelled.

In response came a wave of a dozen foreign language and accented English variations of “Fuck off, you crazy Mexican!”

The crazy Mexican ate it all up and laughed like a madman as he stopped the ‘cat in a cloud of dust a good distance away from the lunch truck. He hung his hardhat on a hook and stepped out as though dismounting a mighty steed and cowboy-walked over.

Taking a quick cursory glance at the suit and tie holding a guava turnover and a large coffee, the construction supervisor (as evidenced by the coiled walkie talkie on his shoulder) turned toward the food and took his time piling onto a large plate with various meaty items and some yucca, then poured himself a *cortada*. Breakfast in hand, he came over to Sol. His long straight black hair was neatly parted in the middle and tied in a 3-section ponytail. No tattoos, no facial hair, black-brown eyes clear like a desert highway.

“Good morning,” he grinned amiably. “You do know that’s not proper safety wear, don’t you? You’ll have to go home and change if you want to work today.”

“Good morning,” Sol returned lightly. “Some of it is, actually,” he wisecracked. “But I’m just here to see Mr. Sullivan for a few minutes today.”

MegaMix concrete plant
NW 15th Street and NW 1st Court, Overtown
9:30am

At the gate he was handed a hardhat by the security guard, who did not ask if he had an appointment. He was expected, apparently. The two walked together across the compound

Berguenza sent for the front entrance sign-in clipboard. Squinting at the last entry he gritted his teeth.

“*Este pendejo...*” he muttered to himself. “Roberto! Take one of the secretaries with you and go downtown to the lawyer’s office. Tell Marty to find out who the fuck this Peter Quint is and where the fuck he lives.”

Miami Shores
6pm

The tweens made a show of their entrance to the dining room, the children’s blending of play and gravitas. Christina, all of eleven, wore an adult’s raspberry silk wrap around her head, presumably her mother’s, kid’s sunglasses and a yellow child’s raincoat. Thomas junior, twelve-and-a-half, also had his shades on under a dark blue baseball cap and matching windbreaker. The weather was entirely mild outside. Sol gave a quizzical look to the parents.

“They’re investigating you,” Debrah explained casually.

“Ah,” Sol grokked. “I see.”

“We performed a routine online screening,” Thomas junior informed his parents though he was looking at Sol. “He checks out.”

“However,” Christine enunciated, as rehearsed, “his agency has only been registered for three years, so...”

“I’ve been doing this kind of work for fifteen years, though,” he pleaded to the kids. “I just decided to go solo a few years ago, that’s all. Like an indie label, you know?”

The kids looked at each other, debated telepathically as only siblings can do, gave each other almost imperceptible nods and turned to their parents.

"It's a go," Thomas junior authorized.

"Great!" Debrah exclaimed and smiled at Sol appreciatively. "Now we can proceed..."

"As it turns out, you've

"You're a Green," he stated to Debrah.

"I'm a Green," she confirmed.

"But you're not," he turned to Sully.

"In my heart I am," Sully answered. "Alas, I am unworthy of the ten pillars of philosophy espoused by the esteemed Green Party."

"Oh, please," Debrah eyerolled to Sol, "He watches boxing matches and sneaks off once a year on Easter morning to wolf down a ham and egg sandwich where his vegetarian family can't see him."

"Or judge him," Sully added with a smile.

"One of the Cuban spots, am I right?" Sol accused. "With the the thick slabs of pork and the thin deli pickle slices, Swiss cheese and Cuban bread all hot pressed till just before the bread blackens?"

"Oh, the shame!" Sully pretended to sob and hid his face in his hands.

"So, I was hoping you can tell me why the guy with the plant place is so important."

The pair looked at each other in complete surprise, yet they seemed strangely pleased.

"Might as well tell him now," Sully said to Debra with a sly grin.

"Alright, Sol, the jig is up." said his client looking like the cat that ate the canary. "That guy at the juice bar, Jeremiah is his name, is actually our silent partner in our big secret plan."

"Really..." said an incredulous Sol, who had watched the man geek out to a Tom Petty song.

"Maybe it's best if we just let these boys meet and Jerry can elaborate for Sol..." Sully offered to his wife, as if playing some kind of practical joke.

“Excellent idea!” Debrah commended. “Sol, Jeremiah is a doll, you’ll love him. I’ll let him know you’ll be coming to see him.”

“You’re not kidding,” realized Sol.

“No, we’re not,” Sully answered. “He’s not as crazy as he acts, well, maybe a little, but the truth is we are, both of us together, working with him on an important project. But for you to get the whole picture, the first part of it has to come from him.”

South Miami
Sunset Plaza
5pm

Aly hunted by Euros; when they both try to find Miami book dealer

Run!

She bolted through the rear exit of the store into the mall’s interior utility hallways

Emmeline saw Edward at the balcony walk across the open plaza space.

“Shoot the runner!” she shouted at him, pointing into the crowd.

The river house
11:27pm

He was completely depleted, nothing left. He just needed one full night of rest and he’d be back to optimum. He collapsed onto his bed and began to drift away happily. And then he heard it; a cautious, slowly building cacophony of high-pitched croaking.

The frogs. He’d forgotten about the damned frogs. If the pool was not regularly maintained, by mid-March after one or two good rainstorms they emerged.

It was as though they all simultaneously transformed from tadpoles into young adults within a few evening’s hours. Dozens of them, and loud as hell itself. And there was nothing he could do about it at that moment except pray for the eventual relief of unconsciousness.

There will always be strife and fighting... there will always be one jackass that ruins the party for everything... It never ends (vigilance)... the world is too small now and there is no more hiding from the stupid... is tomorrow yard trash pick-up day?...

as he falls asleep weds night 23rd;

6.

Wanting To Kill

"...[M]an with all his noble qualities, with sympathy which feels for the most debased, with benevolence which extends not only to other men but to the humblest living creature, with his god-like intellect which has penetrated into the movements and constitution of the solar system - with all these exalted powers - Man still bears in his bodily frame the indelible stamp of his lowly origin."

- Charles Darwin, 'The Descent Of Man', 1871

"Someday we'll live on Venus
Men will walk on Mars
But we will still be monkeys
Down deep inside"

- Talking Heads, 'The Facts Of Life'
Naked, 2008

Humanity's one saving grace is its very humanity. It can be found in the darkest, most brutal of prisons, in war zones, or any of the world's most desolate places and situations. It surfaces when you least expect it, and it creates true miracles and offers hope in the most hopeless of times.

Sadly, there are many humans on this planet entirely devoid of such grace.

Tamiami

Friday, March 25th

3:55am

'Chasing the dragon' is the name given to the form of smoking heroin originating in Shanghai, China, in the 1920's and refined in Hong Kong in the 1950's. Basically, the heroin powder is heated on a metal surface, usually tin foil, and it turns into a wriggling liquid "dragon". The vapors from the cooking drug are inhaled with the use of any available tube from pen shafts to rolled up newspapers.

The little red-haired man, of course, did not keep the tradition alive in the way the slobs in the dens did. No, he did it with elegance and with ritual. Instead of the regular crude foil scraps and plastic straws, he used a shiny and expensive four-inch diameter aluminum smoking bowl on a little sterling steel tripod and fine smoking tubes

made of shoots of *Phyllostachys nigra*, or black bamboo. He even sometimes wore a changshan when he got high, as a grudging nod to the Chinese for their excellent contributions to drug culture. But most important of all, he used the best heroin available in Miami.

In that delightful hour when everyone else is still asleep and you don't even see delivery trucks out on nearby 997, Val Mustela performed his morning rites and was again a master of the universe, creating a secure future for his fellow White Christian Americans.

Although Tamiami was not yet even a town, and named merely as a portmanteau after Tampa and Miami were finally connected by road, that would soon change, as would the course of history itself. For it was his manifest destiny to become the spiritual and religiously prophesied savior of the one pure race on this earthly plane. And it was here in the swamp that the glory would arise.

Coral Gables

7:12am

Marielita Olga Acevedo-Feldman was the type of woman who liked to let her tits lead the way in life. It was a tried-and-true methodology and had never once failed her since high school. Why fix what's not broken? She was confident they'd be good to go through an easy early retirement.

Good-looking and bigger than the average woman, she domineered most, as well as the men, who were usually putty in her hands. And she *needed* to be especially assertive in the cutthroat world of South Florida real estate. Would she have ever achieved the august title of 'Realtor to the Stars' by being timid? Would she have made as much money had she not learned to think like a man?

When the time had come for her to enter the political arena, she was more than well-equipped to navigate among the other predator fish. Both of her Cuban parents had benefitted greatly from Ronald Reagan's largesse toward Latin Americans when he was the American president for most of the 1980's and they were staunch supporters of the Republican party. She had grown up with a portrait of the former Hollywood actor heroically gazing out over the plastic-covered furniture in the living room.

Then, in the go-go economy of the early 90's when everyone was making money hand over fist during the Clinton administration,

she had decided that maybe the Democrats weren't so bad after all and swung on over to their tent to hang out with them for that decade. It was when 9/11 happened and that brave, decisive man of action flight suit American president showed Americans what it meant to take charge and defend our honor that she repented, lowered her head, and humbly returned to the Republican fold.

But Marielita was also a deeply religious person and credited her faith in the Almighty for everything she had been able to take advantage of in this world. It was her personal relationship with her *bello Diosito* that had carried her through the trials and tribulations of having to endure weak siblings in her youth, then three short marriages to spineless idiots, the ordeals of all those divorces and now a fourth marriage to a man who she supposed was manly enough but who she considered wholly lacking in ambition.

It was also He who had walked with her in her struggles to fully accept Him and find the one true church where she could bask in the warmth and light of His eternal love. She had been raised Catholic and found that faith too limited and overly formal for her fervor. She had testified with the Jehovah's Witnesses on sidewalks and at train stations but was sorely disappointed when she was told that she shouldn't try to physically touch the people passing by and that loud singing wasn't really a part of the routine. She had swooned and moaned and bellowed with the Pentecostals but became terrified that she was developing epilepsy from receiving the holy spirit so often and hitting her head when she fell to the ground in prophetic ecstasy. And she had sung and swayed with the Baptists and even auditioned to join the choir and had been appalled when the choir director had told her she couldn't sing. She was resentful, convinced herself that the know-nothing choirmaster had rejected her solely out of petty jealousy of her God-given talents. For a full year after, she avoided all churches and built a private sanctum in a spare room of her McMansion to worship as she saw fit and without the burden of clothing. Venturing into Santeria for a couple months she was forced to hastily dismantle the altar when the weird stuff started happening in that room.

Then one night after a particularly sinful episode involving a handsome stranger she'd met at an urban renewal seminar and a lot of red wine, God spoke directly to her through a preacher on television. It was not the fact that she was cheating on her third

husband with a married man that concerned her, it was the sense of Purpose that the preacher spoke of.

There in that cheap motel room on Flagler Street in West Miami at two thirty in the morning sleeplessly watching cable access programming she heard the right Reverend Rory Rollins lay forth the divine truth she had been seeking her whole life. He had even looked straight into the camera and told her he was speaking to her specifically, awash in sin and seeking redemption.

She decided right then and there to devote herself to his mission with the Most High and Holy Reformed Evangelical Church of the Almighty and Merciful Redeemer. She had pulled out her credit card, called the 800 number and sent five hundred dollars, as well as offering her contact information for volunteer outreach work in southern Florida.

That had been six months ago. She hadn't missed a single Sunday sermon since. And she was doing her utmost to spread the reverend's message in Miami.

Today she would be killing two birds with one stone. This very afternoon she would be taking a big step toward closing a deal that would secure her financially and reputationally for years to come. As a happy result, she would simultaneously be exacting a biblical vengeance on her one true, most despised adversary.

That know-it-all, holier-than-thou, ooh-I'm-a-smarty-pants-scientist meddlesome enviro freak woman who had been a big pointy thorn in her ass for the past three years was finally going to get her comeuppance and see who was really in charge in this town. *To me belongeth vengeance, and recompence...*

With that adrenaline-pumping inspiration she marched right into her bathroom and sounded revelry for her platoon of orange-and-white medicine bottles. With careful calculation, she set out a colorful playlist of round, oblong, hexagonal, and oval little pills that would get her through her busy day. A yellow one to take the edge off, a pink one to steady her focus, a light blue one to ease her joint pain, a dark blue one to keep her calm and a pale green one to modulate all the other four. That set would take her all the way up to brunch. She would play it by ear after that.

Doral

Lexington Luxury Airport Suites, NW 36th Street

8:35am

The mini bar had an excellent assortment of delicious little imported liquor bottles and after a bit of consideration he began the morning with gin and juice. Aaahhh..., but none is tastier or more satisfying than that first one, *n'est-ce pas?* After a couple more and some routine morning shuffling about, he called up for an adult size bottle of Beefeater, a pitcher of fresh squeezed grapefruit juice and some breadstuffs. When his order arrived he made himself comfortable on the terrace. The view was lousy, nothing but treetops and terra cotta roofs but it was better than looking at the airport.

United States Representative for Florida's 1st legislative district (R) and rightfully ordained minister Rory Alphonse Rollins had deftly parlayed this little turn of events into a fundraising opportunity, for both his church and his re-election campaign. He was well enough known throughout the state, but this would mark his first full-on foray into South Florida, and he had always wanted some of that gloriously abundant Miami money.

He'd already been invited to numerous events in town this month and while he was stuck here retrieving those stupid books, he was going to milk every single one of these photo ops for all they were worth. Today he didn't even have to travel far.

Some flatulent filthy rich donor from New York owned a golf resort nearby and was still here for the winter season. At some point during this visit, he would have been obliged to pretend to care about golf and the donor's greatness and endure an hour or two of this assmouth's Adderall-fueled self-aggrandizing tours of the country club temple to himself. The food was always good at that place, though, he remembered. And because the spray tanned blowhard, a manly man like himself, also treated women as inferiors, he always had a big, fat check ready to aid in the right reverend's misogynist agenda. Might as well get it over with and have a nice, big lunch.

The last couple of times he was here he'd been able to move about comfortably incognito in between public appearances. It was so easy to be yourself at night in South Beach. The right clothes, the right clubs, the right bars, and the right people and he was just another fun-loving Florida boy, in a glamorous setting. He dismissed with his security details on these nights.

He never told anyone, but as a young man Rory had always dreamed of being a Hollywood actor, like Montgomery Clift or Rock Hudson. And he could sing, too, no one knew that either. He could have performed in musical movies or stage shows, if he had been allowed to.

But one day when he was fifteen, it was MLK day he remembered, because it was a federal holiday, and both of his parents were out of the house that day. He'd slicked his hair back, put on some tight pants and a sexy, open-buttoned shirt, blasted a forbidden record on the stereo, and set up stage in front of the standing mirror in the front parlor. *Set me free, why don't you baby...*

Then his mother had walked in noiselessly to find him dancing and shaking and singing like a woman and was horrified. She'd come back home to check that he was alright and decided that he was not.

He was given an earlier curfew and added chores. His parents, pious fundamentalists, would have none of that heathen Hollywood nonsense and they coerced him into enlisting with the US Navy where he would "learn to be a man" after a forced early graduation from high school, at the peak of the Vietnam War.

And there, ironically, with all the other seamen Rollins was able to fully feel himself and be completely free, in the Navy. He grew especially close to one other sailor from South Carolina, and they stayed in touch over the years, often visiting one another.

He returned from overseas someone completely new; wizened, emboldened, determined, and very, very unforgiving. He despised the peaceniks, the hippies, the liberal politicians, the blind, ignorant sheep in the public, and the feminine species in general.

Rollins had long ago decided that politics and religion were the best games in town for him.

Over time he'd come to understand and accept that he truly loathed women. All of them, from his own bouffant buffoon of a mother to his spoiled vapid wife and the two daughters he'd spawned with her for appearance's sake, to the multitudes of insufferably annoying women he had to deal with daily.

But no woman did he hate more than that misbegotten squaw feminist she-devil at the university. And before he left Miami, he intended to see her destroyed.

Di Lido Island

10:04am

Founded in 1969, the communist party of Peru, commonly known as the Shining Path, originated in the universities and through the 1970's steadily grew to a level of national presence.

In 1980, after a twelve-year moratorium, the country's military government allowed for national elections. Rather than participate, the communists declared a guerrilla "people's war" to be launched from the highlands. On the evening of the presidential elections members of the party burned ballot boxes in the town of Chuschi, initiating a decades-long campaign of violence and terror.

As part of the effort to contain the threat, the Peruvian military recruited and trained peasants in select areas to form anti-rebel militias called "rondas" to fight, hunt and kill the Shining Path guerrillas.

At the end of December of 1981, well into the second year of being on the defensive against the extremists, the Peruvian government declared an "Emergency Zone" in three Andean Regions, one of which included the Alto Huallaga Valley, a center of cocaine production in the country.

The emergency decree blankly authorized the military to arbitrarily arrest and detain any individual they deemed to be of suspicious nature. Naturally, military authorities rounded up hundreds and hundreds of innocent people, subjecting many of them to rape and torture during interrogation. Soldiers and officers of the Peruvian Armed forces started wearing black baclavas to hide their identities, rendering them practically indistinguishable from the terrorists they were at war with. The violence escalated and continues to the present day.

In February of 1982, Renee Berguenza was a thirty-year old lieutenant assigned to the Alto Huallaga Valley when one day on patrol he happened upon what he later concluded had been God's providence. In a pocket of land almost entirely hidden by the converging hills of three mountains, a lovely little cocaine and heroin farm had been abruptly abandoned by the owners upon the approach of the army.

The lieutenant and his unit effortlessly took over the nearby village as well as operation of the drug plantation and enlisted a dozen eager peasants to tend the crops. He established secure distribution channels in Mexico City and Miami. Within six months Berguenza had made enough money to make preparations for his planned escape from the war to the good life in America.

Upon making his exit to the States, Berguenza arranged over a period of a few months to have the peasants of the village he now essentially owned slowly and methodically kill the remaining five soldiers and one sergeant still in the area who knew anything about the farm. In September he abruptly resigned from the army and immediately boarded a flight to Miami just in time to join in the festivities of the cocaine wars of the 1980's.

As the public cover for his wealth and the narcotics business, he established a concrete manufacturing plant on an entire block of city property, the common size for larger ready-mix plants, which he was able to obtain for pennies on the dollar as it was situated smack dab in the middle of a neighborhood ravaged by drug and alcohol abuse. Using area workers so desperate for jobs that they labored for shamefully low wages, Berguenza built massive, fortress-like cinder block walls around the entire compound and painted them white.

At first the company, MegaMix, Inc., routinely reported massive losses on tax returns and balance sheets citing recessions, wars in the Middle East and labor costs. Simultaneously, because Mr. Berguenza was well-known for his selflessness in the higher Miami social circles, the business somehow managed yearly to donate generously to local and state political campaigns as well as area charities. When another building boom hit in the mid-eighties the concrete company began doing so much business it became impossible to disguise the profits. And when a routine letter of inquiry from the Internal Revenue Service arrived in the mail, Berguenza realized he had to become a public figure, indeed a captain of industry and a compassionate philanthropist.

For the first years of his arrival, he lived in one of the dazzling new luxury high rises out on the water in that quiet little crucible of municipal corruption called North Bay Village, sequestered on the causeway between north beach and El Portal. By 1987 he had millions and decided he needed a more elegant residence, something more appropriate for a man of his stature.

Though he did not know it, Al Pacino's mansion in the movie "Scarface" was not actually in Miami, but in Montecito, California. Every year, countless amateur movie buffs visiting South Florida point to a lookalike on Star Island and swear to their friends and families that that house right there is where Tony Montana was gunned down by the Colombian cartel.

Nonetheless, to assert his own Bad Hombre status, Berguenza, had bought a mansion on nearby Di Lido Island, which was almost as expensive as it would be on Star Island, and he, too, could hit a nice fat line of coke on his dresser top immediately upon rising from bed in the morning, or afternoon, and step out onto his patio to see the idyllic skies of Miami Beach on his left, the glittering skyscrapers of downtown Miami on his right, and the gentle, glistening green blue water of Biscayne Bay all around him.

Apart from the direct supply of "Peruvian flake" cocaine, Renee enjoyed another certain advantage over his competitors among South Florida's drug dealers. While everyone and their barber had coke in Miami, he was one of the few with a direct supply of pure, premium heroin.

Having served as one of the economic pillars of the British Empire in the nineteenth century, the opium industry grew to include producing countries in the United States, Europe, southwestern Asia, and Central and South America. At present, Asia is the primary cultivator of the poppy plants that are the source of heroin and opium, followed next by Mexico, Guatemala, Colombia and Peru. Renee's little plantation in the Alto Huallaga Valley was a perennially flowering money maker.

And in twelve days he was to be honored as the Businessman of the Year by the South Florida Hispanic Business Leaders Association at their annual fete. Well, they used the word 'businessperson' these days, with all that political correctness nonsense, but we all know this is a man's world, he assuaged himself.

And he was a man in full, at the top of the hill and ready to launch even greater conquests. And yet, there was another man out there daring to cast some shadow upon his brilliant sun. A man, he had decided recently, who would need to be eliminated.

Miramar
FBI field office

11:30am

Though unrecognized by the literary world in his own time, the young poet Percy Bysshe Shelley is today considered to be one of the major English Romantics. In a period of British history when it was still dangerous to be a freethinker, he also wrote controversial prose fiction and impassioned essays addressing philosophical, political, and social issues of the day. Many of his works were published only posthumously or else in a sanitized form because of the very real threat of prosecution by the religious and political authorities.

His personal life was composed of illness, scandal, tragedy, tumult and continuous attacks against his individualism, politics and atheism. He died at the age of twenty-nine, drowned at sea off the coast of Italy when a sudden storm overturned his boat on July 8th of 1822.

When he was seventeen years old and still an undergraduate, Shelley wrote the Gothic horror novel 'St. Irvyne; or, The Rosicrucian: A Romance', and published it anonymously as "a Gentleman of the University of Oxford" through the notorious London publishing house of John Joseph Stockdale, who had famously earned the public condemnation of "Publish, and be damned".

The book, filled with bandits, murder, lust, and the occult, was eviscerated by critics and received nary a positive review. Indeed, one reviewer deemed it offensive on every single page. Nonetheless, it proved popular with the reading public and was reprinted as chapbooks upon the author's death and then again in 1850.

The original 1810 Stockdale print runs, which were falsely dated for the following year, are the most valuable editions and it was one of these that had been in Lot 19.

Agent Weiland had at first thought it an anomaly, then a mere coincidence, then finally a possibly important factor in this whole scenario. Three of the four stolen books were works by atheist authors. Was the California expeditionary report a red herring or was it somehow religiously pertinent? It was a foggy notion, she could not deny that, but it kept whispering to her.

Kendall-Tamiami Executive Airport, SW 145th Avenue

1:30pm

She flew in on her father's private jet and blew open the door upon arrival, not waiting for the crew members to get it for her. She saw him on the tarmac, gave him a little wave then closed her eyes and inhaled deeply of the tropical air. Even with the jet fuel fumes mixed in, it was a refreshing change from New York Harbor.

Evidently, she came to party. In a very short skirt and long pleather jacket, a low-cut blouse and strapped stiletto heels, everything white to match her short white bob and white lipstick, she took her time walking down the stair ramp, as if still deciding whether or not Miami was worthy of her presence today.

Following closely behind her while quickly scanning the surroundings was Yǔxuān "Billy" Sheng, Mei's devoted young uncle and assigned protector. He and Sol were friendly, and he threw up his hand in greeting, also seemingly happy to be breaking out of the regular routine.

Mei Ling Xu was the daughter of a man Sol had met in a chance encounter some fifteen years ago, ironically in a frantic midnight run for both of them from Miami to New York. Sol, only nineteen at the time, had helped the gentleman out of a jam and the man, only five years older, had never forgotten. They'd stayed in touch over the years and had become close friends. The man had turned out to be a high-ranking member of a New York Chinese triad, but it was a subject they never broached. Sol had met his friend's family about ten years ago when Mei was a fifteen-year-old computer nerd with pigtails, eyeglasses and braces. She had grown into a strikingly good-looking woman, an accomplished and celebrated classical violinist, a popular socialite, and, secretly, one of the world's most dangerous computer hackers. When she was working (or playing) in that last capacity she preferred to go by her supervillain name of Melee.

She had already traipsed through and temporarily disrupted the internal computer networks of various international banks, a few national governments and some of the world's richest private individuals, making mockeries of all their security systems. That she was not on a single wanted list was a testament to her thoroughness in covering her tracks and the fact that she never really did any serious or permanent damage other than embarrassing a lot of CTOs.

She did it mostly for fun, really, and because she could. And she did it for Sol on the few occasions when he asked, and paid, because he never asked her to do anything illegal and because even though she was all grown up now and beyond such childish things, when she'd been just a silly young girl she'd had a not-so-secret crush on her dad's mysterious young friend.

"Sol! Ohmigod, thank you so much for getting me out of New York! Just in time for Ultra! What are you doing down here?"

"Thank you for coming on such short notice, Mei," he said as they did the cheek pecks. "What *we* are going to be doing is hunting a ghost in the machine. But I won't bore you with that right now. Billy, my dude! Still on duty, I see."

"I graduate at the end of the year. Good to see you, Sol. And I have to say thanks for getting me out of New York, too. It's kind of boring these days."

"Hey!" Mei exclaimed. "Before I forget, and neither of you had better ever tell anyone you saw me do this, Daddy bought me something nice and shiny to deliver a message to you, Sol. Ready?"

He just held out his palm, encouraging her to proceed.

"Alright," she sighed. Throwing her arms outward to her sides and sticking her tongue all the way out of her mouth she bellowed out, "Wwaaazzzuuppp?!?!..."

Sol had to laugh, remembering that chaotic night on the highway with her father and the drunken cowboys in South Carolina in the spring of 1990.

She brought her hand to her mouth, leaned over and spit a little to the ground.

"Ugh," she grimaced. "*So eighties...* C'mon, unc, I have to get to the hotel and start my arrival all over again. Sol, sweetie, I will see you tomorrow night."

"Monday, you mean."

"Noooo... Didn't Daddy tell you when you first called? The only way he was letting me come down here without a full security detail is if you came with us to Ultra."

Sol looked at Billy, who apparently was also aware of this arrangement.

"That's not really my scene, Mei." Sol was allergic to large crowds.

"It is *this weekend*, boss man, that was the deal. You can call him right now if you want."

"No, it's fine, I should have figured that. I'll see you tomorrow night, then."

"Well, don't pout, Sol! We'll have fun, I promise. And please, try not to dress like a cop, okay?"

**The Comedy Clinic, Grand Avenue, Coconut Grove
8:50pm**

He'd gotten there just in time to catch most of the set by the performer right before his old friend Rick came on. The place was packed, though, and he'd had to squeeze into a space next to a column in the shadows between the bar and the tables.

The comedian on stage, a stark, fairly good-looking deadpanner in a grey suit and loosened wine-red tie, was riffing on everything from raising kids to local politics to women troubles to Masonic degrees of stupidity to airline travel to the stages of gentrification and he had the crowd rolling. Despite the beleaguered straight face he wore for the stage, the guy looked to be having a good time. Rick had told him that some of these performers made a nice chunk of change just for telling jokes. It occurred to Sol that making people laugh might really not be a terrible way to make a living. Perhaps the fool and the jester were in truth noble professions. The joker finished his set and made a graceful exit. After a five-minute break and a couple of songs Sol's irreverent and eternally sardonic friend Rick Diaz was introduced.

Like a Spanish conquistador without armor, Rick, his pointy razor-sharp goatee and haircut, and his small but proud beer belly strode up to the microphone in a lavender polo, khakis and black Sunday church shoes to testify on behalf of the good life in Miami and all of its ridiculous absurdities.

Even hidden in the dark, Rick spotted him immediately, allowed himself a quick smile, then ad libbed a joke about how it was a good thing there was no drink minimum tonight or the cheapskate New York snowbirds would never come in.

At his day job, Rick was one of the top inspectors for the City of Miami Buildings Department. He was also an appointed

commissioner on the Miami-Dade County Board of Economic Development.

"You were great, man! You finally found your rhythm," Sol congratulated him when the amateur comedian had finished his set and made his way over to him. He handed Rick a bottle of his favorite German beer. They embraced. Rick always got a little bit sweaty when he was nervous, which was usually only when he was on stage.

"Thanks, brother, very kind of you to say. Only took five years, but, yeah, I can finally fill a half-hour slot without choking. I see you're still with the green tea."

"Keeps me calm. That last guy right before you was pretty funny, too."

"Oh, yeah, he kills. Kind of reminds me of you a little, if you had a sense of humor."

"Ouch. You're never gonna let me live that down, are you?"

"No, sirrr...What can I tell you, you're always too serious." He took a long swig from the bottle.

"I can appreciate a good joke..." Sol protested.

"I know, but that's not why you're here tonight, is it, *acere*?"

"No, that's why I didn't call any of you ahead of time. I'm here for work right now."

"You have to learn how to enjoy life, 'mano! It's always work with you."

"What else do I have? But check it out, this time it's on your turf."

"Is that right..."

"Yeah, I need a quick rundown of the local ordinances as they pertain to alternative or non-traditional building materials, from the luxury towers to the bodegas, without my having to spend all day at city hall or the law library. And I need to know who the major ready-mix concrete players are in the Miami metro region. Please."

*

In December of 1974, New York Times journalist Seymour Hersh revealed to the world the existence of a top-secret CIA project entitled MK-Ultra, terminated the previous year, wherein the United States' foreign intelligence service illegally spied and experimented

upon thousands of American citizens inside the country, some willing but most unwittingly, with psychedelic and other drugs in order to gauge their usefulness toward mind control, psychological torture, and, of course, intelligence gathering.

In the early 1950's, at the height of the Korean War, the US government had become convinced, wrongly as it turned out, that the communists of the Soviet Union, China and North Korea had achieved the science of mind control over American POWs in Korea. The decision was made to match or exceed the enemy's psychological warfare weapons and technology.

In 1952 at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor, scientists there embarked on a historical study of the effects of psychedelic drugs including marijuana, LSD, mescaline, psilocybin, and a little-known drug called MDMA. Unbeknownst to the academics, the program was being funded by the Central Intelligence Agency as the pilot project for a much larger secret agenda.

On April 13th, 1953, newly crowned CIA director Allen Dulles, a true believer in mind control and an ever-elusive magic truth serum, formally authorized the covert operation, as well as a few related efforts, and appointed poison expert Sydney Gottlieb to expand upon two predecessor projects, named Bluebird and Artichoke, which Gottlieb had become a part of and improved over the preceding two years.

Turned away by the military as a young man because of a club foot, Gottlieb had started looking for alternative forms of service to his country, and in the mid-1940's he began seeking out government employment in Washington, DC.

