

**AND
THEN
RUN**

Eric Hublot

To my first wingman, the late Barthur Allen D. I guess God needed help setting up free illegal Canadian satellite porno.

AT 3 A.M. I AM THE ONLY PERSON in the financial district still wearing a suit. Everyone else is wrapped in plastic and blankets, asleep in doorways and under awnings, except for my pursuer, dressed in jeans and a frayed black T-shirt.

He walks behind me, hoping to lead me to one of the limitless hidden spaces behind alley dumpsters, out of the view of the discreet cameras mounted on every building. I walk in front of him, hoping to lead him to one of those limitless hidden spaces.

I pick up the pace. He speeds up even more. Predictably, he approaches from my left, trying to flank me and force me down one particularly unguarded alley. I politely oblige. Does he notice my brisk walk becoming a nonchalant stroll?

“Nice shoes,” he growls. Absurdly, I think, *Nice shoes, wanna fuck?* I force myself not to giggle, compose my grin into a debonair half-smile, and turn to face him. The man knows his trade. He’s got me cornered by an 8 foot tall, brown dumpster, and a 300 foot tall concrete wall.

“It’s always an honor to meet a fellow connoisseur,” I reply. “You have an excellent eye, my friend.”

He blinks in confusion at my response, and then demands, “Fuck, man, you know what I want, and you know what you need

to do.” This whole thing is sounding less and less like a mugging, and more and more like a prison rape.

I bow my head slightly in his direction. “Good fellow, I would hardly presume to know what you want. Although, if your wants are based on your lacks,” I gesture expansively in his direction, “I would imagine that a secondary education, a shower, and sobriety top the list. Though how I would provide those to you at this particular moment, I can’t imagine.”

He pulls out the knife so fast, it seems to materialize in his hand. “Your watch. Your wallet. Your belt. Your shoes.” He’s gone from prison cellmate to booking officer.

I never really get the shoe thing. The watch, sure. Easy to sell. The wallet, obviously. A belt you can sell, or wear. But, who the fuck is going to buy used expensive shoes? Or is he going to wear them? We probably aren’t even the same shoe size—he’s half a foot shorter than I am. And if we are, does he know that Italian dress shoes are better for lounging than walking? That if he switches his black sneakers for these burgundy Ferragamo wingtips, a day of walking around in them will make him want to drop to his knees and worship the goddess Nike?

Suddenly I blurt, “You don’t have to do this.” *What the fuck? Where did that come from?*

He takes a step closer. The knife is a few inches from my face. He repeats his mantra. “Your watch. Your wallet. Your belt. Your shoes.”

I grab his wrist and yank it down against my rising knee. The angle is perfect, and his wrist breaks easily, like a baseball bat. He howls. I know that if I let him go now, he will run. He won’t try to

mug anyone for a while. Maybe ever. Maybe he will give up crime, go back to school, scare other would-be criminals straight. I suppress a snicker at the double entendre as I pull him forward onto his face, his arm behind his back. I stomp down hard with the heel of my shoe between his shoulder and the scapula as I pull his arm out of his socket. He howls again. I hear it as a loud, unpleasant noise, like an annoyingly loud alarm clock.

I just need five more minutes. I kick him in the throat hard enough to shut off the noise, but not hard enough to kill. He coughs and splutters, weeping silently as I break his other arm. He's not fighting back anymore, just lying there, hoping for the empathy or pity we both know isn't there.

I search the alley, but what I want is right next to me. I pull the burgundy silk handkerchief from my suit pocket, double it over, and wrap it around the heavy steel pipe poking out of the dumpster.

The first leg shatters easily with one swing of the steel pipe, as does the second leg. As I yank him upright, more by the throat than by the neck, he miraculously manages to whisper, "I didn't think you were real." He's heard the stories, then.

"I'm not," I reply.

I feel no anger or joy, sadness or revulsion, or catharsis. The only thing I feel as I strangle him against the polished stone of the building is an intellectual relief that I still feel nothing.

15 YEARS AGO

I lean back on one of my black leather couches, left arm across the back of the couch, legs wide.

“Here’s the thing, fuckers,” I explain, gesturing expansively with my right hand. My brand new, square, platinum and diamond cufflinks glitter in the light of one the Ikea light towers next to the couch. “New Orleans has this dark past that’s buried there, but it’s still *there*.”

