



JERRY
STAHL

Author of *Permanent Midnight*

Pain Killers

"Jerry Stahl should either
get the Pulitzer prize
or be shot down in the
street like a dog."

—ANTHONY BOURDAIN

II

a novel



Pain Killers

JERRY STAHL

 HarperCollins e-books

For Monah Li

I spend most of my time not dying.

—Frederick Seidel

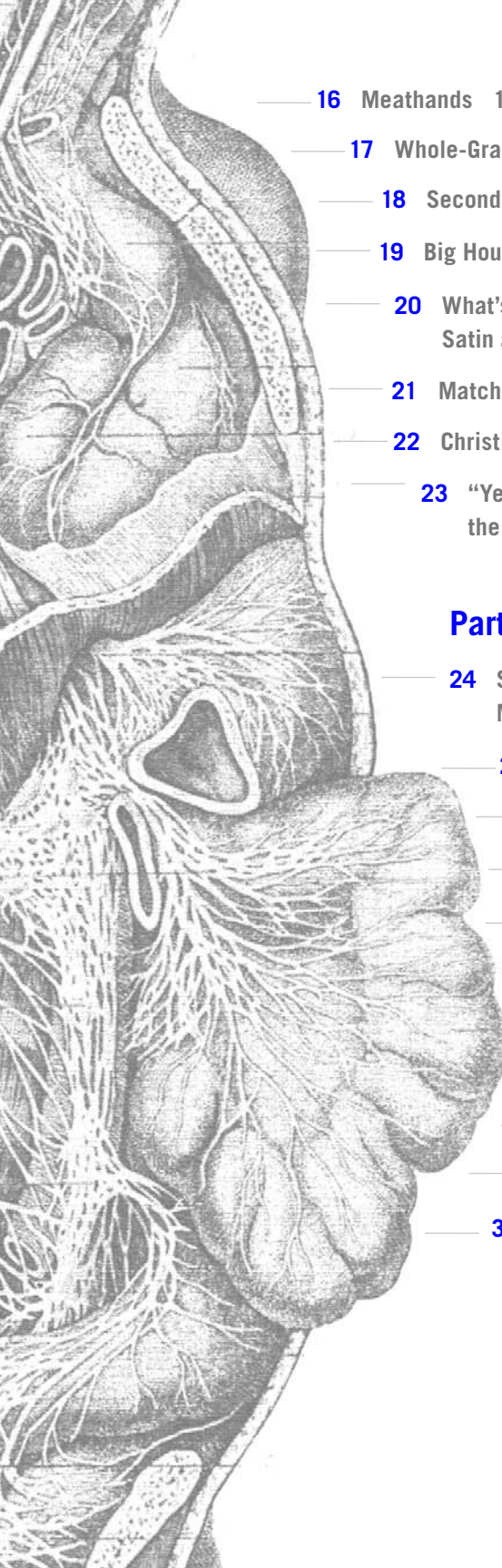


Contents

Epigraph iii

Part I

- **1** Home Invasion 3
- **2** The Job 13
- **3** Quentin Adjacent 24
- **4** Meet the Warden 35
- **5** Wine in a Box 45
- **6** Binge and Purge 56
- **7** Fucking on the Edge of a Cliff 62
- **8** Dr. Death 68
- **9** The Red Cross Is There 74
- **10** Two-Hundred-Year-Old Billy Idol 82
- **11** Pale Blue Eyes 97
- **12** Including Los Angeles Garmento 108
- **13** Vietcong Sex 116
- **14** The Addict's Way 125
- **15** Life Coach, Hymen Wrangler 135



- **16** Meathands 140
- **17** Whole-Grain Nazis 146
- **18** Second Class 167
- **19** Big House Chasids 189
- **20** What's Under All That
Satin and Fur? 198
- **21** Matching Blue Lips 210
- **22** Christian Fun Girls 234
- **23** “Yea Though I Walk Through
the Condo of Meth” 249

Part II

- **24** So Charles Mingus Says to
Mother Teresa . . . 261
- **25** Rescue Dog 265
- **26** *Qué Coche Más Chingo!* 280
- **27** Storm Drain 289
- **28** Get in the Van 294
- **29** Pain Factory 301
- **30** Fear Eats the Soul 317
- **31** Hemingway's Vagina 334
- **32** Bag Man 366
- **33** Just Say *Nein!* 384
- **34** Love in the Time of
Relapse 400

[About the Author](#)

[Other Books by Jerry Stahl](#)

[Credits](#)

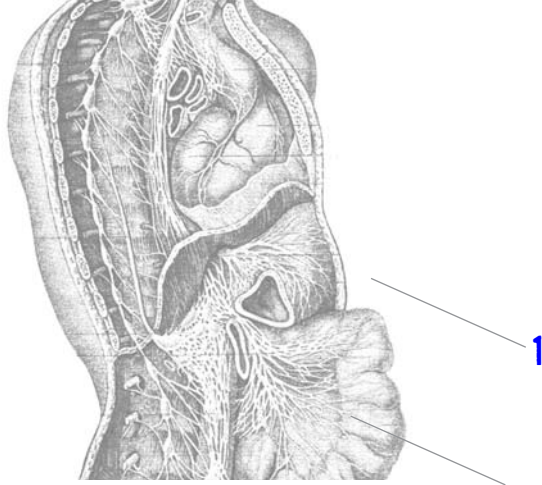
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Part I





Home Invasion

Sun Myung Moon looked great in a bikini.

The sight did not inspire me to schedule gender reassignment, but it was undeniably engaging. As my eyes strayed to the other eighty-by-ten glossies on the bedroom dresser, I found myself wondering if the arrangement was random or if there was some coded message in the way things had been laid out.

The buxom Sun Myung, sandwiched between a muu-muu'd Pope Benedict and a severely hog-tied Clarence Thomas, floated directly over Jerry Falwell, who appeared to be reading the Bible while spanking a hefty, ball-gagged blonde with CHOOSE LIFE branded across her coccyx. Of the four, Falwell was the only one who looked like he was enjoying himself. Maybe that was the message the home invader meant to convey: *Party like Falwell!* Or maybe, in the manner of burglars who relieve themselves on the carpet after stealing your silverware, the message was the fact that they were able to leave anything at all. The message was: *Hey, asshole, look what we can do!*

There was, certainly, a lesson in Justice Thomas's comportment.

Despite the obvious pain and degradation, his expression was one of infinite patience. Gentle understanding. I had never been a fan, but his stoic bearing won me over. The man had nobility.

I basked in that thought for a moment, then reality clawed me again. My home invader might still be in my home. I cried out, feeling like an idiot, “*I’m a cop!*” That’s when I noticed a black and white photo, smaller than the others, wedged behind a dresser leg.

This one showed a smiling, gap-toothed fellow in a uniform. He might have been Jack Lemmon’s cousin, if Jack Lemmon’s cousin had a trim mustache and served in the SS. The twin lightning bolts on the lapels were a dead giveaway. The officer in the photo was in a laboratory, a forbidding nurse at his side. He clamped calipers in both hands, simultaneously measuring the budding breasts of naked, pubescent twin girls on his left and right. Stamped under the shot, in block letters, was BEIDHÄNDIG. Below that, in a looping scrawl, someone had penned the translation: *ambidextrous*.

The ex-cop in me knew I should stop staring and deal with the situation—however it is you deal with strangers planting celebrity perv pics in your bedroom. But the image of that smiling SS man and his calipers was so disturbing, my eyes retreated to the puckish Moon. Why shouldn’t the Korean messiah enjoy some dress-up? Think what early Christians would have done if Jesus had been resurrected with cleavage!

All speculation was shattered by a gravelly voice behind me. “They’re not real!” Before I could react, something cracked the back of my head. I don’t remember going down. I only remember coming to, blinking away twirling stars, in a forced crouch. Trapped in a tiny aluminum jail.

“Christ!” I cried.

“*Him*, I got no photos.”

I blinked some more and realized I wasn’t in jail. I was cramped

within the four legs of a walker. A heavily jowled old man waited for me to raise my eyes, then spat an inch from my knee.

“Putz!”

I considered punching the senior intruder in the testicles. They were, in my Guantánamo crouch, at eye level, drooping prominently behind the shiny weave of his poly-blend Sansabelt trousers.

“What kind of schmohawk gets mugged by a seventy-two-year-old with a walker?”

“Happens all the time.” I yanked myself up by a walker leg so that my new friend and I were jammed face-to-face, like two guys squeezed into a telephone booth. “Just last week an old lady brained me with her orthopedic cane, and the day before that some prick with Alzheimer’s kicked me down a flight of stairs, then forgot he did it and kicked me down another flight.”

“Oh, a funny guy.”

“That’s me,” I said. “May I?”

I lifted one of his hands off the grip and eased by him. The old man’s breath stank of sardines and horseradish. When he picked something fleshy off his tongue and flicked it at me, I slapped him.

“That’s disgusting.”

My attacker rubbed his face, his mouth forming a smile that looked like it was made of other people’s lips. “How ’bout that, the kid’s not a complete pussy.”

I kicked the walker away and caught him when he fell forward. I was that tough.

“How about you shut the fuck up so I can decide whether to strangle you or not? It’d be legal—you broke in!”

This seemed to make the jowly old man even happier. “So what’s stopping you?”

“I’m curious. You make a habit of hobbling around, planting bad tabloid shots in people’s houses? There money in that?”

The old guy spat out another fleck and I backhanded him.

“I live here, Pops. Stop hocking on my carpet.”

He spat again. This time when I tried to slap him, he caught my hand. His grip was a shock, but no more than his reflexes. He kept grinning until he let my hand drop. “Bad habit,” he said.

I winced, which I knew he’d enjoy. Then I righted the fallen walker and handed it back to him. “You still haven’t told me about the pictures.”

“I got a job for you.”

“So that’s why you Walker Texas Rangered me?”

“I wanted to get your attention. The pics are fakes. Photoshop.”

“Fuck the pictures. What are you doing here?”

He shrugged. “You break into a man’s home, you want to give him a show. Ha!”

The old man feinted left with a jab and cackled when I ducked. Enough strange things had happened in my life that the bar for “strange” was fairly high. But this was getting up there.

“Okay, I lied,” the old man blurted. “They’re not all fakes.”

He tapped the gap-toothed SS man in my hand.

“This one is real. He’s the only one I’m interested in.”

“The Nazi. Uh-huh. You know where he lives?”

His meaty lips crumpled in a kind of private giggle. “San Quentin. Ever been there?”

“No.”

“It’s prime real estate. Right near the ocean.”

“I’ve got a lot of questions, but I’m going to start with ‘Why me?’”

“Look at this place. Your life is for shit.”

“That makes me special?”

“It makes you a guy who might think San Quentin’s an improvement.”

“You trying to hire me or put me away?”

“Hire you.”

“To go to prison? Wasn’t that a bad Steven Seagal movie?”

“As opposed to the many fine ones. You’re not listening. You won’t be *in* prison. You’ll be *at* prison.”

“Right. So when I’m gang-raped in my cell, all that D-block dick will be *at* my ass, it won’t be *in* it.”

“For God’s sake!” The old man slapped the photo of the SS man in my hand. “All you have to do is check him out.”

I studied the photograph. “If he’s even alive, he’s gotta be a hundred-something.”

“Ninety-seven. Twenty-four years older than me.”

“It sounds like you know him.”

“We’ve met.”

I waited for more. Nothing. “Who is he?”

A shadow passed over the old man’s face. His bluster was suddenly gone.

“Josef Mengele.”

Just saying the name somehow drained him. I had to help him into a chair. For the first time it occurred to me that maybe my uninvited guest had wandered out of a rest home. Maybe his worried loved ones were scouring the streets.

“Mengele died in ’seventy-nine,” I said as gently as possible. “I saw it on the Biography Channel. Chances are he’s probably still dead.”

The old man regarded me with clear eyes. “He might be. Or he might be in San Quentin. All you have to do is talk to him. You’ll know.”

“Why me? There must be a dozen Simon Wiesenthal guys trying to find him.”

“Ten dozen. But nobody’s asking you to find him. He’s been found. All you need to do is identify him. See if it’s really him.”

“How do I do that?”

“By helping him.”

“Helping him?” Now *I* wanted to sit down. “What are you, a fuck-ing Nazi?”

“Far from it. This is part of a plan. And it’s all set up. Do you have anything to drink?”

I grabbed a bottle of water from beside the bed and gave it to him. He gulped heartily and handed the bottle back with a steady hand. His voice was strong again. “You pose as a drug counselor. Teach a class. There’ll be a few of you in the group, and one of them will be Mengele—or won’t be. You’ll all be sharing your stories.”

“You think Mengele, you think sharing.”

“Go ahead and mock. Are you familiar with the term ‘recovery’?”

“I’ve read about it,” I said.

“Well, that’s what you’ll be doing. You’ll be teaching a drug awareness class.”

