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BY VILE MEANS

by

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Truth is, even when strong, I feared my daily congress with dear Phyllis and today I was not strong. Through her flowed either jewels or sand. For too long all she relinquished was hot desert air. (*No, wait: 'A blast of hot desert air.' No: 'A hot desert air blast.'*)

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, on how she let the walls of boxes crash down just to shake me out of my basement cocoon.

March 6 2.

This morning I woke weak with jewels in short supply, I was malnourished. my stomach recriminated me for not including three lightly poached eggs, a mountain of hash brown doused with salted ketchup,, four slabs of deeply buttered and salted toast, three or four rashers of crisp bacon for my breakfast of half a dry brick of Top Ramen. Dizzy, I grappled both handrails and stepped up to my roulette rendezvous. Her key crashing in the lobby above sent reverberations that tingled my fingers below. I clutched because a faint heart never won a fair maid.

I brought with me, camouflaged among freckles and rust hair, my friendly pet bedbugs. I assumed the species was a fictional alliteration Mother used before her bedtime kiss. Then I moved to Tacoma Avenue where bloodsuckers were real.

Climbing, I rebreathed moist breath behind mask as if it were a literal aqua lung. I closed my eyes to imagine dear Phyllis shoving unsorted letters into the gaping boxes above her. As consequence, there were zero secrets in our mournful building. Possibly her haphazard delivery was her clever ploy to forge subsidized tenants into Community, her Christ-like sacrifice to rally apartment dwellers against her, our common antagonist. Possibly. I lean a light heart towards naiveté.

When I arrived in our lilliputian lobby, my stomach voraciously rumbled because I majored in creative writing and theater. At that time, I still wasn't prepared to rend my soul simply to eat.

Phyllis paused.

Without turning 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 to the wall.

I watered.

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

Dear Lord.

“Dial LitMajor down,’ I thought. I blurted a light hearted guffaw and rocked jovially between my slippers feet to show I was indeed smiling inside. Truefully, rocking may have been a famish induced stumble.

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 tiny fist before she discarded my rubies in someone else’s box.

Phyllis froze. She spoke slowly, “Are you my family?” Over her shoulder, her eyebrows leered. (*No: ‘Her eyes beneath a heavy eyebrow leered. No.*)

She twisted round and her dark Angry Bird eyebrow gave me pause.

I replied, “...No?”

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

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 thick ears nearly closed. Mask was ambered beneath nose which she left unencumbered by Centers for Disease Control and Prevention whims.

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

The envelope hung in front of my face then fluttered to the floor. To her back I said, “It droppeth as the gentle rain from heaven.” I raised eyebrows again 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. The return address was a solitary: Vincent Willem, or something of the sort.

This was not my Wright Park poem royalty.

“This can’t be mine,” I cautioned her. “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 my eyebrows furrowed above mask to prove I could be smiling or at least quizzical.

“Congratulations,” she said turning on me. With a tightly rolled *Quarantine Weekly*, she pushed my hand back to my chest. “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, in the merest protest, “Looks infectious, Phyllis.”

She stabbed it back with her magazine dirk. She held it there this time and used her breathy Harry Callahan voice, though thinking back now, I honestly believe she meant no such channeling. Nevertheless, breathless she spoke (*No: ‘she spake?’*): “Looks like your name to me, Punk.”

Maintaining a truthful recounting of facts, I may have improvised her use of that final noun.

I also chuckled.

Phyllis did not.

I imagine she smiled affably behind tight mask, though.

March 6 6.

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

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 then fastened her eyes back on me. Her eyebrows lowered, "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, may have glanced at the floor, shifted a bit. I definitely kept the letter. Facts are a bit murky here.

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

I examined my new relic. Even my friendly freckles put their movable feast on hold. They scampered forward to feign their interest.

There was no cancellation mark, just ink scratched across the grape adorned lady. The envelope paper was freckled with age spots like Great Grandma's hands. I held it up to buzzing

florescence and saw several minuscule holes shine into constellations. A dank, earthy scent clung.

Fearful that Federal Police were somehow watching on hidden cameras and preparing 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. 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 festooned satchel, she withdrew her phone pre-bagged in Zip-Loc.

"Modern miracle," she mumbled.

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

Times New Roman, of course.

"Astonishing." At that time, rent and technology did not coexist.

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:

March 6 8.

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, after reading I sat stunned. Unworthy.

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

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

Evidently I now lean that way.

Between giggle bursts, we drained our stale reservoirs, giddy at letter's sanctification.

Dizzy romance became introspective which slid into silence and eventually a slight boredom.

She yawned.

I caressed ancient pages to feel the heft of history.

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 wrist with both hands and leaned myself far, far back.

While she sanitized her blacksmith forearms, I felt something still waiting inside the 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, her wide nailed fingers reached up, over and in. They pulled newspaper ends apart to open the twist. Out slid a wonderful sight, a gruesomely wonderful sight.

We all stared.

I stood dumbfounded and encouraged my ecstatic inventions to ricochet.

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

Giggling again, we took turns touching our saintly pepperoni.

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.”

Taking a chance I cleared my throat and 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 and fairly danced her way 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 cold.

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

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

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."

Scatched 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."

I swooned because money is the root of all happiness..

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 because boredom is the root of all evil.

Replacing her mask, she smiled affably.

I wondered if I was somehow inside one of my own laborious fictions, or if I was still abed, being feasted upon. Anyway, I saw no Federal Agents about to swoop and discredit.

Believing myself real, I told my friendly pets they would soon be irradiated.

Proving I did try 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, “You’ll get yours, Bosom Buddy. We may also get healthcare, reestablish prescriptions, fix crumbling teeth and afford dozens of boxes of dry, warm socks.”

“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, maybe all of us. Truth is, I no longer care..

“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, dang was I non-she-lant, 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 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.