“Here he goes with the voodoo dolls and shit,” Aris comments. He takes a swig of Guinness, and I reach for my bottle of San Pellegrino sparkling water.

“No,” I retort. “Fuck the voodoo. New Orleans is where, during slavery, they sold octaroons and quadroons. You know what that is?”

“A person with four arms?” Paul ventures. He has also opted for the Guinness.

“Ha-ha, homo. Check this out—an octaroon is a person who is one-eighth black. And they fucking sold them—in New Orleans!”

Aris turns to Paul. “I agree with Jerome. Let’s go buy some slaves—I’m tired of picking all this cotton myself.”

“They weren’t for picking cotton, dumbass,” I explain. “Have you ever seen an actual octaroon?”

Aris rolls his eyes. “Yeah, when I borrowed your copy of *Inter-racial Gangbang 7*.” He gets up. “This shit is making me hungry. Let’s go get some octopus sushi.”

I pull on my leather dress boots. Sushi does sound pretty good. “They look just like white people. That was the point. You could go to New Orleans to buy sex slaves who look just like white women.

There is literally no way to tell.”

Paul takes a last gulp of Guinness. “That’s weird.”

“Yeah. A white slave owner raping a black slave can tell himself that this person isn’t really a person. She looks so completely different—hair, skin, whatever. In his mind, he can convince himself that it’s not really rape, any more than fucking a sheep. But, he buys an octaroon, dresses her up in nice society clothes, and he can just rape this essentially white girl whenever he wants. She has no recourse with the law, obviously. And she’s basically expecting it—after all, that’s how she came into this world. Massah raping her mom. So, he is doing these acts to a person who he is forced to see as a human being, not as an ‘other.’”

Paul glances at Aris. “Jesus, you need to stop watching that Japanese rape porn shit,” Paul says.

“The point isn’t the rape. The point is the slave owner. A person who has completely faced his own inner demons and accepted them and glories in them—forget the rape, think about what kind of weird shit he has—that they now probably sell somewhere there.”

Aris opens the door of the apartment. “I don’t know about you,” he says to Paul, “But, I don’t know if I want to troll around New Orleans so Jerry can buy himself a necklace of human teeth or whatever the fuck he’s looking for.”

I sigh dramatically. “The girls show you their tits for fifteen cent necklaces.”

Paul grins. “Let’s go.”

At dinner, Aris politely orders “octaroon sashimi,” pointing at the menu. The Japanese waitress frowns with confusion, but

writes down the order without question.

Paul leans back on his chair, balancing on the back two legs. “My uncle went to Japan for business last year,” he tells us. “And the other company took them to this sushi place. They bought an actual live salmon tableside, and cut out the sushi right there. The sushi still had muscle twitch—the pieces of sushi were still twitching on the plate!”

“We have got to try that,” I reply. Aris nods agreement while munching on edamame. He has stopped bothering to remove the soybeans from the pods, and is eating the pods along with the soybeans.

“I don’t think you are supposed to eat them like that,” I helpfully point out.

“Too much work,” he mutters as he continues to chew.

“I hear that,” agrees Paul. “I’ve stopped peeling bananas before I eat them.”

“Obviously,” I chime in. “Like, why should I cut open a coconut before I eat it? The outer shell is just fiber, right?”

“Or open the car door before I drive it,” adds Paul.

I pick up the keys I have left on the table. “Yeah. Why do I need these keys? I need to go into my apartment, I’ll just bust through the fucking wall, right?”

Paul grins. “Or why should I undress before fucking? That’s why God made semen a liquid, so it can go through cloth more easily, obviously.”

Aris gives us a bored look. “Ha-ha, very hilarious. I, for one, will be taking my wang out before I buttsex each of your moms tonight.”

“Wong.” I correct him.

They both look at me, totally confused. “Huh?” asks Aris.

“Wong. The Chinese last name ‘Wang’ is pronounced ‘Wong.’ It means ‘king.’ And since we are in a Japanese restaurant, which is sort of the same, we should be respectful.”

Aris nods gravely. “My bad. Take my wong out. Didn’t mean to be culturally insensitive.”

The thing that I have neglected to mention to either of them so far is that part of my desire to go to New Orleans has to do with my own wong. Not to buy white sex slaves, or any sex slaves, but to visit Maddie Carpenter. Madison Carpenter. Male President, Ruggedly Masculine Job. Jefferson Lumberjack was, apparently, taken.