“And I live up there?”

“Just for a few days. You do the job, and maybe when you come back, you still have a home.”

He reached in his jacket and pulled out one of the flyers the Realtor had stuffed into the buyer’s box she’d spiked into the lawn. NOTICE TO FORECLOSE. She kept sticking them in the box, I kept ripping the box out.

“It makes you feel like an American,” I said, “when you have the same problems as other Americans. . . . But it’s hard to keep up.”

“Like I say, don’t think San Quentin. Think Marin County. Prime real estate. You’ll be right on the water.”

He could see the hesitation in my face. I’ve never been good at just saying no.

“What happens if it is him? A bunch of Jews have him killed?”

“Which Jews?”

“What do you mean ‘Which Jews?’”

“The ones inside or out? Jews in the penitentiary are different than Jews on the outside.”

“I’m guessing, inside or out, there’s a bunch who’d like to skip a trial and go directly to revenge.”

“Some might want to take him out for revenge. Others to hide complicity. I’m talking about Jews, but not necessarily Jew-Jews.”

“What?”

He stared at me with something like pity, then lifted his heavy old man’s body out of the wing chair.

“Some might want to take him out for revenge. Others to hide complicity. I’m talking about Jews, but not necessarily Jewy Jews.”

“What?”

“As I was trying to tell you, there is a difference between Jews who are incarcerated and those who aren’t. See, inside, white trumps Semite. Plenty of Jews are ALS.”

“They have Lou Gehrig’s Disease?”

“Shmuck! Say that too loud, you’re going to break out in flesh wounds. ALS stands for Aryan Land Sharks. They’re about White Power. The baddest of the bad. They don’t take too kindly to being confused with a charity disease.” He put his hand on my shoulder in an avuncular fashion and shrugged. “It’s a different world. Name’s Harry Zell, by the way.”

What could I say but “Nice to meet you, Harry”?

Zell looked at his watch. His shirtsleeves covered his wrists. I couldn’t see if there was a faded number. But there were many other things to mull over—beginning with the proverbial elephant in the room, swinging its trunk between the double bed and dented portable TV.

“So, Josef Mengele is alive, huh?”

Zell kept his response nonverbal: rubbing his fleshy nose and making an *accch* noise.

“I mean, if it’s true, this is a pretty huge event.”

This time Zell drummed his fingers on the walker.

“Hey! It’s not like you can walk into a man’s place, smack him on the head and ask him to find somebody. Well,” I corrected myself, “you *can*. I’m just saying . . . *Mengele*? I can’t believe he’s just sit-

ting there. Waiting to be found. If he's telling people who he is, what makes you think he'll even be there when I show up? Or that I'll be able to get past the CNN trucks?"

Zell repeated the *accchh* and finger drumming, then pursed his meaty lips, sucked in his breath and blew it out in one long sardine-scented sigh, as if a lifetime of disappointment and resignation had prepared him for this one big one.

"He is saying who he is, right?"

"Sure," said Zell. "There's another old freak who says he's Mickey Mantle, three more screaming they're Jesus, and let's not talk about Elvis. If you were an *alta kocker* in a jail cell, wouldn't you want to be somebody else?"

"Maybe. But not a genocidal maniac with a price on his head. Even if it's him—he got away with it this long, why would he come out of hiding now?"

"Because he wants credit."

"For what?"

"Exactly! All you know about him is the genocidal maniac stuff—what about the good things?"

"Are you insane?"

"Me, no. But I'm depending on you to tell me if *he* is. His psych eval describes him as borderline schizophrenic. I checked. Who's gonna believe a schizo in jail? But he doesn't act out. They don't have him on file as a gasser or anything."

"So they don't know what he did to his patients when he was done with them?"

"Not that kind of gasser. Don't you watch *Lockdown*? Gassing is when a prisoner throws urine or feces at a guard. Sometimes they make a soup. The thing I do know is he's vain. So never take him seriously. As in, do not show him respect. Do not react. No matter what he says, no matter how horrible. If it's him, that will drive him crazy. A

vain man at the end of his life. That's as close as we're going to get to DNA. I'll give you ten grand."

"Ten grand's not much, considering."

"I'll get your house back for you."

I did not want to argue. I'd been living on fumes for a while. Continuing to live that way seemed suddenly unbearable. But still . . .

"It's just too fucking unlikely," I said.

"Unlikely?" he repeated, brightening for the first time. "Exactly! Looking at your life, I said to myself, 'Here, Harry, is a man who has never had a problem with the unlikely.'" His voice began to rise, and I kept an eye on his walker in case he tried to swing it again. "I said, 'Here is a man whose own past history, if you had to stick it in a box and put a title on it, that box would say UN-FUCKING-LIKELY. Here is a man who married a woman he met when she murdered her husband with drain cleaner and broken lightbulbs in a bowl of Lucky Charms.'"

"No need to flatter," I said. "Cops meet all kinds of interesting people. Sometimes they even marry them. I'm glad you did your homework—but what does my checkered past have to do with anything?"

"Isn't it obvious? I need somebody I can trust. Who's also desperate," he added, meeting my eyes. "If you weren't desperate, you wouldn't take the job. But if I couldn't trust you, I wouldn't want to give it to you. It's not an easy combination."

"You still haven't told me why you want Mengele."

"The man has his reasons for saying who he is. I have my reasons for finding out the truth."

I started to say something else, and he held up his hand. "Enough. The warden knows everything. You'll meet him first."

I followed him out to the living room, where he stopped to take in the photo of my wife and daughter on the wall.

"Your family?"

His tone was somewhere between inquiry and concern. I gazed at the picture, surprised by the sudden flood of emotion at the sight of my sullen, long-lashed sixteen-year-old daughter and my beautiful, high-cheek-boned newly-ex wife.

“My family, yes. Good to know they’re out there,” I heard myself croak.

When I opened the front door, he stopped and delivered his final instructions.

“Remember, with Mengele, you can be polite, but show no respect. Don’t take him seriously. For him, any disrespect is—”

He didn’t finish. He just grabbed the walker and smashed it into a mirror.

“Do you understand?”

“I get it,” I said, picking glass out of my eyebrow.

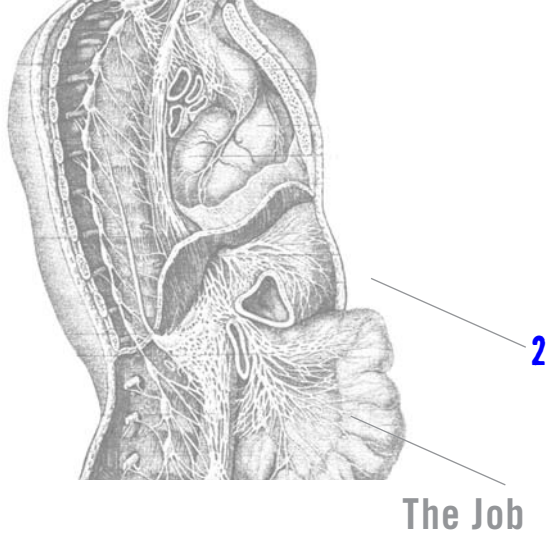
“Good. Then we understand each other. You’ll get an envelope with details and cash.”

Zell kicked the walker out of his way and strode with crunching, great man strides out to a waiting limousine.

I shook a few more mirror shards out of my hair, then watched him open the limo door himself and get in. I wasn’t mad about the mirror—why would I want to look at me? Business being what it was, I was not even that upset at Zell’s perverted and violent mode of job recruitment.

No.

What bothered me, more than anything, was that I knew I was going to take the job.



Burbank to San Francisco was a one-hour flight. United only had two rows of first class. It was weirdly satisfying to be sitting in one of them, feeling the eyes of lesser-ticketed humans as they passed by after I'd been boarded and seated. The resentment in their glances was almost tangible: *Why is that shabby bastard sitting in first?*

The tickets had been hand-delivered in a gray envelope with the cash, along with a copy of the smiling SS Zell had left on my dresser and a time-projection etching of ninetysomething Mengele. It was odd to see the same technology used for missing-children flyers applied to a nonagenarian Nazi. Instead of baby Nancy at three and thirteen it was Dr. Mengele in his Jack Lemmon–circa–*The Apartment* prime and in his current dotage.

A smaller envelope within contained a passport, driver's license and Social Security card. It would have been cool, in a *Mission: Impossible* way, if I'd been given a new identity. That scene in every movie where the spy is told, "From now on, you will be Laszlo Toth. You were a furrier in Madrid." Sadly, this being real life, I was given my own identity. My own SS number, my face on my driver's license. It

was like finding out there's reincarnation, then coming back as yourself. I had not realized my wallet had been emptied of ID until the walker bandit, Harry Zell, gave it back to me with the tickets. Mostly I used cash, when I had it, so I didn't pull out my wallet a lot. The credit cards were pretty much there if I had to break into a locked door. Which A) I did not often have to do, and B) never really worked except on TV. In real life, if you don't have a locksmith and burglar skills, you were pretty much fucked.

Ever thoughtful, Zell had included the San Quentin visitors' dress code in the envelope. "No blue denim! No orange jumpsuits!" (Because, really, why *wouldn't* you drop into a state prison dressed like a state prisoner?) But my favorite deal-breaker was "No see-through tops!" Who knew? Zell—or whoever packed his packages—had also thrown in a paperback of *Chicken Soup for the Prisoner's Soul*. I left it in the sick-bag slot.

The only fraudulent part of the paperwork was my state certificate, proof of my status as licensed drug and alcohol counselor. I had a diploma from somewhere called Steinhelm Life-Skills Institute. It looked as legitimate as I did.

From the road, San Quentin might have been a vast, oceanside nineteenth-century resort. The sprawl of brick and stone blended into the upward roll of land over the Pacific. Think Hilton Head, but institutional, with a death house.

I gave my name at a gate that looked like an overgrown toll booth. A steely blond woman took my driver's license and picked a green receiver from a wall phone. While I waited I took in a ruined gazebo halfway up a curving driveway to the right: a tiny haven, ringed by stone nymphs, where a robber baron might have thrown a birthday

party for his daughter in 1911. W. C. Fields might have lumbered out of it with a croquet mallet and a flask.

“Officer Rincin will be down to meet you in a few minutes.”

There was nowhere to wait. The sun was merciless. I watched an older prisoner in denim and a blue shirt push a wheelbarrow over to a bed of flaming red flowers by the entry road. He kneeled down and touched the first one, gave it a moment, tamped the ground around it a little, then moved on to the next flower and did the same thing. On one level, this scenario stood out as a profound statement about man’s ability to transcend his surroundings and experience beauty even in the direst circumstance. On another, it was a guy kneeling in dirt, blowing his bad breath on a flower, a guy who’d grow old and die sleeping four feet from a toilet.

A screen door slammed. I saw a pair of middle-aged ladies in straw hats and vacation wear step from a small building I hadn’t noticed. The San Quentin gift shop. I checked the pathway down from the brick administration building, saw no one hurrying my way, and headed over for some souvenirs. Sometimes you just have to pamper yourself.

Inside, the ladies giggled over a wooden paddle with a droopy convict in stripes painted on it, over the caption BETTER BE GOOD.

“Is this not the cutest?”

“Ed can put this up right over the bar!”

Lucky Ed. They were still tittering when I stepped inside. The shop occupied a small white room with four glass cases and walls hung with prisoner art and handiwork. A handwritten sign over the old-fashioned cash register said GO AHEAD, SHOPLIFT! Behind the register was a closed door.

I wandered to the first counter. Leather goods. Wallets, belts with eagle-clutching-the-flag buckles the size of hubcaps, and some snazzy handcuff holders. Next to that, management had arranged a paddle display—from spatula-sized on up to small snow

shovel. Each smacker was decorated with the same droopy, hand-painted convict as the one the ladies were holding. Beetle Bailey in stripes.

What really impressed were the paintings. An array of pastel-tinged sunsets, azure waves over rocky shores—nature scenes—filled every inch of wall space behind the counters. Whoever painted them had spent a lot more time in motel rooms, staring at the pictures over the chained-down TV, than in actual nature. No doubt, after enough seventy-nine-hour blinds-closed binges, smoking meth under the bed, those pink skies and shiny seascapes *were* nature.

“See something you like?”

A small, perfectly proportioned blond man in a blue prison shirt eyed me nervously from behind the counter. I hadn’t seen him come through the door, and he made sure to keep that burp gun-era register between us. His face was an unlined fifty. A faded patchwork of tattoos blued his chest where his collar opened.

“All the paintings you see here are done by inmates,” he recited. “You’ll notice there are no signatures, only their prisoner number.”

The counter in front of him contained a dozen key chains: dominoes on one side, a drawing of the prison and gun tower and sq on the other. He backed up a little when I approached. Startled. I found myself speaking slowly.

“How much are the key chains?”

“Four fifty.”

I pulled out a twenty. “I’ll take four.”