In 1948 Gottlieb, his wife, and their two daughters were living in a remote cabin with no running water or electricity near Vienna, Virginia when he began his first government job at the Department of Agriculture, researching chemical structures of organic soils. Later, he worked at the Food and Drug Administration, developing exams to measure the presence of drugs in humans. He was finally recruited by the CIA in 1951, taking the stage at the onset of the Cold War.

By August of that same year, both Director Dulles and Gottlieb, who had already been appointed chief of the recently formed Chemical Division of the Technical Services Staff, were absolutely certain that a truth serum was within reach and that psychedelics held the key to effective mind control.

Documents from the early fifties, later declassified, confirmed that hypnosis was also studied as part of the itinerary. Stated objectives included studying personality types more readily susceptible to hypnosis, "hypnotically induced anxieties", hypnotically increasing an individual's capacity to "observe and recall complex arrangements of physical objects" and "ability to learn and recall complex written matter."

The agenda was expanded to include experimentation at universities, hospitals, military bases and prisons throughout the country. Experiments included administering LSD to mental patients, convicts, drug addicts, and prostitutes - "people who could not fight back," as one agency officer put it. Over 7,000 American veterans also took part in these experiments non-consensually. All of this occurred in direct violation of the Nuremberg Code, signed and agreed to by the United States after World War II.

Deeper investigation into the origins of MK-Ultra revealed that it was effectively a continuation of similar operations conducted in WWII-era Nazi concentration camps at Auschwitz and Dachau, as well as at Japanese facilities. Scholars uncovered evidence of secret CIA recruitment and importing of Nazi scientists, vivisectionists and torturers to the United States to continue experiments on thousands of American subjects and to instruct CIA officers on the use of the lethal gas sarin.

In Langley, Virginia, CIA counter-intelligence chief James Jesus Angleton had come to believe that the agency had been penetrated by a mole at the top levels of the organization. Accordingly, LSD was surreptitiously administered to CIA employees, military personnel, doctors, other government agents, and members of the general public in a wide-net attempt at producing deep confessions or wiping out a subject's mind entirely in order to facilitate reprogramming.

At CIA headquarters and unauthorized field offices and safe houses throughout the country, surprise acid trips became something of an occupational hazard. For many years at the world's most powerful intelligence service you could never really be quite sure who was tripping and who was not. Maybe it was *you*.

An agent named Frank Olson realized he had been given LSD against his will and raised his objections and concerns to his superiors to no avail. Olson abruptly resigned from the agency and a few days

later fell out of a window of a tall building. According to the agency, Olson was given to suicidal tendencies. His family sued for the truth and the agency was eventually forced to kinda sorta apologize for having maybe thrown the man out the window, but without tacitly admitting to it.

One of the most infamous projects of the MK-Ultra program was dubbed Operation Midnight Climax, in which government agents paid prostitutes to draw selected targets to CIA safe houses in San Francisco and New York City that were staged to look like brothels. As operatives watched behind two-way mirrors, the subjects were dosed with LSD in their cocktails or other beverages and their behavior was observed and recorded by the watchers with devices fashioned to look like electrical outlets.

Another later declassified internal document revealed that a central nefarious objective of the mission as a whole was to develop or identify a veritable shopping list of mind-altering chemicals and methods that included, among many others:

- Substances which will promote illogical thinking and impulsiveness to the point where the recipient would be discredited in public
- Materials which will promote the intoxicating effect of alcohol
- Substances which will produce "pure" euphoria with no subsequent let-down
- A material which will cause mental confusion of such a type the individual under its influence will find it difficult to maintain a fabrication under questioning.

As such, by March of 1960, as part of The Cuban Project, a CIA initiative authorized by President Eisenhower, Gottlieb was planning ways of spraying Cuban dictator Fidel Castro's television studio with LSD in addition to various methods of assassination using poisoned (as well as exploding) cigars, wetsuits, and fountain pens, none of which were ever implemented.

Of the many unplanned and unexpected results of MK-Ultra, one of the most significant would have to be that the previously unknown psychedelics were now actively circulating in the public domain. Very often the subjects of the experiments so enjoyed the drugs they were being given that they worked out ways to allocate

large amounts for themselves and their friends. Some of the more distinguished participants were able to extol the wonders of these substances to wide audiences.

Perhaps most famous was an aspiring novelist. To supplement his income while a student at Stanford, author and counter-culture icon Ken Kesey had volunteered for the experiments at the same time he was working as a night aide at a veteran's hospital and writing the classic 'One Flew Over The Cuckoo's Nest'.

Upon the commercial and critical success of his first novel, Kesey formed The Merry Pranksters, a group of provocateur artists and friends who went riding about California and Oregon in a psychedelic painted school bus, merrily handing out doses of LSD to anyone and everyone who was curious about expanding their minds.

Kesey and the Pranksters also started throwing big LSD parties called Acid Tests at his swanky pad in La Honda and other locations in the San Francisco Bay Area, complete with strobe and black lights, glow paint, film projectors and rock bands. A chemist friend named Owsley ("The Bear") had begun mass producing hits of LSD on blotter paper.

Kesey continued to write and produced another classic, the epic 'Sometimes A Great Notion'. He retired to his farm in Oregon where he lived out his days exactly as he had planned, watching his grandkids and the strawberries grow until in 2001 he boarded that final bus ride to Further.

Notorious Boston mobster Joseph "Whitey" Bulger was subjected to the LSD experiments in 1956 while serving time in prison on his first federal bid. Although he later told a fellow gangster he found the experiences "nightmarish" and that they took him "to the depths of insanity", and that he and the other eighteen participating inmates had been duped into the program (which had been disguised as a study to find cures for schizophrenia) with the offer of reduced sentences, he had no problem with later introducing mass quantities of the drug into the New England area.

Bulger went on to terrorize Beantown and its environs for decades with other drugs, guns, extortion, murder, and mayhem. During his tenure he also served as a valuable informant for the FBI until he became a liability and public embarrassment for them. He was subsequently charged, in absentia, with numerous racketeering, weapons, drugs and murder-related cases. Tipped off by his FBI

handler that sealed indictments had been handed down by the grand jury and that arrests were scheduled just in time for Christmas, Bulger went on the lam December 23rd, 1994.

After sixteen years on the run and twelve years on the FBI's Ten Most Wanted list, Whitey Bulger was already an old man when he was captured in 2011. A \$2M bounty, second only to the one for terrorist head Osama bin Laden, had been offered for help in his capture. The final stage in the last year of the international manhunt had involved focusing on bookstores in the Southern California area, where the known booklover was caught.

He was tried in 2013 and sentenced to two life sentences plus five years. In the fourth year of his sentence, sitting in a wheelchair in prison, Bulger was beaten to death by a group of other inmates armed with a shank and a lock-in-a-sock. His eyes had been mostly gouged out and his tongue partially ripped off.

More well-known guinea pigs of MK-Ultra also included Ted 'Unabomber' Kaczynski, a mathematics prodigy and former professor who in 1958 was accepted to Harvard University at the age of fifteen. In his second year there, he was invited by a Harvard psychologist to participate in a "psychology study" wherein he was unknowingly administered LSD. He was seventeen.

Over a period of three years, Kaczynski "volunteered" for two hundred hours of the experiment during which every week he was dosed, hooked up to electrodes, then subjected to humiliation and verbal abuse so that his reactions could be filmed and monitored. The recordings of the subjects' rage and anger would then be replayed to them repeatedly.

Despite these mind-altering sessions, Kaczynski went on to a brilliant mathematics career at the University of Michigan and the University of California at Berkeley. And then between 1978 and 1995 he killed three people and injured twenty-three with mailbombs sent to those individuals whom he had deemed guilty of propagating industrialism and destroying the environment.

In September 1995, the Unabomber extorted the US government and press to publish his ecotopian manifesto, entitled 'Industrial Society and Its Future', with the promise to stop killing. Under pressure from the Clinton administration, The Washington Post published the work on the 19th. Recognizing the writing style, Kaczynski's brother, David, reported his suspicions to the FBI, who

located and arrested the Unabomber six months later on April 3rd, 1996, at his cabin in a remote part of Montana. He was sentenced to eight consecutive life sentences without the possibility of parole.

A last, notable participant in the LSD experiments was Robert Hunter, the only non-performer to ever be inducted into the Rock n' Roll Hall of Fame. Hunter was a lyricist for The Grateful Dead, who were the house band at the Acid Tests in California and who invited us to go with them, you and I, while we can, and what a long, strange trip it's been...

Though the CIA claimed that the entire program had yielded no real results and that the drugs had been deemed too unpredictable to be practical, the operations had run for a full twenty years and were expanded to other parts of the world, most notably to Canada in the north, where there existed a whole host of eager experimenters. Director Dulles had already been dismissed in 1961 by the Kennedy administration after the Bay of Pigs disaster and other CIA failures. In 1973, then current CIA Director Richard Helms ordered all MK-Ultra files to be destroyed. That same year, Sydney Gottlieb retired with his wife to an ecologically centered lifestyle in suburban Virginia, advocating for the environment and world peace, and eating yogurt made from the milk of the goats they raised. In his later years, Gottlieb volunteered as a speech pathologist in middle schools and high schools.

Despite MDMA having played a significantly lesser role than LSD and the other drugs in the MK-Ultra experiments, having been mainly tested on laboratory animals, once it found its way into the public sphere it took on a life of its own.

By 1970 it was identified in a Chicago police report describing the discovery of a makeshift basement lab producing the drug in its crystalline form, already nicknamed 'Molly' on the street. Soon after, from the windy city the world experienced the birth of house music, all night long.

In 1981 in Austin, Texas, an enterprising young chemist and Catholic priest named Michael Clegg was such a believer in the drug that he made it into a pill, named it 'Ecstasy' and decided to bless humanity by providing it in mass quantities through a mail order business. In early promotional efforts he gave it away at local dance clubs and hosted 'Ecstasy Nights'. He soon became a millionaire.

MDMA was not illegal until July 1st, 1985, when it was added to the federal Schedule 1 list of controlled dangerous substances.

Driven underground, it became an integral part of the global subculture at secret electronic dance music parties known as raves throughout the late eighties and early nineties, when everyone from talentless hotel heiresses to your middle-aged next-door neighbor was a club DJ. MDMA aka Ecstasy aka X aka Molly aka E is currently the world's second most used illegal substance, after marijuana.

Just as the lifesaving antibiotic Penicillin was created by a stray speck of mold in a loosely sealed sample of influenza, and the relaxant Valium was formed from a slosh pile of chemicals used to make dyes, and good old Viagra was discovered among medicines being tested to treat chest pain, the empathogen stimulant Ecstasy, too, was created by accident.

In 1912, German chemist Anton Kollisch, while working for pharmaceutical leviathan Merck in Darmstadt, had been looking to produce an anti-hemorrhaging agent that could rival one such product already being sold by Merck's competitor Bayer. Kollisch's area of expertise was in the synthesis of organic compounds.

He began to develop a variant that he hoped would produce the same effect, called 'Methylhydrastinine.' While working on this project, Kollisch produced another new substance, an intermediate step, which he called 'Methylenedioxymethamphetamine'. In the official Merck laboratory records this compound was referred to by an acronym: MDMA.

Kollisch was not sure what he'd created with the secondary compound or what applications it might be good for, but following scientific protocol he went about recording his results and registering the new substances. The patent for MDMA was filed on Christmas Eve. In the end, Kollisch's research and his discoveries were passed over by his employer and sent to the archives.

It would not be until a century later that psychiatrists and psychologists would rediscover MDMA as potentially useful in the treatment of psychological conditions and that the US FDA would allow for limited clinical use of the drug in the therapy of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

Basically, Ecstasy works by igniting the brain's neurons to increase the output of one particular neurotransmitter called serotonin, and to a lesser degree two named dopamine and

norepinephrine. In normal daily bodily operations, it is serotonin naturally present in small amounts that modulates appetite, energy, and mood. On E, the pumping of serotonin is what creates the feelings of euphoria and communality, the positive sensations and thoughts, and the excess of energy in the user. But since the brain can only supply a limited amount of this neurotransmitter, once the drug wears off the user is left with a deficit of serotonin that can take days to recover from and which results in the flipside of the fun part, namely fatigue, negativity, and anti-social feelings, otherwise known as “the crash”.

Though ultimately overlooked by the administrators of MK-Ultra, in MDMA the project had quite nearly succeeded in securing the wonder drug they had been looking for. It is a substance that exponentially increases the effects of alcohol intoxication and induces feelings of great euphoria and unlimited affection for others. Under the influence of Ecstasy, the user is highly impulsive, non-linear in their thinking, and, most importantly, unable to sustain a fallacy under even the most routine questioning. They had almost found their super happy truth serum, except for the part about the comedown.

Downtown Miami

Saturday night, March 26th, sunset

To party like it was 1999, that year on March 13th, the first Ultra Music Festival was held as a one-day event on Miami Beach, inaugurated by Rabbit In The Moon, DJ Baby Anne, Josh Wink, and Paul van Dyk. It was itself a celebratory outgrowth of the Winter Music Conference, which was founded in 1985 as an area-wide week-long networking event in Miami for DJs and other electronic music industry professionals from around the world.

The music fest was an instant success and due to rapidly growing attendance rates it was expanded into a two-day event and moved to a permanent residence at Bayfront Park in downtown Miami.

In 2005, on the second night of the sixth edition of Ultra there was a full moon shining. The headliners that weekend were Tiesto, Paul Oakenfold, Moby, and Goldie. That was also the year that Carl

Cox introduced the Carl Cox and Friends Arena, a mainstay at the festival ever since.

The entrance and exit lines snaked around the outside perimeter of the park moving in two directions from Bayside Marketplace at the north end to Chopin Plaza on the south. Half of the people moving in the lines were either trying to sneak in somehow or were just in party mode and wanted to be a part of the procession of wildly dressed and ecstatic ravers.

Their trio duly inched along with the other pilgrims, Mei Ling blatantly inspecting the revelers passing by on the opposite side and freely expressing her approval or not, Billy and Sol trailing behind her trying to be as inconspicuous as possible.

As they were approaching the main entrance Sol spotted another peculiar trio in the other line walking towards them. Big pimpin' in a long faux fur coat (though it was eighty degrees out), Huggy Bear Gazelles, a Kangol hat and enough gold chains to make Mr. T mad, and with two very pretty young women, one on either side of him, arm in arm all, was none other than the strawberry blonde from the lab, Keif.

Even with the headwear and oversized sunglasses he was unmistakable. Since Sol was not Guillare at the moment, he was out of uniform, did not have his goatee on and was wearing a low-slung baseball cap. Moving to keep Billy blocking a direct line of sight between him and his subject, Sol carefully made sure it was the computer geek he was seeing in this other habitat. Not that the guy, clearly on cloud nine with the two beauties next to him, would have noticed him anyway as he strutted down the walk bobbing his head to the untz untz untz all around them.

Mei Ling's group reached the front of the line and the first ticket check point, where they were redirected to the VIP line. After the second check point, they entered the tent areas reserved for the elite and the wannabe elite.

As a rendezvous point in the event anyone became separated, they selected a highly visible outdoor table area next to a bar tent erected up on one of the artificial hills designed by American modernist landscape architect Isamu Noguchi. They lingered for a while as Mei Ling consulted with a couple of mojitos and ignored her minders. After which she stood, surveyed her queendom, then

descended into the valley of dancers and lights and music to play. Sol and Billy dutifully carried the long invisible train of her gown.

After a couple hours she became hungry and they agreed to take a sit-down break. Billy, who by now knew her diet and appetite, made his way to the VIP food tents to get their snacks as Mei Ling headed to the VIP restroom trailers where she joined the always chaotic queue. Sol would grab something to eat once the other two were seated but for the time being took up a triangular position between them, leaning against a tree where he could keep both in sight.

Seemingly from nowhere an incredibly attractive blonde woman was determinedly making her way over to him. Ocean blue eyes that were set off by a silk turquoise blouse, a string of genuine pearls adorning a leisure class tan, and white denim jeans sheathing a pair of dangerously long legs ending in string tie sandals.

"Hey, handsome, what are you doing hiding over here?"

"Waiting for you, what else?"

"Damn right, baby."

She already had her arm over his shoulder. There was no trace of alcohol on her breath, but the dilated pupils gave the game away.

"Are you a cop?" she asked.

"No..."

"Then why aren't you dancing?"

"My friends and I are taking a break."

"Oh. Where are they? Is your girlfriend with you?"

"Food and bathroom run. I'm happily single."

"Mmmm... And yummy looking, too."

"Thank you. I was thinking the same thing about you."

"I knew it. Where are you from?"

"Well, technically, I'm--"

She didn't let him finish but suddenly had her tongue halfway down his throat and her body attached firmly to his with both her hands frantically running along his back in what might otherwise have felt like a haphazard pat down. Not the best kissing he'd ever had, either, but she was hot as blazes. She tasted of candy and cake frosting and all sorts of sugary sweetness. He felt her slip something into his back pocket that he prayed was a pack of condoms.

Then there was loud shouting and a crowd rush and some kind of tumult near the restrooms and Billy came running down the

hill shouting his name and Sol had to go running, too, because they both knew what it might be.

And sure enough, Mei Ling, true to her nickname, had some young guy hemmed up against the wall of the restroom pavilion with her left hand holding the terrified kid up by the neck and her right arm cocked to deliver a devastating blow. Two other young men were standing nearby begging her not to kill their friend.

"Mei, stop!" Sol shouted as he and Billy made it over to her.

"This little shit grabbed my ass!" Mei shouted.

"I'm sorry! I'm sorry!" the young man garble shouted.

"Mei, drop him," Billy ordered her.

"Drop him drop him or let him go?" she asked.

"Let him go, Mei," Sol pleaded. "He's just a stupid kid. Aren't you, dude?" he asked the barely legal young man.

The frat boy nodded his head emphatically. "I'm stupid. I'm stupid," he blubbered.

"Mei Ling, you have a concerto in two weeks," Billy reminded her.

She released her capture. She could not afford any sore knuckles before her performance in Berlin.

"Yes, you are a stupid shit, aren't you?" she certified. "You don't treat women like that!" she scolded, as the kid slid halfway down the wall on his back. Then she calmly made her way back to the VIP buffet. Billy discreetly took the three young men to the side enveloping all three with his massive arms, reiterated that they should be more respectful toward women and assured them that there were no hard feelings, handing them a few fifties for their injuries in the hope that they would get plastered enough tonight to not remember the incident or Mei Ling's face.

Sol looked around for the blonde woman whose name he didn't even get but she had vanished. The chances of finding her again in this sea of people were close to nil.

As they walked to catch up to their charge, he bemoaned to Billy, "Well, shit, man. That didn't take long..."

Billy gave him the look of an exasperated parent and pointed up into the mesmerizing night sky where the white-gowned goddess illuminated the dark cosmic stage and danced with her troupe of wildly oscillating clouds and flickering stars.

He remembered that the woman had slipped something into his pocket, a book of matches with her number on it if ever he were to have some luck? But no. It was a plastic baggy filled with ten round pink pills stamped with a miniscule e.

7.

Florida Man

"And what I say here in general about the vanity and falsity of the religions of the world, I don't say only about the foreign and pagan religions, which you already regard as false, but I say it as well about your Christian religion because, as a matter of fact, it is no less vain or less false than any other."

- Father Jean Meslier, June 15th, 1664 - June 17th, 1729

Testament: Memoir of the Thoughts and Feelings of Jean Meslier:
Clear and Evident Demonstrations of the Vanity and Falsity
of All the Religions of the World, published posthumously

"Should you settle down in the Sunshine State?
You should know of its tangled fate
How the conquistador came to Florida
Long before it had a name
The medicine man of the Seminole
Knelt by the sacred flame and cursed the soul
Of the conquistador
And his son, and his sons, and the young ones
Of the Florida man

Don't you laugh, it could be you
The Florida curse always comes true
You can jeer, but you don't understand
Any fragile soul can be a Florida man"
- Blue Oyster Cult, 'Florida Man'
The Symbol Remains, 2020

Roots, Shoots and Leaves
NW 20th Street, Allapattah
Sunday, March 27th, 8:50am

In the summer of 1988, Jeremiah Kane killed a man who had tried to rob him outside a sports bar in Baton Rouge, Louisiana. At his trial he was found guilty of voluntary manslaughter, a couple of weapons charges and possession of one pound of marijuana. He was sentenced to twenty-two years in prison, of which he served fourteen years, six months and three days at various prisons and penitentiaries throughout the state. While he was doing time, his father Elmore had passed away and left him a small parcel of neglected land in Miami in an area of meat and produce shipping warehouses adjacent to the

region being developed as a Health District near the old Jackson Memorial Hospital.

Having been incarcerated since his early thirties, upon being paroled to his new Florida address he was immediately forced to find a way to pay the accumulated taxes on his inherited property or have it foreclosed upon by the bank. He was no longer a young man and he'd returned to a world of cell phones, e-mail, the fresh threat of terrorism and a sagging economy. The only job he'd ever had was taking care of the animals and the machines on the family dairy farm in the Florida panhandle, which had already been claimed by the bank as collateral for the original loan on the Miami property.

So, he created a farm. Instead of animals, though, in the middle of an area defined by the block concrete campuses of hospitals and colleges and the hulking massive intersection of Interstates 95 and 395, he filled the full city block with plants.

He'd made the most of the handful of existent buildings on the property, which included a small, two-story warehouse in the mid-center of the property with multiple lofts on the second floor, a one-story former market hall at the southwest corner and a large two-bay garage, with a single large loft, at the southeast corner, by repurposing them as revenue producers.

Gutting, repairing, modifying and cleaning them alone over a period of nine months, he turned the warehouse into a plant nursery and distribution center and the market hall into a salad and juice bar with indoor and outdoor seating. Taking the loft above the garage for himself, he capitalized on all the remaining tools and equipment to create an environmentally friendly machining shop, taking care to install an innovative and careful waste disposal system for the little restaurant and the rest of the complex.

Every square inch of the remaining land space, save for a weaving network of footpaths strewn with wood shavings, was an anarchistically organized forest of small fruit and nut trees and bushes, vegetable and herb plots, tomato trestles, corn stalks and bamboo culms. The northern border on 21st Street was delineated by a row of ten towering coconut-bearing palm trees. The public facing fencing on 20th Street was decorated by sunflowers and berry vines and shaded and scented by an evenly spaced assembly of lemon trees.

Sol had been instructed by Debrah to arrive at the large iron gates of the former garage. He had parked his motorcycle a little way down the road in a fast-food restaurant parking lot and walked past the plant-based café along the vine-covered fencing to the gate arch.

Right before reaching the entrance, through the iron bars he noticed parked just inside the wall and covered under a heavy brown tarp the shape of what could only be a muscle car. He stopped for a second to inspect the shape and lines to see if he could guess what it was when suddenly a gargantuan red Pit Bull jumped heavily onto the covered auto and were it not for the bars separating them would have chomped Sol's head clean off his shoulders. Because he couldn't, the beast loudly barked his frustration. The dog must have been restricted to the garage area, Sol figured, since he hadn't seen him once near the other areas he'd surveilled.

He continued the last ten steps to the large iron gate with its stucco arch and the pit bull followed alongside leaping in twirls and threatening him with all manner of gruesome acts.

Peering through the bars he saw Kane coming out of the garage, shoeless and shirtless, a Miami Dolphins cap plopped on his head, a pair of jeans one size too big, and a lifetime's worth of tattoos on his arms, chest, and neck, and, presumably, his back.

"Ay! Shut the fuck up!" yelled the shirtless man. The dog shut up and sat.

"Mr. Kane! Good morning. I'm Sol. I'm a little early."

Kane squinted at him through the smoke of the cigarette he had returned to his lips and silently opened the gate. The dog, of course, was curiously watching Sol enter. Out of habit, Sol scanned the man's ink for gang affiliations or indications of unsavory aberrations. He saw only the names of various women and rock bands, a mandatory 'Mom' heart, the American flag, the traditional 'FTW', and other such neutral jailhouse accoutrements.

"You're a Yankee," Kane drawled, with a note of surprise. "They ain't tell me you was a Yank."

"I'm not, actually. I'm a Metropolitan. The Yankees are the *other* New York team."

It took him a moment, then a wide grin broke out over Kane's pirate goatee to reveal two front teeth that seemed to have adapted over decades to become custom designed cigarette holders. Up close you could see on his face both the hard lines of all those years spent

behind bars as well as the mirthful kid that had never been extinguished.

"Heh... That's alright", he chuckled. "Okay, well, lemme put a shirt and some shoes on an' I'll show you around."

The dog had started to sniff Sol out and decided to make amends for his rude introduction by first embracing and then humping Sol's leg. Ordinarily, Sol might have just politely removed any other such amorous canine. But in this unique case, he had to take into serious consideration that he very much still needed use of both of his hands.

"Um, Mr. Kane?" he called, and Kane turned around.

"Goddamnit, shithead!" Kane yelled as he walked back over, and palm-punched the muscular dog squarely between its neck and shoulder. While it seemed more annoyed by the blow than anything else, the hellhound took the hint and scampered off to find someone else to terrorize along the perimeter.

"Sorry 'bout that."

"No sweat. I have a Pit, too, female, though."

"That's cool."

Kane returned some five minutes later buttoning a light green short-sleeve shirt and construction boots added to his now-belted jeans.

"You down here just for this job?" he inquired.

"No, I've lived in Miami before."

"Yep, that's the Miami curse. You come down here on vacation, you leave on probation, and you come back on violation."

"Well, no, it wasn't like that."

"Oh, yeah, I guess not with you maybe but however it happens, once Miami gets a hold 'a ya, she don't let go."

"That part is most definitely true. I've lived here on and off since I was a teenager."

"No shit!"

"Yup, mostly in the wintertime, though."

"Ah, you're one 'a those..."

"'Fraid so."

"Ain't nothin' wrong with that. I don't want no part 'a them Nor'easters, neither."

Kane walked over to a kitchen refrigerator standing in the middle of the parking lot, running on a 100-ft. orange extension cord.

"Want a beer?" he offered.

Dude! It's seven thirty in the morning! Sol remarked silently.

"I'm good, Cap. Thank you, though," he downplayed instead, as though it were perfectly normal to have beer for breakfast.

Popping open a 16-ounce can of malt liquor and swallowing half of it with two gulps, Kane seemed to be thinking of how to begin his disclosure. A little more subtly this time, he gave Sol the once over once more.

"So, yer like a security guy..."

"Yeah..."

"An' Debbie says she hired you to help her... tighten up...."

"That's right."

"Okay, well, she also says you've got top secret security clearance for me to tell you 'zackly what it is I'm workin' on with her so I'm 'a tell you. I'm 'a show you, too, but I should warn you that you should be prepared," he raised his right hand as if to conjure up a magic ball of fire, "to have your mind... blown..."

"I am prepared, Mr. Kane."

Kane told him the story of how he'd been hanging out in the Louisiana sports bar when a small group of locals decided to try to rob him and he'd had to shoot one of them, the prison time he did, about how his family had been in Florida for generations, then how his father had left him the property, and how he met the Sullivans.

"Mah daddy always used to tell me, 'Jeremiah, 'ain't but one tribe 'a people in this whole wide world. We all just come in different flavors an' sizes. Said the best thing a man can do in this life is to try to be of some kind of service to the people around him."

In this, the man seemed genuinely sincere. His face softened slightly, as though relieved of some unseen burden.

"Okay... 'Afore I tell you the next part, though, you gotta answer me only one question completely and truthfully. Now, I don't want you to get offended, you seem alright an' I know Deb an' Sully wouldn't send me no bad juju but these days you just never can tell.

"Are you now or have you ever been a member of any law enforcement agency or organization?" he asked, serious as a judge.

"No."

"Say it, please, the whole thing, way I said it."

"I am not now, nor have I ever been a member of any law enforcement agency or organization."

The old he-has-to-admit-to-being-a-cop-if-asked trick. That myth never dies. Thankfully, he didn't have to lie.

"Good enough. C'mon, let's show you around."

Suddenly a coarse sandpaper woman's voice was yelling loudly for his host.

"Jerry! Jerry, where are you?!"

From the direction of the market hall appeared a woman with a tougher walk than the average man, swinging a half-emptied glass pint bottle of clear liquid in her right hand like she was ready to bust it over someone's head. Dressed in 80's MTV-fashion spandex tank top and leggings, with a hefty paunch, a ruddy complexion and a head of reddish blonde hair that she swerved side to side as she waddled toward them, she resembled a shorter, less chubby Axl Rose.

"Where the hell's the weed, Jerry?!" she demanded. Then she noticed Sol. "Who are you?" She cocked her head sideways. "Are you a cop?"

"He ain't a cop, we been through that already," Kane told her. Then with a wide, nicotine patina smile of sheer adoration he turned to Sol. "This is mah girl, Violet." Turning to his girl, he informed her, "Violet, this is Sol. He's workin' for Debbie."

"Oh, yeah? That's nice. Well, he looks like a cop. Where's the weed, Jerry?"

"Where it always is when I'm *working*, baby! In the tray, right by the damn tool chest in the garage."

From behind her she told Sol, "It was nice meeting you!" and turned her attention to more important matters. Kane squinched his face and made a hurrying motion for Sol to follow him before Violet came back that way.

"Girl's almost half my age, still immature," Kane remarked as they walked. "Half Cuban, half Italian, hunnerd percent hellfire. Used to say hi to her all the time down in Little Havana but never really talked to her. 'Till one night I come to find her down at Flagler an' 12th, all busted up. Piece 'a shit boyfriend had really fucked her up.

"Well, I got her to the hospital, an' I knew the bastard. Next day, I went on down there to 8th Street where he hangs out with the other chicos, and I beat that motherfucker so bad he was callin' me momma and beggin' me to stop.

"Anyhow, that was almost a couple years ago now an' she ain't left yet so I guess we're stuck with each other. Last year we

started rentin' out the rooms above the market to other women tryin' to get away from abusive husbands an' boyfriends. We get referrals from local agencies an' even a small subsidy from the State of Florida. Not too many girls lately, though, which I s'pose is actually a good thing, huh?"

Kane took him strolling all around the property but not inside the café or any of the other buildings. When they arrived at a wall of bamboo, he stopped in front of it.

"You know how you always see all them newspaper an' TV news headlines saying 'Florida Man Does Something Stupid Again'? Well, how 'bout maybe this time the headlines are gonna read something more like 'Florida Man Makes Great Important Discovery'. Shit, might even say, 'Saves The Planet', if you really wanna know."

He looked up into the sky as if seeing those morning editions being pumped out hot off the presses like in those black-and-white films. Then he turned back to Sol.