But, just as a person without sight develops sharper hearing, Madison Carpenter had balanced her ruggedly masculine name with a lithe, feminine frame, angelically pale blonde hair, and unexpectedly large tits. And she was brilliant. Or maybe I was just too brain addled to think in her presence, or disagree with her about anything. We had been friends in college—because I wanted to have sex with her, and didn’t have the cojones to be direct about it. I hadn’t seen her for a couple years, and maybe now things would be different. After all, I had way more sexual experience now, and money, and I had been in the newspaper, and I had diamond fucking cufflinks, which I would gladly give away to do dirty and unspeakable things to her.

The one time I had stood up to her had been about jewelry. “If we get married,” she announced to me one day as we strolled to the cafeteria, “I want you to get me a ruby engagement ring. Surrounded by diamonds, obviously.”

“Right,” I had replied agreeably. “Surround the ring with diamonds.”

“Surround the *ruby* with diamonds, smartass. A beautiful, pigeon’s blood ruby.”

“A *what?*”

“That’s the best color of ruby. Pigeon’s blood.”

I stopped walking. “That’s not a real color.”

She hesitated. “Sure it is. The color of the blood of a pigeon.”

We usually talked about art and architecture and literature and other shit I knew nothing about, but this was my area. “That’s not one color. In the veins it is one color, in the arteries another. And once it’s out of the pigeon, it immediately starts to change color. It’s not the same color after a few hours, or probably even a few minutes.”

“Oh.” She looked, for a moment, frail and hesitant, and I would have given my left nut to marry or buttfuck her right then. “Okay, then the color of fresh blood from a pigeon’s arteries.” She made a face. “God, that sounds graphic. Now I don’t even want a ruby engagement ring anymore.”

It occurred to me that, at some point, someone had probably grabbed a pigeon and broken its neck in order to compare its blood to the color of a ruby he was either buying or selling.

“Hey, I’m sorry. How about I take you to that frozen yogurt place after dinner?”

That mollified her a bit, and I scored a nice fake date. At the frozen yogurt place, she opted for pomegranate sorbet. Pomegranate, by the way, is the second most desirable color of ruby. But, the pomegranate sorbet was more of a pink color, the color I was

certain matched the nipples of the tits I wanted to sensuously kiss and then jizz on.

Madison was, in general, one of those girls who was impossible to impress. She never seemed to get past a first date with anyone before being disappointed with them. And nothing I could ever do seemed to turn our friendship in any way romantic. We just spent several hours a week chastely non-dating each other all through college.

Aris held a piece of his purple and white “octaroon” sashimi between his chopsticks. “There is one flaw in your analysis,” he indicates. “Where you said that the slave owners were forced to see their octopussy slaves as like them, not as ‘others.’”

“What?” I ask, waiting for whatever silly joke is coming.

“Since when the fuck does any man look at any women he wants to bone as a person? When does he see them as anything but an ‘other?’”

Paul nods silently. I look at my pink toro sashimi, the most expensive cut of sushi at this restaurant. It is the color of pomegranate sorbet, and, in my imagination, Maddie’s nipples, her pussy, and her asshole.

PRACHA KUNEKORN WAS a lightweight Muay Thai champion decades ago. He is now about sixty years old, under a hundred pounds, and could kick my ass in about three seconds.

“I show you.” He puts out his arm. “Hold wrist.”

I obey. He twists his wrist and breaks my hold easily.

“No, not like woman. Hold firmly.”

He tries to break my hold the same way, but this time I hang

on. Now, he uses the other hand to help, and breaks free.

“You see. Different levels of force. Light force. Medium force. Knockout force. Killing force. I show.”

He puts out his wrist again. I hold, and hope that it’s not time to demonstrate killing force. This time he doesn’t break my hold. Instead, he pulls me forward, and stops me with his knee an inch from my mouth.

“You hold. I pull. You fall. You see?”

“Yes, Sifu,” I reply. Master Kunekorn rolls his eyes. He has told me to call him Pracha, so I obviously refuse to.

“Now you. First hold, light force.”

I put out my wrist. He guides my arm. “Your elbow to my elbow. Break hold.”

It’s pretty easy. “But, wait, Sensei,” I interject. “Why do we learn the light force at all? Why not only the lethal force?”