As he reached in the case to grab them, I saw that he was missing his middle fingers. Before I could decide whether to ask about them, he whispered, “Got a lighter?”

“Don’t smoke anymore.”

In fact, I did have a lighter. You never know when you’ll need to fake some charm or camaraderie by lighting somebody’s Camel. But I didn’t tell him.

“We’re not supposed to either.” He kept his voice low, eyes aimed at the counter. “That’s why a pack goes for thirty dollars.”

“Thirty, huh? Next time I’ll bring a carton.”

His eight fingers fluttered with excitement. But they stopped when I didn’t say anything else. What I wanted to ask was how much he got for snitching out visitors. You didn’t get to be gift shop trustee by slipping the hacks free cup holders. He started to make change from the cash drawer, then stopped. He stared at the money in his hand as though he had no idea how it got there.

“Keep the change,” I said.

Tension came off him like steam. “There’s change?”

When he handed me the bag, he looked me in the eye for the first time.

“Enjoy your life,” he said. “I can’t.”

“*There* you are!”

My contact, Officer Rincin, sauntered toward me from the ID window. He was a stocky, red-faced grinner of sixty or so. One of those skinny guys with a belly—what beer drunks call a “party ball”—pushing apart the buttons of his tan correction officer’s shirt as though it were still inflating. Gray hair wisped out of his brown baseball cap. He might have been top floor man in the Sears appliance section, except for the mild menace of his wire-rim reflector shades and the cuffs on his belt.

“What’dja get?” he inquired, indicating the paper bag in my hand.

“Key chains.”

I opened the bag so he could see in. To show him I wasn’t smuggling anything.

“Great stocking stuffers,” he said. “I understand you’re law enforcement yourself.”

“Was. Young man’s game.”

I said it like I’d simply aged out of the profession, as opposed to crawling out with a bag of dirty money and a wife with “perp” after her name. *Memories!*

“Didn’t want to end up dead or behind a desk,” I blathered on. “Not that there’s a hell of a lot of difference.”

“I hear ya,” my new friend sighed, still grinning. The grin was disconcerting, until I realized it never stopped. Which was more disconcerting. It was like rictus, with jowls and cop ’stache. “You didn’t give Twitchy a lighter, did you?”

“No, why would I?”

“Because he asked.”

“Well, they always want to get over one way or the other, don’t they? My experience, dogs bark, cows moo and convicts con. It’s their nature.”

“You’re all right,” he said. “Course, if you’d have given him that lighter, we’d be marchin’ you to intake for a bun-spread yourself. They take the contraband thing here real serious.”

“But you didn’t really have to sweat me, you have it on video, right?”

“Aren’t you a sharpie!” Rincin grinned some more, then pointed to my gym bag. “Travel light, huh?”

“Yeah, I left the cologne and tuxedo at home.”

“Aces. We’ll just sign your butt in, get you a badge. They can use the photo off your DL. They’re puttin’ you in the Can Patch. Little trailer park on the ass end of the property. Lot of guards live there when they’re startin’ out.”

“Great,” I said.

Rincin just grinned. Of course. We walked toward the gray and stately administration building, where I was surprised to see more inmates in denim walking by, single or paired up.

“A lot of your lifers are pretty mellow,” he said when they am-

bled by. “It’s the transitionals are the knuckleheads, punks just comin’ in who got something to prove. They’re the ones in orange jumpsuits.”

We stepped inside, into the smell of furniture polish and dust. A bored middle-aged woman, chewing gum behind a grille on the left, buzzed us through, toward another pair of Goliath-sized glass and wood doors.

“Hey, Lil,” Rincin said to the buzzer woman. He pointed at me. “Temp staff, here’s his DL.” She snatched my license while we waited in between the doors that locked behind us and the ones still locked in front of us. A pair of mustached young men with gym memberships and dark suits were buzzed out. They eyed me as they passed. My own outfit—black T-shirt, gray Dickies pants, scuffed boots and black leather jacket that made as much sense as ear muffs in the heat—earned a professional size-up from the exiting suits. The taller one waved to Lil and she winked back as she slid a form through the slot. Office romance.

“Have him fill this out,” she said to Rincin, who replied, “Will do, pretty lady,” and handed it to me like I was invisible to everybody but him.

I wrote down the address of my storage space, where most of my possessions used to live. For an extra five a month, the owner accepted mail. The one thing you couldn’t do, Omar the U-Stor-It man informed me when I signed on, was party in the storage space. “Gypsies,” he’d explained, without elaborating. “They ruin the fun for everybody.”

At the line requesting Social Security, I didn’t hesitate. Anyone stealing my identity would be blessed with much more debt than credit. I was happy to share.

“Done,” I said, as if I’d passed some mighty test. Rincin snatched my paperwork and slid it back to Lil. She buzzed us through the second set of doors, past the warden’s office. The whole place was high-ceilinged and airy. The floor shined like it got polished hourly.

Nobody seemed concerned about their proximity to killers, thugs and sex maniacs. The air had a testosterone and Endust tang.

I followed Rincin to a courtyard facing another beautiful stone building, 1852 on a keystone over its entrance. A half-dozen contractors banged away just under the roof. Or maybe they weren't contractors. They all had muscles and back ink. Swinging sledgehammers on a scaffold two flights up struck me as misguided, but maybe OSHA regulations didn't apply to prison labor.

"That there's the original prison site," Rincin tour-guided. "They're finally tearing her down. Lots of folks wanted to come in and photograph the dungeon, but the warden isn't having it. What's the upside of letting the *Chronicle* come in and take pictures of the rack, or all the chains still hanging from the wall rings?"

"Well, it's history," I offered.

"That's my point," he said.

Rincin yanked off his hat, gave his bald spot a scratch, and slapped it back on without explaining himself further. He pointed to another edifice, from which a large Latino guard escorted a moon-faced white inmate in hand and ankle cuffs. The hefty guard waved across the courtyard to my host.

Rincin waved back. "*Hola, Pedro!*" It was one big happy campus.

"This here's the AC, the Adjustment Center," Rincin said. "For guys too violent for gen pop. You work in there, you pretty much have to eat and shit in riot gear. They keep 'em down twenty-three hours. Roll 'em out for an hour exercise in a cage. Then back in the hole."

It was another second before I realized he was leading me over there. I swallowed and tried to smother my fear in the crib.

"So, uh, Officer Rincin, you're not putting me in . . . ?"

I pointed at the adjustment center in what I hoped was a casual fashion. Rincin's grin got a little bigger.

"What? No! Should I?" Then he got sly. "Had you worried, huh?"

"Little bit."

“The environment takes some getting used to. But like I say, you’ll be stayin’ in a trailer. It’s comin’ up. Just around the other end of the lower yard. We’ll pop in my car.”

We rounded a corner and that’s when I saw it: the yard. As featured in every prison entertainment from *Twenty-Thousand Years in Sing-Sing* to *Oz*. The inmates really did walk the track in slow circles, clusters of like-skinned fellows strolling together discussing the fine points of the Council of Nicaea, the falling dollar or other subjects of interest. Blacks owned the hoops. Cannonball-bicepped white guys spotted each other on weight benches. A row of ripped skinheads curled plastic gallon jugs of water. Despite the blast furnace heat, nobody seemed to be slathering on sunblock. Maybe that was the real reason they tattooed their arms to sleeves. It wasn’t that they wanted to blanket their epidermis in flaming tits and swastikas, they just wanted to block out the killer UV rays.

“I know what you’re thinking.”

Rincin nudged me as we headed past a fat hack checking names on a clipboard marked YARD LOG, out onto the track.

“You’re thinking, *What do the Mexican guys do for exercise?*”

“How did you know?”

“Folks always do. See, for one thing this isn’t the only yard. For another—and this’ll surprise you—your Mexicans hold down the tennis courts.”

“Mexican prison tennis,” I repeated dumbly. I didn’t know if he was fucking with me, but since he didn’t march out Samoan badminton I let it go.

“There’s a lot of things that would surprise you,” he said cryptically.

“No doubt.”

Nobody in the yard showed overt interest, but I felt the eyes. Once or twice I thought I heard somebody whistle. Not the kind of thing you want to turn around and check. I didn’t tell Rincin what

really surprised me—beyond the fact that someone was possibly hard-up enough to find forty-year-old white meat worth whistling at. What spooked me even more was how *normal* the residents looked.

Watch enough of the nonstop *Lockdown* and *Lockup* on basic cable, and you'd think the guys inside were all malevolent freaks. Much more chilling, it was just the opposite: the majority wandered the track staring blankly, pasty faces stamped with nothing more menacing than resignation and fatigue. More than half had committed their crimes while intoxicated. Half of these sobered up in the delousing shower. Or just came out of their blackouts in state clothes.

Rincin nudged me. "Check out Hiawatha."

I looked where I thought he was looking. On our right, in the patchy grass, sat a trio of broad-shouldered, ponytailed young men styling plucked eyebrows and shaved stomachs, one with pubescent starter breasts showing through his shirt.

"Regulations let 'em unbutton to the solar plexus," Rincin said to fill me in. "What they do is roll and knot the tails right here, for maximum midriff." He tapped the top of his hard, round stomach, just under his man cleavage. "Turns a prison shirt into a bikini top."

He watched me watching. "As you can see, they like to show off their titty beans." Rincin banged me hard on the arm. "Now check this out."

In a fenced-off square of earth just off the yard, a shirtless, overweight man with white hair down his back ducked into the mouth of a low hut and disappeared. "Warden lets 'em have their own sweat lodge."

A young Native American, hair in braided pigtailed down his back, squatted on a wooden bench, hands on his knees, staring back at me with no expression.

"Say one thing for the red man," said Rincin, "there ain't a lot of white boys I'd want to strip down to my skivvies and sit in the dark with."

"You ever go in there, look for contraband?"

I imagined the pigtailed man had somehow read my lips and felt his accusing eyes on me. Was there such a thing as too paranoid in prison?

Rincin shook his head. "You've seen too many of them jailhouse shows. 'Round here we call 'em 'prison porn.'"

"What does that make you guys? Fluffers?"

For a second Rincin didn't reply. Even though his grin remained intact, I could see him thinking: *If an inmate doesn't do it, I'm going to shank this asshole myself.*

Then, even before the buzzer, everybody in the yard dropped to the ground. I started to hit the dirt and Rincin grabbed me. Yanked me back up by the shoulder. He wasn't gentle. "Dumbest fucking thing you can do is get on the ground. You stay on your feet, standing up, the tower shooter knows you're one of us."

Eager to move on, I pointed across the field, in front of the bleachers, where a team of paramedics was trying to pluck a thrashing orange jumpsuit off the ground onto a gurney. "What happened to him?"

Rincin grabbed my hand and pulled it down. "Don't ever point in prison."

"Sorry," I said.

"No biggie." Rincin looked back at the paramedics, now carrying the stricken inmate off on a stretcher. "Guy's probably a flopper. In this sun, some boys just keel over and have seizures." He turned back to me, gripped my shoulder and wagged a finger at me. "Crank and sun don't mix! Tell your kids!"

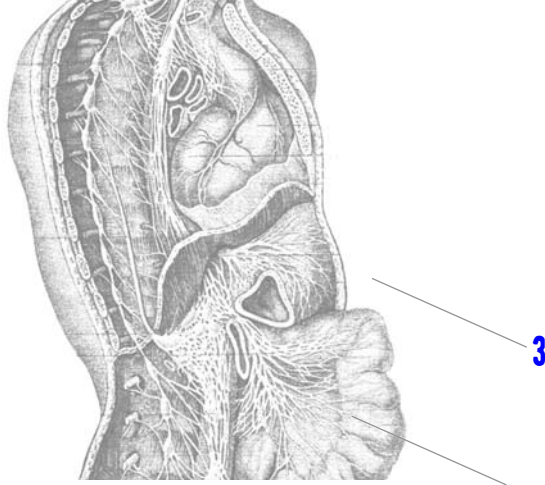
"Words to live by," I said.

"Better believe it. . . . The car's right over here."

I followed Rincin down a steep row of wooden stairs to a dusty parking lot. He held out his key and beeped it at a black Impala. "Sorry if I was a little rough back there."

"No, *I'm* sorry. I'm the green one."

"That would be true," he said.



Quentin Adjacent

Rincin drove with his elbow out the window, expounding on the sights. “What you’re looking at is a small city. Four hundred and seventy-three acres. We are now going by North Block. The death house, built in nineteen twenty-four,” he announced, with the canned enthusiasm of a tour bus operator touting Grauman’s Chinese Theatre. “Somebody here may tell you that Scott Peterson can see the spot where they fished his pregnant wife out of the water by the bridge. They may be telling the truth.”

“Wow.”

I felt him staring at me.

“No, I mean that. Wow!”