"Everybody knows the usefulness of bamboo throughout the history of humankind from Asian temples to Thor Heyerdahl's raft, right? This here's 'Bambusa textilis', or Slender Weaver's bamboo. Most common bamboo in Florida, and there's a reason the word textile is in the name: the fiber from the stalks is one of the strongest in the world.

"Now, as Violet done announced it to the whole wide world an' took some 'a the mystery out of my planned presentation, I smoke weed. I smoke a *lotta* weed. Every day, all day. Even in prison. Learned how to grow it on the farm they send you to when yer getting' close to the end 'a yer sentence and they know you ain't gonna try to run or do anything stupid. Guards 'aint care, half 'a them swampies smoked my shit, too.

"Anyhow, when I got out, all's I had was this little bit of land here and a *gi-normous* mountain of debt. My family's been in Florida for generations an' I'm not the type to up an' quit so I wasn't about to sell this place.

But don't nobody wanna hire somebody's just done twenty years hard time so I made a little money here and there outta the garage an' the parking lot while I fixed up the place, cleared all the available planting ground and turned the soil. The bamboo was already here so I let them be.

“Let’s walk through here,” he invited as he opened a narrow passage between the twenty-foot stalks. It opened gradually as the two men walked until they began approaching a partial clearing.

“I started growing some weed in here so I wouldn’t have to risk gettin’ arrested on some street corner for a coupla nickle bags. I still had a year ‘an a half ‘a parole to finish until recently.”

Just before they reached the opening, the urban farmer paused for dramatic effect.

“Lotta people don’t know that the weed plant itself, the stalks I mean, not the flowers, has a whole history of human use as a fiber and other things. The plants with little or no THC are called hemp.

“Welp! I wasn’t no *botanist* when I started finding out what I could grow here an’ what won’t work, but I’m damn near an expert at this point.

“Turns out, every now an’ then when two different species of plants start growin’ next to each other out in the wild but in close proximity to one another, and the conditions are right, Nature takes its course an’ they also start interbreeding.

“So,” he announced as he led them into the clearing, “it looks like somewhere along the way, some ‘a the Mister Bamboos started diddlin’ some ‘a the Miss Mary Janes or somethin’ like that, like they was *gettin’ it on*, ‘cause lo an’ behold, last year I come to find a dozen ‘a these bad boys already grown up to my knees by the time I started cleaning up the dead leaves ‘an shit from the winter. Some ‘a the goddamned strongest plant fiber the world has ever seen!”

And there in the center of the clearing were about forty or fifty evenly spaced twelve-foot bright green stalks of a new kind of plant, resembling small, leafy trees with muscular tendon-like, jointed shafts, boney branches and plaintive cinquefoil. They all leaned forward to the rising sun as though bowing at a morning ceremony.

“Debbie’s got a research grant lets me grow hemp with low or zero THC but it’s still not legal to grow it commercially. As per the research grant, I’m the only person in the whole state of Florida allowed to grow a limited amount and it all has to go straight to the whitecoats at Deb’s lab. My normal plants I got in a hydroponic system in the garage. These forty-eight are the only ones in the wild.”

“But how did you explain having grown these plants before the grant?” Sol examined.

“Well, now, that’s kinda like a chicken before the egg type ‘a question, ain’t it, bud? Anyhow, we ain’t have to explain *jack*. We just had to put forth a *theory* based on previous plant knowledge, history and experiments. There’s been lotsa similar experiments with crossbreeding plants on record and we got approved right away. The FDA even sent us the seeds to get started. With new plants, I mean.

“Turns out there’s some congresspeople out in Washington tryin’ to make hemp farming legal again. They’re hopin’ to have a bill out on the floor by this summer. Yup.”

“And if that passes and becomes law,” Sol surmised,“ you’ll be able to grow commercially... and Debrah will be able to bring the fiber from these plants to market.”

“Exactamundo! It gets better. Ever since I got out, all the hotshot real estate people been comin’ around here tryin’ to get me to sell the place to put up more ‘a them dee-lux towers with all the beautiful people an’ their ankle dogs.

“But ah’ve always felt this place needed to be something more... I dunno, more important. That’s why we’re gonna use the northeast corner of the block for Sully to build a mid-rise completely made out of plant materials, ‘cept for the few necessary steel beams, ‘a course. It’s gonna be a showcase for the versatility of this plant. Ecologically sound housing and community-oriented structures for everybody.

“My only dilemma now is what do I call it? Cannaboo? Bamabis? It’s gotta be something cool sounding, you know? Rockin’!”

So that was the big secret. A new hybrid plant species with industrial applications potential, under federally sanctioned, and partially funded, experimentation. Sol thanked him for his time and Kane let him out through the café driveway on NW 8th Avenue.

Was this guy on to something? It wasn’t impossible. Debrah and Sully took him seriously enough, that much was clear. And it would seem quite a few others had, too.

*

Some of you will remember John Brown, the militant White American abolitionist. Raised in a house in Hudson, Ohio, that his father Owen, also a staunch abolitionist and anti-slavery activist, operated as a safe house station in the Underground Railroad for slaves escaped from the south, Brown had his entire life worked toward ending slavery. The Brown family had also befriended local Native Americans and often invited them to dinner. John learned some of their language and customs and regularly accompanied them on hunting expeditions.

Reaching his late forties in Springfield, Massachusetts, he had grown disillusioned with decades of failed pacifist abolition efforts, saying that he had tired of all the talk and that the time had come for action. When, in 1850, the United States government passed the Fugitive Slave Act which mandated that authorities in free states were compelled to assist in the recapture of runaway slaves and which imposed penalties upon anyone who offered aid to the escaped, Brown committed himself to taking the fight to the doorstep of pro-slavery forces. He immediately formed the League of Gileadites, a militia group with the express purpose of protecting Blacks who had freed themselves from slavery. Not a single fugitive slave in Springfield was ever returned to their captors.

Brown is most famous for attempting to incite a slave rebellion in 1859 by launching an attack on an armory in pro-slavery Harper's Ferry, Virginia. The raid ultimately failed, and Brown was captured but the event is universally credited with lighting the spark that ignited the American Civil War to end slavery once and for all.

Brown's example inspired the Union Army marching song, 'John Brown's Body', which evolved into the 'Battle Hymn of the Republic', glory, glory, hallelujah. Brown's work and actions also inspired a movement that ran like a great river, quiet and mighty, through generations of anti-racist Americans on until the present day.

Gun clubs bore his name and informal local militias formed throughout the country to educate and train citizens in self-defense. One of these groups was Revolution Rednecks, a loose knit national organization geared toward firearms safety training for rural working-class Whites. Their name referenced a term used by striking coal workers in nationwide labor disputes during a time known as the Coal Wars, which lasted from the 1890's to the end of the 1920's.

Jeremiah Kane had signed up with them a year before getting locked up for a couple of decades and had faithfully mailed in his membership dues every year. He was rewarded with a monthly newsletter which had helped him stay up to date on events in the world outside of the prison walls.

*

Little Havana **Monday, March 28th, 6:11am**

People sometimes wonder why you hear so many stories about dirty cops. It's simple: every city and every town in the country has at least one. Either because they're knowingly lousy at their jobs or because they abuse their positions of authority to enact their own personal power trips, these individuals foment the distrust and loathing felt by communities directly affected by such corruption. And the larger the tree, the more rotten apples you'll get.

At the time of Miami's first boom in the 1920's as northerners began arriving, the city's police chief, H. Leslie Quigg, like most of the other White police officers, made no secret of the fact that he was a Ku Klux Klan member. Quigg set the tone of race relations in the new city by personally beating a Black bellboy to death in public for having spoken to a White woman. Jim Crow laws and selective enforcement of local ordinances were the municipal standards well into the twentieth century.

Racist attitudes, acts, and policies were commonplace in all of the city's police precincts. With the constant redoubling of the drug trade through south Florida, Miami also soon rapidly joined the ranks of other major American cities making headlines with stories of police corruption and squads of racist, drug dealing assassin officers.

*

Unlike in the northeast, where it seems everyone is convinced that only Monday morning is the very best time to get everything done that they've procrastinated about for the past month or three, in Miami Monday mornings are relatively sedate. In Little Havana it's

particularly quiet as everyone shrugs off the remaining detritus of the weekend's parties.

One of his favorite runs was around Marlins Park and the back streets surrounding it, where trees formed wide arches and the yard cocks called out in answer to his footfalls. Avoiding the muffler exhaust and gas stations of Flagler Street he ran east along SW 3rd Street toward the south end of the river.

It was at 9th Avenue that he grew a tail. Blue sedan with tinted windows, they were keeping some distance but driving way too slow. He ran for another couple blocks to make sure they were keeping pace with him then abruptly stopped mid-block and waited for the car to catch up.

It came to a stop in front of him and Sol tensed. It was either cops or gangbangers, and he was unarmed. The driver's window came down. A bulky, buzzcut cop, tanned skin, mid to late forties. Dark blue t-shirt with printed Miami PD badge number but no name and no stripes.

What do you want? Sol thought to himself but said nothing.

"Mornin'. You live around here?" the officer asked.

"Sort of."

"What does that mean? You either live around here or you don't."

"It means that sometimes I live here and sometimes I don't. I have a house on River Drive."

The officer didn't appreciate Sol's uppity tone.

"Where on River Drive?"

"Next to the river, why?"

That was too much for the cop. He got out of the car.

"Let's see some ID", he ordered.

"I'm just out for my morning run. I only have my phone and my keys on me."

"Turn around and put your hands on the wall."

"Oh, get outta here. I haven't done anything."

"Do it!" the cop shouted as he put his hand on his gun.

Maybe Sol fit the description of some burglar or other ne'er-do-well in a BOLO report or APB who the police were looking for in this area, he allowed. Maybe there had been a recent rash of automobile break-ins or vandalism in the neighborhood. But he received no explanation, only the other man's hands running up and

down his legs and all around his torso. And then again on his legs, only slower now, and Sol realized the guy was taking his time.

"You keep that up," Sol growled, "and you're either gonna have to propose, or you're gonna have to kill me."

The cop's hands froze momentarily then executed a few final repeat pats at Sol's waist to underline that the officer was merely double checking for hidden weapons.

Still offering no justification for the unwarranted stop-and-search, the cop returned leisurely to his car.

The anger rising in him, Sol dispensed with caution.

"Don't I even get a name on our first date?" he taunted.

The cop gave him a last salacious look and a smug chuckle.

"Lieutenant Dominguez. Ask about me. And next time carry some kind of ID on you," he muttered as he drove off.

Sol had just been groped by a cop and it was a very, very bad feeling. He wondered how often women had to put up with that kind of shit. It was that day that he realized where the phrase "cop a feel" had originated.

*

The annual report by the Southern Poverty Law Center, an American non-profit that tracks extremist organizations all over the country, consistently lists Florida as the state having the second-highest number of hate groups in the country. (When it comes to the state having the most amount of hate groups in the United States, it's California über alles.)

The vast majority of these extremists are nationalist white supremacists and neo-Nazis. In the southern United States these groups are almost invariably adherents of the Confederacy cause. The prime example is The League of the South, neo-Confederate white nationalists and supremacists who describe themselves as a social and religious movement toward a Christian southern culture in the 'free and independent republic' of the Southern United States, comprised of the eleven Confederate states during the American Civil War.

Another good example of this type of southern culture on the skids would be the Christian Dixie American Knights, a subgroup of the Ku Klux Klan and the self-proclaimed vanguard of the crusade to save white women and girls from the Jews, the Blacks and all the

other inferior races. Like all of the many other southern hate groups who put 'Knights' in their name, the CDAK insist they are direct descendants of the medieval Knights Templar religious order and can even draw you a diagram to prove it.

The neo-Nazis, of course, like to dress up in riding chaps, knee-high leather boots and other kinky World War II German Reich regalia and cosplay that they're the storm troopers defending the Herrenvolk.

Contrary to popular conjecture, Hitler was not an atheist but was raised as a Catholic and even served as a choirboy in his local church. Absurdly enough, the Nazis considered themselves Christians. In the Greater German Reich, a number of Protestant church leaders even implored Herr Fuhrer to create a 'state church', or Reichskirche, obedient to Nazism and the state.

Number twenty-four of the twenty-five points of the Nazi Party ideology reads as follows:

24. We demand freedom for all religious faiths in the state, insofar as they do not endanger its existence or offend the moral and ethical sense of the Germanic race.

The party as such represents the point of view of a positive Christianity without binding itself to any one particular confession. It fights against the Jewish materialist spirit within and without, and is convinced that a lasting recovery of our folk can only come about from within on the principle: COMMON GOOD BEFORE INDIVIDUAL GOOD

So confused are the multitudes of American ignoramuses that they have declared a holy war against socialism while at the same time espousing the tenets of an ideological movement whose members so revered by them were, in fact, socialists.

Point 24, the organization, was a hybrid neo-Nazi Christian southern nationalist group particular to the three states of Florida, Alabama and Georgia though they claimed to have adherents in all the Confederate states. It had its origins in Alabama prisons and operated in a much more secretive manner than the usual glut of weekend warriors and online crusaders and it recruited selectively

and directly from state and federal prisons and penitentiaries. Among the requirements for prospective members were open affiliations with white supremacist prison gangs and regular church attendance at any Christian services offered at the facilities where they were currently housed. Apart from the prohibitions against homosexuality and crimes against persons of presumed Aryan descent, however, there weren't many other hurdles to being a member.

Although the group's activities extended mainly to petty criminality and acts of intimidation such as midnight flyer distribution, racist and anti-Semitic graffiti, and cross burnings, numerous reports and credible rumors existed of targeted violence against minority groups at public gatherings as well as the assassination of their own members who were thought to have betrayed the organization. In Florida they boasted of a chapter in forty of the sixty-seven counties, though it was likely closer to about twenty or thirty. They were primarily based in South Florida.

*

Grapeland **7:18pm**

Why a group of skinheads would be hanging around a quiet suburban neighborhood and a biochem lab seemed a little unusual for Sol.

Florida City, Florida **8:30pm**

Bulwarked on the north all along the county line by the expansive crop fields and airfields of the mostly agricultural city of Homestead, Miami-Dade County's and mainland Florida's southernmost city is literally and figuratively an outpost of America. Still very rural, small patches of Florida City seem to be frozen in different periods of the country's history.

There are strips of roadside motels still bearing signs, décor and furniture from the 50's and 60's, farms and buildings from the early 1900's, gated communities from the 1990's, a trailer park from

the 70's and streets that walked right into the eternal wilderness of the Everglades.

Also known as the Gateway to the Florida Keys, the municipality straddles South Dixie Highway, the one long road available for the pilgrimage to the string of islands that punctuates the southeast border of the United States. At the edge of town and at a convergence of highways, there is a smattering of bars with names like Last Chance Saloon and Paradise Gates.

A little way down Card Sound Road was a ramshackle place called Dick's Sports Bar that looked like it had been spared by the hurricanes only because of its sheer ugliness. Wood plank walls and a porch walk that looked like they could collapse just by blowing on them, windows that had not ever been cleaned since they were first installed, and so much trash littered around the perimeter and parking lot, someone happening by would think the property was abandoned.

But inside were

Miami-Dade County Police Officer Jay Gallo wasn't having it today.

The Miami-Dade County Jail is one of the filthiest places in the world. This is on purpose, part of the general crime deterrence system implemented early in the city's formation. The officials and guards unabashedly want the captives to feel like they're in some brutal, third world country's cages. Only employee areas and offices are regularly cleaned and sanitized. With selective air-conditioning in that tropical climate, insects, reptiles and rodents flourish everywhere in the jail and they compete with the inmates for housing. Cockroaches called Palmetto Bugs are the size of mice, the mice are large enough to gang fight the rats in the dining hall at night, and snakes patrol the insides of the walls getting so fat they sometimes come up through the plumbing when they need more flexing space.

The prisoners come from everywhere: drunk and rowdy tourists from Europe and the rest of America; lifetime criminals expelled from other countries; Caribbean and South American drug mules; the permanent resident delegations from local Black, Latino and poor White communities; the occasional Arab or Asian blackguard and always at least one or two angry, indignant Haitians.

But a whole group of white racist skinheads is a rare, if not singular, occurrence here and it caused such a sensation among the inmates that the bunch had to be kept separate from the general population and placed in protective custody in a housing unit cleared just for them.

After a couple of hours in the reception bullpen, Sol and a handful of the rest of the evening's catch were sent to the intake unit, a large cell block where he could see a number of the facility's guests already sizing him up.

It took another two hours before he could assert his way along the queue of inmates waiting to use one of the four payphones available to the forty-eight prisoners in the unit. He was able to leave a message with Matthew's 24-hour emergency answering service just minutes before lockdown.

They put him in a cell with something under a blanket on the lower bunk that smelled like it hadn't bathed since that first day of entry into the world.

Sol climbed onto the upper bunk to wait. Before the second hour had passed the intercom speaker in the room was telling him he had a visitor.

She was a pretty woman who downplayed her femininity as a sacrifice to professionalism in a field dominated by men. Mahogany dark hair in a throwback 70's woman-power cut, barely detectable eyeliner and mascara, and a deliberately obscured healthy body. But she was all business anyway, perfectly starched white button down, suit jacket and pants even though the sun had gone down, like she'd been at her desk when the call came in.

"Hello, Mr. Isistrato. I'm Special Agent Mary Grace Weiland. I heard about your incident tonight but I'm here because I need to ask you about something else."

"As in FBI special agent, agent Weiland?"

"Yes."

"Alright, what about?"

"You just drove down from New Jersey about a week ago?"

Here's where it gets tricky. Lying to a federal officer is a federal offense. He didn't want to lie to her if he could avoid it and at the same time he wanted to know why she was here.

"I drove into Miami a week ago in a car I originally rented then purchased. Is that what this is about?"

“Well, no, actually. You picked up a passenger somewhere in north Florida...” she cast her line.

“I picked up, a woman who needed a ride to the coast.”

“Yes! Exactly! Where did you pick her up, please? And what did she look like?”

Fuck.

Did the country rapist send the cops after him, her, them? What had Aly done that she had the feds after her? His jaw instinctively clamped shut. It was probably best not to talk anymore and at that moment with the best of all possible theatrical stage timing his attorney burst into the room.

Well, no, let me correct that, she didn't exactly *burst* into the room, she just kind of opened the door and walked in at exactly the right moment.

About average height, wearing a man's suit and tie, a Joe Strummer haircut and a ring through her nose, she took a quick glance around to assess the situation.

“Hi, Sol. How you doin', you alright?” she checked.

He could not help smirking. He was meeting Matthew's Miami associate, Tal Shuster.

“Hello,” she tossed to the others. “Who are all of you and why are you here?”

Weiland stood. “I'm Special Agent Weiland, of the FBI. We only wanted-”

“-That's great, Agent Weiland,” Tal stopped her. “That's all I needed. You can all get the fuck out now.”

“Your client-”

“-Is sitting in a jail cell and I am here to get him out of it. *You* are here talking to him without my presence or permission. Unless this is a matter of life and death, you are to leave immediately, and I will not repeat myself. You can leave your business cards on the table, here's mine,” as she threw a handful on the table, “and you can feel free to call me during regular business hours.”

There was nothing any of them could say, so they began filing out.

“I'll have you out of here within the hour, Sol,” Tal announced firmly, then she banged on the cell door. “Ay, turnkey! Chop chop! Let's wrap this up!”

Taking Agent Weiland's card before he left the room, Sol was returned to the reception housing unit and put back in his cage to wait. It was a little bit more than an hour but who was counting minutes besides him?

Given his clothes and belongings back he was starting to feel a little vindictive. Tal was in the waiting lobby and finally cracked a smile when she saw him.

"Hell of a way to introduce yourself," she teased.

"Well, you're part of the reason I stick with Matthew's *law firm!*" he boasted loudly for the benefit of all the corrections officers giving him the side eye as he walked into the lobby a free man again.

"You are awesome, thank you," he greeted her with his indoor voice. "I would have preferred a more proper introduction to Matt's Miami associates, but what can you do?"

Outside, parked askew and partially on the curb was a purple Lamborghini. Unless there was a kingpin or a big pimpin' come to bail out one of his people in a vehicle that didn't have any badges in the window, he was going to assume this was her car. She beeped a button on her key fob and the two spaceship doors opened, just like in the rap videos.

He got in the spaceship with her.

"I do have to apologize for making you come out at this hour."

"Nothing, I have to do it all the time in this town."

"I can imagine."

"Queens, huh?" she confirmed as they sped through the empty streets of the courts district, though it sounded more like an accusation.

"Yup. Bronx, right?"

"That's right," she affirmed proudly. He half expected her to ask if he had a problem wit' dat.

Maybe he should offer an olive branch and tell her that he wasn't *really* all that much of a diehard baseball fan. She just kept her eyes on the road, weighing the balance between a loose, distanced business relationship and an age-old rivalry.

Then, being a born arbitrator and peacemaker, she offered a pleasant resolution.

"The Marlins are looking real good this year," she informed him.

"So I've heard. We're gonna hafta keep an eye on them."

“Yup.”

There was peace in the valley. They were nearing his place but he had to walk. A half mile along the river would do.

“I’m good here, Tal. I need to get some air. Thanks a million for everything. I won’t forget it.”

“Anytime, Sol. It was good meeting you.”

“Same here. Stay outta trouble.”

“You should be telling *me* that?”

He just gave her a look.

She laughed, saying “Alright, alright, alright,” as she sped off.

Tamiami

Tuesday, March 29th

4:34am

As long as there have been books there have been book burnings. Almost always they have been large public spectacles, symbolic acts of conquest and attempts at the erasure of history, particularly of the vanquished or adversarial. A complete accounting of infamous book burnings fills volumes, but some instances stand out in the history of destruction of the written word.

In 213 BCE in China, following his total victory in the time of Warring States, Emperor Qin Shih Huang ordered the burning of all philosophy and historical books from the defeated states so that Chinese history would begin with him. Shortly afterward he had multitudes of scholars buried alive so that no one could dispute his version of events.

The Romans in 186 BCE sought to wipe out what they deemed foreign influences by banning the Bacchanalia, pagan festivals celebrating Bacchus, the god of agriculture, wine and fertility, who was originally known as Dionysus before he emigrated from Greece. As an added measure to protect Roman culture and prevent disorder, the ruling elite decreed that all books mentioning these celebrations, or magic, or divination, or ‘un-Roman’ activities, be outlawed and publicly set aflame.

None other than Roman general and statesman Julius Caesar, during his prolonged and bitter blood feud with archrival Roman general and statesman Pompey Magnus, in the year 48 BCE was the first in a long line of many emperors and other masters of war to set

fire to the library at Alexandria, famed repository of all wisdom of the ancient world. When pressed about whether it had been an accident, Caesar would always answer roundaboutly maybe yes, maybe no. Finally, in 272 AD, the entire district where the library existed was burned to the ground by emperor Aurelius as he wrested the city from the forces of the Palmyrene queen Zenobia. If anything remained of the mythical institution, it was wholly erased by the siege of emperor Diocletian in 297 AD.

With the invention of the printing press sometime around 1440, the Catholic Church suddenly found itself with the immense burden of multitudes more heretical works to burn. To put the fear of God into the blasphemers, the church began heaving the authors onto the pyre along with their devil works.

Less than a hundred years later, in December of 1520, reformer Martin Luther, whose works were among those banned and burned by the Catholics, returned the compliment and helped keep the tradition alive by staging a famous book fire in a public square in Wittenberg, Germany, where he incinerated canonical works and the very papal bull of Excommunication Exsurge Domine that had removed him from the church.

Bibliocide soon became such a lucrative occupation that one Chevalier Charles-Henri Sanson de Longval was ensured double duty job security for forty years in Paris; first as the royal executioner and book burner under King Louis XVI, then as the High Executioner of the First French Republic, when there was always a jolly book burning happening somewhere in town with him presiding.

In America, it was in the South immediately after John Brown's momentous raid at Harper's Ferry in 1859 that panicked slaveowners and pro-slavery politicians and preachers unanimously decreed that any books determined to be anti-slavery, or 'anti-Southern', received the barbecue pit treatment. They started with textbooks from public schools.

But in modern times, no other book burning is so nefarious and celebrated as the May 10th, 1933, Nazi libricide bonfires in Berlin that were captured on film and which initiated a long series of ceremonial book burnings that extended throughout the regime and into Nazi-occupied countries such as Poland, in particular. Books blacklisted for the flames included works by authors who were Jewish, half-Jewish, looked Jewish, might be Jewish, artists, novelists,

intellectuals, leftists, liberals, communists, sexologists, pacifists, anarchists, or just good writers. The Nazis raided libraries, bookstores, and publishing warehouses to confiscate any materials they determined to be 'un-German'.

At this point in our story it becomes necessary to make absolutely clear the distinct difference between a bibliophile and a bibliomane. Of course, we all know that a bibliophile is a lover of books, simply and plainly, hence your forgivable continued presence with us here now. Very often a bibliophile is fortunate enough to amass enough books to proudly declare that they have a library at home, whether it's an entire room of the house or two shelves and a coffee table in your studio apartment.

But a bibliomane, synonymous to bibliomaniac, is someone who has become inordinately, and many times indiscriminately, obsessed with the accumulation of books. These are the wayward bibliophiles who have stepped over that fine line between whimsy and madness, such as the extraordinary personalities we discussed earlier. Some of these bibliomanes know exactly what types of books they absolutely *must have* and why, and some don't particularly care as long as they have a cover and pages and there is still some space in the kitchen to put them.

Now, on very rare occasions, a certain type of bibliomane is not actually a lover of books at all, but a *bibliophobe*; someone who fears and/or hates books.

Val Mustela both hated and feared books, and he knew exactly why. For him, there was only one book that had ever needed to be printed and that was the Holy Bible; that's why they call it the Bible, *duh...*, THE Book, the one and only.

All other books were inherently evil, worthless, empty wastes of paper. But it was those books that had been written and published in direct challenge and offense to God that he hated the most. He feared these books because he had seen the power they bestowed to cause individuals to lay claim to free will, an affront to His established laws. And so it was his sacred duty and his God-given right to courageously collect these unholy volumes whenever and wherever they surfaced, to gather them, and then to burn them.

First there was those godless Vikings, the original *godlauss*, who brazenly spoke and sang of self-reliance and inner strength and freedom from any gods. So emboldened were these infidels that they began scratching these long poems and songs (heresies!) onto wood and wax in futile hopes of preservation. Well, we saw what happened to *them*. The supremacy of Christianity erased them.

But then an Arab poet named Abū al-‘Alā’ al-Ma‘arrī later in the first millenium AD had to go about declaring a personal war against *all* the god-fearing religions, even his own family’s Islam, and writing horrible things on parchments like, “There are two types of humans, those with intelligence and no religion, and those with religion and no intellect.” After enjoying undue, in Mustela’s opinion, notoriety and financial success the *kafir* attempted to live a quiet life of austerity by confining himself to his house but he was forced to suffer many constant dignitary visitors from around the world and vast personal wealth to the end of his days.

Along came that German language defiling Dane named Matthias Knutzen who began the sacrilegious tradition of atheist writings in Europe in 1674 with three published and *personally* distributed pamphlets, the nerve, heretical talk about “the conscious people” and living honestly and other rubbish. Knutzen was the first of the ungodly to go on paper record as a true non-believer and had the audacity to teach his ideas to others. Threatened with arrest, he was duly run out of town and ended up a penniless exile who faded into obscurity.

Nonetheless, the seeds of devilish rebellion against God had been planted and in Poland in 1689 an audacious aristocrat named Kazimierz Łyszczyński dared to publish an entire philosophical treatise not only denying the very existence of God but also the authority of His representatives on the earthly plane. Claiming that religion and God were a fabrication employed by human rulers to exert their will over the simple folk, and that those same folk would attack anyone who attempted to show them the truth, Łyszczyński was charged with atheism, by now a crime with a name, and fittingly sentenced to death. But first his tongue was pulled out and his hands were slow burned to crispy black stumps, and then he was beheaded.

Yet such examples of God’s wrath were not enough to deter that renegade French priest from putting forth a whole *book* testifying against His Supremacy in 1729. Granted, that one got away with his

crime by waiting until his death before publication, but no doubt he suffered his just punishment in the afterlife. Meslier's work, however, marked the beginning of the literature of the unbelievers.

They called it 'the Enlightenment', that hundred years from the late 1700's to the late 1800's that they said was the 'Age of Reason'. *As if*. All those so-called philosophes with all their precious salons and high-minded ideas, the latter of which they usually had to publish anonymously, by the way, and all for naught. Look where it got them. Fancy pants ringleaders like Baron d'Holbach and Denis Diderot went to *prison*, that's where, and their blasphemous writings were publicly banned and burned by my man, the ubiquitous Monsieur Sanson de Longval, Le Bourreau De Paris.

The cursed poet Percy Shelley was one of them, too. In 1811, not even out of college yet, the presumptuous young scoundrel published a philosophical essay entitled "The Necessity of Atheism" and afterward a whole slew of stubbornly atheistic works. His poem 'The Masque of Anarchy' has inspired generations of civil disobedience and resistance to perfectly proper patriarchal principals. But his works, too, had to be published anonymously and even when they were published with his name after his death, they were banned all over the place for more than a hundred years.

Yet none of those blasphemers was as reviled by Mustela as that goddamned sacrilegious scientist who deigned to ask for proof of God's existence and then wrote two dozen books proclaiming Nature's perfection *without once mentioning the glory of God*. It would be a truly ecstatic religious experience for him to burn the Darwin herbal for all the world to see.

The Shelley novel and the heretic priest's journal only added to the momentousness of the occasion and the other honorable attendees would certainly appreciate his trifecta triumph. The Zamarano Eighty book he had no use for, but its sale would cover the extra costs he'd been incurring in the effort to retrieve Lot 19.

*

Allapattah
10:40am

Some questions lingered after his visit with Kane on Sunday and last night's encounter with the skinheads. The guy had said Sol could stop by any time so he was taking him up on it.

Reverend Representative Rollins had been informed by his staff that Mustela was rumored to be linked to white supremacists and that did not bother him in the least. Many of his most prominent supporters were law abiding Klan members. As far as the campaign finance regulators were concerned, the sniveling little imp was a respected business leader in the entertainment industry. The donations to the church and the campaigns were always made in modest amounts that wouldn't arouse suspicion and were also spread out among Mustela's various registered companies. With all of the illicit enterprises that he was involved in, he was wise enough to always cover his tracks and maintain a low profile. Despite the small risk of exposure to Val's unsavory associations, it was more than worth it to the preacher politician to nurture their relationship.

*

Long before the European explorers began arriving and long before there was such a thing as an American Deep South, the Miccosukee lived peacefully in the region that now comprises Georgia and Alabama. Originally a part of the Lower Chiaha, one of the tribes of the Creek Confederacy, they began migrating to northern Florida in the early 1700's when Americans and Europeans began moving into their territories.