“No, need many different force. Your friend, he say, ‘You come into pool with me.’ You no want go pool. He try drag you from hamburger barbecue. You do what? You kill friend? You knock teeth out? No, you break hold. Two friends drag, you break hold more strong. You don’t say, ‘He want put me in pool, I kill him.’ You see?”

I laugh. “Thank you, Guruji.”

We spend some time breaking holds. Then we work on kicks. “Yes, kick with shin, not foot. Shin strong. Top of foot weak. Heel strong.” Then, finally, we spend a half hour sparring. During that half hour, I land zero punches and zero kicks. It’s not that he moves or dodges quickly. In fact, he moves and dodges slowly, lazily. It’s as if he knows where the kick will be like 20 seconds before I even

think about it, and he calmly moves out of the way and watches me kick the air in front of him. No matter how much I mask my punches, no matter how precisely I follow the drills of not telegraphing my moves, he always knows.

After some time, he says. "Now we sit." He sits down cross-legged on the mat, and I do the same. "You big, strong, American man. You bench press how much?"

"Two-thirty, Master," I reply.

"I old, small. I bench press fifty, maybe sixty. I no strong. We fight ten times, I win ten times. Why?"

"Because I can't hit you, Lao Shi."

He nods. "But, why you can't hit? I small, but not small like fly."

I laugh. "Because you are never where I try to hit."

He raises a finger. "Yes. But, where you try hit? Head. Head. Always head. You try body shot, but your body shot just setup for head shot. I know what you do before you start fight. Everybody know what you do before you do. I tell you today what you do in six months. Head. Head. Or body shot to distract, then head."

"But, Professor, the head is most vulnerable," I protest.

He shakes his head. "All body is vulnerable. Knockout not just head. Knockout from pain, you know? Enough pain in leg, enemy knock out. Fall asleep. Break leg, enemy no move. No kick. No power to punch, if break leg. Break arm, enemy run. Or easy to hurt now. Break wrist. Weaken enemy. Cripple enemy. You do three hundred punch to head, five hundred kick to head, you miss. I do five kick to ankle, four kick to wrist, I hit. I win."

In slow motion, I kick Aris in the side with my red python boots. He falls back against the railing of the airport moving walk-

way. He comes back at me in slow motion with an uppercut to the jaw. I slump against the moving walkway.

“I wonder how many sex toy commercials have used this song,” muses Aris. I notice that the airport is playing “Good Vibrations.”

Paul shakes his head. “Licensing would be too expensive.”

“Then, whenever the copyright runs out,” Aris revises, “I wonder how many sex toy commercials will use this song.”

“On this math TV show, they did a rendition of this, but they used ‘Tessellations’ instead of ‘Good Vibrations,’” I say.

Aris turns sideways on the moving walkway, and leans back against the moving railing. “What the fuck is a tessellation?”

“Like a geometric pattern,” I explain. “Different interlocking geometric shapes, to cover an area. Like hexagons and triangles and shit, on like a floor pattern.”

Aris nods. The nod continues, and he’s nodding to the music. Suddenly he sings, in the same tune, “I’m talkin’ ‘bout penetration.”

I grin. Paul sings backup, “Oo-ooh, penetration.”

Aris sings, “Prepubescent violation.”

Paul and I harmonize, “Oo-ooh, penetration.”

There’s a pause as we think. The airport music switches to “Jailhouse Rock.” We don’t care.

Paul sings, “There’s gonna be a sharp sensation.”

I add, “There’s gonna be some incarceration.”

All three: “Oo-oo-oo-ooh, Penetration.”

We laugh. I’m relieved that there are so few travelers at this time on a weekday.

On the plane, Aris says, “You know that time you had ankle surgery? You know they saw your junk, right?”

I stop searching for pretzels in the snack mix. “Why?”

“They would have needed to flip you over, onto your back. Naked flip.”

I shrug. “Who gives a shit? I was unconscious.”

He grins evilly. “Yeah, but *they* weren’t.”

Depending how you look at it, New Orleans’ French Quarter either has no dark underbelly, or only a dark underbelly. It’s a giant, drunken, frat party—rock and hip hop party music, high school and college kids, and cups and bottles of beer everywhere.