“Right. Over there you got your infirmary. Behind that, your South Block. Behind that, your dining hall and water cannons.” With this he reached into the backseat into a cooler. Pulled out two cans of Coke. He popped both pop-tops at once and handed me one. That must have taken practice. We both sucked fizz from the lids and wiped our mouths.

“Coca-Cola,” he said. “Calms my nerves.”

“You still get . . . not calm?”

“I’ve stroked out twice.” He stared away from the ocean, toward the water tower. “You know, I been here twenty-eight years.” His smile, unchanged, now seemed poignant. “You know what’s different now? I’m *old*!” Suddenly he snapped his fingers as if he’d remembered something important. “I bet this might interest you—I was here for the Kosher Mosher reclassification fight. In ’eighty-eight.”

I told him I hadn’t heard of that.

“Really? I figured you for a Jew.”

“Uh-huh.”

Rincin knocked back the last of his Coke and belched. “Well,” he said, crushing the can in his hand and grabbing another one. “That’s the tragedy, isn’t it? When your own people forget.”

A blue and white sailboat floated out in the bay, in some shimmering world that had nothing to do with this one. The outs. I wondered if the sailboat people knew that they were half a mile from the Hillside Strangler and 317 other killers with nicknames, professional and recreational.

It would probably be scorching later, but right now the temperature was perfect. The CO handed me another preopened can of Coke. Somehow knowing I’d finished my first.

“So who *was* Mosher?” I asked, since it seemed expected.

“An Orthodox Jew, an actual rabbi, in for domestic. What happened is, he got stuck in a cell with a shot-caller for the ALS. A real peckerwood. Zeke Mosher. Whole thing was somebody’s idea of a joke. But the rabbi, he’s so tortured by his celly, he keeps tryin’ to get himself reclassified as a nonwhite man. Claims he’s the victim of race baiting.”

He took a breath, guzzling between sentences. “They keep races together when they assign cells. Shouldn’t be that way, but TLIP—that’s life in prison. Anyway, the whole thing was like some kinda joke to the staff and the fellas on the tier. But it was no joke for the

Jew! He's got the whatchamacallem, the shylocks, growing outta his temple. He ties little boxes to his head with leather straps, the whole shmear."

Rincin looked proud to have gotten the "shmear" thing in.

"Did the administration go for it?" I asked.

"Go for what?

"The reclassification. Did Kosher get to move out of the cell with Mosher?"

"Let me tell the story. What happened is, one day the peckerwood crossed the line. He ripped the prophylactic right off the rabbi's arm while he was praying with it."

"You mean the phylactery."

Rincin snapped, still keeping his grin on, "Did I say I was an expert? The peckerwood, he cooks up a shot in a contraband spoon and says, 'Know what I'm shootin' up? I'm shootin' up *pork juice*!' Then he takes *his* phylaka-dakkies, this leather strap with wooden boxes attached, he ties off and fixes with it!"

"What happened?"

"You mean after? *Right* after? The rabbi had a little heart attack. The case went to the penal board, who heard experts talking about how Jews were a race, or they weren't a race, they were a religion. One expert, from Alabama, said they were a cult. On the other hand, skin is skin. Nobody made a federal case when black Muslims shared cells with Baptists."

"That makes sense."

"Not to the rabbi's representatives. All that mattered to them was that Nazi thought Jews were a virus. Ask any hard-core Aryan, he'll tell you straight up. 'They look white, that's how they sneak into the mainstream and start polluting the race.'

"All this came up, but in the end the board decided white's white, even with the dangly shylocks."

"Payots," I said.

"Pay us for what?"

"Payots." That's what that hair tuft is called, the sidelocks, on the Orthodox guys."

"I'll take your word on that, sir. But the board decided to put him back in the cell. Said it was a bad precedent. And, I gotta tell you, you'd walk by the cell, day or night, it was like watching a buffed-up Aryan cat and a little squeaky Jew mouse. Every day it was something, but the Aryan won't come out and kill the rabbi. He's having too much fun. I'm telling you, this was nothing nice. Poor Hebe was in hell—or whatever you people call it."

"Dos Gehenem."

"That some Jew word?"

"Yiddish for eternal jury duty."

"I'll take your word. I'm just saying, these guys were stuck with each other day in, day out. That's when I realized it was perfect."

"Perfect for what?"

"Sitcom."

"That could work," I said, just to say something.

"You're telling me," said Rincin. "Problem was I never met any Jews. I mean, if you're gonna write, you gotta know your subject. So what happens, I finally get to know a Hebrew, and who is it? Bobby Bernstein."

"I know the name, I just can't . . . Wait, was that Son of Sam?"

"That was David Berkowitz." He looked disappointed. "I'm surprised at you. Bobby Bernstein happens to be one of the baddest, meanest, toughest sonuvabitches in the ALS. And he happens to be a Semite."

"Isn't that like a black guy joining the Klan?"

"Apples and oranges," he said. "You look at Bernstein. Shaved head. Ripped. Full carpet of white power ink."

He made a fist, straightened his arms. Tapped his left wrist—"Star of David over here." Then he tapped his right—"Swastika over *here*. Now, I don't meet too many sons of Abraham in my line of work, but am I goin' out on a limb if I say Bernstein isn't typical?"

"No, he's definitely not typical."

We were halfway up the dirt road to my trailer. My stomach lurched and he elbowed me. Rincin was turning out to be an elboweer. "So what are you sayin'? About my idea, I mean."

"I'm saying, you want a sitcom, give it a twist. Forget the peckerwood. Put the Orthodox Jew in with the Jew who's the Nazi. Mosher and Bernstein. Better yet, make them brothers."

"You mean black guys?"

"What? No, no, I mean *real* brothers—so on visiting day their mother can come. A Jewish mother visiting her boys in jail—one's a practicing Orthodox, one's a big man in the ALS."

I could sense him squinting at me under his reflector shades. Suspicious. "I write the thing you just said, it becomes *Two and a Half Jews*—it's your word against mine."

I clapped him on the back. "My gift to you. If it takes off and you want to give me a point, I wouldn't say no."

"Are you in show business?"

"Very peripherally."

"Well, what you want to do is establish yourself as consultant. That's what guys do. I give you a consultant credit, that's money in the bank. Who knows, you might go full Bruckheimer."

"A guy can dream," I said. "So, you think the doctor's the real thing?" I realized my blunder before it was out of my mouth. I'd been here five minutes and possibly blown my cover.

"The real thing? The doctor? He the real old German guy?"

He took a last swig of Coke, flattened the can and tossed it in the backseat with the others. We drove in silence across the main road where the ATM and the gift shop were. "Up here are the employee

residences. Those are some nice little houses. You won't be living in those."

He swung the Chevy up a bumpy dirt road that curved around the nice houses, toward a gravel lot onto which a dozen double-wides had been dragged and dropped. We parked at the far end beside a fresh-scrubbed trailer, water still plinking from the roof.

Officer Rincin got out and tugged a ring of keys out from a pull string on his belt, then began flipping through them. He eyed me as he tried the first one on the door. As it turns out I wasn't moving into the just-washed baby-blue double-wide. My new home was the wagon behind it. An old-time snailback, like something Lucy and Ricky would attach to the back of their sedan on a fishing trip.

"Who lived here before me, a hunchback?"

"Actually, the term is 'scoliosis.' My daughter is afflicted." While I tried to swallow my tongue, he patted the trailer's flank, waking a cloud of gnats. "I raised eleven children in this rust bucket."

"Are you serious?"

He unlocked the door and let the key ring zip back to his belt, then gave me the elbow and burst out laughing. "Gotcha!"

Before this I didn't know what fun was.

"Prison humor," Rincin said, wiping his eyes. "Boy, you wanna make it in here, you gotta work on your bullshit filter. I thought you was edgy-cated."

"Edgy-cated, that's good."

I chuckled along, big enough to have a little laugh at my own expense. I wasn't thrilled about establishing my moron credentials so soon, but it was worth it if it meant he'd forget about the Mengele blunder.

Rincin kicked the door open hard and jumped back, as if expecting gunfire from within. It seemed as ludicrous as waving a hat on a stick. But then, this was his job.

Before we stepped inside he turned to me. "What did you mean before, about the doctor being the real thing?"

"I mean," I said, making it up as I went along, "I heard the doctor might still be using. See, I really want to work with people who are serious."

"You're the serious type, is that it?"

When I'd taken this job, I'd figured the big problem would be not spooking Mengele: trying to ID the old man without getting him nervous and without getting anybody who might be after him nervous. What I did not anticipate was having to bivouac in a tin-can petri dish barely bigger than a handicapped stall.

On the plus side, I didn't have a cell mate. And the ceiling was high enough so that I only had to lean slightly sideways to keep from scraping my scalp. The real challenge would be breathing. That smell. This wasn't just a trailer, it was a biosphere. The site of what appeared to be an extended experiment on the interplay of mold and mammal discharge, with shag carpet, fold-down bed and kitchenette.

I knew certain spores could alter brain function.

"Excuse me," said Officer Rincin, and squeezed past me close enough for his Taser to brush my genitals. It was an odd sensation. Odder when he reached toward me, arms extended. I was about to tell him I was a virgin when I realized he wasn't going for a man clench but reaching for the two exposed screws above my head.

"Beg pardon. Handles are missing. Bed folds out like so."

He pulled the single bunk down to eye level, then yanked down the built-in particleboard ladder. They say particleboard gives off peroxide, but they don't say when. We both admired the efficient design. On impulse, I reached up and touched the sagging foam mattress. It was damp. Before this, I'd never even thought the word "soilage." But there was something else. Teeth marks.

"Hang on," I blurted. "The guy before me was a biter?"

"Good eyes." Rincin nodded, lapsing back to canned tour guide delivery. "Now, if a citizen sees this, his first thought is, *What made a man sink his teeth into rotting foam?* But a CO? First thing *he's* thinking

is, *Nobody just bites. Not to judge a fellow officer, what else did this perv do on Nibble Nights?*”

“Whatever it was, I can’t say I like the idea of sleeping in it.”

But smiling Corrections Officer Rincin was ready for that.

“Rubber sheets. Right now there’s a foam shortage. Good news is, we wrap her in rubber, you’ll be fine,” he said. “And we’ll get these handles fixed for you ASAP.”

I was impressed. He seemed unfazed by the eye-burning stench.

“Guy before you, name of Turk. Big fella. He drank a little. . . . His wife left him after he started as a guard. That happens. Administration got him this snailback. Then he drank a little more. Big Boy kept keeling over, grabbing the handles. Ripped ’em right out of the wood every time he fell. The investigators said that’s how it happened.”

“How what happened?”

I focused on keeping the fingers that had touched foam away from my face. That’s how you get staph infections.

“The accident.” Rincin kneeled and yanked up a chocolate-colored splotch of carpet, revealing a bloodstain beneath. “They cleaned ’er up pretty good.”

I didn’t ask any questions. The splotch, the bite marks, they pretty much explained it. The stench didn’t come from simple fungus. Or out of a cat. It was desperation. Left to ferment. Man fungus.

Rincin checked his watch. “What say you take fifteen to get squared away. Then we’ll meet the warden. I’ll be right outside.”

After he left, I thought I heard muffled heaving, but I wasn’t sure. The smell was so bad it affected my hearing.

I’d moved into a lot of places. It’s weird. The first thing I always do is open the drawers. Looking for clues. Not that any were necessary. It’s not like it’s hard to figure out the kind of person who would end up in

this kind of place. Once you hit the ground, does it matter how many floors you fell?

I put down my bag, shoved the port-a-bed back into its slot and got to work.

The silverware drawer came out with a yank. Empty. A cabinet over the sink window hung by one hinge. For a second, I took in the view. A high fence separated my row of trailers from a trio of much nicer double-wides. My tin can was plopped on soiled dirt; grass grew between the trailers on the other side and a gravel pathway led from the road to each front door. Up the path to the first, a white guard walked behind a black couple—following as stately as the flower girl in a wedding. The convict was rail thin in prison denims, the woman in large sunglasses, tasseled red leather vest and Capri pants that clung to the dimpled pillars of her calves. They'd already started to split in the back.

They disappeared around a corner. I eased open the overhead cabinet, releasing an avalanche of magazines. Fat glossies bounced off the throbbing egg on my head, a souvenir of Zell's walker. I glanced down at a picture of a doe-eyed Asian girl in traction. She pouted from her hospital bed, in a neck brace, one arm and both legs in traction, a sliver of white bush-shmushing panties peeping out between them. I closed the magazine, but there she was again—the Japanese victim-girl—beaming and damaged, legs drilled with metal pins, one eye black, an arm in a sling, from the glossy, waterlogged cover of June 2004's *Broken Dolls*.

I didn't hear Rincin open the door. He tilted his head, glanced at the cover of the magazine, then straightened up and looked back at me. "Glad to see you've made yourself at home."

I waited for him to say "Gotcha!"