There they interacted with and lived alongside the Seminole people and many runaway African slaves. Although Florida was then part of New Spain and the Spanish Empire, Spain had declared that anyone who could make it to Florida would be a free person. The Miccosukee were left largely undisturbed and for another hundred years they lived autonomously.

The Americans simultaneously viewed the haven for escaped slaves both as a threat to their economic interests as well as some rather desirable real estate. They decided they wanted it for themselves. In 1818 American general Andrew Jackson eagerly invaded Florida in retaliation for the Creek War of 1813-1814 and

waged war against the indigenous people along with the Spanish. When the Natives resisted his onslaughts once again, he ignited the three Seminole Wars which lasted until 1858.

Native villages were burned to the ground, children were drowned, and their parents slaughtered. By 1819, Spain had opted to unburden itself of a territory it could neither successfully settle nor adequately defend and ceded Florida to the United States. It was officially transferred to American rule in 1821.

Having failed to fully eradicate the Natives out of the south and now the President of the United States, Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act in 1830, officially authorizing the complete forced relocation of sixty thousand people of the Cherokee, Chickasaw, Choctaw, Muskogee (Creek), and Seminole tribes, whom the Americans, seemingly missing the irony, collectively dubbed 'The Five Civilized Tribes', to territories west of the Mississippi River set aside for Native resettlement.

The elderly, children, the infirm, pregnant women, the crippled, and all of the people who were the original inhabitants of the land were forced at gunpoint and bullwhip to walk the hundreds of miles, and in some cases a thousand, to a harsh terrain they'd never been to but were being told they now had to live in. Other Native nations, including the Osage and the Quapaws, had already been forced into these areas and met the new arrivals with hostility.

During the journey or upon arrival in the reservation lands, thousands died of starvation, disease, and exposure to the elements. In American history books, this constructive genocide is euphemistically referred to as 'The Trail of Tears'. Eventually, almost all the Creeks who spoke Mikasuki had been killed or removed to federally established 'Indian Territories' in the west.

But one small band of about a hundred Miccosukee never surrendered. Instead, they escaped to the Everglades, where they were able to hide and live quietly in peace for one last century. They took no one's land and kept to themselves. They learned to remain mobile and to travel lightly, moving temporary hammock camps as needed and avoiding contact with the outside world.

When the Tamiami Trail was completed in 1928 and ran right through the Everglades, the tribe was forced to interact with the new society around them. A few Miccosukee settlements appeared along the roadway and the beginnings of a careful trade relationship

developed. To the Americans and Europeans, the Natives were an amusing curiosity to be enjoyed along with the newly popular scenery of the mysterious swamplands. Nonetheless, more urbane and enlightened allies of the tribe and of the Everglades succeeded in securing official protections against government and settler intrusion.

After the extraordinary service and performance of duties by Native Americans fighting for the United States in World War II, the federal government took the conciliatory actions of passing the Indian Claims Act of 1946 and establishing an Indian Claims Commission to hear the claims of Native tribes against the United States. Financial compensation was offered per acreage of land lost by the Natives as a result of breached federal treaties.

Like many other tribes throughout the country, the Miccosukee were not interested in money and only wanted their original lands returned to them. The claims commission, however, was not authorized to cede or grant territory and in many cases the tribes took the money and used it to buy back as much of their own land as they could. In some instances, tribes had to relinquish federal recognition as part of the arbitration process.

In a process referred to as 'checkerboarding', tribal lands were often intersected by and interspersed with state- and privately-owned lands.

The Miccosukee in Florida rightfully contended that they had never surrendered to or reached an official peace with the United States and as such remained a sovereign nation. The state government of Florida officially recognized the tribe in 1957.

When the federal government dragged its feet to do the same, a highly regarded member of the tribe named Buffalo Tiger led a delegation of Miccosukee to Cuba, where they were formally recognized by Fidel Castro's communist government and even offered a home where they could live as they pleased if America would not let them be.

Thoroughly embarrassed, the United States drafted new land treaties and in 1962 officially recognized the Miccosukee Tribe of Indians of Florida. It took until 1976 to reach a final settlement of claims.

The Miccosukee Indian Reservation is a collective title for lands throughout south Florida owned and governed by the tribe. The largest area is three hundred thirty-three acres on the northern border

of Everglades National Park, forty-five miles west of Miami. The tribe also controls two hundred thousand acres of wetlands.

The smallest parcel of tribal land is at the western edge of Miami, including a site where in 1999 the tribe created the Miccosukee Casino and Resort.

8.

The Geeks Were Right

“Predator skills
Chemical wars
Plastic islands at sea
Watch what the humans ruin
With machines
While I'm in deep REM sleep
Or twilight zones
I take a freight elevator
And press fast forward
So I can grind these teeth
And peek through time
If I could bring things back
They'd feedback wild
And when I saw the future
The geeks were right”
- The Faint, ‘The Geeks Were Right’
Fascinatiion, 2008

“Great spirits have always encountered violent opposition from mediocre minds. The mediocre mind is incapable of understanding the man who refuses to bow blindly to conventional prejudices and chooses instead to express his opinions courageously and honestly.”

- Albert Einstein, date unknown

Ridiculed, ostracized, humiliated, maligned, belittled, abandoned, harangued, harassed, hated, discredited, disavowed, derided, deprived, denied, blacklisted, censored, barred, banned, repudiated, shunned, disowned, disassociated, whipped, stretched on racks, exiled, imprisoned, tortured, burned, hung, beheaded, and shot or stoned to death. These are the ways society has traditionally greeted the bringers of new ideas and challenges to accepted wisdom.

This is also how the general populace has received those individuals who have sought to sanctify and protect the natural world. Called ‘eco-wackos’, ‘tree huggers’, ‘squirrel nuts’, among other things, the history of the ecological movement began and continues against an unsleeping, omnipresent and active suppression,

and pure, undiluted malevolence by the forces that benefit from the despoilation of the Earth.

Environmental activists, like humanitarian aid workers and free press journalists, are routinely killed, maimed, disappeared, jailed on trumped-up charges, or otherwise removed as obstacles by those they expose or defy in countries all over the world. Hollywood and Big Publishing often portray environmentalists as terrorists.

In European society, a careful and respectful regard for the natural environment was first extolled by the poets and artists of the Romantic movement in the late eighteenth century. Environmentalism as a philosophy and political movement began as a direct response to the Industrial Revolution, which began spewing smoke from coal combustion into the air day and night from the mid 1700's through the early 1800's, as well as to the exponentially increased discharge of industrial chemical waste into the 1900's. Early forest conservation efforts, research, and mandates began in the 1860's in the forests of India, then still under British empirical rule.

In England it was the urban middle class that pressured the government to address the hydrochloric acid and other pollutants being pumped into the air, and by 1863 Britain's Alkali Acts were passed as the first of modern wide-scale environmental laws. The late 1800's also saw the formation of the first wildlife conservation societies as well as the expansion of the movement to the United States, where it was spearheaded by naturalist philosophers such as Henry David Thoreau, who authored the environmentalist classic 'Walden; or Life In The Woods' and the essay 'Civil Disobedience', and writer zoologist botanist glaciologist John Muir who founded the Sierra Club in 1892. But by 1900 the massive amounts of toxic industrial waste were matching the increasing loads of untreated human waste.

While the early half of the twentieth century witnessed a tremendous growth of interest in the importance of the wilderness and preservation efforts, it was not until after World War II and a succession of major industrial disasters in the fifties and sixties that people started to fully recognize the dangers and effects of disregard for the natural environment. Oil spills, radiation from the hydrogen bomb explosions, and proof of society's susceptibility to ambient

chemical poisoning added a new dimension to the modern apocalyptic reality.

Powerful books such as Rachel Carson's 'Silent Spring' (1962) and Paul Ehrlich's 'The Population Bomb' (1968) grabbed the public by the collar and confronted them with the consequences of reckless indifference to the natural environment.

Through the entire decade of the sixties and into the seventies, a steady flow of federal protective legislation was handed down by various administrations, including the Land and Water Conservation Act (1964), the Wilderness Act (1964), the National Environmental Policy Act (1969), the Clean Air Act (1970, originally 1963), the Clean Water Act (1972) and the Endangered Species Act (1973).

Most memorably, and much to the chagrin of the Democratic Party, Republican President Richard Nixon had early in his tenure shrewdly included and highlighted environmental concerns, which appealed to the entire spectrum of voters from right to left and rich to poor, as major tenets of his platform. At the same time, the Republicans made no secret of their loathing for environmentalists and their ilk, whom they viewed as anti-business and socially discordant. But the tree huggers were not an election threat, unlike the Libertarian Party, which regularly siphoned off a quarter to a half million conservative voters every election cycle.

Although Tricky Dick was the figurehead who enthusiastically smiled for the cameras while signing the final documents, it was the unyielding efforts by the thousands of volunteers in grassroots organizations around the country and individuals such as Senators Gaylord Nelson and Edmund Muskie and legendary consumer rights activist Ralph Nader that had produced the legislation.

The first Earth Day on April 22nd, 1970, was actually a national day of protest on the scale of the contemporary anti-war demonstrations, and not the milquetoast "celebrations" of green-colored beverages and once-yearly park clean-ups that it is today. Millions of Americans were demanding change, action, and accountability from their government in combatting pollution. In response, on December 2nd of that same year, the United States Environmental Protection Agency began operations. By 1972 the United Nations held its first Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm, Sweden, and formed its own environmental agencies.

Environmentalists in America in the 1960's and 1970's confronted and brought attention to the dangers of nuclear waste and nuclear weapons, of acid rain in the 1980's, of deforestation and ozone depletion in the 1990's, and of global warming and climate change in the 2000's.

Inspired by the swift rise and growth of Green parties in Australia, New Zealand, and Europe in the early 1980's, especially Germany, where the Greens had achieved national recognition status, the seeds for a national Green Party in the United States were sown in the fields of blossoming state Green parties, which had begun running candidates for office at the local, county, and state levels in the mid-80's.

In August of 1984 five dozen schoolteachers, farmers, church and community leaders, and activists from a wide range of missions including the civil justice, environmentalist, feminist and pacifist movements, gathered at Macalester College in St. Paul, Minnesota, to create the Green Committees of Correspondence, so named after the Committees of Correspondence of the American Revolution.

By the mid-90's two national-level Green parties had emerged: the Association of State Green Parties and the Greens/GreenPartyUSA. In July of 2001, after the expected internal wranglings and birth pains, the two groups more or less coalesced, mid-wived by political activist Mike Feinstein and environmentalist teamster Howie Hawkins to become The Green Party of the United States, which was granted National Committee status by the Federal Election Commission on November 8th of that year.

The Democrats in the eighties recognized the power and momentum of the ecology movement and adopted an environmentally friendly stance tempered by the prioritization of their corporate donors' business interests.

Career politician Senator Al Gore, son of a career politician, had followed in his father's steps exactly by first becoming a US Representative then Senator for the state of Tennessee. Having earlier accused Nixon of co-opting the environmental issue, Gore co-opted the issue for his failed 1988 presidential campaign, and it became his schtick on into the new millennium. In 1992 he was elected Vice-President as part of Bill Clinton's Democrat ticket in the latter's successful presidential bid.

Also in 1992, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in the late spring, the United Nations held the major Conference on Environment and Development, alternately known as the Earth Summit or the Rio Summit. There, the members drafted the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change which, among other things, created a binding international environmental treaty to counteract "dangerous human interference with the climate system". Another part of the contract stipulated that signatory countries agreed "not to carry out any activities on the lands of indigenous peoples that would cause environmental degradation or that would be culturally inappropriate". The United States and 153 other nations signed the treaty.

By 1995 the UN had completed the first draft of the Kyoto Protocol, the largest international environmental pact in history, which expanded on the UNFCCC to acknowledge the scientific consensus on the dangers posed by global warming, outline specific and sweeping targets on emissions, and commit member states to the express reduction of these greenhouse gas emissions.

That same year, at the national Green Gathering in Albuquerque, New Mexico, despite some objections from those committed to decentralization, the Greens decided to run a candidate for President. Together with an organization named Third Parties '96, the state Green parties convinced proven environmental champion Ralph Nader to accept the nomination, though on the condition he placed that campaign spending would be limited to \$5,000.

The state Green parties have never accepted corporate donations and the national party would act no differently. Nader chose Native American economist, environmentalist, and writer Winona LaDuke as his running mate.

Many, if not most, of the original subscribers to the Green Party's ideology were formerly Democrats, disillusioned and dismayed by the party's capitulation to capital gains. Their dejected fellows implored them to reconsider and urged that now was not the time for third parties as it was too soon in America's fragile young democracy for such a concept and that only one other national party was needed to counterbalance the treacheries of those other guys.

Appearing on only twenty-two state ballots and going up against the incumbent Clinton administration, which was enjoying a robust economy and relative domestic stability, and against the

Republican ticket of then-recently former Senate Majority leader Bob Dole and former Housing Secretary, congressman, and pro football player Jack Kemp, the Nader/LaDuke ticket earned 685,297 votes, or 0.7% of the total popular vote, and are not even usually mentioned in general accountings of the election.

Grossly underestimated in the 1992 election when he grabbed nearly 19% of the popular vote running as an Independent, and now running as the nominee for the Reform Party, US Navy sailor and businessman Texarkanan Texan Ross Perot, despite being excluded from the presidential debates and receiving practically no media attention, again surpassed expectations by garnering 8.4%, or 8,085,294, of the popular vote. He was not called a spoiler by anyone, but he was certainly called all kinds of other things by the Republicans, who have never ignored the staying power of name-calling. The Democrats handily defeated the Republicans and enjoyed a comfortable second term, notwithstanding a sex scandal and subsequent historic impeachment.

In early December of 1997, the United Nations gathered in Kyoto, Japan, to finalize negotiations and formally adopt the Kyoto Protocol. There were 192 signatory nations. The United States was not one of them.

US Vice-President Gore, whom President Slick Willie had expressly put in direct control of American environmental policy, flew in on Monday, the 8th, to address the press conference at the United Nations Committee on Climate Change and illuminate for everyone the American position on the treaty.

Apart from the consideration of his own family's miscellaneous millions invested in Occidental Petroleum, Mr. Enviro and his boss were not about to bite the hands of the big gas and oil companies that had fed them six million dollars for their reelection campaign the previous year.

After paying lip service to the urgency of the climate situation, Gore then sublimely confounded the entire world audience with a stunning aria of doublespeak that would have made Orwell proud. As he put it, despite the US being the world's number one producer of greenhouse gases, it could not commit to the treaty because developing countries were not doing enough to acknowledge the environmental crisis.

It is an inconvenient truth that when the crucial moment came for the one person who was shouting the loudest about global warming with a multimillion-dollar megaphone and the real power to take meaningful and decisive action in the matter instead blinked and threw down some smoke pellets to obscure his exit in the disappearing hero act.

Following Gore's counsel, the Clinton administration refused to even bother sending forth the Kyoto Protocol to the US Senate for ratification, thereby smoothly sidestepping Congressional debate. The treaty was dead in the muddy water of American politics.

"As we have said before," the Vice-President 'splained, "we will not submit the Protocol for ratification without the meaningful participation of key developing countries in efforts to address climate change,".

A year later, in November of '98, Gore "symbolically" signed the Kyoto Protocol to show everyone, especially his environmentalist donors, that the American government was still supportive of the whole spirit of the thing, here, here.

In the 2000 Presidential Election primaries, Gore became the Democratic nominee, with Connecticut Senator Joe Lieberman as his running mate.

At the same time, the Association of State Green Parties decided to try running the Nader/LaDuke ticket one more time and doubled the number of state ballots they appeared on to forty-four.

And once again the Democrats tried to dissuade the Greens from participating in the elections, emphasizing the looming Y2K global computer crash on New Year's Eve which only Gore and other original members of the 80's Atari Democrats could avert. That, and the Republican candidate, George W. Bush, scion of former CIA Chief George Herbert Walker Bush, had Darth Vader as his running mate.

But everyone underestimated Dubya, who could tell a joke almost completely, and routinely said such plainly stupid things that they came off as jokes and to the common voter he was at least entertaining, whereas Albert Arnold, who was still scolding people about being better recyclers and whose wife Tipper was one of the founders of the music lyric warning label organization PMRC in the 80's, was seen as stiff and boring. To younger voters, the Democratic ticket was like voting for your parents to tell you to eat your vegetables and say your prayers before bed.

Although Nader was mostly dismissed by the general public as wonky and bland, he and LaDuke appealed to the serious environmentalists. As a senator, Gore's submitted policy changes and watered-down versions of other people's proposals had routinely and noticeably favored corporations, more often than not providing the biggest polluters with regulation loopholes and get-out-of-jail free cards. As Veep, he had peacocked his true colors.

Gore won the popular vote with 50,999,897 (48.38%), and Bush received 50,456,002 (47.86%). The other four independent party candidates combined received 1,015,060 votes, or .96%. Another 51,186 voters (.05%) were rooting for the candidate named 'Other'. The Greens surprised everyone by receiving 2,883,105 votes, or 2.7% of the popular vote.

But this would be the fourth of only five American elections in which the loser of the popular vote actually received the most electoral votes and Gore would be the first candidate since Grover Cleveland in 1888 to win the popular vote and lose in the Electoral College. The results were so sharply contested that the election ultimately had to be decided by the United States Supreme Court.

Because of Bush's razor-thin margin of victory in New Hampshire and Florida, Democrats blamed the Green Party for "spoiling" Gore's victory. That the governor of Florida happened to be Dubya's lil' brother Jeb, who had done everything he could think of to aid in his elder sibling's campaign efforts and the automatic, law-triggered Florida recount, or that Supreme Court Justice Sandra Day O'Connor, it was later revealed, had helped steer the Court's decision in favor of Bush, these factors were nothing compared to the perceived damage the Greens had done by simply exercising their citizen's rights.

That nearly four million voters wanted a change from the usual ping pong politics of the two-party system was of no import compared to maintaining the status quo. Had the simple and logical concept and method of ranked choice voting been implemented by then, Gore would have won all around and third-party votes would have been a non-issue.

In the 2004 elections, riding an ocean swell of patriotism after the 9/11 terrorist attacks, the Republicans made history with the presidential incumbents' re-election and a record setting number of voter turnout. Ralph Nader, running as an Independent, and the

Libertarian Party each took home less than five hundred thousand and four hundred thousand votes, respectively. The Greens came in last out of the major third parties, with twenty-two thousand less votes than the 143,630 faithful gathered by the religiously conservative originalists of the Constitution Party.

On the state level, however, the Greens by that year had begun making serious inroads to political offices everywhere from city councils and boards of education to county freeholder commissions and state legislatures.

The Green Party of Florida, having overcome stringent restrictions for third parties in the twelve years since its formation, boasted 6,646 registered members.

In Miami-Dade County, Green candidate Debrah Rae Sullivan defeated eight-year incumbent Republican Marielita Acevedo-Goldberg for the 3rd District's representative seat on the Board of County Commissioners.

Marielita was flabbergasted and appalled that some carpetbagger New York JAP could just parachute in and install herself like that and she convinced herself that it had been a fluke. It had to be a ripple from the Green Party's spoiler effect of four years prior. There was no other explanation for it. It was impossible that someone as locally popular as herself could lose to a no name wannabe eco-entrepreneur science geek. *And how the hell does Miami Shores even qualify as a town with less than ten thousand residents?!* she roared.

From then on, all scientificy types were her sworn enemies for life, beginning first and foremost with Miss Smartypants Sullivan.

*

Sometime in 1969 in Illinois, an enraged middle school science teacher named James F. Philips, upon seeing the horrible deaths of local river wildlife being directly caused by illegal pollution from untouchable companies in the area, started taking direct action against the culprit corporations.

A skilled canoeist who in his spare time taught Native American trapping and boating methods, Philips took the nickname The Fox, after the Illinois tributary where he (allegedly) began his campaign by plugging sewage pipes outlawed in 1962. He then

publicly announced his intentions by dumping a bucket of toxic water from the river onto the desk of an executive at the Chicago offices of Stone Container Corporation, which operated a steel factory on the riverbanks.

Another area polluter was Armour Dial, the soap company owned by Henkel Corporation, and which was spewing excess toxic waste into Mill Creek, part of the Fox River. Philips printed up thousands of stickers which read "Armour Dial Kills Our Water" and he and a group of (alleged) co-conspirators traveled to supermarkets around the country placing the stickers on bars of Dial soap.

Throughout the '70's, Phillips' acts of "ecological sabotage" gained national notoriety and included highway signs, putting caps on the tops of smokestacks, delivering skunks to the homes of owners of polluting companies and once transporting fifty pounds of sewage from Lake Michigan directly to the reception desk of the company which had originally discharged the waste.

It didn't take long before The Fox's direct acts of protest and public shaming began to be emulated by others. 1971 saw the formation of the international environmental activist organization Greenpeace, taking their cue from Philips' example and growing to campaign all over the world for myriad ecological causes and advocating for non-violent direct action. Other like-minded groups formed globally.

In 1975, novelist Edward Abbey wrote a book entitled 'The Monkey Wrench Gang' about a fictional group of ecologically minded activists who took protest a step further by carrying out sabotage operations against the heavy machinery and transportation systems of polluting corporations in the American West.

In real life, the group Earth First! was formed in 1980 and The Earth Liberation Front (ELF) in 1992, both ecocentric organizations with more radical, though still non-violent, ideologies, such as the practice of 'rewilding', and approaches to environmental activism, which have included the destruction of property and unlawful industrial sabotage.

It was also at this time that citizens also began filing lawsuits against property owners, corporations and state entities for aesthetic, health and environmental damage caused by harmful policies and practices. Decided in 1965 by the Second Circuit Court of Appeals, Scenic Hudson Preservation Conference v. Federal Power

Commission was one of the first cases establishing the right of citizens to sue in such instances and helped to stop the construction of a power plant on Storm King Mountain in New York State.

*

Allapattah
10:37am

*

At the end of the nineteenth century, Swedish physicist, chemist, and Nobel Prize laureate Svante August Arrhenius was the first scientist to raise the theory of global warming. Using the principles of physical chemistry, a new science then, Arrhenius demonstrated how decreases or increases of carbon dioxide in the Earth's atmosphere would directly affect the planet's surface temperature. His contemporaries, however, believed that climate was self-regulating, and that the greenhouse effect was absorbed by the atmosphere so that increased CO2 levels meant nothing.

By 1938 English engineer and inventor Guy Stewart Callendar had begun publishing evidence that the Earth was, in fact, warming and that carbon dioxide levels were rising. He, too, was disbelieved.

During the pivotal 1950's Canadian physicist Gilbert Plass used an intricate computer model that calculated projections of the correlated rise in temperatures and greenhouse gas concentrations; Austrian born American nuclear physicist and physical chemist Hans Seuss was able to prove that fossil fuels were a direct cause of the rise in CO2 levels; American geologist and oceanographer Roger Revelle demonstrated that the increases of the greenhouse gases would not be absorbed by the oceans. Revelle and Seuss co-authored a 1957 article warning about the limited sustainability by the Earth of human-generated gas emissions. Building on their research, American geochemist and oceanographer Charles Keeling was able to measure and record the steady rise of anthropogenic carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and at long last confirmed Svante Arrhenius' 1896 prediction.

The scientific community in the 1980's, having finally arrived at a general consensus, sounded the alarm to the public. Director of NASA's Goddard Institute for Space Studies James Hansen testified before Congress on June 23rd, 1988, and stated in no uncertain terms that as of that year the Earth was warmer than it had ever been since humans began taking its temperature; that the greenhouse effect was real and global warming had begun; and that this global warming would in turn "begin to effect the probability of extreme events such as summer heat waves". To drive the point home, Dr. Hansen added that the four warmest years ever recorded had occurred in the '80's and that the rate of warming over the previous twenty-five years was without precedent.

That same year, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change was established to formally advise world governments on the situation based on interdisciplinary scientific research.

Almost immediately, fossil fuel industry groups, individual corporations, adversarial scientists, and conservative think tanks in the United States initiated a semi-coordinated campaign of disinformation and climate change denial propaganda. As the tobacco industry did with hiding the harmful effects of their products, the proponents of fossil fuels' modus operandi was to cast doubt on the validity of scientific reports and statistics. This process of confusing the public then expanded to other countries, Australia and Canada, in particular.

*

Sol - Roconnoiters w/ Mei Ling

*

It is generally believed by historians and scientists that the hemp plant was cultivated by indigenous people on the North American continent long before European exploration, as it was in most other parts of the world. However, the first recorded use of the plant in America came in the form of a 1619 mandate by the Virginia Assembly stipulating that all farmers were required to grow flax and hemp seed. Soon, the Massachusetts and Connecticut colonies followed suit and then through the 17th and 18th centuries American

farmers were growing hemp for both domestic consumption as well as export to Europe. At that time, believe it or not, it was illegal to refuse to grow hemp.

Among the founding fathers, General George Washington, first President of the United States of America, was a hemp farmer, as was Thomas Jefferson, who also printed an early draft of the Declaration of Independence on hemp paper. The ever-industrious Benjamin Franklin established one of the first hemp paper mills in the new country.

For more than two hundred years hemp was regularly used as currency in trade and the government even accepted it as tax payments. In times of war, it was an essential commodity used to make everything from rope and sails and parachute webbing, to maps and books and cloth fiber.

The hemp industry enjoyed steady growth in the 19th century and into the early 20th century. In the early 1930's it was widely projected to become a billion-dollar market. This wonderfully versatile plant was an esteemed source of American pride, until it wasn't.

At the same time that hemp was being touted as a miracle product, it was conversely viewed as an existential threat by manufacturers of competing products. The infamous William Randolph Hearst, owner of the nation's largest newspaper chain and an entire forest of trees used for making paper, as well as an avowed supporter of the Nazi Party, had decided that hemp paper was an unwelcome and unacceptable alternative to wood pulp. Credited with the creation of sensationalist "yellow journalism", Hearst began a smear campaign against the hemp plant (which contains little to no elements of the THC hallucinogen), utilizing the term 'marihuana' to confuse it with its THC-loaded botanical cousin and demonizing it as the portal to moral depravity, wanton lust and unspeakable acts of violence.

His anti-cannabis propaganda, regularly published alongside guest editorials by Hitler, Mussolini, and other fascists, (and probably a private word from Hearst himself) convinced the head of the FBI's Narcotics Bureau, Harry J. Anslinger, to draft and enact The Marihuana Tax Act of 1937, passed by Congress on August 2nd. Though the legislation did not overtly outlaw hemp, it may as well have since the inordinately heavy taxes and deliberately complicated

regulations suddenly made it increasingly burdensome and unprofitable for hemp farmers to continue growing the crop.

In 1938, a church-funded propaganda film entitled 'Reefer Madness' depicted children and adults nightmarishly transformed into immoral and violent maniacs after smoking marijuana. The public and the government, both state and federal, were horrified into believing that they had to eliminate this devil's plant from the face of the earth. Though the hemp industry was achieving amazing things by this time, its death knell had been sounded by the powers that be.

It was no coincidence that a number of existent and nascent industries directly benefitted from the eradication of a single product that rendered them all obsolete, not least among them the new and rapidly expanding petrochemical business that had begun in the 1920's, almighty cotton, and the wood-based paper makers.

The majority of the few remaining hemp farmers were adamant that had cultivation and innovation with hemp been allowed to continue, even more beneficial and forward-thinking products and processes would be available to us today. Moreover, hemp production, which is faster and easier than lumber manufacturing, would have helped to avert the deforestation crisis that is the reality facing us now. Hemp is carbon negative, sucking up CO2 as it grows. And as hemp grows bountifully without pesticides or herbicides, it exists as an excellent alternative to cotton, one of the most chemical-intensive crops ever cultivated by humans.

*

Agent Weiland – arrives at conclusions at Miami rare book dealer

*

Roots, Shoots and Leaves
Wednesday, March 30th, 8:19pm

It was not such a stretch of the imagination to consider that whoever might be spying on Debrah would also be interested in keeping an eye on Jeremiah. Any opportunity for easy access to look around when the owner was more relaxed was an opportunity not to be ignored.

Among the beatniks of the fifties and the hippies of the sixties his shoes would have made him suspect. But after the melancholy shoe gazers of the eighties and the industrious punks of the nineties, his Oxfords passed without notice. A plain white T and black jeans, gave the glasses the night off, and he was just part of the scenery.

When he opened his eyes, there she was. It couldn't be possible.

Yet she was just as real as the other people in the crowd and the drum in front of him.

She held his gaze and would not release him.

It was only when a small group of boisterous newcomers arrived that he was able to exhale. He could not abruptly exit the 'song' they were playing without drawing attention to himself so waited until the rhythm began giving way to a new one and got up to stretch his legs.

What were they going to say to one another? 'Hullo, again?' Each had been on the other's mind incessantly since they'd parted and in some primal psychic way, they both seemed to sense it.

He was walking toward her and her heart started beating like a hammer. His own had not stopped the drumming. Neither of them smiled as he approached her but when at last he was standing in front of her he broke out in that smile he had on the beach.

All he said was, "Aly. Walk with me?"

She said nothing but went with him. He didn't know how to begin. He already knew she wasn't okay so didn't ask. After they'd walked a couple blocks in silence he stopped them on 7th Avenue in front of a small, old theatre building dated 1926 on the portico.

"I'm not a big believer in fate," he said as though walking through a minefield. "I just kind of handle things as they come my way. But now you've come my way twice. And I'm not entirely sure how to handle it. The only thing I do know is that I don't want to lose you again."

Does he tell her he knows she's in some kind of trouble? Not yet.

Does she tell him she's in a big heap of trouble? No, let him finish what he has to say.

"I am very sorry I lied to you. I... I just don't like to tell people my business, that's all. You didn't need to know I was coming to Miami, yet here you are."

She said nothing and he had some considerable difficulty with the last part.

"You... I... You're not someone I want to be lying to, Aly. I don't know why you're here, I can only hope it might mean a chance or something. Between us I mean."

"But it seems to me like you're not a big believer in a lot of things, Sol."

Was that a veiled question? He had no response.

"You're hard to figure," she clarified. "I wasn't looking for anyone. A new relationship is the last thing I need, and you act the same way. And still, it felt like maybe we had made a connection and I thought you had felt it, too, but there was no way to tell."

"But you had me at punk rock."

It took her a second, then she remembered the T-shirt.

For the record, she kissed him first. She grabbed him by the hair at the back of his head and pressed herself against him, not giving a damn about anything except that moment. He tasted of mint tea. She tasted like the orchid of heaven, and he did not want to ever stop kissing her. It felt like a hundred years that he had longed to hold her close to him.