Paul and Aris grab bottles of Guinness at the hotel bar. As soon as we walk out of the hotel, a group of high school girls hand us several glittery beaded necklaces, and run off shrieking, “WOOOOOOO!” before any of us have gotten the chance to thank or attempt to seduce them.

On the flip side, the permanent drunkenness erases any dark side. It’s not an issue of relativity. It’s not that if it’s all dark side, then no one part is any darker than any other. It’s that the drunkenness is an anaesthetic. If you are, at best, dimly aware of something, how bad could it be? Is it seduction if the target is unconscious, or is it just less smelly necrophilia? Is the violation really meaningful if the violatee isn’t aware of it?

We walk into a bar a bit down the street that is playing 80s music at stadium concert volume. The bouncer doesn’t check our IDs or even comment on the drinks we are bringing in.

We don’t need to plan—we’ve run this too many times. “Do your thing,” I say to Paul.

Paul makes girls think two things: “safe” and “husband.” He’s tall, blonde, handsome, conservatively dressed. He will approach

the girls first, gain their trust, before Aris and I walk in and make things more interesting.

The “husband” part of Paul’s charm isn’t particularly helpful here in the Big Easy. No one comes here to get drunk for four days straight and come home with someone to introduce to Mom. For that matter, the “husband” charm isn’t particularly useful anywhere. Girls who will sleep with Aris after four hours will wait for four months before letting Paul get past second base. They want him to respect them, to see them as wife material. The idea is that after like eight months, supposedly Paul will think, “Wow, I’m so lucky, this wife-material, high-quality girl is blowing me!” instead of “Why the fuck would I marry this blowjob slut?” Apparently, these girls assume that an Economics major from Princeton doesn’t know the difference between value and price.

In order to deal with the husband issue, Paul does what any good economist would do: he maintains a portfolio of women. Even though each woman may take like eight months to come to maturity, since he has like ten girls at any given time, one is yielding every couple weeks. He doesn’t even have to really break up with them—he can just let them find out that he’s been cheating.

As annoying as the husband-charm can be, the “safe” part of his charm is worth Paul’s weight in diamonds. The myth is that girls are looking for two types: Mr. Right, and Mr. Right Now. Maybe that was true at some point in history, but today it’s more like “Attractive, probably unfaithful guy to have fun with, and unattractive, loyal stooge to marry.” That second guy is the new Mr. Right, and no girl is looking for him in this bar, or really at any bar.

So, no one here is really searching for a man who will stay

around. But, they are looking for a Mr. Right Now who won't brutalize, kidnap, or murder them. For whatever reason, I tend to set off that alarm, but Paul neutralizes it beautifully.

Now, with Paul and Aris engaged in conversation, it's my turn to walk in. "Hey, guys." I punch Paul in the arm, and do one of those handshake chest bump things with Aris. I turn to the girl who seems most in charge, most potentially problematic, and I say, "Hey, you guys aren't trying to corrupt my friend, are you?"

"Excuse me?" she demands. She's a heavyset, bleached blonde girl, but she is guarding two cute waify girls. This is definitely one troll worth talking to.

"What makes you so sure your *friend*," with the emphasis, she makes "friend" sound like it refers to either a gay husband or men-ses, "isn't trying to corrupt us?!"

"Because he is as innocent as the newly fallen snow," I glance at him, and he is grinning evilly. The husband thing should be gone by now. "And you and your henchmen here are anything but."

The troll girl looks mortified. "Excuse me?"

One of the cute ones, a brunette who might be a quarter Asian, says, "Yeah, I'm not a henchman." She's a little slurry. Next to me, Aris continues talking to a couple of the other girls, and one of the girls whispers something to Paul.

"My apologies, miss. Henchwoman, though I'm not sure that's a real word." To the chunky guardian, I say, "Now, I may have been mistaken, mademoiselle, and deeply apologize for any offense." I sort of bow my head, and then offer my hand. "Allow me to introduce myself. Jerome Esterson, at your service."

The mistake that many men make in such a scenario is they

go right for their target. Or they do a quick distraction at the troll guarding the bridge, and then go right for the target. In this case, the target is the hot Asian quadroom. But, that target-seeking is expected, and defended against, in this case by the girl who is the food-eating equivalent of a porn star.

So I'm going to take a different approach. I'm going to seduce the quadroom by talking to the fatty. "You know what I like about you?" I say to the troll. "You're a leader among your friends. You're confident. You aren't afraid to talk. I respect that." The quadroom and the other hottie, a small redhead with a pointy nose, have heard me, and will now feel obliged to talk. No one wants to be the scared little follower.