When he didn't I scooped a couple of magazines from the sink: back issues of *Moppets* and a well-thumbed *Clown Sex* catalogue. Rin-

cin saw the things and raised his eyebrows. “Hey,” I said, “I didn’t bring these from home.”

By way of reply he grabbed a copy of *Pony Girls* featuring a big-thighed brunette pulling a bald man in a two-wheeled carriage on the cover. “*Yippy-ki-yay!*” he said with no enthusiasm.

“Moppets, clown whores and pony girls? No wonder the guy drank,” I said.

“Naw.” Rincin started scooping up the porno. “He didn’t drink ’cause he was a perv, he drank ’cause he was a perv who liked the taste of Schlitz. Besides which, he was probably selling these inside.” He opened an *Ebony She-Male* and eyed the glossy contents appraisingly. “You could get five bucks a page for this out on the yard. Six if they’re cherry.”

I didn’t ask what he planned to do with them. Maybe we each had something on each other. Maybe not.

“By the way,” said the sergeant, indicating the splendor around us, “this is just temporary. They’re hooking up the power on a new box, just for you.”

“Really? ’Cause I’ll miss this place.” I ran a hand over the mildewed counter. “Kidding! That sounds good.”

“I don’t know about good, but it’s better than this pud hut. Meanwhile the warden wants to see you.”

“Right now?” I don’t know why I was panicked.

“Not till after I bleed my lizard,” he said, squeezing past me again. “Scuse me, the little boys’ is this a-way.”

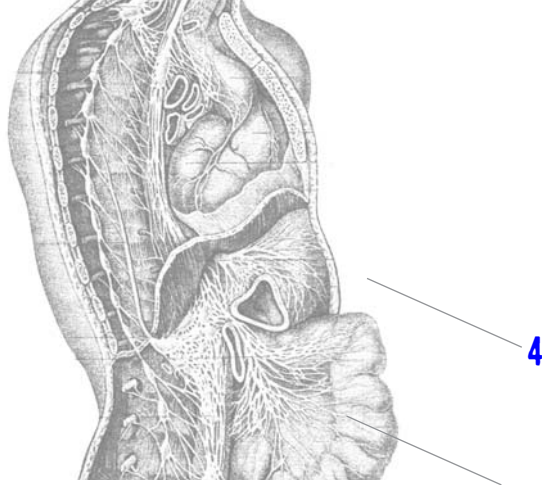
I didn’t want to stand there, so I stepped outside. His stream was so high-impact the snailback’s two good wheels vibrated. Then I looked up and realized it was a helicopter coming in for a landing. Rincin saw me watching the chopper when he stepped out behind me, plopping his hat back on. “Don’t worry, Dr. Drew, it’s probably a medevac. They’re not coming for you.”

“Funny. But I’m not really Dr. Drew.”

“I know that. But you do what he does, right?”

“Oh, sure. Except I’m not a doctor. I don’t have my own TV and radio show. And he probably has a lot more money.”

My chaperone got back in the car. “Well you don’t have to brag about it,” he called back. “Time to say hello to the big dog.”



Meet the Warden

The warden, a ramrod-spined ex-navy boxer, was working a Bernie Kerik: shaved head and brush-cut law enforcement mustache. He was five foot four but blessed with a square and enormous jaw. That jaw looked like it could handle itself. I could imagine it pushing ahead of him, clearing a path through a world of massive bad guys twice his size. He eyed me across the desk, tenting his fingers between the little U.S. flag and the flag of California. I stared back, a little over his head, at a framed photo of him gazing up at Arnold Schwarzenegger. I wondered if the warden had to resist the urge to brag—he may have been a foot shorter, but his chin looked like it could bench-press ten times more than the governor's.

“So,” he began, “as part of your undercover work, you’ll be running a drug rehabilitation workshop.”

“That’s the idea.”

“You’ve had some experience with drugs?”

“I’ve done some research, sir. I just didn’t know it was research at the time.”

"That a joke?"

"More or less," I said, instantly regretting it. The man stared down serial killers every day. He didn't need me to amuse him.

"Cute," he said, then picked up a document and studied it. I read "Department of Corrections" on top, upside-down. The warden skimmed a few more papers attached by paper clip, then raised his eyes. "I'm surprised you never visited us before."

"Is that a joke?"

"Prison humor," he continued when it was clear I wasn't going to laugh. "You'll get used to it. There's some funny stuff that goes on. But," he said flatly, "we do have Nazis."

My own voice came out tinny. "Right, of course. I knew that. . . ."

"Mr. Rupert?"

"Yes!"

"You'll be dealing with six addicts."

My ears were ringing.

"Sex addicts?" I shifted in my chair. "They didn't mention . . . I mean, not to judge, I'm just saying . . . who hasn't—I mean, I'm not sure in terms of sobriety, if, you know, sobriety is even the right word—"

"Mr. Rupert?"

"Yes, sir?"

The warden tapped his pencil on the desk and stared at me. He'd put on reading glasses, the kind with round little lenses that made whoever wore them look somehow critical, disapproving. His magnified eyeballs seemed appalled. And I didn't blame them.

"Not sex addicts," he said, after I'd repolished the chair by squirming in it for a minute. "Six addicts."

"Six addicts?"

"That's what I said."

"There have to be more than six addicts in San Quentin," I said.

He took off his glasses and picked up a miniature ball-and-chain made from papier-mâché. The one-ball made me think of Hitler. They sold them in the gift shop.

“There are six addicts,” he continued, “who I think can really benefit from your kind of program.”

“And what kind of program would that be?”

“The kind that can really benefit them.”

“Well,” I said—where were we going with this?—“it would be great if I could help out in that way.”

“Don’t worry,” he replied drily, “I know the reason you’re here. I also know your history. A cop and a drug addict. Interesting combo.”

“Ex,” I said, trying not to sound too touchy on the subject.

There was an awkward silence. Suddenly I saw myself as he saw me. Battered black leather and soul patch. Your basic faux badass. A tattooed, middle-aged white law enforcement loser who thought shooting dope for a decade gave him some kind of street cred. In other words, from where he was standing, the worst kind of civilian—the kind who thought he knew what time it was.

I bit my lip to keep from defending myself. I wanted to share my theory: all of us, at some point in life, choose our cliché. But I held my mud. Or tried to.

I had, I should explain, a bad habit of thinking I knew what people were thinking while I was talking to them. Sometimes I actually replied. Which was never good. Even if you were right about what was going on in another man’s head, there was no upside to responding if he hadn’t actually said anything.

“Some powerful people,” the warden went on, “obviously think you’re the right man for the job. Of course, it’s a little unorthodox.”

“Of course.”

“Well, I’m a little unorthodox, too. Right, Colfax?”

“So I’ve read, sir.”

I’d felt someone looming, and when Colfax spoke I felt free to

turn around. Colfax was six-six, no wider than a Volvo, three hundred pounds of order-maintaining muscle, packed in a snug deputy's uniform and topped with a shaved head, acne-pocked skin and the requisite handlebar mustache. He must have come in after we'd sat down. *Even big men learn to walk like cats in the big house*, I thought. (And wondered why I was suddenly channeling promo lines from the Turner Classic Movies channel.)

"Look at me!" The warden snapped his fingers and I jerked my head in his direction. Everything in prison is a test, but it hadn't occurred to me the warden would be testing, too. It should have. But just when I thought he was going to go all "this is my house" territorial, he went somewhere else.

"Let me put this on the table," he said. "Just because you're here undercover, that doesn't mean you can't do some kind of good with these fellows. Drug addiction is a scourge. I realize you're not actually here for that purpose, but there's no reason, as a kind of side benefit, you can't show these fellows something. We've had UC inside before, for all kinds of things. We had a fed undercover in D Block for six months, trying to flush out a baby raper named Mooney."

"Flush out?"

"We had him on a parole violation. But we knew he'd had relations with his girlfriend's daughter. Problem was, girlfriend clammed up after she reported it. That happens when your boyfriend sticks your face in a pot of grits. Of course, missy wouldn't report that either. So that's where the UC came in. To get Mooney to say what we already knew."

"Of course," I echoed, as if I myself had been around the track with facial grits situations. "So, how'd that work out?"

The warden leaned sideways, talking past me. "Colfax, how'd that work out?"

“Not well, sir.”

Just then a trustee who might have doubled for Uncle Ben—before he was updated—limped in with a tray. The warden rubbed his hands. “Ah, chamomile. Like some?”

“I’m good,” I said.

“Suit yourself.”

The tea man poured and backed away. The warden took the cup and blew delicately. He sipped, somehow making even that look macho.

“Not well,” he repeated with a satisfied sigh. “That pretty much sums it up. To get close to Mooney the UC had the idea that he should act like a kiddie diddler. So Mooney would trust him. Trouble is, he was a little too convincing. They became best friends.”

“What happened? He get into a fight?”

“Not exactly a fight. A young Zulu out to make his bones heard Mooney and the UC swapping cookie recipes, or whatever the hell pedophiles talk about, and stuck a spork in his aorta. Our man just kind of bled out. Convicts hate pee-pee bandits. They’re fair game.”

“How do they feel about drug counselors?”

“Fine, as long as you don’t get any of their customers clean. That’s messing with their money.” His Gibraltar jaw lent gravitas to every pronouncement. “Long as you don’t take money out of their pocket, you can all hold hands at meetings.”

“So then—there’s nobody from gangs in the class?”

“Oh no. Everybody’s in a gang in a prison. If you have a race, you have a gang. Fact of life.”

“So then everybody in the class is already clean?”

“Bingo. All clean.” The warden took another sip of chamomile and smacked his lips. “Unless they’re not. We do random UAs.”

“Piss tests?”

“Piss tests. Right.”

I felt a tingle of panic. A tiny quarter smile rode over the warden's cowcatcher jaw. "That's not going to be a problem, is it, Mr. Rupert?"

"What, the piss test? No. God no. Of course not. No problem at all."

I let my voice trail off. Or maybe it just wandered off on its own, wanting to get as far away from me as possible. The warden let me sputter out.

"Just so we're both clear," I started up again, "I'm here because they want me to find out about the old man, the German. Everything else—helping guys get clean, teaching them life skills—that's great. It's fantastic. But, at the end of the day, it's gravy."

"Gravy. Uh-huh." The warden sat back and tented his fingers again. "You, sir, are an interesting fella."

The way he said it—like he had footage of me touching myself at bus stops—made me cringe all the way to my toenails.

The warden stood and extended a dainty hand. For a dizzy second, I didn't know whether to shake it or kiss it. "Well," he continued, "I guess you'll just have to decide your own level of commitment. Colfax?"

The big CO stepped forward with a cup sealed in a plastic bag. He produced it from behind his back, like a dog treat. The warden smiled again. This was fun.

"You know the drill, right? Print your name right on the cup and seal 'er up tight."

Now it was my chance to smile. "You need this now?"

The warden clapped me on the back. "Of course not. Bring it tomorrow. Now how about we get to your group? Like I say, I've selected some fellas I think can benefit from a week of recovery know-how. Here's the team," he said, and slid a stack of folders in my direction.

I stared at them, certain I should say something—but what? "You know, I'm not really here to—"

"Oh, come on," he interrupted, mistaking my reticence as some kind of prissiness in the face of raw crime. "You being ex-police and

all, you're not going to be shocked at what some of these fellows have done."

"I'll read it sitting down," I said, "just in case."

"Read it sitting down. That's a good'n. Hear that, Colfax?"

"Long as he pees standing up," said the corn-fed guard. More prison yuks.

There was a long, odd silence, then the warden snapped his fingers again.

"Rupert!"

The warden crooked his finger, then leaned forward himself, thrusting his Greyhound bus of a jaw over the table in my direction. What would life be like with a cudgel like that under your lower lip?

"You know, Rupert, there's one thing you learn in my line of work."

The warden clicked his tongue and grinned, plainly on fire to tell me what it was. I didn't bite. (Life, for a neurotic, so often boiled down to a battle of wills in which only one side realized there was a battle going on.) The warden brushed imaginary dandruff off his lapels and re-tented his hands, steepled forefingers meeting at the tips and pointing my way. The gesture could not have been more menacing if he'd been aiming a Luger.

"You get pretty good at reading a man."

"Really?" This time I decided to go along. Why antagonize? "How do you do that, Warden?"

"You're asking me *how*?"

"Unless it's a trade secret. Something you take a blood oath to keep under your hat at warden school."

The warden recoiled visibly.

This always happened. Ninety-nine percent of the time, I was cool. But in the presence of those whose favor and approval I most needed, I regressed. Succumbed to some residual antiauthority reflex, as unseemly in a man my age as a Rolling Stones lapping-tongue tattoo on your grandmother's breast. Substance-abuse professionals said

you stopped maturing at the age you started getting loaded. Forever fifteen. The warden leaned toward me. "You want to know how I read guys? It's simple. I don't listen."

"You don't listen?"

"Nope." His voice dropped an octave by way of transmitting some bit of arcane and dangerous wisdom. "I watch the hands."

