

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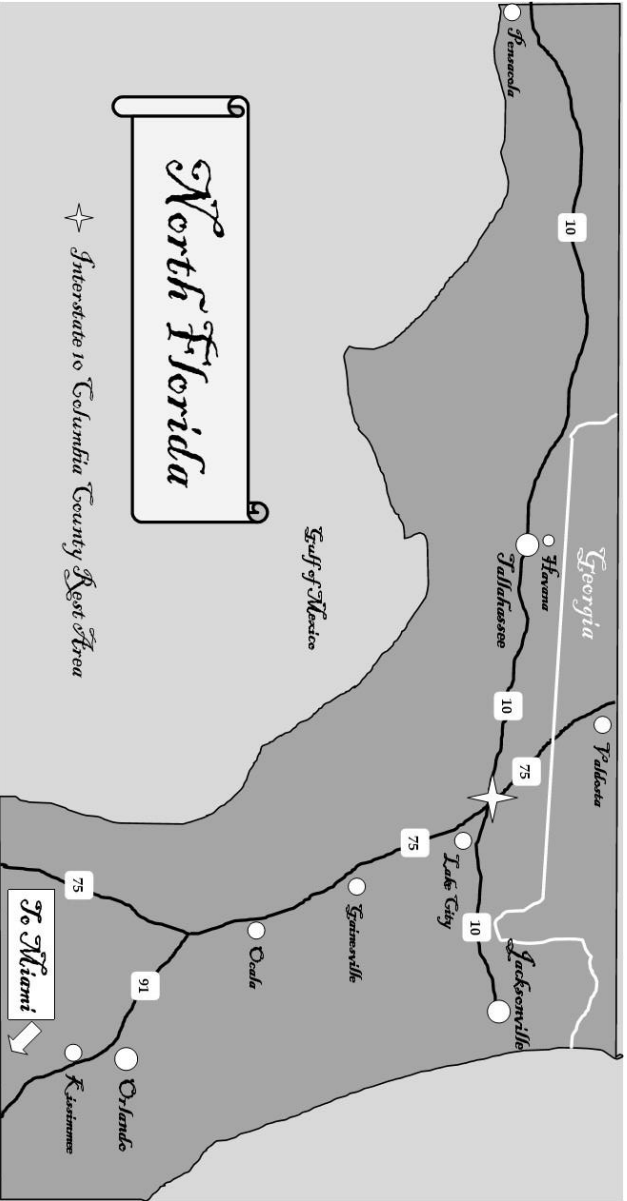
For Christopher John,
my saint and north star since June of '78

“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 blocked 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 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 absolution, 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. A good long healthy walk was in order instead, then. Perhaps in the warmer late afternoon, 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, 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 cold 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 having a wonderful 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 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 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 Loisaída. 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 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 U.S. 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 U.S. 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 from headquarters this afternoon.

Someone had stolen fifty-three thousand dollars’ worth of rare books scheduled for auction at a university in west 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.

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.

Apparently, 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.

Micosukee, 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, Waukeelah 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 Rockwilder?"

"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 explained.

“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 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 parts and equipment 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 said '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 manual for wrought iron fence restoration from the DIY section.

Checking the time, he realized he'd already been in here 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 she was 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 the 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 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 the divorce attorneys would put a stop to such foolish talk immediately.”

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 flash her the finger 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 Liberty International Airport, Newark, New Jersey 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.

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. He had asked Teague 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 he 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 securrrity..."

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 sitting 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 U.S. 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 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 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 leaned closer 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 only 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 get 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 of 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 door and out of the way. There was hay all over the 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 had no family to close up his affairs. 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 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 light 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'. 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 I put Georgia plates on it. 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.

"Right," was all the buyer 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 60's, 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 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 car voice 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 three more doors opened and there were four undercover cops pointing guns at him as they rushed him, simultaneously shouting orders and questions 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, 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’, 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 protest, 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. An’ since that gun permit ‘a yers ain’t from the great state of Georgia neither, you’ll just have to stay with us here in our fine city this evening.”

“This is bullshit, and you know it. 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 crack 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, and it was a different deputy at the desk now, 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 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 see what else they might have in store for him.

"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.

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 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 an' a half 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, ambling his massive bulk over to her with a big, goofy grin. Had to be a farmer or trucker in that stereotypical plaid shirt and a 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 this second."

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! It 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.

"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 hopping in on a pogo stick and she would have seen a savior in him. But what got out of that 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 laughs. 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 this time 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 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 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 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 contained inside the car. 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 and let's go sign some papers."

Inside the office the rental guy couldn't stop chuckling to himself. The renter was not 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 '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 mind if me an' the electric Texas blues girl sing a few songs together, either.* Indeed, he slept right through her 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 sounded

absurdly impossible 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 at the lunch counter.

“I do believe I’ll have me some pie,” he announced with a 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, actually. 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.

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 performing 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 notches and turned on her side. The ride was quiet again for a while until they reached the honking horns of a traffic jam 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 person 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 marching 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 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 semi-athletics, 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 back onto 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 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 èl con la denominacion de San Carlos, y del sucesso 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 quite 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."

The suspect's boyfriend had told Agent Weiland and her people that she had mentioned trying to return the books to the original donor.

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 for his visit.

At long last he entered that dark, winding road lined with the massive southern live oaks 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 his groceries around to the side entrance which was closer 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 bit disoriented in the dark of the night. She headed for the bright yellow background 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 dark eyeglasses and half a cigar hanging out of his gaping mouth, could not contain 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 and shook her head at the sappiness.

"That is very sweet of you. Very, 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 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!"*