And then she pushed him away and let out a big breath of astonishment. For a moment she just stood there, having surprised herself.

What the hell am I doing? she yelled at herself.

Whatever it was, she wanted to keep doing it and took two determined steps to return to him and kiss him again.

He belonged to her, let her do what she would with him. She could have killed him at that moment and he would have died happy.

"Let's get out of here,"
yearned to taste every inch of her and she wanted to satisfy all of his desire.

Slowly, tormentingly, so slowly he kissed her, here and there, and slowly lifted her shirt, and she guided her fingers along the taut muscles of his back and shoulders.

Yes... kiss, kiss me. Everywhere, kiss me, she started to surrender herself.

He pleaded with her urgently, telling her how much he wanted to worship her if only for this one night of his life, and he fell to his knees bringing his hands to her hips and lifting her skirt to her waist. She ran her fingers possessively through his hair and she let him.

Deep in the night she told him her true name in the language of her people. It meant 'beautiful water' and it sounded to him like a bird song.

She told him of the struggles of her tribe, and of the Green Corn Dance when she was little, and of her idea to write a children's book that told the story of her people so that kids around the world would know of the Miccosukee before they completely disappeared.

He told her about growing up in New York and Jersey as a child of immigrants, and of leaving home at an early age, and explained why he was in such a hurry to get paid to be able to meet the huge upcoming legal fees in the visitation case with his son.

He divulged that though he came from an island people famous for their sea-faring legends and that he'd flown over the oceans a few times he had never actually been out on the water farther than New York Bay and that his one and only fear in life, and certainly irrational, was, in fact, sharks. His often-clueless father had thought it might be fun to take a five-year old to see 'Jaws' on the big screen when it premiered.

She laughed compassionately and tried offering up the facts and odds about shark attacks, but he waved it off saying he'd read and heard it all before and even handled small sharks when fishing and that just the thought of a brush-by with one of the bigger specimens and their slimy rough skin sent cold chills up his spine.

They talked about everything, and about little nothings, about the realities of the country they lived in, people they knew, places they'd been, Beatles or Stones? (a given, with these two), their favorite ice cream flavors, desert island discs, worst subjects in school, and would we blow the human experiment after all?

"Nature has the answer to all those questions that are churning inside of you," she told him as she slowly drew three circles around his heart and kissed his cheek. "But if more of us don't stand

up to defend her none of it will matter. That old saying is truer than ever. If you're not a part of the solution, you really are a part of the problem."

At some point there came an abrupt silence. They didn't try to fill it, they were fine together without saying anything. But, of course, there still existed an invisible barrier between them; the one secret they had not yet shared with each other that night.

She no longer wanted to keep it from him, so she told him about the books.

"I think you know I'm in a little bit of trouble... Okay, well, a lotta bit of trouble."

"I do. I didn't want to pry."

"And I wish I didn't have to tell you something like this but... but I feel like I can trust you and--"

"-You can."

"-And I'm not trying to bring you any problems, but I thought I had it all figured out and now I'm thinking maybe I don't have it all figured out and maybe I could use a little, like, advice, maybe?..."

"I don't kiss and tell, Aly. Whatever it is, I want to help any way I can and I should have told you that the day we met. You really don't fit the dangerous criminal lifestyle."

She took a deep breath and told him about her job at the university library and the yearly auction; about the little red-haired man and the congressman preacher who the universe must have appointed to be her mortal enemy in this life, and about their plan to somehow use the four books she'd stolen to secure a shady land deal hoodwinking the Miccosukee tribe, the Miami university and the state of Florida and where they would be building a massive tax-exempt racist, misogynist and xenophobic nest of religion-centered political action aligned with the state Republican party, and how she felt like she had to do something and the books seemed to be at the center of their scheme so she took them and now the entire state police apparatus was looking for her.

"And there's also a very stylishly dressed couple trying to kill me for the books," she added at last.

The tourists. It had to be. When he asked her to describe them, he had not been wrong. Then it was his turn to take a long breath.

"Wow," he exhaled. "Couldn't go small, huh?"

She playfully pounded him on the shoulder. Then he said nothing more for a good ten minutes before initiating a long line of carefully considered questions, repeating some, until it seemed they had both dozed off.

Somewhere before dawn he whispered to her in the dark.

“Aly.”

She wasn’t asleep, either.

“Sol.”

“I’ll hide you.”

She didn’t answer. Within a few minutes, though, she began kissing him again softly and they resumed their lovemaking.

Later in the morning they could not tear themselves apart from each other, though not for lack of trying. They kissed until they were both dead.

And then the burner phone for Alex Hayduke started ringing.

Thursday, March 31st, 1:30pm

Hempcrete, as you can guess, is something like concrete made out of hemp. Created in France, where hemp production was never outlawed, in the mid 1980’s when restoration people were experimenting with replacements for the deteriorating wattle and daub of timber-frame medieval buildings, it’s a biocomposite building material made of the shives, the woody stem, of the hemp plant and a lime-based binder.

Though it doesn’t work well as load-bearing blocks, it serves as an ideal acoustic and thermal insulating wall material that “breathes”, that is, it absorbs water moisture and air, allowing it to help cool a structure in high temperatures and warm it in colder temperatures, within the same twenty-four hour timeframe, as in climates with extreme differences between night and day. It is non-toxic, naturally resistant to insects and mold, and has excellent fire resistance. Best of all, there is low carbon emission in its manufacture and the finished product is able to absorb carbon gases, to work as a kind of “carbon sink.”

Ecollaboration Enterprises was able to legally import and resell both the finished product in blocks, as well as bulk amounts of the materials mixture.

He had cleaned up enough to be presentable at a sales call downtown at the Flagler Street offices of a northern developer who, like himself, had a penchant for Beaux Arts buildings. The prospect's company was particularly interested in plant-based plastic plumbing pipes and hempcrete's insulation applications, the latter of which he had heard was popular in Europe. Many of the buildings in that part of downtown had been built in the early 1920's.

Aly had the luxury of leisure for a few hours and went about inspecting the lair of her unexpected new lover. Like the man himself, sparsity seemed to obscure a longer story. Apparently, he kept a stock of spare pre-paid phones and gave her one to be able to call him later. Without discussion he'd also given her the keys for the Trans Am to get around with.

When the text messages started coming in, he had the potential client's complete attention. Not only could the multimillionaire real estate redeveloper save money on building materials that would closely match the original substances while helping to save the environment, his reputation as the restorer of important historical structures would only grow. One in the pocket.

He apologized emphatically to the civilly wintered man for the phone that would not stop buzzing in his pocket and stepped into the hallway to take the call. (Yes, a true sales professional would have turned the thing off, but Sol wasn't really a sales rep at all now, was he?) Only three people had this number and Mei never called to waste his time.

"Sol, the call is coming from inside the house!"

"What?!"

"Don't you remember that line? That movie from the eighties, when you were already about fifty, the one with the babysitter and the stalker?"

Yes, he remembered.

"What are you saying?" he urged.

"He's there! It's Kaos Kode! I would know him anywhere. Well, I mean, I don't actually know what he looks like, but he's inside there. I know his signatures."

"At the lab, you mean? How do you know?"

“Because I did all the outside approaches. To do what he does he has to be physically inside the building.”

Damn. Time to roll. He apologized to the genuinely visionary real estate mogul and made a hasty exit. Back on the phone with Mei Ling he told her to meet him at a location near the lab complex.

“Okay, boss man, but you’d better hurry. I might want him more than you do.”

Along the way, he swung into the alley behind a strip mall and Nick Hayduke became Guillare Fodario again, who drove to NW 14th Street to switch cars and arrive at Ecollaboration with two hours left before the end of the day.

9.

Everything Hits at Once

Good fortune and bad fortune arrive in the same canoe.
- Cree saying

“Help me, somebody, help me
I wonder where I am
I see my future before me
I’ll hurt you when I can

It seems like I’ve been here before
It seems like I’ve been here before
It seems like I’ve been here before
It seems like I’ve been here before”
- New Order, ‘Everything’s Gone Green’
Substance, 1987

Friday, April 1st Daybreak

Like most of us human computers, Sol’s brain kept working after his body shut down to recharge. And as we have all experienced, sometimes the brain likes to excitedly wake the body much earlier than the body would prefer with the grand, cannot-wait news of a solved crossword puzzle or lengthy mathematical equation or difficult musical arrangement, or perhaps the most perfectly reasonable solution to an interpersonal conflict and why didn’t I think of that before?

And also sometimes, the brain will calmly nudge you awake, the way your cat puts her paw on your face to get you up and moving, with a completed checklist of answers to the questions that were ricocheting around in your head before you at last gave in to sleep the night before.

Firebrand Model & Talent Agency
A1A, Hollywood, Florida
9:49am

The girls came from all parts of the country in a thousand forms of arrival, for thousands of reasons, and he knew exactly where to look for them. They were usually hungry, wanted cigarettes, needed to shower, needed a fix of some sort or two, needed a place to sleep. Shopping malls, movie theatres, 24-hour convenience stores, all-night diners, the liquor store closest to the runaway centers; they were like low hanging fruit. By now he had it down to a science.

For the initial hunts Mustela had a very well-paid assistant named Maxine Gusanos; attractive, educated, charming and soulless. It was her job to lure the girls with money, clothing, food, and promises of stardom through the mentoring of the big-time talent agent she worked for. She was also the procurer of the adult male clients for the girls that had already been turned into tricks.

To keep up daytime appearances, a small suite was rented on the third floor in one of the few office towers on the beach. Through an endless supply of agencies, Mustela kept a turnstile reception desk of temps that he changed out every sixty days, or sooner if they were the curious types.

When Sol walked into the waiting room, he startled a young woman watching a *novela* on the Spanish language TV channel.

"Meester Mustela eese no here today," she told him. From Sol's estimation, she hadn't been in the country more than a year or two.

"Am I able to make an appointment?"

"Who jou are, sir?"

"I'm an investigator."

"Jou are investigating Meester Mustela?"

"Yes. Am I able to make an appointment? I need to ask him a few questions."

"I en only temporrery, señor!" she pleaded. "Eese only my second week!"

"*Yo no soy la migra, mi hija, tranquila,*" he told her, meaning he wasn't from INS. "I only need to see Mr. Mustela."

The young woman, probably Central American, said nothing but made some kind of mental calculation. Without another word, she grabbed a beige handbag from her desktop and walked past Sol and right out of the office.

Sol looked over to the wall on the right which had a large built-in mirror in its center. On the other side of the one-way glass Val

Mustela was cringing behind his desk, hoping the man in the suit didn't have X-ray vision.

Confident he was at least being seen and/or recorded on video camera, Sol also made his way outside.

Cuties Wings N' Tings
CocoWalk, Coconut Grove
2:30pm

Single mothers are the only real superheroes on this planet. Everyone else is the supporting, or non-supporting, cast of actors.

*

Pamela S. had filed suit against Firebrand Model & Talent Agency and Val Mustela four years ago on the very day she turned eighteen. The original filing charged breach of contract, sexual harassment, false advertising, libel, and professional malpractice. The case was settled out of court and she had signed a non-disclosure agreement.

Currently she was working at the Grove location of a national franchise of chicken-and-beer joints that exploited the good looks of its all-female waitstaff. He had no time for elaborate overtures, just flashed the state seal that looked like a badge and the over-partied manager put up no resistance.

"She's on her break in the back at the deck tables," he answered nervously. "Is she in some kind of trouble?"

"Not in the least," Sol reassured him, "On the contrary, I just need her help for about five minutes."

Sitting alone at an empty table in a seating area looking out onto the ocean was one of the most beautiful women Sol had ever seen in his life. Head in hand she was reading a large hardcover and wearing the godawful body-hugging uniform of tight logo T-shirt, short and shiny gold shorts over flesh-colored pantyhose, white athletic socks, white sneakers.

Outkast's 'Hey Ya' pumped over the house speakers and she tapped one foot along to the music. He tried to make some kind of noise with his steps as he approached so as to not startle her but she was engrossed in her reading.

"Ms. [REDACTED]?"

She jumped up and gave him a quick once-over.

"Yes, that's me," she answered with a mix of excitement and apprehension, an all-American girl of sandy hair and lashes, big hazel eyes, a smattering of adorable sun freckles, and lips that sang silently of carefree, aimless summers.

When she closed the book and set it aside, he noticed it was that reimagining of Oz's wicked witch which had just been adapted into a Tony award-winning Broadway play.

He showed her his investigator's license and told her why he had come to see her. She was visibly disappointed.

"Oh... I thought maybe you were an agent or a producer or something," she lamented. "I have my work address posted in case there's any last-minute casting calls."

"I know. That's how I found you. And I am sorry to disappoint you, but I'm happy to pay you for your time. I just need a couple of minutes and you'll never see me again."

"Well, if it's about that sonofabitch you want to talk about then you'll *have* to pay me 'cause I hate even thinking about the turd. Fifty bucks to start and you've got five minutes. My break is over soon, and I'm not even supposed to be discussing him at all."

"I completely understand, and I very much appreciate your time," he replied, immediately handing her a fifty which she nimbly slipped into one of her long white tube socks.

"This is completely confidential and will not go past me," he assured her. "I believe Mr. Mustela is something very different from what he represents himself as in the daytime."

She made that sound when you suddenly let the air out of a full tire to say he didn't know the half of it.

"Mister, you just qualified for the understatement of the year. Let's begin with him not even being any kind of talent agent at all. That business is just a front and he's just a friggin' pimp. And worse."

She confirmed his suspicions and raised new questions. When he told her that he expected to file charges against Mustela she divulged a few additional details about his operations which were an unexpected boon.

The young woman had a five-year-old daughter to take care of with no apparent support from family or the child's father. A family court case was in arrears, and she paid a daycare service. According

to her resume she was also taking night school theater classes at the community college to augment her portfolio. Sol slipped her another hundred and fifty as he took her hand in his and gave it a quick, firm shake.

"Thank you, again. You have been a tremendous help."

"So, you're not even an actor of any kind?" she asked with a quick glance at the bills he'd given her. "I mean, you're not bad looking, you know. You could probably get plenty of roles without even trying."

"That is very kind of you, Pamela," he half-smiled. "My mother would have paid you a small fortune for saying that. I just don't have the chops that you real actors have."

This brightened her face. "I'll see you, then," she farewelled as she got ready to return to work.

"When you're on Broadway," he suggested. "I'll keep an eye out for you in New York."

She may or may not have intended for him to hear it, but as he was walking away, he heard her say under her breath, "What a fool."

Monday, April 4th, 9:30am

"Sol. Anne's attorneys have filed a motion for an expedited hearing for the twentieth of this month, and it's winner takes all. That's two weeks, brother man. You have to be there or you'll blow your case. Call me right now, please."

"Hey, man, you alright?" asked Matthew.

"Same as it ever was. What gave Anne's lawyers the sudden inspiration for this horseshit?"

"Actuary tables, actually, Sol. Your mortality expectations have spiked dramatically in the past twelve months, toward the negative I hate to tell you. And Anne, scrupulous as ever as far as your will is concerned, having factored in the change of your professional occupational title and recent public events, is taking precautionary methods against any uneventful eventualities."

"She's betting on me getting killed soon."

"Pretty much."

"Alright. Thanks for the heads up, Matt. I'll see you before the twentieth."

Allapattah 6:09pm

If it wasn't football season, Monday nights were made for bowling leagues. Jeremiah took his league nights very seriously, limiting himself to only one wake-up beer, one at lunch and two for a siesta at three. Around five he would take a long hot bath, nursing an extra-large coffee and separately soaking his championship bowling hand, and wrist, in a secret weapon solution of iodine, witch hazel and Palmolive dishwashing liquid. By six-thirty he was ready for battle in his starched league shirt with his name and club patches, and his lucky jeans, his hair parted neatly down the middle.

Because there were no longer any bowling alleys in Miami, he and Violet would drive all the way up to Aventura, where there was a proper bowling alley at a plaza near the mall, where they would have either a victory feast or agony hot dogs. It was the only night of the week, with the exception of the monthly special Saturday date night, that he brought the '85 Charger out from under the tarp. The hellhound was restricted to a long chain that allowed him to patrol the parking lot and the edge of the café outdoor seating.

The café itself closed at six Monday through Friday, four o'clock on Saturdays. It usually only took about an hour to wipe down and disinfect the counters and equipment, refrigerate what needed to be refrigerated, deposit the compost waste, and prop the chairs upside down on the tables. Somewhere around eight a young man from the neighborhood came in to sweep and mop the floors and take out the garbage.

Jeremiah and Violet made their royal departure at the usual appointed time. It had been a slow day and there were no kitchen catastrophes to attend to. Once she had set the alarm and pulled down the security grates, she made her way up to her room above the market hall to gather her belongings.

Sol had lent her the Trans Am to bring her stuff over to his place and she had it parked right outside the vehicle entrance at NW 8th Avenue. It wasn't much and she was able to carry it all in one trip. She had dropped the bags in front of the trunk and was digging for the keys when the beat-up white van pulled up next to her.

The side door opened and out jumped a group of skinheads who rushed her. She fought them with everything she had but they

got her inside the van. One of them grabbed her bags and they took off.

Tamiami

9:08pm

"Let's go! We have to get out of here," Aly urged her.

"No, you can go," Sheila answered, shaking her head and looking at the floor. "I can't leave the girls."

"Girls? What girls?"

"The bad girls. The ones Val brings here on punishment 'cause they've been bad. They're downstairs in the basement."

Aly was stunned, but only for a second.

"Show me," she demanded.

At the bottom of a rickety staircase was a low-ceilinged and low-lit dormitory dungeon. Aly froze when she saw about fifteen beds lined out in two columns of

The river house

11:12pm

Aly shows up with strung out chick.

"I gave them hell, Sol, I swear I did."

"I know you did, Aly, I know for sure you did."

He held her tightly and had to wipe the tears of rage on her jacket.

For the first time in his life, he now knew what it was to feel murderous.

"How do you know they're not there of their own free will, Aly?"

"Sol! They're only girls! And they no longer *have* any willpower! He made them his slaves, and those are someone's daughters! We have to do something!"

"Alright. But the two of you have to stay here."

Allapattah

9:57pm

He was too late.

Any vegetation had burned fast, most of the buildings were similarly at least half burned; a fire had been set at each. The makeshift lab seemed to have sustained a small explosion around which were spread yellow numbered evidence markers.

There was one last firetruck wrapping it up. Jeremiah and Violet were sitting on the hood of the Charger, the only thing they owned to escape the torching.

Grapeland

10:27pm

Sully turned to look at him directly, having come to a deadly decision. In the macabre dance of light and shadows as the fire raged on, his face no longer had the benevolence Sol had first seen.

“Sol... most of my life I’ve tried to create things, build things, fix things,” he said slowly and quietly. “But now I’m going to break things... And I’m going to destroy things...”

“You know how to find the people who did this, don’t you?”

“Yes, I do.”

“I have money for you to take me to them. Just give me a number.”

“No, Sully... You’re all paid up. The rest of this is personal for me. Just give me forty-eight hours and I promise you we’ll get every single person involved in this.”

A single, slow nod was his only answer.

As jaded as he was, Sol, perhaps naively, still had some faith left in the laws that humans had laid down for themselves to preserve civility. But what protections do you have to ensure you can survive when law is lawless?

*

**City of Miami Fire Station #10, 4101 NW 7th Street
Tuesday, 7:45am**

“Good morning, is Chief Waters around?” Sol asked.

"The Chief's very busy," declared a short autistic man, late 30's or early 40's, bald, wearing an ill-fitting department uniform and holding a garden hose he was using to wash off the sidewalk in front of the truck gate.

"I have something very important to discuss with him. Any chance you could let him know I'm down here?"

"I'm Oogie. I'm his executive assistant. Chief's very busy."

The Chief was in fact doing nothing but wearing out a circular track on the carpet in his office, sleepless and still fuming about last night's fires.

"Can you keep a secret, Oogie?"

The executive assistant's eyes narrowed warily at the stranger.

"Yes..."

"It's about the fires last night."

Oogie looked toward the ground. "About Randy?.."

Sol nodded when the man looked up shyly.

"Here," Oogie ordered as he handed Sol the hose end. "Hold this toward the sidewalk." And he took off at a dash.

Chief Maurice Waters was in a rancorously foul mood, which was rare. The station's first Black Chief was usually easy and even-tempered. Randy's was the first death to occur on his watch and he'd been one of their own. It was weighing heavily on him. The firehouse was quiet, and the firefighters could be seen quietly busying themselves as far away from his office as they could manage.

Oogie came running back and took the hose from Sol's hand.

"Chief says you can come upstairs," he panted. "Wait. Lemme turn the water off an' I'll take you." And handed Sol the hose again.

After a brief introduction and preamble, he showed the chief the footage and afterward handed him a copy, asking only that knowledge of the video be kept within his department.

"Thank you," Waters said between gritted teeth. "I'm assuming you're gonna get other copies into the right hands."

"I'm building the case as fast as I can, we're dropping the hammer in twenty-four hours. But it has to be airtight, because these are police officers involved."

"Pieces of shit is what they are."

"With very powerful lawyers to represent them, paid for by their union."

“But why did you come to tell me beforehand?”

Miami Shores

Tuesday, April 5th, 8:30am

The minute he had his family home the previous night, Sully had begun packing a week’s worth of clothing for them, so that in the morning they only needed to add indispensables and other personal items. He was silent and mechanical. It made the kids nervous. They’d never seen their father like this.

After a sedate and abbreviated dinner, he ordered everyone to get to bed early for an early rise, they were going to be staying with their grandparents Koehler for a few days. When she had soothed the kids’ nerves somewhat, Debrah came downstairs to the kitchen where Sully was looking out the window, having set out a rarely touched bottle of whiskey and taken a shot.

“Tommy... baby, please, don’t do this. Whatever it is you’re thinking, it’s not worth it. We’re fully covered by our insurance, remember?”

“That’s not the point and you know it. These people aren’t going to stop. They’re not just going to go away. There’s only one language they understand, and I speak it fluently.”

“What are your kids going to do without their father?!” she demanded desperately.

“Debrah, don’t do that. Nothing is going to happen to me, my love, I promise you that. I just need all of you out of town for a few days, that’s all. I’ll be coming to pick you myself.”

In their almost twelve years together she’d seen him this way only once before, in the early years, and it had not ended well for those who had set him off. There was no talking to him. When the morning finally came, she had gathered the kids and let him drive them to the airport.

No one spoke a word until the kids had to hold back their tears as Sully made stern and hasty goodbyes.

Consulado del Peru en Miami

1401 Ponce de Leon Blvd, Coral Gables

9:15am

The Peruvian ambassador's life in Miami was rather enviable, free of scandal or turmoil and filled with cultural events, lavish meals, hours upon hours of tropical leisure and all of life's fineries.

And then without warning and out of nowhere appeared this no-name, unimaginatively dressed private detective with the charm of an undertaker bearing not only bad news but the makings of an explosive international scandal for his and his host country.

Miccosukee Tribe Of Indians Of Florida

SW 8th Street & US Highway 41

11:10am

"There is someone trying to steal your land," Sol told the chairman and two others seated before him.

"Again?" the chairman responded.

"Always, I imagine. This is right near here, three acres that were mixed in with state prison properties and a local owner."

"Ah. The swamp."

"Yes. There's a group of people attempting to slip the tribe's property into a package sale of the adjacent properties."

"Some things never change," the chairman lamented.

"I have the proof. You can put a stop to it."

US Drug Enforcement Agency

2100 North Commerce Parkway, Weston, Fort Lauderdale

"I'm here to make a trade."

Alameda

12:50pm

For many of us, the past is a very dark place. And as deep as we may bury it, we always know it remains. For some of us, it resurfaces from time to time.

Out on West Flagler Street, near the Miami-Dade County Auditorium and just past a very large church, is a very small church, so small it almost looks more like a municipal sidewalk adornment rather than a place of worship. A huge square residential building of

dark camel bricks looms over it directly from behind, adding to the diminution.

Sully didn't push his personal religious beliefs on his family but often they accompanied him to Sunday Mass at the Roman Catholic church near their home. This tiny sanctuary, however, with seashells long ago hand-plastered around the tight wooden doorframe, was where he would come in times of private struggle when he needed to be alone. The chapel could only hold a handful of people at a time but there was never anyone there. The door was always wide open, day or night, and there were four mini rows of pews. There were no members of the clergy on hand and no church services other than the weekly placement of candles and incense.

Taking a place directly before a life-size statue of Christ on the cross, he genuflected, knelt, and genuflected again.

After a moment, doing his best to restrain his anger, he laid out his case to his Lord and Creator and begged for forgiveness for what he was about to do.

Lemon City

3:40pm

Marvin L. had been a child soldier in Honduras in the decade that it was being ruled by military juntas. In a chaotic, bullet-filled time when the United States military was in the country supporting right-wing Contra paramilitaries at war with the Marxist Sandinista rebels in neighboring Nicaragua, it was a free-for-all among the Honduran warlords, and boys like Marvin were shuffled around like so much cannon fodder.

His father, a Christian pastor, had risked his life to first find, then liberate him from that month's government forces. Having already lost two sons to the fighting, he smuggled his wife and his youngest two children to Miami, where they found refuge with a network of churches dedicated to the aid of people fleeing civil strife.

Arriving at the end of the eighties, Marvin was on the cusp of manhood when he found himself speaking no English in a strange land and a dazzlingly new city overflowing with beautiful women, parades of fancy sports cars, and diamonds, gold chains and cash everywhere. Tempted to delve into the fast money streams of street hustling, he instead bent to his father's supplications and took menial

jobs in South Beach restaurants and started studying to attend American schools.

One day arriving early for work he took a walk to kill some time and came upon a ramshackle boxing gym owned and operated by a boxing legend approaching old age. He became a regular and there he met Sol, another transplanted teenage outsider. They became fast friends and Sol would help him practice his reading and writing a few times a week after or before their training sessions at the gym.

When he reached an average height and realized he would not be growing any taller he decided to grow widthwise and bulked up to light heavyweight class, such that he resembled a darker, better looking, and better-read Mike Tyson. And like Iron Mike, Marvin soon made a name for himself by quickly knocking out his opponents in the ring.

His real opposition, though, came not from the sport he'd taken up to stay out of trouble, but from the neighborhood where he and his family lived in a small house on NE 59th Street. A group of newbie street corner drug dealers had taken exception to what they perceived as Marvin's family's air of superiority and lack of respect. Knowing that none of them alone could beat him in a fair fight, they began to threaten him as a gang and with gun violence.

One night someone fired three shots into the family's living room, sending a message. Everyone had been asleep in their bedrooms, and no one was hurt, but that night altered Marvin's destiny. Once the responding officers had made their reports and left, he hopped in a taxi and headed out to a notorious hotel on NW 79th Street and 7th Avenue where he knew some very bad people through one of the shadier fight promoters who hung around the gym.

The following afternoon, as the four gloating wannabe gangsters stood around basking in their imagined victory at their usual hangout, Marvin turned the corner and walked up on them opening fire with an AK-47, shredding through their legs like a weedwhacker through tall grass. A recording of the brief 911 call reveals that someone called for an ambulance for "some guys [who] had an accident" but when the police canvassed the area no one had seen or heard a thing and the guys on the floor with Swiss cheese knees swore up and down that the shooter had driven by so fast that they didn't get a good look at him.

From then on Marvin had been forced to seek a work-from-home position so he started selling guns, the only other thing he knew well besides cooking, soldiering, history books and boxing.

When Sol, Sully and Jeremiah arrived at the house, Marvin was seated at a large square wooden table in the backyard playing a game of dominoes with three others. He flashed Sol a wide boyish grin.

"We're finishing up today's lesson for my Dominicanos," he bragged merrily. "Go ahead and make yourselves at home, please. Marta will be out in a minute with drinks for you."

Only one of the two opposing players caught the smack talking and he frowned at the set of *fichas* in his hands trying to divine a way to come back from the landslide displayed on the tally sheet. Sol and the others took up places at a nearby patio table. Marvin's game partner, a fit, dangerous-looking and deeply tanned man in a black t-shirt, about late forties, with long hair in a single braid and numerous facial scars, glanced over at them only for a long second. When the game drew to a close, Marvin dismissed his first set of guests to attend to the second. The man with the long hair took a seat against the back of the house between the kitchen door and the driveway.

They sat for a while to make introductions and Sol laid out the situation to his former training companion.

"Nazi skinheads, you say?" Marvin inquired with a nasally mock Victorian British accent.

"Swastikas and confederate flags," Sol affirmed.

"Hmmm... And AR's, I assume," the gun runner suggested, serious again.

"More than likely," his old friend again confirmed.

Marvin stood and motioned for them to follow him to a standard size metal shipping container tucked away in the deliberately overgrown grass of the expansive yard.

"I already know the kinds of guns Sol prefers. Were you gentlemen looking for anything in particular?"

"I need a new shotgun, pump action," Jeremiah gimmied eagerly. "Make that two."

"Done."

"Do you by any chance have any grenades?" Sully asked.

“As a matter of fact, Mr. Sully, I have a whole crate of them.”

When they had brought in Sully’s SUV to the back to load up and start making their way out, Marvin pulled Sol to the side.

“Hey, listen, brother. What sayest thou if I ride along with you boys and then you and me are finally square on that other thing?”

“You mean about that time in Little Haiti?”

“Yeah. I come and help you with this little trouble and then we’re even Steven. Cool?”

“Sure, I guess, but I keep telling you you don’t have to. That was just a bad situation we got caught up in.”

“I know. But this sounds like fun, and I’m pretty bored out here these days.”

“Alright, but just you. You can’t bring any of your people. We have to keep this as quiet as possible.”

5:33pm

**Phone call between Brooklyn, New York
and Boston, Massachusetts**

Boston: “Abey, baby! What a nice surprise! How’s the world treatin’ you, then? How’s Judy?”

Brooklyn: “Conner, we’ve got a situation. Is this a secure line?”

Noting the gravity in the other man’s voice, Conner Sullivan braced himself for bad news.

Boston: “Of course, Abe. What’s going on? The kids alright?”

Brooklyn: “They’re actually here with us right now, upstairs, with their mother. Thomas put them on a plane this morning and they’re all kinda shaken up. Seems somebody set a fire at Debrah’s lab and Thomas isn’t taking it too well. Has he called you? He’s not answering his phone.”

Boston: “No... You know he wouldn’t call me.” A long pause. “Alright. It sounds like my boy’s about to do something stupid.”

Pause. “And I’m to help him do it. Can I call you back in a little bit, Abe? I’m to make some calls.”

New York: “Yeah, Conner, I’ll be right here. Listen, if somebody’s fucking with my little girl they’ve made a very big fucking mistake.”

Boston: “Oh, I know, Abe. We’ll find out.”