"The hands?"

I raised my own palms in front of my eyes and stared at them. Who were these dangerous strangers? Then we both leaned forward again. Had either of us gone further we'd have bumped foreheads.

"So," I said, "say somebody's across the table pointing their fingers at your solar plexus like a .357; how would you read it?"

"That's easy. My read would be they're letting me know they're armed. In every sense of the word. I'd say they were saying, 'Don't try anything, fella, 'cause I've got your number before you even start counting.'"

I put my hands up and sat back in my chair. "Point taken. Don't shoot."

The warden checked his watch, snapped his fingers and pointed to the door. Which was apparently Officer Colfax's signal to step behind me again. Colfax took a car-crusher grip on my shoulder, holding me down. Was the warden afraid I was going to attack him? Or did his bodyguard just like me? In prison, everything was something else. Which was true on the outside, too. Just not as vividly.

The warden moved smoothly to the door, where he stopped and faced me. "Might want to study those files. See who you're dealing with. They're all very excited."

"And the German?"

"You'll meet him. Then you can tell me. He's supposed to be *who-sis* again?"

"A doctor," I said.

Zell had implied the warden was in on it. But here he was playing ignorant. Which meant either Zell was lying or the warden was testing me again. Retesting. To see if I'd be on the level with him.

"Dr. Josef Mengele," I said.

"Right right right!"

The warden snapped his fingers again, causing Colfax to tighten his pincer grip on my trapezoids. I resolved not to cry out. I was an easy crier as a boy.

"The Doctor of Death," he continued, heading for the door. "I saw a thing, on the History Channel."

It was obvious he wanted to leave. I didn't take it personally. There were important chow hall trazor incidents to adjudicate. Funding to nudge out of Sacramento. But I couldn't just let him go without asking—even if it made me look desperate.

"Do *you* think it's him?"

He stopped in the doorway, eyes narrowing as he made a snap decision to give up real information. "He's a ninety-seven-year-old man who talks German to himself. You ever listen to German? It sounds like when you get glass in your garbage disposal. Even when he talks American, the old guy's accent is so thick it sounds like he's farting out of his mouth."

"Nice. He say anything you remember?"

For one bad second I was sure he was going to order Colfax to go supermax on me. Leave me sobbing on the curb with a bus ticket in my mouth and a broken collarbone.

"Wernher von Braun. That's the only thing comes to mind."

"Wernher von Braun?"

"Do I have to repeat that for you? I have a penitentiary to run."

He started out again, and before I could consider the consequences I heard myself plead, "*Wait!*" It came out more shrieky than I'd have liked.

The warden thrust his jaw back through the door. Even if he was under control, I was pretty sure his jaw wanted to kill me. “Did you have abandonment issues, son?”

“I just wanted to know, what is he in for?”

“Who?”

“The old man—I guess we don’t really know if he’s a doctor.”

“I’d say he was a man of science.”

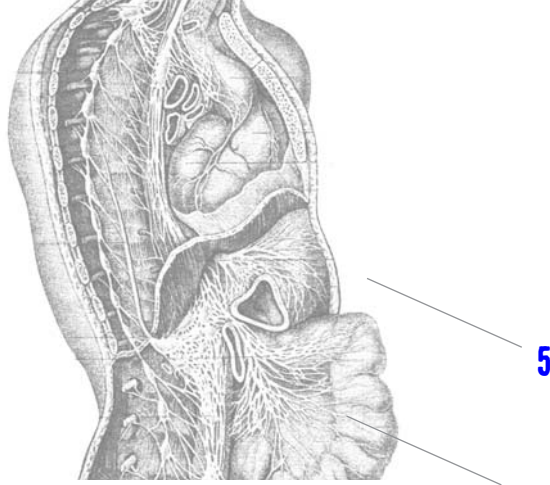
“Why? What did he do?”

“Hit-and-run.”

“Hit-and-run? How’s that make him a scientist?”

“When they picked him up, he had his own little lab going. They don’t know what he was making, but he was making something. Any more questions, I suggest you ask Officer Rincin, and he’ll refer you to the proper individual.”

This time he didn’t say good-bye. Before he followed, Colfax unclenched my tendon and gave me a little hair-tussle. I wanted to believe the hair-muss was some traditional CO “Now you’re one of us” maneuver—like when mafiosi gang-kissed a newly made man or Skull and Bones lay naked in coffins while John Kerry urinated on them. But I suspected it meant I was a bitch.



Wine in a Box

Back in my snailback, I slapped the stack of intake files on the kitchen table—yellow for violent crimes, red for non, though it seemed like it should be the other way around. That’s how *I’d* have done it.

A lady police therapist once told me that control issues were really just fear of lack of control disguised as power. She interviewed me when I asked for a stress-related early pension, about a thousand years ago. She was very sincere. I asked if what she meant was that all strong people were weak. Was all power just fear of powerlessness in disguise?

Something I said must have moved her. Or else she was just lonely. Suddenly, she tiptoed around her desk, dropped to her knees and performed frantic, bristly fellatio while I studied the adorable kitten-tangled-in-yarn painting over her desk. In retrospect, I wondered if it was painted by a convict. *If I were a child molester*, I remember thinking when she put me in her mouth, *I’d paint kittens*. With that unwanted insight, my prospects shriveled, I showed the impulsive mental health professional the love and respect I felt for

her by shrinking in her mouth. Sometimes women are as romantic as men. Beside the kitten, I noticed a black and white picture of Fabio. Signed. I couldn't make out the inscription, but it looked meaningful. If the kittens hadn't killed my erection, the sight of Fabio stomped on it with man sandals.

At the end of the session, the police therapist informed me that I had problems.

Two weeks later, I got the dread POP letter, the Police Officer Pension Board. They voted to deny. Citing, as a key factor, the therapist's assessment that I was trying to "use the system." All this happened before I actually quit the force—after I met Tina, nearly became a congressman, fucked things up and began my stellar career as an independent investigation professional on the West Coast.

Now I sat hunched in the sticky kitchenette, facing inmate files and breathing mold spores. I couldn't tell what made the furniture sweat, if the moisture came from within, oozing out, or vice versa. Wherever I sat there was a sodden *thwop* and squish, like the sound a shoe makes stepping on a snail in a puddle.

The first file I needed to see was Mengele's. If it *was* Mengele. I reached for the stack—then stopped myself.

Until now, I had focused on everything but the simple reality of sitting across from a real-life Josef Mengele. I suddenly realized my naïveté. You couldn't just pull up a chair and start chatting with an evil legend.

You had to prepare.

But how *could* you prepare?

I pushed the files away. Then pulled them back toward me again.

I have never done a brave thing in my life when I had time to think about it first. And this moment was no exception. I didn't know if I was more scared that the Butcher of Auschwitz would be here or that he wouldn't. So, instead of bold action, I decided to kick back and

give in to the ball sweat, palpitations and shortness of breath of a well-earned panic attack.

I had put my trust in an old man who broke into my home, berated me, showed me some two-bit celebrity candids and beat me with his handicap appliance before offering me a job.

But why obsess on past idiocies with the good times to come? What if I met Mengele and just lost it? Started to cry? Or what if all this was a front and I was actually being *delivered* to him? Like a lab animal. How did I know he still wasn't doing experiments? Maybe my own shoe-leather liver—the third of three transplants, thanks for asking—would be used for some infernal, Mengele-esque purpose. They kept putting them in, and they kept going bad. If the doctor were still in the camps, he could transplant the severely hep C–infected organ into the body of a twelve-year-old Gypsy. Just to see if it made the young Roman scream at his family, then short out and spiral into a hate-nap.

Which is where I was headed. Until, with three brain cells still awake, I landed on a way to actually do the job I was so scared of.

I wouldn't run away from my quarry—but I wouldn't run toward him either. Instead of riffling through the prisoner files, scoping out a ninety-seven-year-old's mug shot and yelling "Bingo" when I found it, I'd pluck files out of the pile at random. Leave it to the penal gods.

Surprise required less preparation.

I started with a yellow file. Holding my breath—I was ready—I opened to a photocopied mug shot of Prisoner C-099419. A delicate, sleepy-eyed young felon with long hair and a face as flat and expressionless as a Mayan king's. Definitely not Mengele material.

ERNESTO NEGRANTE, 24, AKA CRANKY H [Hispanic] Four counts of assault with a deadly weapon. 18th Street gang member, L.A.

The file rambled. As if somebody had sat down and read a bunch of other files and scribbled up highlights—or left out some details.

CO NOTES: Inmate jumped into La Eme 11/06.

ARRESTING OFFICER HECTOR DELGADO: Perp in vehicle with his brother TITO NEGRANTE AKA JOKER KGA [known gang associate] when Tito was shot. Perp claimed brother picked him up on the way home from school. QUOTE: How'm I supposed to know Joker was so dusted he'd start shootin' outside the cop shop? UNQUOTE

I skipped ahead. . . . Cranky was a one-eight. Eighteenth Street. He was seventeen. His mug shot showed the face of a frail youngster. Seventeen going on twelve. Sentenced as an adult to ten years in Quentin. Now he was a soldier in the Mexican mafia. Which explained why he'd signed up for drug class. I'd read, in the *L.A. Times* "California Section" crime page, that La Eme had issued an edict that members inside get off meth. Or face the consequences.

I gave Cranky an approving tap. *At least you'll be motivated.*

Next, a red file. Why not?

MOVERN DINKLE, 39. African-American. Eleven months, parole violation. ARP [alcohol related parole violation].

Subject released 1.27.08 at approximately 1100. Returned to facility 1.27.08 1700.

Free for six hours? My fucking hero! Something about luck that bad gives a man hope. I couldn't explain it, but I already liked him.

Subj. prev. served 97 months of 144 mo. sentence. Five counts, involuntary manslaughter . . .

Five? A large coffee stain blotted the rest of that page, up to:

. . . completed alcohol education program.

Paper-clipped to the file was a small scissored-out newspaper article: “Under the influence, Mr. Dinkle had a head-on collision with a van full of Cub Scouts. Four scouts were killed on impact. The scout-master, a high school track star, Iraq vet, Sunday school teacher and dad-to-be, was left a quadriplegic before succumbing to viral pneumonia. . . .”

ARRESTING OFFICER: At approximately 1300 perp cited for urinating in muffin case at Starbucks.

“Starbucks? Movern, listen!” I leaned down close so Movern’s mug shot could hear me better. “Nobody drinks at Starbucks. What do they teach you in alcohol education, anyway?”

No doubt, with my help and expertise in the field, the next time Movern got sprung, he might make it twenty-four hours before getting sloppy drunk and exposing himself again.

The next file was written by hand on carbon paper. Quaint.

INMATE D-7664C2 ROSCOE BENTON, 55. African-American.

Beside Roscoe’s prints and mug shot was a more recent photo, from the *Bay Guardian*. “Inmate Doing Life Helps Others Live.” The young Roscoe glared like Miles Davis and the old one, down thirty-six years, stared back like Buddha, if Buddha’d been a lanky, locked-down brother with a soul patch, a beanie and eyes that did not take the same things seriously that you did. I stared into those eyes for a minute and felt mysteriously better before reading how Benton got life for killing a plainclothes cop while holding up a dry cleaner. The officer, in fact, was there *to pick up his uniform*.

What are the odds?

It didn’t seem fair. How was Roscoe supposed to know the man was police if his blues were on a hanger?

Roscoe, I learned, founded the Black Guerilla Fighters prison gang—the BGF—at San Quentin in 1971 with George Jackson, his fellow Panther. The late George Jackson. Then something happened. In his forties, Roscoe'd earned a GED, BA and masters in comparative religion. Now he ran inmate meditation classes and the “Living with Hep C and HIV Inside” support group. I placed my hand on the file like it had the power to heal. I squeezed my eyes shut and tried not to hear my own tiny whisper.

“I need some fucking help, Roscoe!”

I myself had dodged AIDS, back in my needle jockey days, but not that hepatitis C. My liver had gone New Media, fully viral, and not even nine months of rage-inducing interferon shots in my belly fat had been able to cure it. The stuff powered the viral load to under twenty million, down from a bloated seventy mil but still high enough for my liver to function as efficiently as a paperweight.

Hep C was like having an old-fashioned anarchist's bomb implanted in your liver, waiting for the fuse to burn down and blow you into full-blown cirrhosis, then over the finish line to cancer. You just never knew how long the fuse was. But nothing, as any hepatotoxicologist could tell you, got it burning faster than alcohol. This made for some regret over my decision to start drinking again. Then again, I was getting tired of organ number three. Time for fresh meat!

I'd found the box of wine under the sink when I looked for something to poison the roaches. If they even were roaches. From the sound they made skittering in the cabinets they might have been small farm animals.