The troll seems unsure, but she smiles. "You're sweet. Where are you guys from?"

Before I can answer, the tipsy quadroom blurts out, "I like your beard."

It takes all my discipline to not glance down below her belt and say, "Thanks, I like yours too," and then all my discipline reserves to simply say, "Thank you, miss," and turn back to the troll.

PRESENT DAY

As a child, when I used to hear the phrase, "Criminal Underworld," I imagined a secret society where everyone knew everyone. As if there were some secret bars in every city where burglars, drug traffickers, rapists, arsonists, and, of course, "kingpins" hung out, and planned stuff. Like in a Batman movie. Then I wondered why the police didn't just show up to that bar and arrest everyone.

In reality, most criminals are like me—alone. Some work with one or two close friends. *You shove the guy, and I'll sneak the wallet. Or meet us at this corner, we'll jump in the van. Or you drive, I'll shoot.*

Most petty criminals know a handful of other criminals, and that's usually for business. You steal cars, you need to know a good chop shop. You run a chop shop, you need to know some guys who can steal cars.

The large crime syndicates—they are more like unlicensed corporations. In fact, much of what they do to make money involves evading tariffs and other restrictions on mostly legal goods. Corporations have their lobbyists and consultants find legal ways to deal with those tariffs. In fact, most of the morally reprehensible things I have witnessed have been done by legal businesses, not illegal cartels. Drug traffickers don't poison drinking water or use illegally thin shielding on nuclear power plants next to village schools.

A powerful criminal organization rarely needs to use violent enforcement, just like a powerful union rarely needs to actually call a strike. Most of the violence ends up being one petty criminal to another.

The particular corporation I am currently consulting for is having a problem with a particularly powerful union. My job is to help fix it.

In college, I volunteered for a union one summer, and believed to my core that they were the most important part of a fair, capitalist society. A few years later, I believed that they were the most corrupt impediment to a fair, capitalist, society. Now I don't have much of an opinion.

I grin rakishly as I stroll into the client's corporate office. One of the secretaries—Pamela?—is chatting with the receptionist, Erin.

“Good morning, ladies,” I say.

“Mornin', Mr. Esterson.”

“You look tired,” Erin the receptionist observes with a raised eyebrow.

“Yeah, Mr. Esterson,” chides Pamela. “What could you have been doing so late at night?”

There is an art to maintaining a reputation for philandering without actually philandering. Fortunately, that art is about as difficult as finger painting. A handsome bachelor at my age is either a womanizer or gay.

“Alas, Ms. Pamela, Ms. Erin, I was up all night, hoping that you both would be my surprise guests for the evening. But, unless you arrived in the early hours of the morning, or came to the wrong room, you both left me quite disappointed.

“Mr. Esterson, you old dog,” chides Erin the receptionist. “Don't expect us to believe for a second that you were alone.”

I put on a look of polite confusion. “Miss Erin, when did I ever say I was alone?”

I walk off, and look back with an evil smile. They feign total shock.

The other thing that's true about the criminal underworld is that because there are so many loners, no one gives a shit if one goes missing for a while. The petty criminal with a history of drugs is known to be unreliable, disappearing for months at a time, etc. No one looks for them for at least a few weeks. Usually, no one ever looks.

I've been reported a couple times. Or maybe 50 or 5,000 times, but only twice did anyone take the addled word of a homeless

vagrant seriously enough to report it. Or technically once. The first time, it was in a research paper about the homeless that a young sociology major wrote in college. Yours truly was cited as an example of one of the more interesting hallucinations that a particular drug addled homeless person had had. I was described as “dressed like the president,” and that I had “killed a nigger and ate his eyes.” The “nigger” in question was Vietnamese, and I don’t know where the eye thing came from.

The other time was reported in some local tabloid that I guess was trying to loosely base stories on actual events. The witness was never named, but I knew it was real—time, place, etc. The headline was “Gentleman Vigilante in Long Park.”

Catchy, right? Though inaccurate. I’m not really a gentleman, and sure as fuck not a vigilante.