Opa-Locka
Opa-Locka Airport, NW 42nd Avenue
11:37pm

At the start of the quiet time for the overnight crew, a last-minute entry had been added to the arrival logs for a flight coming in from Boston. One of the larger charter jets taxied in just as the third shift was starting their second cups of coffee.

Once in a while, national and regional sports teams, big-name touring bands or symphonic orchestras, campaigning politicians, or tourist church groups will come in on jumbos at this hour after long hours in the air. This night, what descended from the plane was the roughest, rowdiest and meanest looking assembly of erstwhile baseball players any of them had ever seen arrive for spring training. Baseball, it was assumed, because behind this march of some two dozen toughs, most of them unshaven or bearded, some of them swinging whiskey bottles and relighting half-smoked cigars, two equally rough-looking coaches (?) tugged a couple of oversized duffel bags each with the handle ends of some twenty wooden and aluminum baseball bats sticking out.

After breezing through the paperwork, the group was herded onto and whisked away by a deluxe charter bus that had noiselessly pulled into the parking lot just a few minutes before the jet landed.

10.

It's Not You, It's The E Talking

"We want to fill our culture again with the Christian spirit... We want to burn out all the recent immoral developments in literature, in the theatre, and in the press. In short, we want to burn out the poison of immorality which has entered into our whole life and culture, as a result of liberal excess."

- Adolf Hitler, in a speech to the Nazi Party, circa 1938

"Today one must think like a hero
to behave like a merely decent human being."

- John Le Carré, The Russia House, 1989

"Pop, what the heck is a peaceful warrior? I saw it on a book cover the other day. That doesn't make any sense at all."

His old man, who was thirty-one at the time and never actually got to become an old man, put down the shoe he was shining and placed it next to its partner under the bed where they sat below his freshly pressed dark blue uniform. Wiping the streaks of shoe polish off his hands with a rag, he looked at his ever-serious boy whose large black eyes were always questioning and investigating and saw he'd been wanting to ask this for some time.

"Did you look inside the book?" he asked.

"Of course, Pop. But it was all mumbo jumbo."

The year was 1980. He'd just turned ten and his preferred genre of literature that year was those old detective comics about the men without fear; cigar chomping badasses and vigilante newspaper reporters. The cover of the book he'd seen had a cool painting of the silhouette of a man seemingly channeling the powers of the universe. But the inside was all long boring text about boring adult problems.

Although his father spoke English poorly, he was anything but illiterate and had shown substantial promise at university in his home country before he and Sol's mother had abruptly decided to try their luck in America. He spoke to his son in his native tongue lest the boy become too Americanized and forget where he came from.

“Let’s go for a walk, *o gios mou*, we should probably talk about this a little.”

It was autumn in New York and not yet cold. Near their apartment in Astoria, Queens there was a large park next to the East River where his father would take him when he expected a lengthy examination of a particular matter wherein his budding Sherlock Holmes would insist on debating the issue from all different angles. After a couple of blocks of giving it some thought, his father attempted to explain as best as his boy’s age would allow.

“Well, Sol, some guys like to fight. Sometimes they like it too much, they enjoy hurting other people, and that’s a bad thing. They’re always trying to start fights with other people, usually for no good reason or for no reason at all. These are men of war.

“And some guys don’t like to fight at all, either because they know that it’s wrong to be fighting or because they don’t know how to fight and they’re scared of getting hurt. Now, take Jesus Christ or Mahatma Gandhi, for example. They were not afraid of anyone or anything, but they simply refused to engage in violence. Remember? Well, that was because they were men of peace.

“Then there is a third type of man, which I suppose can be described as a peaceful warrior. A peaceful warrior knows *how* to fight but will avoid violence by all means available. If he cannot find a peaceful resolution, and if the cause is just, he is not afraid to fight. Does that make sense to you?”

Then came the onslaught of historical questions and ethical considerations and legal definitions and the what-ifs and another half hour of walking.

He was remembering this as he prepared himself for what he had to do now.

Shenandoa

**Sullivan & Son Construction Company, SW 8th Street & 30th Avenue
Wednesday, April 6th, 6:44am**

A Lull on a construction site is not a pause in activity, but a behemoth of a machine. A tractor engine on tractor wheels wielding a telescoping loading arm, it is essentially a forklift on steroids. In another case of strong brand identification, it was the leading

manufacturer's name that replaced the word telehandler and became synonymous with this type of heavy equipment.

Sully's model was the Godzilla of the Lull line. With giant all-terrain tires the height of a man's chest, turbo diesel engine, a 5-ton load capacity, a fork arm that could reach to the fourth floor of a structure and all-terrain all-wheel drive, it was a fearsome thing in action. And with a hydraulic tilt carriage and wheel system, a skilled operator like Sully could make it do a gangsta lean to reach odd-angled loads or other hard to access targets.

As Sully loaded his "green monster" onto the flatbed trailer, Sol was the first to arrive on his motorcycle, followed shortly thereafter by Marvin in his Jeep and Jeremiah in the Charger. The plan was to quickly hit various targets as a commando unit, then strategically employ a circuit of explosives around (but not close to) the house where the young women were being held and flush the skin headed rats out into the open where they could be picked off. Marvin did not himself carry the C4 and necessary accessories, but it only took a couple of phone calls to secure them.

They hadn't been gathered in front of the office trailer for more than a few minutes before the first of the company's workers began driving into the yard in their pick-ups and SUVs as though this were any other day. They pulled into their usual parking spaces and started up their usual morning banter over coffee thermoses, empanadas and pastries.

Sol and the other three looked at each other in confusion. Sully had just finished saying he had called every single crew chief yesterday morning and instructed everyone to take the week off, paid. When more of them started arriving, Sully marched down the ramp to clear up what was obviously a miscommunication.

He walked up to the closest gathered group, where Lopez was uncharacteristically subdued.

"Guys! What are you doing here?" he asked them. "I told everybody to take the week off. Go home!"

No one spoke for a few seconds. Then Lopez cleared his throat. In a respectful but firm tone he spoke to the man he had worked with side by side for over a decade now.

"Yeah, *jefe*, we know what you said... But, you see, the thing is even though we might not know exactly what it is you're about to do, we're not going let you do it alone, or with just your three friends

over there, no disrespect to them. You're family, Sully. Wherever you go, we go."

He had not expected such loyalty and was caught off guard. He simply turned around and stormed back up the ramp muttering, "Looks like they're coming with us," as he passed the other three planners, and "I gotta take a piss," hurrying into the office bathroom.

He didn't want any of them to see that all the dust they had kicked up with their trucks had made his eyes watery. He splashed some water on his face and through his hair then placed his hands on the sink and looked himself in the eye. Taking a deep breath, he returned outside to be the leader he had always been.

Suddenly there was a thunderous rumble of motorcycles from somewhere, so loud they couldn't tell which direction. All of them tensed and readied themselves. It might be biker skinheads if there was such a thing.

When the rolling mass of metal and leather came in from the direction of NW 42nd Avenue, however, the features on their faces and the abundance of hair on the riders clearly said they were not nazis-on-wheels. And from their patches and stylings one could see they were Native men.

The lead rider, a powerfully built young man in his mid-twenties and a leather vest, stopped the pack in front of the small group of men standing in front of the office trailer. He looked at all of them, then directly at Sol.

"You're Sol," he demanded.

"I am. And you're Kinhagee."

"Correct. My cousin says you're a good man, even if you don't know it. We're here to ride with you."

"Thank you, man. I am truly honored. But you don't have to do this."

"Yes, I do. They've hurt my family and I'm going to return it to them tenfold. And anyway, it's been a while since us redskins kicked some ass around here."

"Fair enough."

And then a huge white deluxe charter bus made a wide, loping turn into the entrance road like a boxy metal mammoth. It made its way to the fence line and parked in line with the office trailer.

“Uncle Finn! What the hell are you doing in Miami? Oh, wait.”

“Aye, boy! We’ve come for the party! Brought a bunch ‘a friends an’ family to see you! Even bailed out a couple of your ol’ mates from high school.”

As though it were some kind of outlaw parade, minutes after the bus had parked Revolution Rednecks the loud blaring of

And then the Miami bass came in. Like the forming of a Saturday night drag race on a bright sunny morning, the vibrations from concert-size woofers shook the earth. They came in like a killer bee swarm of different vehicles ranging from racers to hooties to a black, heavily loaded Navigator with dark tinted windows. From the last of these emerged from the three passenger doors three very large men, one of which was Sol’s younger brother Krysto.

Sol rushed over angrily waving his hands at his sibling.

“No! No, no, no, no, *No!* You cannot be involved in this,” he complained, wagging his finger. “How the *hell* did you find me?!”

“C’mon, Sol, did you forget I read? Nazi shitheads getting together for a big circle jerk out in the swamp, suspected arson at Mr. Sullivan’s wife’s lab and that vegetarian place in Allapattah... The streets say some crazy New Yorker is going to war with the skins, just like someone I know did in the 90’s.

“Well, I put two and two together and came up with five. This time I’m old enough to go with you.”

Sol only shook his head.

“Baby boy, I sincerely appreciate the gesture, you know I do, but you can’t be a part of this kind of thing. Your mother would kill me if anything happened to you.”

Krysto’s smile was as wide as the river Nile.

“It was *our* mother who sent me to try to keep you out of trouble, fool! Besides, big brova!... I’m grown now and you can’t tell me what to do anymore. You’re not the only one that’s good with the mitts, you know.”

Then the smile was gone, and he was no longer that always laughing skinny twelve-year-old with the missing front tooth and eternally bright eyes that Sol always saw in him, but now an adult size and wizened man of serious intent. Apparently, he was also a young lord of the underground.

Still, Sol was considering calling it all off and just doing everything by himself later with a yellow school bus, some well-placed explosives and a whole lotta machine gun funk. There was no need to get all of these innocent men involved. The other three leads were quiet.

Kinhagee was the only one who spoke.

"You should not deny your brother if all he wants is to fight at your side."

Sol only looked at the ground for a long moment. A tidal wave of guilt threatened to swallow him.

"Fine," he almost whispered. He turned to his beloved younger brother. "But when we go in, you'd better be right in my line of sight every time I look. Are we clear?"

"Of course, old boy! Somebody's gotta keep you alive!"

"Alright. Let's rock."

To lighten the mood a little, Sully walked up the ramp and jokingly held up his hand flat above his eyes and took a long look around the yard.

He shouted loudly, "Is that about everybody, then?!"

Shouts and laughter of all kinds answered him and when all that started dying down he received an answer of a different kind. At first it was a low, distant whining murmur and it grew quickly into something that almost sounded like a jet engine. Suddenly a terrible screeching on the asphalt of the street, the staccato thuds of stuttering rubber tires and in an actual cloud of dust and exhaust smoke, in blew swinging wildly through the yard a silver Bugatti Chiron, like a beast that had found its prey. It came to a stop in the center of the crowd.

As the swirl of particles settled, the passenger side door opened and an elegantly dressed and sharply groomed man made a slow, calculating exit, loathe to soil his finery. Long-legged and with sharp facial features he looked directly at Sully, smiled, and held up one finger of his right hand to let him know he'd only be a sec. He reached behind him and behind the passenger's seat and pulled out a long, heavy-looking rectangular case, then set it five feet away from him and closed the passenger door.

As he began briskly walking over to the driver's side, that door opened and revealed behind the wheel an otherworldly beautiful platinum blonde woman with golden caramel skin in a short, slit shimmery burgundy skirt and an equally shimmery pearl

white blouse. She bent forward and he reached behind her to pull out another similarly long and rectangular, but thinner, hard case. This, too, he placed five feet away from the car.

Then he leaned into the car seemingly to give the woman a farewell peck when she grabbed the lapels of his jacket and pulled him to her, giving him such a kiss that it looked like she was trying to suffocate him then and there until he broke away and admonished gently, "I have to go."

"I will see you later," she said in Arabic with a Lebanese accent. She pulled her door closed, the sleek sports car roared straight backward a few yards then spun around as if of its own volition, roared again, and was gone.

The well-tailored gentleman stared after her for a few moments, hung his head and shook it in lingering amazement. Then he straightened up and turned back to the reason he was there.

Mindful but not acknowledging that all eyes were on him, he smiled congenially and spoke only to Sully.

"Good morning, Thomas. I am Perlman. Your father-in-law sends his regards and has asked me to offer you my assistance for your project. I am a technician, you see," he explained, with the calmest, most pleasant face Sol had ever seen on a natural born killer.

The plan had changed significantly.

Biscayne Bay

10:05am

In the harsh glare of the mid-morning sun four jet skis and riders were silhouetted as they approached Rene Berguenza's yacht from the east. The diversified businessman liked to keep his boat anchored less than a mile out from Virginia Key, where he could gaze upon it from the upper floors of his Miami Beach castle.

Two of the skiers were loaded with diving gear and other equipment, while the other two were strapped with enough guns and ammunition to hold off a small marine platoon.

In addition to the other arms, Sol and Jeremiah each came equipped with a Harrington & Richardson extra long-range tranquilizer gun mounted with Bushnell holographic sights. These are the types of rifles used at zoos and cattle ranches to put down the raging bulls, rhinos and elephants. Not only can they shoot a 50-

caliber dart with 100-yard accuracy, they work equally well with 32-gauge shotgun shells.

The jet skiers were starting with ballistic syringes tipped with hypodermic needles and loaded with enough Ketamine to knock out a 300-pound human. The shotgun capacity was the last resort.

As they'd already observed, at all times only one man was kept abovedeck and one below. An experienced former hunter, Jeremiah had called dibs on the first shot. Kinhagee and Sully each placed a leg on Jeremia's jet ski on either side of him to help steady it. Once he attuned his equilibrium to the water's undulations, the holo-sight made the target easy, and the topside goon did a face plant on the floorboards thirty seconds after realizing he had a dart in his rear end. They waited another two minutes to see if the sound of the falling body had alerted the second man below deck, but no one emerged.

Alfonso Avenue, Coral Gables, Florida **2:11pm**

Generally speaking, construction sites located in residential areas operate on day shifts of seven-thirty in the morning to three-thirty or four in the afternoon. There are some crews and individuals who prefer a six-thirty start to have an early finish and some part of the day left to themselves. In some of the more genteel zip codes like South Beach, Kendall and Coral Gables, local ordinances prohibit any type of construction noise or activity before nine o'clock.

Legally, construction activities and operations in these areas can continue up to and no later than five o'clock, but by two-thirty most of the workers already have their tools and equipment packed up or locked up and are washing up for the ride home. The last half hour or so before punching out is spent talking and joking with colleagues and hiding from supervisors. On Friday afternoons you can see everyone from day laborers to superintendents start jumping ship right after lunch or the minute they have their paycheck in hand.

But on Wednesday afternoons in Miami, the traffic coming out of the dozens of ever-present major development sites is slow and sluggish and clogs all the major arteries throughout the metropolitan area from Hollywood to Miramar to South Miami.

Chulo was the best of the flaggers and gatemen in the company, able to do alone what it usually took two or three other people to do, directing the fast-paced traffic of tons of metal and materials in a non-stop flow, making sure everything and everyone got to where they had to go and nobody got hurt, sometimes in the most impossible-seeming and chaotic situations, on tight streets and tight schedules, never once losing his cool like most others did.

Sully had given him a shot at redemption when he had arrived as a scraggly, troubled, and quarrelsome young man from Puerto Rico, didn't speak the language and nobody wanted to give him a steady job. Four years later, his English was impeccable, he was a model worker and with the blessing and certifications of the federal occupational safety administration and his number one boss after God he didn't take shit from anybody, whether it was safety inspectors, the police or the subcontractors. If you were in the way, you had to move. And if you weren't in the way, you needed to move anyway.

Usually, it's a rather stressful post to hold as you are the first person everyone encounters upon arriving at a site but today and tomorrow's assignments were going to be sweet. He would be able to show Sully his gratitude while at the same time chillin' in the sun and breeze for a couple days. And best of all, he got to do something he was never allowed to do on the job and that was listen to his CD player while working. He had his instructions and all he had to do was play his position. Sully had told him that for this operation, he, the youngest out of all of them, would be the one to set it off. So that's what he started his music with, taking control of that one little patch of the galaxy, on the left, on the right.

The first part took place in an exclusive little round hive of McMansions buffered by Route 1, the University of Miami and a moat artificially created by the Coral Gables Waterway. They set up at exactly two o'clock. There was no traffic whatsoever in this chichi neighborhood and all he had to do was restrict entrance to this one cul-de-sac and radio his boss when the bottle-blonde woman with the big rack whom he'd been shown a picture of left her house at number fifty-six in her black Mercedes. He had set two orange traffic cones between the corners. It was almost three o'clock when Marielita came vrooming out of her garage and he had just enough time to move a cone before she plowed over it. She screeched to a halt when she got a

good look at the handsome young construction worker dancing in those tight jeans.

"What's going on here?" she demanded, really just to examine him.

"Afternoon, ma'am, we're just making a few sidewalk repairs in the area. Don't want any of the crew vehicles trying to park on your street, that's all."

She mulled it over and found it satisfactory.

"Good," she decreed. Then after a second consideration she asked, "Are you, uh, are you all going to be here tomorrow, too?"

"Just till Friday, ma'am. But we'll be done by four every day. Then it's back to Aventura."

"Oh. I see. Excellent. Well, carry on, then," she giggled with her girly voice. "See you *mañana*..."

Chulo gave her a wink and assured her, "I'll be here, sexy..."

She tossed her head back and laughed and zoomed away.

How the hell did that dude from New York know the woman would stop and question him?

"Sully, Sully. Come in, Sully" he radioed.

"Go for Sully."

"Okay, boss, the lady just came flying out of here like a bat out of hell."

"Copy that. Sounds about right. Stand by, Chulo."

"10-4"

Once they'd determined that Marielita was well on her way to the beach, Sully unloaded the Lull and rolled it onto the street. Chulo immediately set up a no-entry zone with yellow caution tape and the rest of the traffic cones. Jeremiah and two of the bigger guys from the masonry and plumbing crews pulled up in a van and parked right on the sidewalk. They hung out with Chulo in case there were any insistently curious rubbernecks.

Leisurely climbing up the portico and crumbling the stone steps with those monster tires, Sully stopped the metal beast a few feet directly before the palatial front door of Marielita's McMansion. With the forks of the lift set four feet apart he inched the carriage forward until the tips of the blades were kissing that line where wall meets floor on either side of the doorway. He wiggled the throttle a little back and forth sideways and gingerly scraped out an entry under the 2x4's that formed the wall frame. Smoothly slipping the

blades in under the framing, he gently nudged the forks the rest of the way forward, causing the wood beams to creak and moan loudly, until the grill of the lift was flush with the doors and the wall.

Then with one hard yank of the lift throttle he ripped the face off the house, sending pieces of wall and windows and the portico roof and columns flying into the air.

Pausing only a moment to savor the taste of it, he entered the Lull into the house through the giant hole in the wall, crushing all the furnishings underneath. For shits and giggles he punched another giant hole in the ceiling and ripped all the way through the second floor and the roof. Then he eliminated the rest of whatever room that was directly above the entrance as he retracted the fork carriage.

The machine's lift arm has the same downward crushing power as its upward lifting capacity of ten thousand pounds. Whistling an old country tune he remembered from his youth, Sully proceeded to alternately tear and flatten and pull and crush sections of the walls, floors and ceilings.

One single neighbor came out of her house to see what the commotion was. Staring in amazement for a minute or so she rushed back inside and returned a few minutes later with a large bag of tortilla chips, a small tub of guacamole dip and a tall, thick cocktail glass with a tiny umbrella in it, all of which she placed on a glass-topped coffee table. Sitting on a folding chair she kicked her feet onto another one across from it and leaned back to watch happily.

It can take years to build a mansion. Marielita's prefab palace took sixteen months to complete. It took Sully a little more than an hour to fully demolish it, reducing it to a satisfactory pile of rubble. He stepped out of the driver's cab and snapped a picture with his phone to share with Debrah later. He did not care that it was evidence that could be used against him.

Then he hopped back in and rolled out to where Lopez had the flatbed ready and waiting. They had the Lull chained and were on Coral Way within five minutes. Jeremiah, Chulo and their two companions erased the roadblock and did their own disappearing act into the traffic in the opposite direction.

Where two hours before there had stood a two-million-dollar showcase property there was now what looked like the result of a precision missile strike.

**South Florida Business Leaders
Annual Banquet and Awards Ceremony
Miami Beach Convention Center, Collins Avenue
4pm**

Banquets are always understaffed at large venues, no matter the event or location. Banquet servers and the laborers called housemen are notorious for calling out sick at the last minute, coming in late and simply not showing up without bothering to call. Even the most seasoned banquet managers know full well that the closer it gets to crunch time, the more chaotic everything becomes and that at some point in the evening they will be breaking a sweat. And that's without surprise developments.

To Sol's immense relief, the seating arrangements for these types of events at the convention center were now being prepared on computers. Had it been held somewhere less up to date he would most likely have had to do an extraneous amount of paper shuffling and handwriting mimicking.

Scheduled to sit with Honoree Berguenzas, Marielita and the right reverend, were ...

Sol simply brought in an extra table, gave it to the guests he'd moved and added three 'Reserved' placards that would be cast aside within the first hour of the large gathering. In their place at the honoree's table he assigned nameless settings for 'Office of Cultural Affairs'.

It had always seemed to Sol that the CIA's awkward and clumsy attempts at extracting information from individuals with the use of psychedelics were doomed from the start simply by the settings and approaches they chose.

"I thought there were going to be some other big wigs sitting with us. Who are you people and why are all of you dressed so *blah*? This is a party!" Marielita chided.

"We're with the city's cultural commission," Weiland clarified for her. "We don't exactly get paid a lot."

"Oh. Well *that* must suck. Are we still getting our pictures taken, though?"

“Oh, most definitely, Mrs. Acevedo-Goldberg,” Weiland assured her.

Agent Weiland and the two other federal officers had been advised to not arrive before an exact time and to not touch anything on the table.

Forget a grand entrance, Berguenza had arrived shortly after the doors opened so that he could soak up as much adulation as he could get. As such, he was the first

All three had been in their late teens and early twenties in the hazy days of disco and funk and the DJ was playing the hits of their youth.

But it was when Rod Stewart’s ‘Do Ya Think I’m Sexy’ came on that he really lost his shit.

“That’s my jam!” he exclaimed as he jumped out of his chair.

Sashaying over to the empty dance floor, he opened a couple more buttons on his shirt and alleviated himself of whatever last remaining traces of inhibition there might be and was once again that twenty-year old gigolo making the women sweat in that Lima disco, gyrating, posing, strutting, free and living la vida loca before being roped into the goddamned army.

Not to be outdone, Marielita and Rollins cha-cha’d right on over to join him and the three were an instant sensation, swaying and gyrating and jumping and artistically expressing their innermost thoughts and feelings to those beautiful songs of their youth (they sounded so new now!) and the flashing, wonderfully colored lights that seemed synchronized to dance in unison with them.

The DJ, one Samuel ‘Kaleidoscope’ Radcon, seeing what was happening, discreetly reached into his fanny pack and retrieved the other half of his little orange pill and slipped it onto his tongue. Then he switched up the records he’d set out to play.

Except that not everyone was enjoying the performance as much as the performers themselves, and when Marielita began touching her toes and doing jumping jacks to Olivia Newton John’s ‘Physical’, it was clear to the other guests and the event organizers that something was amiss.

And when Donna Summers' 'Hot Stuff' came on and the three unchoreographed dancers did a chaotic college bar karaoke vocal line-up the president of the business association and a handful of colleagues came running over to help them back to their table, apologizing profusely that he hadn't expected the wine and champagne to be so strong.

11.

There Goes My Gun

“Once I had my heroes
Once I had my dreams
But all of that is changed now
They’ve turned things inside out
The truth is not that comfortable, no
And mother taught us patience
The virtues of restraint
And father taught us boundaries
Beyond which we must go
To find the secrets promised us, yeah
That’s when I reach for my revolver
That’s when it all gets blown away”
- Mission of Burma, ‘That’s When I Reach For My Revolver’
signals, calls and marches, 1981

“Don’t pull the thang out unless you plan to bang
Don’t even bang unless you plan to hit something...”
- Outkast, ‘B.O.B.’ (Bombs Over Baghdad)
Outkast, 1989

Like the vehicles, the audiovisual equipment, the microprocessors and telecommunications, firearms for Sol were nothing more than the tools of the trade. Yes, he was highly proficient in their use, but he was hardly enthusiastic about it. The truth was he didn’t even like guns, loathed them, in fact. They conveyed false power to weak men and too often forced good people to do bad things. Marvels of engineering and craft they are, sure, he conceded, yet the pistols and rifles, along with the missiles and bombs, were for him merely reminders that humans had never really evolved beyond the bows and arrows, the spears, and the sticks and stones.

No matter the actual weight, guns are twice as heavy when you have to take them in hand. And if you then have to put them to use, they are as heavy as the weight of the world itself.

Miami Springs
Knight Riderz Gentlemen’s Club, NW North River Drive at 32nd St.
Thursday, April 7th, 3:40am

Sol, Sully, Jeremiah and Kinhagee came in on Sol's skiff, quietly upstream from the river house. All four were adept at working with fire and with the aid of some nifty little gadgets from Tel Aviv between them they worked out the best way to set a timed, slow-moving and precisely irreversible blaze to the headquarters of the crew that had overseen and shielded the arson at the lab and Jeremiah's place.

The strip club sat partially out on the water on stilts in a semi-industrial section. The flames would rise and shine an hour after the fire starters left and with the sun serve to cast a surreal glow on the twilight river. The men of the local firehouses would arrive sometime in between then.

Chief Waters was standing foremost near the flames, alone with Oogie at his left. The rest of the firefighters formed an at ease perimeter around the property, not in full gear. Last night they had all been shown the videos Sol had provided and ordered not to discuss the matter outside of their stations. The Chief had thought it best not to burden Oogie with more emotional baggage.

"You know who hangs out here, right, Chief?"

"Yup."

"I don't like these guys, Chief."

"Me neither, Oogie."

"They cheat at the charity ball games, you know that, right, Chief?"

"I know."

"And they're mean."

"Yeah, they are."

"Shouldn't we be putting out the fire, Chief?"

"Soon, Oogie. This is what's called a controlled fire."

Dominguez raced into the parking lot with a drama queen screeching of his wheels, jumped out of his car and rushed up to stand to the chief's right. The rest of the Knight Riderz started pulling in behind him within minutes.

"Whew! It's a good thing you guys showed up so quickly!" he bellowed.

"Yup."

After about five minutes of no action whatsoever on the part of the firefighters, though, the lieutenant grew confused. There was already costly damage occurring to his property by the second and everyone was just standing around watching the fire grow.

"Why aren't you doing anything, Waters? Can't you see the roof's already caught fire?!"

"It's Chief Waters to you, Detective. As for the roof, well, you know what they say about that..."

"What?! What are you talking about?!" shrieked the panicked lieutenant.

"If the roof is on fire, let the motherfucker burn."

There was some kind of synapse failure in the lieutenant's brain, and he just blinked a couple times and stood dumbfounded for a second.

Oogie could not have helped himself if he'd wanted to. He threw his hands into the air to push up imaginary rafters.

"The roof! The roof! The roof is on fire! We don't need no water! Let the mother-effer burn! Burn, mother-effer, burn!" he sang with delight. Oogie did not use curse words.

The lieutenant's eyes looked like they would pop out of their sockets and the veins on his neck bulged to burst.

"You think that's funny, you fucking re-"

Boom! Chief Waters pumped the back of his right elbow into the lieutenant's mouth to shatter a couple of his teeth, then turned and used a left-handed uppercut drill punch to crack his jaw.

Some of the lieutenant's boys moved to defend their commander and it was at that precise moment that the Miami firefighters and Sully and Jeremiah, who had both been dressed as firefighters, handed each and every one of the Knight Riderz the unabridged ass whupping of a lifetime. A couple of them reached for their weapons but they were swiftly disarmed and further penalized.

It lasted less than ten minutes, as firefighters are a very coordinated and efficient sort. When they were done, they allowed the EMS crews to come in, patch up the lumped up and cart them away while they themselves put out the fire that had calmly burned half of the building enough that it then collapsed into the patiently waiting water. Throughout the later day the rotten apples would be visited by numerous officers and investigators from various other county, state and federal law enforcement agencies.

Lieutenant Dominguez, duly recognized leader of his men, had been left for last in the line of evacs. He was slumped against his blue Corvette, contemplating his punitive beating when Sol sauntered over and squatted beside him.

"How you doin', Dominguez? You don't look so good. You remember me?"

Dominguez bobbed his head toward him and cocked his only openable eye. "The jogger..." he acknowledged from busted lips.

"That's right. My name's Sol. I have my ID with me this time. But you can just ask about me."

Overtown MegaMix Concrete 6:10am

On average the larger ready-mix concrete suppliers in the Miami area will send out between one to three dozen loaded trucks just to start off the morning and they begin leaving as early as 4am for the longer hauls north or south. Depending on their assigned delivery locations, the drivers will come back to the plant any number of times during the day to reload and return to a job site.

The sole entrance to Berguenza's compound was on a wide one-way street in a former industrial sector of the city that was all one-way streets. The quickest route to the main roads was once almost around the whole block to NW 14th Street, then a right to the west and the entangled 95's, or a left to 1 and the beaches.

Wearing cheap Mardi Gras masks from the party store three teams of two

Krysto & Sol, Jeremiah & Kinhagee, Sully & Lopez

"Come on out of the truck, please, boss," Krysto requested.

"*Necesitamos el camion, mi jefe,*" Sol clarified as he lifted his shirt to reveal the gun butt. "*Entiendes?*"

The elder gentleman understood and calmly walked over to the waiting passenger van, got inside and adjusted the sleep mask that had been handed him.

Lopez & Sully

Jeremiah & Kinhagee

The driver in the last truck they needed was an Alabama transplant and a bit dense. He would need some detailed instructions. Kinhagee was the driver and Jeremiah the shotgun.

"It's your lucky day, pardner, you've got the day off, paid," Jeremiah informed him.

"What is this, some kind of joke?" asked Alabama.

"Does this look like a fucking joke to you, stupid?"

Tamiami

4:14pm

There is one big reason the state of Florida situated a good number of its maximum-security prisons at the western edge of the Miami metropolitan area, where it abuts the Everglades. It just so happens that the Florida Everglades are the one and only place in the entire world where alligators and crocodiles live together naturally. And all the way west of the city, where SW 8th Street becomes the Tamiami Trail and joins the vast wilderness that covers the bottom fifth of the state, the 'gators and the crocs splash about happily in the sun all day and in the deep sightless night devouring the abundance that a protected federal wildlife management area provides. Should a convict or two decide they'd like to grant themselves an unofficial early release, they would be free to explore miles and miles of swampland wholly filled with always hungry primordial monsters, swarms of man-eating mosquitoes and a wide assortment of venomous snakes that swim better than you do, some which can also eat you.