I hadn't planned on drinking the stuff. I'd just wanted to see how it tasted. Wine in a box! Gallo Sparkling Rosé. It tickled the palate like melted-down hospital gloves and Splenda. The stuff probably would have killed the roaches, or at least disoriented them, but I didn't want to share. There weren't any glasses, so I drank straight from the box, out of a plastic pop-up nozzle that scratched the inside of my mouth.

I had, I confess, a checkered history of oral hygiene. I fell out of the habit of dental visits when I had a habit of heroin. After Tina left, I developed a burning urge for root canal, generally followed by a prescription or two for Percocet. (Or one of its loving cousins.)

Now my gums bled when I said hello. Which meant easy access for any strain of hell canker that the last social climber who slurped out of the nozzle had left there. Along with fatigue and brain fog, the hypotenuse of the hep C triangle was a compromised immune system. “Compromised” meant that if someone had a fever in Cleveland, I caught the flu. But I wouldn’t die from it. And even if I did, I’d probably be too confused and logy to notice.

I tamped the blood off my lip with the back of my wrist. Took another sip, careful not to spill any on the files, which I had sworn to give back to the warden. I couldn’t tell if I had a buzz or a migraine and stared out the window of my trailer, trying to decide.

I rarely drank, even before the five years I stopped taking anything that affected me “from the neck up.” And now I remembered why. Alcohol never made me happy—it just made unhappiness embarrassing and sloppy. For a professional drug addict, alcohol was what you got when you couldn’t get what you needed. And you always needed something.

Now I remembered.

By the time I mustered the inner strength to stop reminiscing and go back to the files, it had gotten dark. My lower back was killing me, and my thighs itched where they had been in contact with whatever was soaking out of the seat cushions. I didn’t know where the light switches were. My lighter, for the cigarettes I no longer didn’t smoke, was in the pocket of a jacket I couldn’t see. It was amazing how fast things went to shit when you started drinking, after not drinking. An hour and a half after I’d begun to slurp from the wine carton, I was already reeling in the dark, cracking my knuckles and scratching myself, gripped by cellular torment and trembling at the notion of trying to

make it through the next five minutes. What I really wanted to do was pour the sparkling rosé up my nose to kill the stench.

Instead, I began to sneeze. I tried to believe this was from trailer spores, but I knew it was the Windexy Gallo.

Just retasting the stuff resulted in testicle pain. I clamped a hand over my mouth and nostrils, but I could not escape the smell. I tried to imagine the man who'd occupied the trailer before me. I unclamped my nostrils and shut my eyes. Breathing in, I visualized a molting pile of sweat socks and frayed underpants. In the middle of that sat a naked fat man eating rotten meat out of a greasy paper bag, jerking off over the August '99 *Shaved Amputees*. I could almost hear his sock-swaddled meat slapping off the face of the one-armed cover girl. *I know what you want, you little stump slut!*

No doubt the snailback's previous occupant had pleased himself precisely where I was sitting. As if to back up my wine-box vision, the banquette gave a phantom squish.

One can only do so much damage in an alcoholic stupor (assuming one is not behind the wheel, like Movern). But, as hard as I tried, I never made it to unconscious. I bolted out of the breakfast nook, swiping the air in front of my face like it was trying to bite me. It took a while to find the door. I fumbled with the locks, convinced a cockroach had flown into my mouth.

Spitting and gasping, I forced the lock and hurled myself in the dirt beside the trailer, where I threw up with quiet dignity.

I remained in the dark, wondering if my performance had been recorded by the video cameras mounted on the prison walls. Perhaps they could run it for my drug awareness class, a sterling example of the kind of life they too could enjoy. The possibilities were endless.

The lights were on in the double-wide opposite the fence. This was what Rincin had called the "love shack." A conjugal visit in progress.

I stood up and saw a face in the double-wide's porthole window and dropped to the ground again.

It couldn't be.

When I raised my head again, the face was gone.

It . . . could . . . not . . . be. . .

But it was.

The door opened and I saw Tina, naked. She stepped out of the trailer and lit a cigarette. Even if I couldn't completely make out her face, her naked sway gave her away. Tina liked to light up naked outside at night. And she swayed when she smoked. The tip of what I knew by the waft of stale menthol was one of her bought-by-the-carton Newports glowed brighter orange. The sight was so familiar, I forgot I was watching and not remembering. Somebody else lurched out the door. In the moonlight I saw the shaved head, steroid bulk and full-body ink of a man who doesn't work for Prudential Life Insurance. When the bullet-headed freak lunged for my ex-wife, I stood back up. Like I could do anything. Like I had to. If anybody could take care of herself it was Tina.

Tina turned, almost casually, and the moon went behind a cloud. In the darkness I could see the orange chaser of her lit cigarette moving fast. Then sparks. Then nothing. Just a muffled "*FUCK*" as the man staggered backward, clutching his arm, and stepped back into the open trailer. Tina stopped just long enough in the doorway to light another Newport and show me her body in silhouette.

We'd been married a year before I could finally decipher her body. Her left shoulder angled slightly higher than her right, due to a drunken stepfather's penchant for swinging her around by her right arm when she was a baby. She claimed her earliest memory was flying sideways through the air, the centrifugal force so huge the stepfather got nosebleeds and her little-girl shoulder lurched permanently out of its socket. This lent her, from the front, the aspect of someone permanently shrugging off the world. It was subtle. But in profile, her skewed shoulders created the unsettling impression that whichever breast was further away was bigger. She once explained that this had

to do with her tit lacuna and cited some law of Newton's. Whatever the physics involved, Tina knew how to dress and assemble herself so as to look even. But naked, splashed with moonlight, the dipping collarbone and slightly off-kilter tits were on spectacular display. Even in the dark her nipples looked ironic. She couldn't be anybody else. As though I'd been spun around myself, I rolled onto my back on the whirling earth and stared up at the impossibility of everything.

The first night we spent together, Tina had sworn that she would quit smoking when she could hold a cigarette under her breasts. Ten years later, she was still smoking. The gift was genetic, she said. Her grandmother grew up on a tobacco farm. "*Nobody ever talks about white sharecroppers.*" Her natal mother, who also picked the leaf as a child, was the model for the "Mud Flap Girl," the kneeling, long-haired, buxom female silhouette made popular by long-haul truckers in the seventies. As far as I knew, she never collected royalties. I doubted it was true, but then, what was?

I lifted my head, considered some kind of rescue—at least a call for help—then let myself fall back in the dirt. What did I owe some muscle-bound con? He married her. If she maimed him with a lit cigarette, it was his fault. I hoped she didn't blind him.

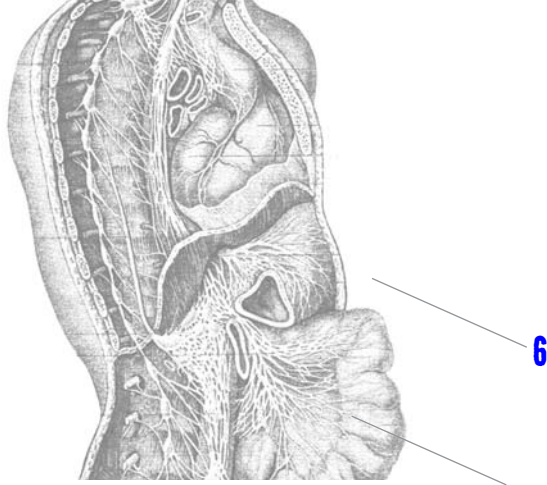
Now I was glad I was drunk—or at least sweating and nauseated, a close second. Without the antifreeze, the import of what I'd just seen would have had me chewing mud. But Gallo in cardboard could only do so much. The stars loomed like threats. The stone walls hummed. Why had I agreed to go to prison and pass myself off as sober and capable? Was it to forget that Tina had left me? That maybe I'd made her leave?

I didn't know how love worked. But I was an expert on how it didn't. Once the worst thing I could imagine happening happened,

the only thing that could take my mind off it was something worse. Sometimes I had to really work to find it. But now I was lucky.

I obsessed about what she and the wide white felon were doing on their conjugal visit. I had a peep-show booth lodged in my brain, and I could not stop feeding it quarters. What were the odds my newly ex wife would marry an incarcerated muscle-head and have trailer sex in a San Quentin love hut—the very night I arrived in San Quentin?

One thing about Tina, she always had good stories.



Binge and Purge

The night before she left, after nine years of marriage, Tina told me she was four months abstinent.

My first thought was, *If you're abstinent, then who have I been having sex with?*

I'd just rolled off her, pleased with myself. The memory inspired a retro-cringe.

She said it wasn't that kind of abstinence. She meant abstinent—as in not bingeing, not purging. She confessed that she'd been making herself throw up since she was nine. I didn't have to ask why. Her father was still doing time. I was all set to say something supportive when she announced that, working her Overeaters Anonymous program, she'd realized that I was the reason she'd been throwing up. My moods made me hard to tolerate; she had to get numb. I wasn't doing well in the private investigation business. Worse, I took my work home with me. "How can I be the reason," I asked, more defensive than I'd intended, "if you started when you were nine?"

"You're the reason I'm doing it now. You're so angry."

I had hurt a man in traffic that same evening. I ran him off the

road, yanked him out of his car and threw him against the side of his baby-blue Honda Civic. He'd given me the finger trying to get on the 110 South. I hadn't expected anybody so large to be in a Civic. Hadn't expected him to come out swinging. I'm not a great fighter, but I know enough to jab somebody in the neck before they get a punch off. Lucky for me he crumbled. That happens if you crunch a windpipe. Which I did, with a smile on my face, so quickly that I was able to get down on my knees and act like I'd stopped to help a man having a heart attack. Before taking his license I whispered that I'd find out where he lived and eat his heart if he tried to do anything. Then I got back in the Lincoln, where Tina waited with a face like a death mask, and we drove home in silence.

"So what am I supposed to do?" I asked when she made her announcement.

"Deal with your anger. Or don't. What I have to do is leave."

"Why?"

"I just told you. If I don't stop I'm going to burn out my esophagus and die. The stomach acid has already eaten half my teeth. I don't want our child doing it."

"What child?"

"If we ever have one. Just thinking about it makes me want to die. That I could do damage . . ."

I was shaken at my cluelessness. How could I have been living and sleeping with her and not known? It was like finding out you were a collaborator—when you didn't know there was a war going on. Tina had had a lifetime of pain and weirdness before our paths crossed, before she hooked up with me—but the thought that I caused this was too much. I wanted to rip my own heart out with a claw hammer.

I'd held her while she cried. It was windy outside, and I stared out the window of our bedroom at a walnut tree that seemed to be wagging its finger at me. Tina recovered fast, as if she'd never even cried. She eyed me almost sympathetically.

“So you’re bulimic,” I said, hearing the words come out wrong before I even uttered them, “and that’s my fault?”

“Until you can get rid of the buttons, you have to get rid of the button pushers.”

“Is that why you got rid of Marvin?”

When she gets angry, Tina’s cheekbones sharpen up like Faye Dunaway’s, but more feral. I watched her transformation from grief to rage, in awe of her peculiar beauty. Even with cleavage so unapologetically asymmetric, she *had* something. I breathed in and out, determined not to react, to just listen.

“Collateral damage. You want to know how many obese women roll over on their babies every year? It’s a disease, honey. Like alcoholism. Just as fatal to the people around it as to the people who have it.”

“I guess I’m lucky to be alive,” I said, attempting to inject some humor into the dialogue. “I like it when you roll on top of me.”

She placed her hand on my cheek. “Why couldn’t you have been this sweet before now?”

“You know me,” I said, “the sweet gene’s recessive.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “Marvin was sweet. And he was also a repellent idiot.”

“Well, you showed him!”

Marvin, for the record, was her husband. The one I found dead after she’d Dranoed his Lucky Charms. I was the homicide detective. We were in a small town outside Pittsburgh. I threw the tainted cereal in the garbage disposal before the evidence techs showed up. They called it an accident. It was not what Hollywood would call a “meet cute.”

I knew she was guilty. But I fell in love on the spot. Insane as it sounds, the situation made me feel protective and safe at the same time. But now she had reached the point where she had to puke herself numb just to tolerate my company. Being born a Jew, guilt stuck

to me like lint to Velcro. On top of which, it now looked like the real reason we split was so she could free herself up for a studly convict. An Aryan brother she could bone in a prison pump-wagon . . . Love!

I'm leaving out some details. I had a sixteen-year-old daughter from an earlier marriage. Lola wrote occasionally to ask for money in her mother's handwriting. She lived with my ex-wife, Donna, who did public relations for pharmaceutical firms. I was in love with her samples. Donna caught me riffling her bags for painkillers on our honeymoon. That was before I cleaned up. I talked my way out of it by saying I needed a Kleenex. Then she caught me again, stealing sample packs she was supposed to distribute to doctors. After that she changed the locks, had the marriage annulled and still refers to me as "He who shall not be mentioned." I'd made my peace with that. Though it was hard knowing I didn't see my child as often as I wanted to. Her thinking was, "Just because you love her doesn't mean it's good for her to have you around." Needless to say, things didn't get better once Tina came on the scene.

