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BY VILE MEANS

by  
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Boredom  
is the Root of all Evil.

Truth is, I feared my daily congress with dear Phyllis. Dizzy from lack of nutrients because Dad's case of Top Romin ran out a week ago. Or Maybe 11 days. Who can know when vertiginous?

Lacking, I grappled both handrails and slowly stepped up to my rendezvous, bringing with me, camouflage among freckles, my friendly pet bedbugs.

Her key crashing in lobby above sent reverberations to tingle my fingers on handrails below. Like Shelobe, I clutched because a faint heart never won a fair maid.

I rebreathed moist breath behind mask and trudged each step. Her banging vibrations stopped, meaning her key had found its hole.

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

With her trough of tough love now open, she'd begin her flailing in earnest.

Climbing, I closed my eyes imagining dear Phyllis pulling from bag tiny fists of miscellaneous mail to haphazardly shove unsorted letters into gaping boxes above her.

As consequence, there were zero secrets in our mournful building. Possibly this was her clever ploy to forge subsidized tenants into Community. Possibly it was her Christ-like sacrifice to rally us together against our common antagonist. Possibly. I lean a light heart towards naiveté.

Arriving in lilliputian lobby, my stomach rumbled voraciously because I majored in creative writing and theater.

Phyllis paused.

Without turning around, she asked, "You Theo?"

"A rose by any other name...?" I ratcheted eyebrows as high as I could to show dear Phyllis, behind both mask and her, I smiled.

I lean that way too.

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

I watered.

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

Dear Lord.

I ratcheted silliness down and forced a light hearted guffaw, rocking jovially between feet to show I was indeed smiling inside. Truefully, rocking may have been caused by famishment.

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

I stepped close behind dear Phyllis, hoping to catch my name in her fist before discarding in someone else’s box.

Phyllis stopped her stretch and stuff and spoke slowly, “Are you my family?” Over her shoulder she leered.

Angry Bird eyebrows gave me pause. “...No?”

“Shoulder blades against that wall, Buck-Oh.” Her shovel thumb pointed my way.

I obeyed but did not water.

She turned full frontal and stared. Wrapped tightly across her wide jaw she too wore a mask. Rubber bands strained both ears nearly closed. Mask was ambered beneath nose which she left unencumbered by Federal Center for Disease Control and Prevention whims.

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

The envelope hung in front and fluttered to the floor. To her back I said, “It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.” I raised eyebrows to show I could, probably should, be smiling.

Her witty retort never returned.

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

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

This was not my poem royalty.

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

I held it out with eyebrows furrowed above mask to prove I could be smiling or possibly quizzical.

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

Speaking of language, I still believe her use of the word ‘rout’ to be a bit diminutive. I would have preferred “rounds” or better still, the commanding “appointed rounds.” Anything to delineate Character and Setting. Feds gotta flaunt.

Handing the envelope back, I raised my eyebrows again, cautiously, with light protest, “It looks infectious, Phyllis.”

She stabbed it back with her magazine dirk. She held it there and used her breathy Harry Calahan voice, though thinking back now, I honestly believe she meant no such character channeling. Nevertheless, breathless she spoke: “Looks like your name to me, Punk.”

Keeping this documentary a truthful recounting of facts, I may have improvised the final noun.

I chuckled.

Phyllis did not.

I imagine she smiled affably behind tight mask, though.

In early April, dear Phyllis still brandished festive Christmas ornaments dangling and clanking from overstuffed mail bag. Ornaments were 10 oz. cans of Russian and Venezuelan pepper spray. Her sacred weapons were also antagonists in countless legends around our building. She squared off with me now. Like a gunslinging gnome, her fingers began feeling for the heaviest can.

I cleared my throat and tongued a crumbling tooth. “It can’t be legal,” I warned her, “just handing out undeliverable mail,” I forced a loud chuckle through filtered mask.

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

Stubby fingers found a well oiled can inked with black and red skulls. Staring at me, her thumb clicked its plastic top open.

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

I do recall narrow eyes glaring. She clacked the cap shut and revolved back to slosh arbitrary sheafs high into slots she could not reach.

I examined my new relic. My friendly freckles scampered forward to feign their interest.