It was in this borderland between civilization and the jungle that the little red-haired man had tucked away his kingdom. And this is where he had dreamed of beginning a small empire built on the most sordid, psychotically twisted, Bible-themed drug-addled racist fantasy imaginable.

What was once a five-acre farm that had produced sweet corn and tomatoes was now an expanse of barren fields used as a forced

labor whorehouse and parade grounds for hate rallies. The front of the dilapidated estate held a broad and long asphalt strip that counted about forty parking spaces and a larger pad in the back that held twice as many.

The main house was on an artificial hill orbited by a guard house and reception hut at the eastern front, a maintenance shed and second guard house at the western rear, a clubhouse and lodge at the south, and a bathhouse and swimming pool to the north. An asphalt driveway encircled the house, connecting the two parking lots. A dirt road led away from the west gates into the mangroves. All of this had been reconnoitered on Sunday.

Mustela and Point 24 had scheduled the rally and book burning for Friday. To assist his local crew with security, Val and MacAdams had arranged for three other South Florida area groups of hate boys to arrive early and avail themselves of his ample accommodations and generosity. They had begun arriving Wednesday night. Today, both lots and the sides of the house overflowed with cars, trucks and motorcycles.

Jorgé "George" Oterro, a petty thief, street hustler, and one-time chicken farmer, was the proud new leader of Pride Guys, essentially nothing more than a homophobic, xenophobic and racist fight club for suburban guys who shared the belief that white men were under siege by the colored people of the world and that their manhood was being questioned in the process. They were available for hire as thugs at white supremacist gatherings and many of them flew confederate flags from their trucks. Oterro, who was Hispanic, was designated as the head of the three invited security groups for the event as he was most familiar with the Miami region and he had "read a whole shitload of books about military operations" while he was serving a one-year sentence in the county jail for selling bootleg diabetes test strips in Pompano Beach parking lots. His compatriots were not aware that Oterro was currently working as an informant for both federal and state law enforcement agencies.

The Brothers Sworn militia was the conspiracy-driven, anti-government amosexual vanguard of the New Right. This was the group, whose large numbers were largely kept secret, comprised mostly of racist ex-military and former law enforcement personnel. The Florida chapter of this little army of irregulars was helmed by one Wilbur Roderick Stiles IV, a disbarred, disgraced and disgruntled

attorney turned notary public and army reservist. Stiles was not entirely comfortable having to work directly alongside Oterro at this event, mostly because Oterro was at that time boning his wife.

The third hired group was the neo-Nazi nationalists of Onward Patriot, a highly theatrical and propaganda-heavy organization recently founded and led by a teenaged basement-based cyberspace “rebel” named Brian Trussles, two years later now legally drunk all the time, for the defense and reclamation of a land that their white ancestors had conquered for white people and white people only. Onward Patriot’s constant foils and sworn enemies were those pesky antifa people.

Judging himself first, Sol had weighed the merits of the operation, decided the jury had returned a guilty verdict, and appointed himself executioner. Clearly, the girls being held inside had been abandoned not only by their families but by society as a whole and by the local authorities in particular. There was no way in hell that Mustela’s activities had gone unnoticed. And as far as any compunction or reservations he felt about inflicting physical harm on their captors, he had only to remind himself of the things they must have done to these girls and that these were the type of “men” who would happily tie a Black man to the back of their pick-up truck and drag him along until he was nothing but a large slab of meat and protruding bones. The way they do in those barbaric countries.

Off 997 and over the canal bridge he came riding in on the motorcycle, calm and easy, his eyes doing all the work for now. There were no forward guards and it looked like there was no one in the front fields.

He continued toward the house until he reached a distance where only a sniper with a high-powered rifle could reach him and stopped. Parking the bike, he dismounted and walked about thirty yards toward the property line, clearly demarked between Mustela’s barren dirt and the state-maintained grass and trees of the roadside land. Raising his binoculars to his eyes, he saw that he’d been right about their laxness and the guard shed was unoccupied. He gave them a few minutes.

Inside the house, the young man assigned to watch the windows jumped up to tell McAdams and the others.

"He's here! He's here" he panted when he found them in the back at the picnic tables.

"Just him?" asked the would-be Neo-Nazi general.

"Yup. Come in on that rice burner and parked right up there near the property line."

"Well, what's he doing?"

"Uh, he's just kind of standing there..."

"What an idiot," McAdams said as he stood. "Guy must think he's fucking indestructible or something. Did you see a gun on him?"

"Nope. Just a pair of binoculars."

"Binoculars? Oh, yeah? Okay, well, uh, we got any binoculars around here? Somebody back there's gotta have binoculars, right? Ay, Trussles! Go find me some binoculars!"

Trussles bristled at the command but did as he was told.

"But what if he does have a gun?"

"Relax, you morons, the bullets wouldn't even make it this far. And don't we have a whole shit ton of guns around here for fuck's sake?!"

"I'm telling you he's an IRS man. They can't afford to send but one guy at a time these days. an' I'll bet you a hunnerd dollars he's got a government issued revolver in his jacket."

The yellow legal envelope held nothing but a few sheets of blank paper. The briefcase, on the other hand, hid a fully loaded Heckler & Koch MP7 submachine gun and six extra ammunition clips.

As they played the looking glass war, Jeremiah roared in with the Charger's enhanced speakers blaring Queen's 'We Will Rock You' loud enough that the occupants of the house could hear it.

Parking near Sol's bike he waited a moment to bob his head and enjoy the closing guitar line then stepped out in all his redneck glory, flannel flying in the breeze over his white tank top and, with his eyes fixed on the house where his dog's killers awaited their fate at his hands, walked over to stand some ten feet away from Sol.

A moment later Kinhagee came flying in across the fields on his Harley and raced directly along the property line shouting a thousand ancient and modern curses. As per the plan, he left his bike near the other two vehicles and walked over to stand precisely twenty yards away from Jeremiah. Keeping their distances from one another, the three walked forward until they were all about fifty feet outside the property line.

MacAdams, seeing them line up, snickered to himself.

“What a joke. These three dummies want a fight.”

“An Indian, a redneck and a taxman walk into a funeral...” attempted Oterro.

Like a cunning military strategist, MacAdams peered through his field glasses at the three invaders as he devised an awe-inspiring plan of attack.

“Alright, they want a showdown,” he gurgled angrily. “Well, they’re gonna get it and regret it. Oterro, Stiles, an’ Trussles, y’all grab about five ‘a yer guys each. I’m gonna get a handful of my crew an’ in five minutes we’ll all meet up front an’... an’... Is that a fucking bulldozer?!”

The bulldozer Sully had borrowed from a friend who owned a highway paving company, as the one he owned was smaller than what was needed for this operation. The Caterpillar D11 is one of the largest made and this one carried a blade that was five feet high and fourteen feet wide. Federal Occupational Safety and Health Administration (OSHA) construction standards had finally caught up to the physics of highly pressurized projectiles as small as pebbles and the glass shields on operator booths of heavy equipment were now in the new century effectively bulletproof.

With one hand on the back of the blade and walking gingerly behind it in a slight crouch was Marvin, strapped with a Kalashnikov assault rifle in the crook of his right arm and another one on his back. Hooked behind each top end of the blade were sets of a Mossberg 590M shotgun and a Sig Sauer M400 AR-15. Sully eased the machine into the space between where Jeremiah and Kinhagee were standing.

Not a single one of the white supremacy guys looked like they were in shape. Even the ones who looked like they could bench-press something all had beer bellies.

The mission was search-and-rescue for the girls. The one lone standing order was aim to maim, not to kill, anyone that got in the way. There had been some grumbling from among those with homicidal tendencies, but no one made a big deal about it.

“Alright, gentlemen, bring ‘em out.”

From the tree line emerged the dozens that had been moving in from the highway. Some came running, howling and cursing and hungry for action, others trotted out like soccer players, pacing themselves, and still more took their time walking out onto the field, confident they would get some. Some of them were swinging baseball bats or crowbars or truncheons, some had their firearms at the ready. All of them lined up on either side of the bulldozer.

Only those with firearms and body armor or some type of protective wear would constitute the advance. All other weapons and fighters would take up the rear. And thankfully there were no prima donnas or wannabe supermen among them.

Sol checked to see that his brother was close at hand. Krysto gave him a solemn, benevolent look he’d never seen before. His kid brother was in beast mode.

Sully, Jeremiah, and Kinhagee all looked like they wanted to take on ten men each themselves. Sol gave a glance to the living weapon behind the bulldozer blade and nodded.

Like a jack-in-the-box, Marvin sprung up from behind the massive shovelhead with the AK-47 swiveling from side to side. He let the moment sink in.

For most of the racist men lined up in front of the house the sight was their one most terrible nightmare: a Black man holding an automatic rifle, aimed directly at them. One of the skinheads twitched a leg as if to try walking but the other leg wouldn’t move and a dark wet stain began forming over his crotch and down his thigh.

Suddenly from nowhere there was a blaring of ‘The Hymn of the Republic’ followed by a small convoy of rough rider vehicles, Jeeps, dune buggies and pumped-up trucks, all flying the 36-starred Union flag.

“Oh, no! It’s the Antifa!” cried one of the Neo-Nazis.

When the first couple of skinheads made a run for it, the small invading army roared like a single giant dragon and rushed the house. Sully charged the bulldozer forward and Perlman, Sol, Marvin and Jeremiah provided cover fire and made sure none of the neo-fascists got off a single shot.

The skinhead leaders and some of the gun toters scrambled their way back into the house. They started firing off shots haphazardly from the windows. Sully and Sol signaled for everyone to hold and take cover.

The little red-haired man had the temerity to pronounce a list of demands.

"Well, you still got a week before Tax Day, tell him you'll settle up with them this week."

"No. I have a list of demands *for them*. Here, send one of your guys to hand this to them."

Mustela shoved a sheet of looseleaf paper with ink scribbles on it at him. With bluster and Bible quotes he was essentially asking for free passage and a million dollars.

"Use the girls as hostages. Nobody cares about them anyway, but they don't know that. Waste one at a time if you have to, let them know we're serious."

"Whuh? What?"

"You heard what the fuck I said! Start killing the girls one at a time until they meet my demands."

"Look, I--"

"YOU have to protect me!"

"Sorry, man, I don't need your money anymore. I just want to get out of here alive."

"NO! You *have to* protect me! Look closely!" the little red-haired man squealed as he pulled up his sleeve to reveal a tattoo just inside his elbow that MacAdams recognized as the mark of one of the highest ranks in Point 24, a High Priest, as it were, and the equivalent of a Grand Wizard in the Klan. He was bound by a sworn oath to defend this annoying little man.

“Aw, shit, there goes my gun! You done made me shoot yourself in the foot. Now where’s this farm at ‘afore I shoot you in your fucking face, motherfucker?!”

The skinhead forced himself to stop screaming.

“Fuck! It’s just up the fucking road in the back! Fuck! My foot!”

The guy had been laying in wait for Sol

“Where the fuck you think you’re going, boy?”

Sol had been taken quickly beyond the threshold. He felt more than pain and he wanted only some tender mercy and sweet oblivion and to be done with all of this already. Release. He wanted to be set free. A nice nap would really be okay, too.

Get up.

It was his father telling him to get up, son, it’s time to face the day.

It was Diamond Darryl Hawkins, his old trainer, telling him to get up don’t let that pussy motherfucker get that weak shit off, after getting knocked down by a lucky shot.

It was his son telling him to get up, Pop Pop, it’s Saturday.

Get up!! He screamed inside himself. *There are people counting on you!*

His body worked instinctively, an organic machine with two decades of daily training. His arms thrust him upward, his legs wanted revenge as he stood again. He didn’t even need to shake it off.

Breathe.

The beast in front of him was huffing and puffing.

“I’m too big for you, boy!” he bragged.

“That’s it? That’s all you got for me?” Sol snarled. “Big as you are, that’s all you’ve got?!”

He smelled fear. The Nazi’s eyes were involuntarily widened.

“Okay. Now it’s my turn,” Sol growled.

They circled each other a couple times and the brute tried to dance with him but Sol realized he could just play with this idiot, and gave him a few quick jabs to confuse him, and to loosen up. It was time to go to work on this fool.

Angered by Sol's insulting straight hits the Nazi tried to return the favor with a couple of cannon shots but might as well have been moving in slow motion as Sol tucked in and delivered a half dozen body shots to tenderize the meat.

The skinhead didn't understand what was happening as his torso complained of abuse. Sol gave him a second to think about it then jackhammered him twice in the solar plexus.

There was a heaving gulp. The Nazi couldn't breathe. He seemed to favor his right leg as he struggled to maintain his balance. So that's the one Sol decided to break, beginning by slamming his heel into the skinhead's ankle. Down he went on one knee, as if proposing marriage.

"And now you can't walk, either, see, stupid?!" Sol was gloating, it was the adrenaline. *Focus*, he had to remind himself. He decided to just knock his head off and put him to sleep for a while and leave the leftovers for someone else. It took a three-piece of hard punches to his face before the sonofabitch finally said good night to Gracie.

"Hail to victory, motherfucker," Sol spat.

And then in stepped the guy's clone. Or a brother or inbred cousin, or whatever it was, these guys all looked the same to him, but it was the same size as the one he'd just knocked out. If truth be told, Sol wasn't entirely sure he was quite ready for another guy this big to fight so soon. Luckily for him he didn't have to worry about it.

Krysto kicked in the door waving the four-four. The clone froze, he had no gun.

"I see nobody ever taught you shitheads to pick on somebody your own size," Krysto observed, looking around.

As he sauntered past his nearly exhausted brother the mischievous kid's grin erupted on his beard and he placed the Magnum in Sol's hand.

"Hold my gun. I'll be right back," he giggled.

The nazi cocked his right arm back and snarled, "Let's go, fucker!"

Krysto walked right up to him and kicked him square in the chest sending him crashing halfway through the sheet rock of the wall. Then he leaned in and pummeled him three times with his fists. Grabbing him by the nape of his leather vest he pulled the Nazi out of the wall and threw him to the ground where he fell to all fours.

"Stand up, stupid," Krysto commanded. "Or I'm gonna see how far up your ass I can stick these size fourteens."

The skinhead weeble wobbled to his feet.

"That's good, 'cause these kicks are brand new."

And with a left-handed upper cut straight from hell and a loud crack, he sent the skinhead's skull flying backward, dragging the rest of the hate-filled body with it as he took a swan dive to the floor.

Krysto took a moment to admire his work then turned to his brother.

"You okay?"

"I am now. Good timing. You do know I was just catching my breath before I took care of that guy..."

"I know, Sol, I know. One by one..."

"One by one," Sol chuckled, breathing heavily.

As they approached the swamphouse

The Darwin herbal is burned,

As it turned out, the little red-haired man didn't have any hair at all; he was as bald as a baby vulture. Oiled-up and glistening in the hellish flames of the bonfire he was like a live Bosch character, dancing in eternal naked condemnation.

At first, they didn't know what to do with him, momentarily stunned by the spectacle. Then they all noticed the young blonde girl laying seemingly unconscious on a large stone slab near the fire wearing only a bra and panties.

In the same instant Sol rushed to place himself between the girl and Mustela, Mustela realized he was not alone and froze, Jeremiah raised his shotgun in a blind rage toward Mustela and Sully grabbed Jeremiah's arm and restrained him.

"Don't Jeremiah! He's not worth your soul!"

"I'm already goin' ta hell, Sully, you know that. But I'm sending this fucking devil back where he belongs ahead 'a me."

"No! Your fate is not a given and *you* know that."

"He's right, Jerry," Sol almost shouted. "Look. He has to answer for all of this." He was pointing at an area just beyond the flames where two dozen small graves were just barely discernible.

Jeremiah raised the shotgun again and Sully had to completely grab him with both arms. Sol raised his pistol and aimed it at Mustela's groin. His hand was only trembling a little bit.

"So... it looks like you'll have to arrest me, Mr. Taxman," Mustela slurred in his drugged-out dream. "I should probably put some pants on, don't you think?"

*

The Diplomat Hotel
Ocean Drive & 3rd Street, Miami Beach
Thursday, April 7th, 2:23pm

Roxanne [REDACTED] was the founder and director of one of the top three literary agencies in Sweden.

Among the many boutique and international chain hotels that fill South Beach there are some that are more exclusive than others and do not take reservations less than a year in advance. These luxury establishments normally have their own private beach but The Diplomat, like the more haughty, went ahead and took the extra step of installing white wooden fencing along its borders on the sand and bright orange buoyed maritime rope strung out into the water to ward off the common folk. In a small, air-conditioned booth, an armed guard monitors the entrance from the boardwalk.

She was expecting him today, but that was not the case yesterday when he surprised her with a phone call directly through the hotel switchboard. She was curious to meet this oh-so-clever and resourceful individual and had agreed to let him come visit for a brief talk. But she certainly wasn't about to interrupt her tanning schedule for an intrepid nobody. He sounded on the phone like an old, bitter policeman.

Getting out of the car he took off his jacket as it was a sweltering day. The concierge was kind enough to check in his gun and shoulder holster for a little while and asked him to wait a moment for an escort. Soon a very polite security guard appeared and walked him past the restaurant and lounge, through a side corridor and out to the sand and sun.

Sol saw a small sea of royal blue beach umbrellas, emblazoned with the hotel's large 'D' insignia, interspersed with pockets of copper-toned bodies stretched out on towels.

All the way out near the water's teasing slaps, and slightly removed a noticeable distance from the other sunbathers, was an extra-large hot-pink umbrella with little tassles.

Sol looked to the security guard.

"That's her," the man confirmed, unable to hide an admiring smile. "I'll be right here in this little air-conditioned booth if you need me," he cracked.

Why the woman couldn't have received him in some civilized indoor setting was beyond him. He had no choice but to loosen his tie and a couple buttons of his shirt or he would look like an idiot. With one hand on the glass railing between the sand and cement, he took off his shoes and socks, hooked them on two fingers and trekked through the sand and heat to settle up with the woman who had set all of these extraordinary events in motion.

But the sand was burning hot and though he walked as briskly as he could among the umbrellas by the time he reached the pink one the soles of his feet were scorching. He continued past his subject and splashed tankle deep into the water. Cooled again, he approached her. He wouldn't need more than a few minutes.

Under the hot pink were a portable service tray with a tall glass and large pitcher of an iced pink beverage with lime slices, a shallow wicker basket filled with half a dozen paperbacks, and one of the very most exquisite pair of legs Sol had ever had the pleasure of witnessing.

"Good afternoon, Ms. [REDACTED]?"

"Hello."

"Thank you for seeing me today."

"Yes, well, what's this about then since you couldn't tell me over the telephone?"

"I'm here about the books. The rare books that

There was the Swedish accent, probably only came on strong when she was perturbed. Most of the Scandinavian countries list English as a second or third national language and she'd done her

best to become more American sounding. She removed the sunglasses to reveal icy blue North Sea eyes in a bewitchingly beautiful face.

"What do I care about those old stuffy books?" she sniffed. "I'm only interested in *new* original voices, *modern* literature."

"Yes, I know. But that's not really what sells these days is it?"

No reply.

"And I imagine it gets pretty expensive maintaining a stable of critic's darlings before they've broken into the commercial markets."

"Just what are you getting at, sir? I haven't got all day for this conversation."

"Of course not. Well, if you'll indulge me for just a few minutes, madame, I'll be out of your way immediately. I have this theory that I'm trying to work out. Last December one of your countrymen, 'The RL Man', as he was called in Sweden, killed himself after getting caught stealing and selling rare books from the National Library. Caused quite a sensation in your country, I understand, so I'm hoping you'll remember."

Her face froze in defiance but her eyes smoldered.

"No?" Sol feigned. "Well, yeah, big commotion. Not just the newspapers and television stations but... other places as well. You see, this RL Man, Anders Burius, he had been doing this thing for years, did a lot of business with a lot of different types of people.

"When he was arrested you can understand a lot of these same people became very nervous. And when he went and committed suicide there was no way to be sure what, if any, records he'd left behind or what evidence or leads the authorities had."

Swedish authorities subsequently received information that 13 of the stolen books had been sold by Ketterer to individuals and/or entities in the United States.

6pm

“The other investigator was here this afternoon. He said you’d be coming by and that I should let you know.”

“I’m sorry, the *other* investigator?”

“The New Yorker.”

“Ah. Yes, right. The black-haired gentleman with the glasses?”

“Precisely,

Weiland was not wholly sure how she felt at the moment. Had she been bested? Aided? Tricked? Unknowingly co-opted?

12.

The Book Of Love

“The book of love is long and boring
No one can lift the damn thing
It’s full of charts and facts and figures
And instructions for dancing
But I
I love it when you read to me
And you
You can read me anything”

- Peter Gabriel, ‘The Book Of Love’
Scratch My Back, 2010

“When the morning
gathers the rainbow
Want you to know
I’m a rainbow, too
So, to the rescue
Here I am
Want you to know just if you can
Where I stand”

- Robert Nesta Marley, ‘Sun Is Shining’,
Soul Revolution, 1971

Biscayne Bay Friday, April 8th, 3:21pm

The message was recorded using a computer-generated voice:
“The king’s road ends every hundred years as the moon sets.
[Pause] Twenty-five point seven three three three. [Pause] Minus
seventy-nine point two five zero zero.”

A math equation? And a riddle? Negative fifty-three and a
half thousand? Dollars? What did it all mean?

It took nearly a full hour of banging his head against the wall
and scribbling pointless calculations on a couple sheets of scrap paper
before he figured it out. He glanced at his watch and took off running.

You’re getting rusty, man, he criticized himself.

It was latitude and longitude, and an exact hour. A time and a
place, the other stuff he could figure out later. In the satchel was all he

needed to go halfway around the world if he had to. He flew the motorcycle toward the waterfront.

At Bayside the one daily ferry and all the cruise lines had already left port and the next batch wouldn't arrive until the evening, to set out in the morning. He called the three numbers for charter boats that his smartphone came up with and none were available.

In sheer desperation he raced to the public library downtown which would be closing soon. The main branch building shares an entire city block with the History Miami Museum and together they constitute the Miami-Dade Cultural Center. The entrances are on an elevated artificial plateau on either side of a large, Spanish-style plaza in the center of the complex. A wide terrazzo ramp leads up from street level through an open-air arcade.

He parked the motorcycle on the sidewalk at West Flagler Street and 1st Ave and went running up the incline, slicing his way through the exiting crowds. When he burst through the sliding doors the security guard was quick to tell him the library would be closing soon.

"I'll be less than five minutes," Sol explained.

Near the reference desk a cheery, diminutive thin man with a thin beard and a horned owl pair of eyeglasses was walking with a large stack of books in his arms and stopped in his tracks when he saw the large, frenzied-looking man rushing toward him. Until then, he thought he'd seen every type of library patron there was.

"Hiya! Are you a librarian?!" Sol asked out of breath.

"I am indeed! How can I help?" the man replied brightly.

"Do you still carry the yellow pages?"

"Sure. What state?"

"Florida. And the atlases, please."

"Of course."

At the very end of Matheson Hammock Park Road between the Grove and the Gables there is a small marina. The one and only boat anywhere within sight that wasn't a private was an old, rickety-looking fishing boat. He parked the bike in the lot and hurried to the pier. As he did his best not to run along the dock, he made out the Bahamian flag flying below the American one. He saw movement in the pilot house.

When he got closer he was able to see an older dreadlocked man dockside, sitting in a very worn leather swivel office chair deftly using a small machete to peel pineapples.

Sol eased his gait so he could catch his breath and not look like a desperate madman. The seated gentleman moved only his eyes to see the stranger approaching and slowed but did not stop his work.

Sol raised his right fist to his heart and stood six feet before the Rastafarian.

"Respect, Dread," Sol said.

"Ree-spect, bredrin," the Rasta returned warmly.

"I apologize for showing up unannounced like this, but I need to get to Bimini right away. You're listed in the Yellow Pages as available for charter."

"Yes, bredrin... However, ting is we no don' work on Fridays. Sign says so right there behind you."

Sol looked behind him and, yes, there on a post was a hand painted sign that said simply, 'Open 6am, Closed Fridays'. Just Fridays apparently. One would think there was plenty of money to be made at the start of the weekend. Knowing only a little about Rastafarianism, he prayed it wasn't actually an offense against the man's religion to work on Fridays.

"It's an emergency, captain. I'm happy to pay double whatever the rate is."

"That is very generous of you, beloved. But you see, my time is worth more than money."

This was an undeniable universal truth, and so Sol was out of luck, it seemed. He looked at the sun-bleached planks of the pier, he smelled the ocean and heard the seagulls in the distance and the words just came out of him.

"There is a woman waiting for me," he said, almost to himself.

Expecting to be told that that was his own problem, Sol suddenly felt very foolish.

"But why didn't you just say that in the first place, bredrin? You *know* you can't keep a woman waiting, man!"

Sol wanted to sort of laughcry with relief.

"I know, Dread," he blubbered, "I just didn't want to have to swim there."

The Rasta burst out laughing.

"No, man!" he bellowed. "Too many sharks out there!"

"I know, man. Trust me, I know," Sol murmured with a shake of his head.

"Nelson!" the Rasta suddenly shouted. "Nelson! Get ready! We have a mission of love!"

There was a loud bump in the wheelhouse. A young man of about nineteen or twenty and with shorter dreadlocks popped his head out one of the porthole windows, then immediately popped it back in.

"Okay," the elder Rasta said, "double is good. It's a two-hour ride over there and you have to pay for our return trip as well. 'Sayn? I don' expect you'll be coming back with us tonight. Go ahead and get on board, bredrin. We leave in about ten minutes."

"Thank you, Dread. Thank you so much."

"Yeah, man!"

Sol jumped onto the boat as if to try to make it immediately take off like a flying carpet. The young dread, after an upraised chin half-nod hello, ever so slowly went about bringing materials aboard off the pier before finally untying the vessel from its moors.

Thirteen minutes and twenty-three seconds later they set out into the ocean. As the wind and the waves teased and taunted him, he was surprised to discover that he didn't feel the tiniest bit of fear for those multitudes of ravenous giant dagger-toothed fish that were undoubtedly at that very moment swimming along right underneath the boat just waiting for him to fall overboard or lean a little too much over the rail. He wondered what kind of adamantium fishing poles were needed to reel one of those monsters in and if maybe one of these days he wouldn't come back out here and give it a try.

The sun began bidding its good evenings and adieus as it descended into the water.

Bailey Town, Bimini, The Bahamas

With the Dreads' blessings he jumped off the boat at the pier so that they didn't need to do more than turn around. At Buccaneer there was a ferry connection, one stop, seventeen minutes, North Bimini Government Station, only one block over to take the long walk along the King's Highway.

With his kind of luck, it was more than possible he was again wrong in his calculations.

There was a few seconds of hesitant silence from each of them and then they both said it at the same time.

“I want you to come with me.”

She had hoped he wouldn't ask her that. He had not expected her to ask that.

After another few seconds of uncertain silence the reality set in. She lowered her eyes to the table. He waited.

“I can't go to New York with you,” she almost whispered. She looked up at him and her eyes were starting to water. “I... it's not for me. I'm not a city girl...”

They both knew he wanted to go with her, and she saw him leaving her at the pier and he saw her leaving him perhaps forever.

Saturday, April 9th **Midmorning**

On July 10th, 1985, two operatives of the French foreign intelligence agency DGSE, working on direct authorization from President Francois Mitterand, used limpet mines to bomb and sink the Greenpeace flagship 'Rainbow Warrior', which had been harbored at Port of Auckland, New Zealand.

The boat, only slightly larger than a tug, and its crew were on their way to join a flotilla of protest ships assembling at the Mururoa Atoll in the Tuamotu Archipelago of French Polynesia in the South Pacific to demonstrate against French nuclear weapons testing in an area of the ocean previously declared by regional nations to be a nuclear-free zone.

Code-named 'Operation Satanique', the operation involved infiltration, surveillance and the bombing by DGSE agents posing as Swiss tourists and activists. It caused an international uproar and was roundly condemned as an act of state terrorism, though for the sake of diplomacy was officially referred to as a 'breach of international law'.

Two explosives had been attached to the hull of the ship and timed to detonate seven minutes apart. The first bomb exploded at 11:38pm and blew open a hole the size of an automobile.

After initially evacuating the crew, Captain Peter Wilcox and a handful of others returned to the ship to inspect and take pictures of the damage. Portuguese-Dutch activist photographer Fernando

Pereira went below deck to retrieve his camera equipment and was immediately drowned by the instant flooding when the second bomb went off at 11:45. The other crew members abovedeck were hurled off the boat by the explosion but survived.

In the aftermath, almost all of the agents involved in Satanique managed to elude worldwide manhunts and disappeared. The two bombers were identified and arrested with the help of a Neighborhood Watch program. They both pled guilty to manslaughter and were each sentenced to ten years but were released after less than two years when the French government threatened to cripple New Zealand's national economy with an embargo of the country's exports to the European Economic Community if the two agents were not let go.

Eventually, under pressure from the United Nations and the international community, France was forced to formally apologize and pay millions in damages to Greenpeace, New Zealand, and Pereira's parents and his wife and children.

The episode had countless ripple effects and inspired many people and organizations to join the fight to protect the oceans.

*

"I've made peace with the Spanish and the English.

"But I'm holding a grudge against the French so I think I'm giving the old priest's journal to someone who would appreciate it more than a government museum."

"And who would that be?"

"Oh, I'm keeping that a secret, lover."

Aly was a playful woman born, always loved a bit of mischief, she would tell you so herself.

What a beautiful, sacred thing this was in his hands, and how many other hands had held it through the centuries, entrusted for however many hours to keep it safe and secure?

It was worth at least a cool quarter million and he didn't have the slightest inclination to try to sell it at all. It would make a most excellent addition to his collection.

Is it possible that paradise lost can be regained?

13.

Last Day Of Magic

“You may say I’m a dreamer,
but I’m not the only one”
- John Lennon, ‘Imagine’
Imagine, 1980

“People in power do not like it when you question how they fucking got their power, that is what I learned from that whole mess.”

- Jessa Crispin, on Bookslut.com (the original),
in an interview with Literary Hub, May 9, 2016

Saturday, April 16th Sunrise

Miami’s nickname of ‘The Magic City’ came about as the result of an amazing redoubling of its population every year during its early formation. But for Sol it meant something else entirely.

He’d had some horrible moments in the past in this city, and even now again this year, and yet, she had always managed to get him through it. The beauty and promise he had seen here vastly outweighed the unfortunate events. And she had taught him so many things about himself that he would never have known otherwise. She had often helped him find strength, and wisdom, and hope. She kept his secrets, and she was always up for new adventures.