The writer of the article wrote a screenplay based on the made-up article, and *The Gentleman Vigilante* got made by a mid-size independent studio. They even promoted it well enough at Comic-Con that it got picked up by Miramax for distribution. (They had a guy dressed as the Gentleman Vigilante save a lady from a purse snatcher, and then had him slice at him with a fencing sword so his pants fell off, and he had a gentleman vigilante sign on the ass of his boxers.)

I went to the opening night in Los Angeles. It was one of the few times in my adult life that I felt underdressed. The Gentleman Vigilante in the movie dressed like a fucking English Butler at Buckingham Palace or something—tuxedo, ruffled shirt. He carried a cane sword and wore a black stovepipe hat with a white feather. He also spoke in like sonnets or limericks all the time, and

even though he used normal words when he spoke to criminals, he make them sound Shakespearean. And almost every single guy in the theater was wearing a tux (I was wearing a suit, no tie.) Keep in mind, these are mostly teenagers and kids in their early twenties. They *rented* tuxes to see the movie. They actually had to announce before the movie to please remove your tophats, because so many people wore Abe Lincoln style tophats that it would have been impossible to see anything.

So, this Gentleman Vigilante, you find out that his parents were killed by a mugger when he was eight or nine (like Batman), but his mom had always told him how important manners and dress were, so to pay homage to her he is always well-dressed, well-spoken, and polite, especially when he's killing some bad guy (while saying poetry, obviously).

Eventually he finds the kingpin, who is also the president of Oxford, so he is even more educated and refined than the Gentleman Vigilante, and he's like a professor of poetry and also a former fencing champion. So they have this poetry/fencing battle, and then during the battle the kingpin, says,

“Does it not your conscience bother
That it was I who killed your mother?”

Because in order to become president, he had to off his competition which was apparently the Gentleman Vigilante's dad.

The Gentleman Vigilante is stunned, but then he revives, fights back with way more energy, and says this poem that boils down to “slant rhyme is for pussies,” and then stabs the kingpin through the heart.

Anyway, after the thing, everyone in the audience is speak-

ing in these rhyming couplets and all (“Before I go and bang your daughter/I must release some bladder water.”) I ended up seeing it twice.

NEW ORLEANS: 15 YEARS AGO

We stop at one of the many outdoor vendors of silver and steel rings.

“What do you guys think of this one?” Aris asks. “Does this say, ‘Anti-Domesticity’ enough?”

It’s a steel thumb ring with a band of black flames through the center. I shrug. “Yeah, I guess. But I feel like we can find something more...old-world.”

Paul strolls over. “Tempered in the blood of slain octaroons.”

Jesus. I look around the street to see who would be lynching my silver tongued friend. Paul realizes his mistake. He smiles carelessly. “My bad.”

“Seriously?” I demand, but I can’t not snicker.

Aris now has one thumb ring on each hand, and has accosted a small group of girls. “So, which do you think looks better,” he asks. “This one?” He moves the right thumb upwards in a slight curve, subtly miming sticking his thumb up a girl’s ass. Paul and I barely keep straight faces. Fortunately, the girls don’t get the joke.

“Or this one?” He now mimes shoving the left thumb up a girl’s ass.

The girls consider. Aris wiggles the right thumb. I turn away, take a few steps, and laugh silently. Paul keeps his cool. By the time I turn back, Aris is now twisting his thumbs back and forth,

“So which one like, feels better, in your gut. Like internally, which do you like?”

“That one looks more feminine,” volunteers a girl. She has a point—it looks sort of like a girl’s wedding band.

“So it’s a good way to pick up dykes?” he inquires politely. A couple of the girls laugh. The rest seem pissed.

“Why do guys always only think about picking up girls?” one girl demands.

Aris shrugs. “Biology. Without guys wanting to have sex, there would be no more babies.” He turns towards Paul and me, and wiggles both thumbs. “Ribbed for her pleasure,” he notes.

“Disgusting,” comments the first girl. “Is that all you can talk about?”

“I suppose we could talk about Sartre and Camus if you prefer,” he pronounces the names correctly, but with an exaggerated French accent. “Or, as you would say, Sarter and Camuss.”

The girl’s eyes go wide with furious disbelief. “Wow. I was an English major. I’ve studied those writers far more than you have.”

Aris glances at her dismissively as he says, “Your parents must be so proud,” and then turns back towards us as he takes his bottle of Guinness back from Paul.