There was no cancellation mark, just ink scratched across the grape adorned lady. The envelope paper was thin, crisp, freckled with age spots like Great Grandma’s hands. Holding it up to buzzing florescence, several minuscule holes shone like constellations. A deep, earthy scent clung, impelling anticipation.

Fearful that Federal Police were watching on hidden cameras and ready to pounce, I gently tore along the end of someone else's envelope. I blew inside which infuriated a cloud of filaments as fragile as King Tut’s linen, buzzing them about my face. Using middle and index fingers as tweezers, I withdrew three yellow pages, folded and flaking. Cracking them open aroused more shards.

Dear Phyllis finished locking mail boxes back to the wall. She turned to face me, sweetly anticipating my news, I’m sure.

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

“Easy Peezy,” she wheezed.

Rummaging under satchel and Christmas cans, she withdrew her phone pre-bagged in a Zip-Loc. “Modern miracle,” she mumbled.

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

Times New Roman, of course.

“Astonishing.” After graduation, technology and I parted.

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

My Dearest Theo,

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

Before I explain what compelled me to take this matter into my own hand, you must first swear on our parent’s lives to forgive me, Dear Brother for my life will truly end if you reject me...

#

Truth is, I sat stunned. Unworthy.

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

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

Evidently I now lean that way.

Between giggle bursts, we unashamedly drained our stale reservoirs, giddy to receive lobby's sanctification.

Our dizzy romance fell to hapless helplessness which slid into silence and eventually slight boredom.

She yawned.

I caressed ancient pages.

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

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

She was appalled. "Up! Pull me up!"

I grabbed her royal wrist and leaned myself far, far back to raise dear Phyllis to her full four and a half feet, all the while protecting this ancient pillar of human provenance.



While she sanitized her blacksmith forearms, I felt something still stuck inside the grease stained envelope.

I tipped it over and out tumbled a twist of greased newspaper showing: “23 décembre 1888.”

Phyllis peered over pages at prize within prize.

Surprisingly dexterous, wide nailed fingers reached up, over and in. They pulled newspaper ends apart, opening the twist. Out slid a wonderful sight, a gruesomely wonderful sight.

We all stared.

I stood dumbfounded, encouraging ecstatic thoughts to ricochet.

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

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

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

Giggling again, we took turns touching our saintly pepperoni.

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

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

Upright now, she had a light and delicate demeanor, fairly dancing out our front door.

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

From somewhere beneath her mail bag she pulled her smokes. She slid it through a thin hole in the stretch folds of her mask and lit it. She inhaled like a newborn, blowing columns of beautiful brown-amber out unbridled nostrils.

Recomposed, she lifted the rear roll door of government van and shoulder pushed giant duffel bags of undelivered work aside revealing a battered wooden crate.

As she spoke, her cigarette bobbed in time to her words like a conductor's baton: "If those scrawny arms," here her eyes lovingly scrutinized my arms and bony joints, "can, ya know... lift it outa here, it's yours, Thee-Oh."

She looked at me, pinched her mask above her mouth, dragged it below chin, coughed out for all and let drip a fluorescent yellow glob onto the pavement.

I was giddy.

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

Not from hunger, I swooned.

Dear Phyllis spit.

Replacing her mask, she smiled affably.

I wondered if I was somehow inside my own laborious fiction. This was fact. I knew it was! Anyway, I saw no Federal Agents about to swoop and discredit.

I believed myself safe and told my friendly pets they would soon be irradiated.

Proving I did listen in *Elizabethan Lit. 356*, I said calmly, “Yes! ...Yes, Phyllis, I can lift this. Anne lives here! ...We were worried.”

“You know this Anne Haiawatha?”

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

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

A pizza delivery bicycle sped past wafting a wake of objective correlative so delicious my stomach loudly recriminated me. I consoled, “This may just be our chance to get healthcare, reestablish prescriptions, fix crumbling teeth and afford dozens of boxes of dry, warm socks, Bosom Buddy,”

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

One of us chuckled again.

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

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

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

Slowly shaking my head, “Remember Shakespeare’s tenacious lie, Dear Phyllis,” I commiserated. “‘Poor and content is rich enough.’ What we make of that is our own truth.”

THE END.