The whole of the city of Miami is flat terrain, the highest natural point being twenty-four feet above sea level at the Miami Rock Ridge in Coconut Grove, and the average elevation being only six feet above sea level. And because of its relative newness, the city is almost completely paved with asphalt and concrete largely still unaffected by age-related potholes or cracked sidewalks. As such, and notwithstanding the ever-present threat of flash flooding, perhaps the best way to really see the city, if you are at leisure, is on a bicycle.

At least Sol felt so. One is able to cruise merrily past all the cars and trucks and buses as they sit stuck and frumpy faced in the thick stew of Miami traffic. You can fast forward to different parts of

the city by boarding with the bike on the Metrorail or the Mover, or even a bus or the Miami Trolley if they're not too crowded, as they all have bike racks at the front of the vehicles. The highest inclines are the bridges over the waterways, and they are all scenic or have roundabouts nearby if you're feeling lazy. You don't have to find parking to have a *cortadito* from a sidewalk café window or some fresh frozen fruit from a roadside vendor. And you can find all the hidden little quiet spots where no cars go.

That is how he felt he wanted to spend his last day in town. Fortunately for him, *guyaberas* are equally popular in black as they are in all the other colors. Wearing only the tropical staple shirt, his swim trunks and a pair of poolside slip-ons, he packed a towel and the 9mm in a medium-sized army satchel and walked light-footed over the bridge to the Guatemalan bike repair shop at NW 16th Terrace, where they always had some refurbished bicycles available for cheap and were open by seven-thirty, usually with a group of older Latinos out front already chewing the fat, little paper espresso shot cups in hand.

He found a big, comfortable sky-blue beach cruiser and coasted over to Civic Center Station some five blocks away. Purchasing an all-day pass, he boarded the southbound train to Omni station and the Venetian causeway.

Lincoln Road, South Beach

10:30am

When he was eleven years old Sol had his eyes examined at school and was told he needed to wear glasses. It was a light prescription and probably just temporary for a year or two, the optometrist explained, but Sol had been mortified. He'd just started seeing girls in a new way and they, too, seemed to be taking notice of him as well. Becoming a four-eyes would completely destroy his blooming love life.

His father, a big believer in doctors' orders, was not sympathetic to Sol's plight, saying only that the glasses would make him look very smart and girls loved a smart-looking guy and that he'd better not catch him *not* wearing those hundred-and-twelve-dollar glasses once they arrived in the mail.

His mother, sensing her oldest son's crisis of vanity, told him she had an idea that might help him warm to the necessity of the eyeglasses. Since she had the day off from work the next day she invited him for ice cream and they agreed she would pick him up from school.

The following day at the ice cream parlor she presented Sol with a pair of joke eyeglass frames with no lenses and put on the pair she had bought for herself.

"We're going to play a little game," she instructed. "We're going to walk down this main street with these fake glasses on and our ice cream cones. Whenever I give the word, at the same time we both stick a finger right through one of the frames and scratch an imaginary itch. Got it?"

Sol thought it was silly, of course, but he had a triple cone so whatever. He got the gist of the game after the first couple times when he noticed that his mother would say 'Now' whenever anyone stared a little too long at the odd mother and son pair with the matching eyeglasses and how they did double-takes at the synchronized finger pokes.

Delighted at the different reactions from people and bursting with laughter each time, Sol made his mother continue the game all the way down to the waterfront until he finished the last of his ice cream. Somehow the exercise worked. After that day, Sol was just okay with wearing glasses.

She had accepted his invitation to brunch on the usual condition that the place be in South Beach, nowhere chintzy. Roland was by now familiar with the routine and gave Sol a knowing wink when he arrived.

She was feeling movie star glamorous this morning and letting everyone know it. She had summoned up her inner Holly Golightly and was taking her for a stroll along her own private tropical 5th Avenue with her handsome New Yorker son on her arm and let those thirsty chicks staring at them eat their hearts out.

69th Street, North Beach
1 o'clock

One fine day in one of those timeless summers when they both still qualified as little kids, Sol had scheduled himself for an early morning experimental test run on his brand-new miniature race car. It was a pedal/battery hybrid.

His little brother, already a practiced observer, peeking toward Sol's room from his bowl of cereal at the breakfast table had spied his big brother's furtive preparations with racing gloves and goggles and after a couple of nonchalant passes in front of his door decided to try his luck.

"Where you going?" he inquired, as if he didn't know.

"Nowhere."

"You're lying. You're taking the car out somewhere where no one can see you."

"Fine. I want to see what it can do. I have an idea I wanna try. And if anybody asks, you haven't seen me either."

"I wanna go." The car had a front and a back seat.

"No. It's risky and it's not safe for you to come with me."

"You never take me along with you!" Krystico complained too loudly, and it was not a very accurate statement.

"I take you with me more than I should," Sol had replied, not even meaning it. "Alright, let's go."

It was a Saturday. All of the other kids would be glued to the television set and there wouldn't be any of the regular weekday activity where they were going. He was taking them to an area near their house that was basically a concentration of cemeteries. The sprawling Catholic cemetery was the nearest and situated at the top of a steep hill. Across one of the main roads was the Jewish cemetery that took up two city blocks and adjacent to it was the old Dutch Protestant cemetery which was the oldest and smallest of the three.

The way he had schematised it, they would launch from the highest point, where there was a row of mausoleums and a roadway that curved leisurely down the incline, Italian-style, before opening out onto the grand entrance plaza where he and his exclusively trusted brother co-pilot would cruise to a glorious finish of the championship race and the thunder of the world's applause.

Except, for all of the powers of their imagination, the vehicle they were riding in was still nothing more than a large plastic toy, with a toy plastic-and-tin brake handle. The grass and the asphalt were still slick with the morning dew. The little electric motor and

wheel system meant nothing as they flew down the hill propelled by lead-free gravity, and it was all Sol could do to keep the steering wheel straight.

Where they were supposed to have come to a smooth stop, the little capsule was zooming at maximum speed and kept right on going out the exit gates onto Amboy Avenue where by some miracle they were not hit by the passing cars that swerved and screeched and blared their horns around them as they as they blew right into the entrance of the Jewish cemetery and continued speeding down the steep incline straight toward a massive and jagged ancient stone wall.

To avoid getting smashed up on the sharp mortared rocks, Sol made a last-second maneuver cutting the wheel to send them sliding sideways across a long stretch of grass until they reached a section of beveled tombstone rows and were sent soaring into the air, tossed out of the vessel like a pair of dice, tumbling onto the graves.

After an extended stun grenade moment, his scuffed-up, mud faced and wild-eyed little brother, bloodied with thin scrapes at the elbow and cheek, staggered to his feet. Sol had landed his torso right on a tombstone and was laying on his side, waiting for some air to return inside him and checking gingerly to see if those might be broken ribs he felt.

“Holy shit, kiddo! I’m so sorry about that! Are you okay?!” he grunted from his horizontal position. “I didn’t think that was gonna happen. I must’ve miscalculated.” It was the first time Sol had used curse words, but certainly not the last.

“I’m okay, I think,” Krystico huffed, also catching his breath. Then, even at that early age always the wiser of the two brothers, after some thought added, “Let’s do it again. Just more careful this time.”

Professional kind of Miamians, Krysto, Michaela and a small crew of their inner circle had a large tent set up under which they fit half a dozen beach chairs, a double stack of coolers and a corner station with a lawn chair for the assigned DJ who was playing a mellow mix of old school rap, some dance hall reggae and buzzy new school IDM.

South Floridians have all the time in the world for tanning, but sun-starved northerners have to get it when they can. Sol found his spot right at the edge of the tent where Krysto and his serious steady were relaxing in the breezy shade with a couple of piña coladas.

Throwing down his towel angled to follow the sun, he then flopped his body onto the accommodating sand mattress.

"I do envy the fact that you guys can do this any given day of the week," he mumbled from the towel.

"It is kinda nice," Michaela agreed.

"Here," Krysto intoned from his plastic and aluminum throne without opening his eyes or moving except for extending his arm to hand Sol a small glass bottle. "I got you some fancy green tea. 'Cause you fancy..."

"Shut up. Lemme see. Ooh! Thank you, little brother!"

As the song goes, it was just another day in paradise. Sol tried to soak up enough sun to last him till July and the New York summer.

Somewhere between four and five he began to say his farewells and Krysto's ace, Cassius, who had politely declined the invitation to the romp in the swamp, said he had to head out as well. Even larger than Krysto, the gentle giant drove an F-150 pickup and offered to drop Sol and his bicycle on the mainland.

**NE 99th Street and NE 4th Avenue Road, Miami Shores
5:30pm**

She was doing a rendition of a foxy 50's housewife in form fitting red-and-white checkered shorts, red tank top under a knotted white blouse, white hair band, prairie sandals and television sunglasses.

"Oh, my goodness, Sol, we should just baste you with butter and serve you instead of the fish," Debrah teased. "You're red as a lobster!"

"I might not make it to Rockaway Beach this year. Don't want to chance it," gleamed a set of white teeth shining in a smile set against a sunburnt background.

The Sullivans were having a meatless backyard barbecue and had invited Sol. He had swung by the ProPublics supermarket and picked up some sparkling wine for his hosts along with a tray of Greek salad from the deli section. For once, he had remembered to make sure that the bicycle had a carry rack.

Sully was wearing a large paper Chef Boyardee hat and a teal-and-orange apron with the Miami Marlins logo as he worked the grill.

“Don’t worry, Sol,” he greeted, once more his jovial self. “There’s a big, fat Mullet ready to be smoked for you.”

“You are the man, Sully!” Sol salivated. With grilled mushrooms and onions on top and some of that corn on the cob he saw nearby, he would be in pescatarian heaven.

The kids had a bunch of their friends over to hang out and after saying hello completely ignored him. That was a good thing, Sol thought, relieved that they were kids again.

Once Debrah and Sol had convinced Sully to take a break, they were able to talk for a while and he had a chance to eat some of what he was cooking. They informed Sol that they would be proceeding according to plan, temporarily delayed but with redoubled intent.

“We start digging right away, in a few weeks,” Sully reported in between rows of corn on the cob. “Soon as the arson investigators say they’re done.”

“Anybody else been bothering you?” Sol asked.

“Like who? There’s no one to press charges against me or try to retaliate. The woman from the FBI called like you said she would. The only thing she said was that they would be in touch over the next few weeks and asked that I not take any oversea vacations for the next few months.

“Same with Jeremiah. Only reason he’s not here now is he’s having his own little carnivore shindig right now.”

“Yeah, I know,” Sol laughed. “I’m headed over there in a little bit.

The empty lot behind the burnt Roots, Shoots and Leaves 7:30pm

There was an assortment of neighborhood residents, area hipsters and devoted fans of the eatery. Tables and benches had been hastily constructed from pallets donated by a neighborhood recycler. The owner of the lot, a friend of Jeremiah’s, had brought over his backyard grill and a gas-powered generator. One of the tables held pyramids of food and beer cans. Violet and Jeremiah reigned supreme on vinyl poolside chairs wearing matching mirrored sunglasses.

“There he is!” Jeremiah announced when Sol weaved his way through the crowd to them. “Mr. Metropolitan!”

“Mistuh Mistuh!” Violet hailed heartily.

"Now I know it's contrary to your lifestyle, Sol, but maybe just this one time you can have a cold one with your new best friend," Jeremiah invited. "For old time's sake."

"What old times?"

"Last week, goddamnit! Why I always gotta be *explainin'* e'ry little damn thang?"

"Yeah, alright, why not? I was out in the sun for a couple hours this afternoon. I'm a little thirsty."

"There ya' go! It'll cool you down, bud," Jeremiah commented. "You're lookin' kinda crunchy fried there."

"Awesome!" Violet hollered. "Look! We got three kinds: Sudz Ice, Nature's Ice and Milwaukee's Beast. Ice."

"Let's go with Milwaukee, in the name of all brewers."

He nursed the beer as he walked around mingling with the crowd a little, mostly just standing next to conversations and nodding, until he found Jeremiah again, sitting on a segment of telephone pole currently serving as a parking space marker and staring dreamily out at the last of the daylight. He was clearly buzzing.

"You know what, Sol? Even when I'm finally a gazillionaire, I'm 'a still drink cheap beer. An' you know what I'm 'a tell all the gossip columnists and other haters? I'm 'a say, that's right, I drink cheap beer, so what, fuck you."

They toasted.

"Because you're a gazillionaire," Sol saluted.

"Goddamned right," Jeremiah grinned happily and almost fell off the log.

Though he qualified as a heavyweight in the boxing ring, Sol was a super lightweight when it came to alcohol and after that one single tallboy he was gliding joyfully on his bicycle along 20th Street all the way to Miami Avenue, then a quick right along the trolley tracks to the tree-lined quiet of the City of Miami Cemetery where all the ghosts called out his name in greeting, and where have you been?, then out onto NE 2nd Avenue and a small block of turn-of-the-century buildings, a side street of willow trees, and suddenly the burst of life on Biscayne Boulevard with locals, tourists, workers and businesspeople from around the world all at once.

Bayside Marketplace

Approximately 8:30pm

The old gang had threatened to embarrass him at the airport if he didn't visit with them before he left so he asked them to meet him at the music stage of the world-famous waterfront mall.

Rick had rounded up all his cohorts from the wild days in the early nineties. They were known then as the Green Gates Crew for the massive iron fencing at the old Masonic temple they had sequestered as the base for their exploits.

There at a large table on the deck of an independently owned seafood restaurant, with his trademark barbarian size beer stein in hand, was beatific blue-eyed Saint Larry, the demolitions expert. Jim T., the philosopher covert ops vet was pontificating as always. Marine combat chopper pilot Aphex Solo was already raising hell in his endearing way. Even wild girl sharpshooter Sacagawea (that was her real name, her parents were hippies) made a rare nighttime appearance to send off her old pal, the eternal part-timer from New York.

"Alright, alright, everybody," proclaimed Rick, the former Ranger machine gunner who had founded their odd band of misfits. "Sol's gonna do his usual 'One beer and I'm going home' routine. So, we found the biggest fucking beer we could find around here and he has to drink the whole fucking thing before we let him go home!"

Larry carried it out with a look of fake alarm from behind a small display stand. Sacagawea, sexy as ever, performed the "Voila!" and removed a black cloth dinner napkin covering an exaggeratedly large beer glass, the kind you only find at tourist traps, filled to the perfectly frothed brim with dark amber.

"Dutch, baby!" she winked. "Just like you like it, Sol."

He glanced at his watch. This might take a while. He raised the trophy-like glass with both hands and toasted, "To all my friends!"

There were huzzahs and "Chug it like a man!" from Aphex and, inevitably, the rehashing of war stories began. They had taken a corner table looking out over the water so as to not disturb the civilians with their rowdiness.

A cruise ship had just pulled in when they had taken their seats and now its passengers were being let off. A thick column of

bright vacation outfits came streaming directly toward the mall. In the middle of this colorful conga line of tourists was a particularly animated small group of people who seemed to be carrying over to shore a party they had started aboard the boat. The entourage was centered around one individual.

That was another thing about Miami. You really do never know who you'll bump into anywhere in town at any time, especially at night.

Because the man had recently been all over the arts and culture pages of all the major newspapers with the release of his latest play, Sol instantly recognized the world-famous Argentinian painter and playwright Paul Dazar, an unabashed romantic, shameless bon vivant, and prolific stealer of other men's women. Sol had known the artist from the days when he was still selling poetry chapbooks and small canvas panels down at Astor Square in the East Village. Not just literally but figuratively, Dazar's ship had finally come in. He hadn't changed a bit except for some graying at the temples and a healthy weight gain. Like a falcon, he spotted Sol on the deck.

"Solissimo!" shouted the newly minted celebrity when he saw his old musician friend. The artist's eye never falters.

"Right on time, as always!"

Sol was relieved to see that success had not gone to Dazar's head and that he hadn't lost his conviviality. The two groups of revelers merged, and they took up half the seating area in front of the music stage at the water's edge.

Bayside has bands playing every night of the week, almost every night of the year. You can catch everything from dub to ska to swing to doo-wop to early rock n' roll to old school hip-hop to Afropop to salsa to rainforest pan pipes to polka to reggae to Klezmer music to, well, you get the idea.

It is impossible not to want to join in the celebration of life when everyone is dancing and even ill-humored squares like Sol will do a little two-step when a lovely lady drags him out onto the dance floor, as one of Dazar's companions did.

At ten o'clock the night's penultimate band took the stage playing an eclectic mix of world beat and Indian ragga. It had an ethereal effect on him. He walked out along an empty pier where he could still hear the music and not the clamor of the audience.

Legs dangling off the side of the boardwalk, his thoughts turned to her again as they had throughout the day.

Three miles off the coast of Salud, Panama, Caribbean Sea 10:10pm

She had the sky to herself, had swiped an ice-cold bottle of Balboa beer and a wedge of lime and made a discreet withdrawal from the shenanigans occurring below deck.

She had planned for this moment for a very long time, and yet when it finally came, a year earlier than scheduled, it had a bittersweet taste. Before her junior year of college had finished, before meeting her ex, and before all this craziness with the books and Miami and Sol, she had promised herself she would throw caution to the wind and make the big, big jump out to sea to do her part in defending the oceans.

She'd only mentioned it to her ex a couple of times and saw that he hadn't taken her seriously. And of course it was a ridiculous fantasy that Sol would just up and leave everything in his personal life to go with her but once in a while you have to take a chance nonetheless.

Perhaps their roads would intertwine again. Who knows? It was not impossible, was it? In the meantime, she had plenty of work ahead of her.

Frankfurt, Germany

She was pissed off, worried and scared. It was awful to always keep her in the dark and never call. But most of all, her lover, a complete introvert, loathed having to manage the art gallery whenever she disappeared without warning.

London, England

As always, it was only his cat who was glad to see him returned in one piece. And he was glad to see his cat, ever vigilant in the bookstore's windows.

Stockholm, Sweden

Was she taking it personally? Absolutely. Who the hell invited that busybody into her business? She was going to make a point of finding out exactly who he thought he was.

Jersey City, New Jersey Monday, April 18th, 7:28am

Back in the northeast, Spring was just getting started in earnest, the robins and tree buds everywhere giving full performances to mark the full swing of the season.

The women in his life had given him plenty to think about recently and, as usual, they were mostly right. Beyond what he had convinced himself was sufficient, it was true that he was capable of more. He did not resent the truth, he considered himself fortunate to benefit from their wisdom.

As imperfect and limited as he was, he began to think of how he might be able to make a greater impact on the world with his skillset, how to make it a better place for others around him. Maybe there might even be some decent money to be made along the way, as well. A few ideas came to mind. Superyachts of the megarich, for example, pump eight-hundred times more carbon-dioxide-equivalent gases into the atmosphere than the average American generates in a year. Maybe he could do like the revenue officers and start confiscating a few. They're easier to sell than you might imagine.

Just a thought. There were also the legal work options, of course, maybe even a quiet office. In any case, we do what we can where we are. He would get started in the morning.

But for now, the only thing he wanted to think about was what he had been looking forward to the whole time of the Miami job. Though New Jersey is perennially the butt of countless jokes about everything from South Jersey's redneck rationalities to Jersey City's haughty disdain for *all 'a youz*, there is a reason it's called the Garden State. Nowhere near as wild as it once was, there are nonetheless still countless rivers, streams and lakes hidden in what he liked to think of as the green hills of Earth that Jerseyans did not brag about but were quietly proud of.

It was in those secret magic places that he liked to take his son fishing, where the boy could simply explore at will, catching crawfish by hand and laughing in the rushing water, where everything was perfect, and calm and peaceful, and they were in harmony with nature, if only for a limited time. Seeing through his child's eyes, the world was made new again.

Epilogue

Hurricane Katrina arrived in Miami on August 25th, 2005, unleashing widespread death and destruction throughout the southeastern United States. Making landfall eighteen miles north of downtown, at the tiny city of Hallandale Beach, the historic storm wreaked a path of havoc that claimed 1,892 lives and was the costliest hurricane on record until 2017 when Hurricane Harvey came in to tie.

In New Orleans she exposed the shamefully inadequate flood protection system of levees deployed around the city and flooded 80% of the area as well as vast parts of nearby parishes. Shutting down the power, transportation, and communications facilities, she stranded tens of thousands of people who had chosen not to evacuate before her second landfall and left them with little or no access to food, shelter or other basic necessities.

Not only were the region's authorities wholly unprepared for such devastation, but the emergency managers also managed to fumble the response. Federal, state, local and private rescue operations had to be launched and most of these, too, were handled with such ineptitude that eventually numerous officials from the FEMA Director on down to the New Orleans Police Department Superintendent were shamed into resigning. It was the meteorologists and US Coast Guard front liners who most often took initiative and action to save lives without waiting for bureaucratic or political considerations or orders.

Numerous investigations afterward determined that the designers and builders of the regional levee system some decades earlier, the US Army Corps of Engineers, was accountable for the massive and deadly failure, but federal courts eventually held that the Corps could not be held financially liable because of sovereign immunity in the Flood Control Act of 1928.

On April 14th, 2007, 1,400 communities in all fifty of the United States held a one-day rally called Step It Up!, to demand that their Congressional representatives enact 80% curbs on carbon emissions by the year 2050.

In the summer of 2008, an eccentric British antiques dealer and lifelong con artist named Raymond Scott was arrested and charged with the theft of Shakespeare's 'First Folio', described by some as "arguably the most important book in English literature" and certainly one of the most influential. Naturally, it is also one of the most valuable printed books in the world. Only 235 copies are known to remain out of the original 750. One of these sold at auction at Christie's in New York in October 2001, for \$6.16 million and in October of 2020, a copy sold there for \$10 million, which made it the most expensive work of literature ever auctioned.

The 1623 collection of 36 plays, which includes *The Tempest*, *Twelfth Night*, and *Measure for Measure*, was stolen in broad daylight in 1998 at a quiet exhibition in Durham Cathedral Library in northern England.

Scott had kept the book in his home for ten years and then flamboyantly took it to the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., to have it appraised in hopes of a sale at auction. He'd arrived without notice, even brought a cake for them, bowties for the director, and a two-thousand-dollar donation to the foundation. The astute experts at this most foremost of Shakespeare institutions, which holds 80-odd of the First Folios, listened attentively as he described at length and in detail how he was there with the rare volume on behalf of a Cuban major whose kindly mother had faithfully kept "the old English book" safe for many years in Havana. And when he left, they promptly called the FBI, the British Embassy and Durham police who all worked together to confirm that it was the stolen book from the old church.

Upon his arrest he informed the coppers that he was "an alcoholic and need[ed] two bottles of top-of-the-range champagne every day, but only after 6pm" and that he hoped they had some in the police station.

Arriving throughout his trial of three weeks in a limousine and accompanied by four bodyguards, Scott was ultimately acquitted of the actual theft of the book but found guilty of handling stolen property and smuggling the item into the United States. He was sentenced to eight years and by the second year into his term he had hung himself in his cell.

The other two items stolen from the Durham Church Library, a fragment of a poem by Geoffrey Chaucer tucked into a medieval

book and an early English translation of the New Testament, both highly valuable in and of themselves, were never recovered.

Later in 2012, when Al-Qaeda-affiliated Islamist extremists from a group calling themselves Ansar Dine invaded Timbuktu in Mali one of their main declared targets were invaluable rare medieval Islamic books that they had determined needed to be publicly burned.

Curator librarian Abdel Kader Haidara and a handful of brave colleagues risked their lives to smuggle out 350,000 manuscripts from the Ahmed Baba Institute library and then hide and protect the priceless works during the occupation.

In a formal ceremony in downtown Manhattan on the afternoon of June 17th of 2015, the US Attorney's Office announced the recovery and return to the National Library of Sweden of five of thirteen rare books stolen by Anders Burius which were known by authorities to have made their way to the United States. Among the rescued works were books dating to the 1600's.

In late May of 2015, former American President Clinton casually mentioned to his old, somewhat rich useful idiot real estate shyster buddy in New York that perhaps it would be a splendid idea for him to run as the Republican candidate for President. The vainglorious, orange-skinned narcissist wholeheartedly agreed. He'd known this obvious truth all along, of course, but now he'd heard it from someone who had actually held the job before, and it looked easier than ever.

Anonymously leaked documents revealed that as part of the planning for Clinton's wife, Hillary, to take her turn as President, the Clintons and the Democratic National Committee had come up with the stunningly brilliant strategy of propping up and elevating a shameless and audaciously racist xenophobe fool to become the "leader of the pack" and a "pied piper" to the other Republican candidates, forcing them all into increasingly far-right positions. The Democrats' working theory was that the American voter would find the hateful policy proposals from any of these Republican candidates so repugnant and unacceptable as to ensure that their party would easily coast to a noble, high-minded victory in 2016.

Except, it turned out that there were a whole lot more racist and xenophobic Americans than everyone had realized or wanted to admit. And so, that eternally infamous low-IQ, morally bereft and near illiterate spoiled rich boy gave truth to the old adage that absolutely anyone could become President here.

Once again, though, it was the Greens' fault. This time it was for having run a formidable woman candidate, Dr. Jill Stein, an internal medicine specialist turned activist, who won over 1,457,218 voters in only 44 states and supposedly derailed Hillary's scheduled coronation, despite the Democrats' dire warnings that it was *still* not time for third parties as the very fate of American democracy hung in the balance and the Tesseract had to be recovered from Loki to preserve the cosmic time-space continuum.

Within seven months, on August 11th, 2017, white supremacists held a rally in Charlottesville, Virginia, ostensibly to oppose the proposed removal of a park statue of Confederate general Robert E. Lee and, as stated by the organizers, to unite the white nationalists in America. Attendees included neo-Confederates, neo-Nazis, Klansmen, far-right militias, neo-fascists, generally identifying white nationalists and those claiming to be 'alt-right', an umbrella term for white supremacists. The charlatan in the White House praised and saluted these people.

On the second day of the event, one of these specimens became so crazed by the presence of counter protesters that he rammed his car through a crowd of them, killing paralegal and civil rights activist Heather Heyer and injuring 35 others.

Heather's final social media post stated, "If you're not outraged, you're not paying attention."

In 2018 Congress passed The Agriculture Improvement Act, or 'Farm Bill', which included the removal of hemp and hemp seeds from the federal Controlled Substances list and authorized the production of hemp throughout the country.

Additionally, the Farm Bill ordered the USDA (Department of Agriculture) to issue guidance and regulations for creating a national framework establishing the regulation of hemp production. Now able to grow a legal commodity, American hemp farmers qualified for participation in formerly unavailable federal farm programs.

Later the same year, the Farm Bill was modified to include the removal of CBD (cannabidiol, the groovy stuff that's in the cannabis sativa plant) from the Controlled Substances list as well as build upon protections for hemp farmers who wished to participate in their home state's hemp production programs.

It was a sea change in the struggle of hemp farmers. All states were now able to grow hemp commercially and for a wide range of purposes from oil to the CBD to seeds and fiber.

By the following year, the United States had become third among the world's hemp producers, after China and Canada.

Also in 2019, in seven of eight developed countries studied in a major survey, it was found that the most important issue facing the world was climate breakdown.

One day in March of 2020 (no one can quite remember the exact date because the entire year was one day in March) the COVID-19 coronavirus global pandemic was declared and lockdowns and quarantines were ordered in nearly all of the countries of the world. Human activity everywhere on the planet came to a virtual standstill. For a brief, timeless time the Earth breathed a visible and audible sigh of relief. Pollution levels dropped to those of pre-Industrial eras. You could taste how much cleaner the air was for that one day.

At the same time, the supposed nation leader of the free world was being led by a complete idiot who proclaimed that all of the heads of state in the rest of the world's countries had gotten together to play a global prank on everyone by concocting an imaginary disease solely to interfere with his preordained re-election. When the bodies started piling up and the moron-in-chief was forced by his own cabinet to face up to the truth he suggested injecting disinfectant into patients as a cure, to show he was now taking the virus seriously.

This writer was personally told by a neighbor on the supermarket checkout line that we didn't have to worry or take precautions at all because the President of the United States of America had said on television last night that it was all just one big joke. She was not an old woman, and soon after that night she was never again seen in the neighborhood.

Just in the United States alone, over one million people died of coronavirus needlessly, thanks in large part to an ignorant and cowardly self-serving anti-science imbecile.

On January 6th, 2021, red-hatted and animal hide costumed Republican supporters of the initially illegitimate then twice-impeached, four-time indicted Individual One wannabe gangster fake billionaire occupant of the Oval Office stormed the United States Capitol building in Washington, D.C., in an attempt to overthrow the government when their easily startled fearless leader refused to gracefully concede defeat or acknowledge the eviction notice of the 2020 elections.

After causing the death of Capitol police officer Brian Sicknick and four insurrectionists and injuring at least a hundred and forty more officers, they celebrated their successful riot by vandalizing the building and taking selfies in hallways and in the offices of the opposition party.

In April of 2022, Pen America, a free expression non-profit, estimated that in the previous year across 86 school districts in 26 states more than 1,500 books had been banned.

Global Witness, a Washington- and London-based international NGO, released a report in September of '22 that documented the abhorrent news that in the preceding ten years more than 1,700 defenders of the land and environment had been killed, a rate approximate to one killed every two days. The deadliest countries for these murders are Brazil, Colombia, Philippines, and Mexico, all American allies.

In the United States, a quarter million girls and women are reported missing every year. In 2020, the last year of pre-pandemic records, there were 209,375 cases of teenage girls going missing.

By 2023, nearly half of Americans believed the government was coming to get them eventually for one reason or another, or to at least take away their guns and bibles and attempt to collect outstanding tax bills, and also that meteorologists were secretly controlling the weather and lying to the public about it in their

reports. These were the same gullible simpletons ready and eager to again vote for the same tax-evading, golf cheat, draft dodging, dumb-as-a-rock, diaper-wearing con artist Nazi aspirant they had put in office eight years prior.

In a surprise wonderful Monday morning, on August 14th, 2023, US District Court Judge Kathy Seeley in Montana state court ruled in favor of young activists, aged between five and twenty-two, who had sued the state for their right to a “clean and healthful environment” and against governmental policies that the plaintiffs demonstrated harmed the public and the environment by the state’s sustained promotion of fossil fuels. It was the United States’ first constitutional and first youth-led climate lawsuit to make it to trial, and the kids won.

Also in the early 2020’s, young people and adults by the millions in America instantly took to wearing Nirvana T-shirts after they’d been made popular again by some social media influencers, though they knew nothing about the rock band of thirty years prior beyond the story of the shotgun suicide singer guitarist and the one song that the alien kid from Aberdeen had written specifically to serve the servants, and entertain us...