The girl looks like she is going to hit him, so I step up to try to smooth things over. “Listen, I’m sorry, he’s had a bit too much to drink. He’s normally a lot more fun to talk to.”

She’s far from mollified. “He should know how to behave himself better. I’m sorry, but your friend is an idiot.”

I try to smile charmingly. “I know he seems that way right now, but on any normal day I know you would have a great time talking

to him about Camus and Sartre, and Nietzsche and Socrates and everyone else.”

Later, as we walk down the street, Aris asks, “Who’s Camus, anyway?”

Paul snickers. “Nice.”

I roll my eyes. “We read him in high school. Remember that Myth of Sisyphus?”

Aris considers. “The guy who had to push up the rock? I thought that thing was from Greek Mythology. Wasn’t Camus way more recent?”

“He didn’t write the original story. He wrote this existential analysis of it, where he basically says that Sisyphus takes power from the gods by choosing to push the rock up the hill of his own accord. That way, the punishment loses power, because he is now choosing to do it.”

Aris stops. “So, you’re telling me that by just being more obedient, he is somehow taking power from the gods?”

“It’s not more obedient—it’s disobeying by doing the same actions for his own reasons—dude, I don’t know, it’s complicated. Paul, tell him.”

Paul grins. “Wait, who is Sisyphus again?”

We resume walking.

“But, what happens,” muses Aris, “if he refuses to push up the rock? They can’t make him voluntarily do it, right? They can drag him up with the rock, but then they are dragging up the rock.”

I look at Paul who just shrugs. “I suppose they would just punish him worse. Like burn him forever if he doesn’t play along?” Even as I say it, it sounds wrong.

“But then the actual punishment is the burning, and the rock is the plea bargain. But, it always seemed in the story like the rock itself is the punishment. I mean, he’s not like that other guy who was way hungry and thirsty, but the water and food kept going away from him—what’s that guy’s name?”

“Tantalus.”

We have come to another ring seller, with similar options. Aris picks up one with a gecko design, and slips it onto his thumb.

“Right, it’s not like Tantalus, because the gods took normal human urges, thirst and hunger, and increased them. Or just left them normal, but made it impossible to drink or eat, which by itself would have made him hungry and thirsty. So there they are just frustrating the desires. But it’s not like there is an inherent desire to push rocks up hills. And he always seems to be doing it sort of unwillingly, except in Camus’ version. And even if he wanted to, after the first of couple times he would probably have learned his lesson, and given up. Unless he has some kind of retard OCD. He knows what’s going to happen. Why not just do nothing? Why not just lie there? Why not say, ‘Fuck off, gods,’ and make their super-creative and famous punishment just not work, and force them to just burn him or whatever? Rob them of their elegance. And at least that’s passive—you don’t have to try hard every day.”

“Maybe he thought there was a chance it would work,” suggests Paul.

“After like four thousand years of doing it? Did Sisyphus have Down’s Syndrome?”

“Dude, why didn’t you just discuss all that with the English

major girl?” I ask.

Aris shrugs. “Rather push a rock up a hill.”

I look through the rings. Paul was right about the “tempered in the blood of slain octaroons” comment. For whatever unconscious reason, that’s what I am searching for. I want the lady in the dark back room of an antique store to say, “These are the manacles used on the sex slaves that...” or something. Even though I’m morally opposed to slavery, even though racism pisses me off, I’m looking for some object stained by the darkness of the time. Am I a 12 year old wearing a death metal T-shirt?

One tiny store at the end of an alley has some unsettling masks for sale. Hope surges—were these masks part of some dark and unspeakable ritual, some secret voodoo practice, virgin sacrifice, something? “These were made by a rising local artist,” the guy working there explains. “She wanted to explore the community influences of New Orleans Jazz, West African folk art, and Western gender roles. Do you see how these masks combine some male features with female ones? Look at the chin, the forehead, the painted cheeks...”

“Tranny masks,” quips Aris. The guy laughs as the formality evaporates. He’s a few years younger than us, college or maybe even high school age, with shaggy blonde hair and an eyebrow ring.

“You guys should see this girl, the one who makes them,” he confides. “First time I saw her, I was 100% sure she was a man.”

“First time I saw you,” Aris replies, “I was 100% sure you were a girl.”

The kid laughs. “Anyway,” Aris continues, “my friend here is looking for some old artifacts. Where can we find those?”