Until our divorce—my second—Tina and I lived together in a small house in Los Angeles. I'd made a semi-decent living dividing my time between being a private investigation professional and a consultant on television shows and movies that wanted to sound "authentic." There was, like Rincin said, a whole industry of ex-law enforcement, ex-criminal, ex-gangbanger, ex-anybody-who'd-lived-on-either-side-of-"crime" types who were able to capitalize on the entertainment industry's appetite. A studio executive would pay money just to sit in a room with somebody who once sat in a room with somebody real. I was a double threat, an erstwhile cop and erstwhile dope fiend. It happens. Not to brag.

To my surprise, there was an investigation into the handling of

Marvin's death. They decided that I had tainted the crime scene. I confessed, pleading narcotic inebriation. I was "self-medicating." I was remanded to a twenty-eight-day spin-dry: hospital withdrawal followed by rehabilitation. The real problem was that I fell in love with the perp.

Why forget the good times?

I was still in touch with the doctor. He was an "addictionologist."

While in rehab, I caught him fixing in the handicap restroom. Which, at four in the morning, he'd forgotten to lock. Afterward, it was our little secret. I didn't extort much: painkiller scripts whenever I wanted them, sleeping pills as needed for Tina and progesterone for her cat, who had feline osteoporosis. I later found out the hormones were for her. After hoarding the calcium out of her system for thirty years, Tina had the bone density of an eighty-year-old. But she was still hot.

My future ex-wife murdered her husband, but me bitch-slapping a Sunday driver was too much. She told me that she'd learned to vomit soundlessly, without even needing a finger. *Look, Ma, no hands!* She could have given bulimia lessons. But she thought I had the problem. We used to fight about my negativity. My catastrophizing. Tina would tell me what her father used to say: "Worrying is just praying for what you don't want." I'd dread things so much I actually made them happen. And all this time, she had a secret.

Eating disorders are brutal. But let me confess: beyond knowing how much pain she'd caused herself, what hurt was knowing how much she had concealed from me all those years. Any cop could tell you—if a perp was hiding one thing, they were usually hiding something else. Or maybe it was just my ego. When things got bad she gave me an Al-Anon schedule. "Codependent" sounded like something you wore with an adult diaper.

As Tina was leaving, I grabbed her arm at the door and spun her around. Tried to pull her close, feeling weirdly like John Huston cud-

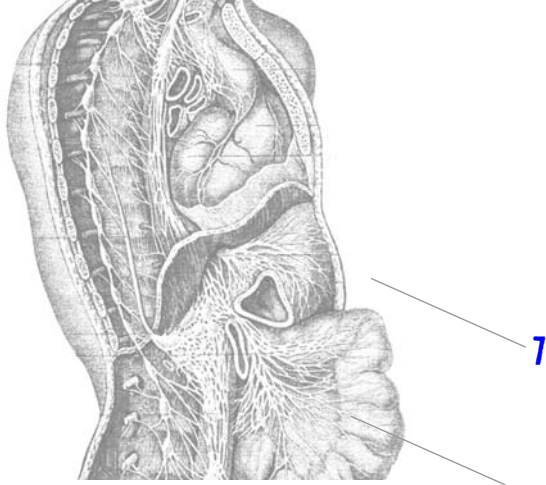
dling his daughter-slash-granddaughter after shooting her sister-slash-mother at the end of *Chinatown*.

I pleaded with her. “Just tell me, before you go.”

“Tell you what?”

“If I made you come,” I blurted, serving up a slice of my secure and romantic inner life.

“Buckets,” she replied, “and now you’re making me go.”



Fucking on the Edge of a Cliff

Once you saw how your wife killed her husband, you lived with a certain back-of-the-head hum. You knew what could happen. You'd seen the evidence. But still . . . You didn't think about it. Not all the time. Just on special occasions.

Had anyone asked, I'd have explained it like this: If you were fucking a beautiful woman on the edge of a cliff, would you look down the whole time? Or would you look at her? By definition, if a woman is beautiful enough for you to fuck on a cliff, she's beautiful enough to make you forget to look down. Except when she wants to remind you how close you are to the edge. What would happen if you rolled off. Or she pushed you. The problem was, the beverage I'd found under the snailback sink had skewed my perception. Not one part of me believed Tina could have feelings for the inked-up skeek I'd glimpsed out the trailer window. Wedding an ALS brother seemed like a long way around just to make a point. But maybe there was something else going on. What did I know? The box wine left me pining for something more full-bodied, like Listerine.

I did not even realize I had passed out until I picked the leech

off my eye. It turned out to be a waterlogged Band-Aid. I tried to sit up and banged my head off the bottom of the trailer. Facedown, if the variety of floor-flora stuck to my mouth was any indication. I'd thrown my jacket on and found the lighter. I flicked it, illuminating a pit of moldering magazines, old-fashioned brogans and dental molds, metal cabinet drawers stuffed with carbon and typewritten files. A flaky *Time*, wedged under a brick, showed J. Edgar Hoover on the cover, staring down Commies. Underneath the *Time*, a rusted Red Cross lockbox jutted from the ranks of other antiquated but seemingly freshly dumped items.

I didn't care about the garbage. I remembered the first time I arrested a junkie Dumpster-diving behind a hospital. He had four bottles of expired resperidine, an antipsychotic favored by families who needed to shut up senile screamers, and a gross of tongue depressors jammed in his army jacket. Hospitals could be gold mines. (The only better pickings, drugwise, were the trans cans outside airport customs. Many an international traveler with pills in their pockets lost their nerve and dumped them. But the airport janitorial staff had the trash can action sewn up.)

Grabbing two Red Cross boxes, I headed back inside and scraped the side of my face on something that turned out to be the missing light switch. Thus illuminated, I pulled down the bed. I spread a *San Francisco Chronicle* on top and dumped the boxes on it. Then I re-hit the files. I needed to distract myself from rerunning the Tina highlight reel in my head. Thankfully, the love-hut lights had gone off. If I focused, I could pretend I'd hallucinated everything and go back to work.

DAVID "DAVEY" ZELOVSKY

Caucasian, 21 months for parole violation. Weapons possession.

This one was bad. This one was *wrong*.

The face just stopped above a nubby bottom lip, which barely cov-

ered his gums and left his teeth exposed, giving him the look of some feral hillbilly insect.

Five years, domestic abuse.

In a blackout, Davey jammed his wife's hand in a waffle iron in front of his twin son and daughter. Under occupation, he had put "catalogue model." He had also had a small part in a soap opera. He was that kind of handsome.

Reading details of his "weapons possession," I marveled at the immense variety of fate. Davey's crime: he botched a suicide attempt and got violated for having a gun. Hard luck. But the law's the law. That's what's wrong with it.

A sketchy psych eval shed no light but added details.

Perp's wife had taken their twins with instructions to relatives not to tell him where she went. He visited her father to plead. Father-in-law rejected him.

I studied his sideshow grill. The drama of the nongifted criminal. Can't stalk her if you can't find her, huh, buddy? Who hasn't been *there*?

Perp purchased gun from Mex. (unknown) gardener who kept the .45 in a case of hose nozzles. Seepage may have warped the barrel.

"Andre Duquesne" was handwritten on the next file. Possibly the classiest name I had ever heard. But the file was empty.

BERNARD ROOKS, 21, African-American, possession with intent to distribute 100 grams of crack cocaine, 15 years.

As opposed to the one and a half he'd have gotten if it had been pow-

der. The photo showed a burly, sad-faced youngster. There was a CDC memo paper-clipped to the file cover. Now that the U.S. Sentencing Commission had issued retroactive sentence reductions to balance the crack versus powder disparity, offenders could appeal to the original judge who sentenced them. Nothing said willingness to a sentencing board more than completion of a drug program. Someone else with real motivation.

And finally, his file yellow—"Fritz Ullman, 97, Caucasian" stared up from his mug shot with the same mocking, outraged eyes, trim mustache, and Jack Lemmon—esque features I'd seen the day I stumbled onto Sun Myung, Clarence Thomas, and Jerry Falwell on my bedroom dresser. The face had another five decades on it. The hair was white. Gone was the smart SS uniform.

The original file was almost completely blacked out, leaving only a few "of"s and "the"s. Along with this information-free document, someone had inserted a single folded sheet of legal paper. I unfolded it and read, in pencil:

Arrested for attempted vehicular manslaughter, perp convicted of hit-and-run and fleeing the scene of an accident. Three years.

. . . More intriguing, a search turned up evidence of "lab equipment—probably drug-related—in his van, which belonged to the Department of Animal Control. A public defender got the van search thrown out, so "Fritz" did not have narcotic charges added to his vehicular manslaughter. . . . A supplemental psych eval revealed:

Inmate C-899923 exhibited delusional behavior, possibly methamphetamine psychosis. (The court noted defendant's "angry affect" and "explosive outbursts.") Inmate claims to be "Dr. Josef Mingola" (sic) a "high-ranking SS man and 'race scientist,'" and demanded to speak with the head of the FDA.

... Asked if he heard voices, perp responded in affirmative—"but none of them speak German." Believed to be highly intelligent. Prescribed Depakote for bipolar disorder, Effexor for depression, a senior multivitamin supplement, and a weekly enema.

Maybe he was enjoying himself.

I sat back to ponder my quarry.

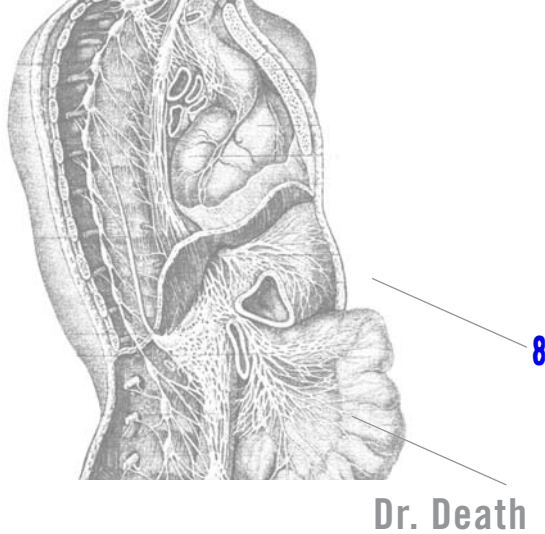
He seemed, on the face of it, an unremarkable old man. Who was possibly a mass murderer. He wanted the world to know. Which was either a strong indication he was lying or evidence of his veracity. Assuming he wasn't simply schizophrenic, possessed of a peculiar sense of humor or paid to impersonate Josef Mengele . . . My guess was poor Number Four: senility.

Zell wanted my opinion. I needed the work. I didn't tell him the dirty little secret: the least-effective method of finding out if someone over eighty is telling the truth is by talking to them. Everybody told stories. But, unlike younger liars, sometimes our senior prevaricators did not know they were telling them.

I'd known Alzheimer's victims who took on the identity of TV characters and historical figures. They forgot details of their own past but superimposed, like senior idiot savants, facts and details from the lives of others. Back in Upper Marilyn, the small town where I cut my cop teeth, I'd rounded up two wandering octogenarian men who thought they were famous, one Lincoln and one Lee Marvin, and a great-grandmother who claimed to be Lady Bird Johnson and kept taking her clothes off in mall fountains. If you were old enough, nobody called you a liar. They didn't even call you lewd. They'd say you had dementia and blame the behavior on declining faculties.

I heard a talk show doctor say they'd found an Alzheimer's gene. If Mengele had it, he was hanging tough. Or maybe he'd spotted the senility gene in full bloom in his own ninety-seven-year-old DNA and somehow deleted it, breeding it off the Master Race roster altogether.

To me it was pretty clear: Mengele was demented. But he didn't have dementia.



In a perfect world, I would have gone back to the crime scene. (The hit-and-run in L.A., not the death camp in Poland.) Interviewed witnesses. Unearthed the facts about the woman he ran down, seen if perpetrator and perpetrated had a connection; found out where Ullman/Mengele lived and who he'd spoken to after the bumper party.

Any crackpot with TiVo, Google skills or a library card could dig enough death-camp trivia to pass himself off as an OG from Auschwitz.

I dove into the rest of Zell's Mengele info pack. A dozen smudged carbon copies detailed the doctor's varied and disturbing intended-to-save-the-race procedures. At Auschwitz-Birkenau he had sewn twins together. He reasoned that if they were fused, the resulting megatwin could do twice the work for half the feed. He experimented with hydrochloric acid douches and scrotal radiation by way of low-cost sterilization.

Zell had unearthed a handful of Mengele diary pages. The random sample I picked reeked with stilted self-regard. Mengele wrote

like a man giving himself medals. *“There are two ways to save the race: by eliminating lesser races, and enhancing the superior one. This is the duty of a scientist of the Reich—a duty that I, Mengele, fulfilled!”*

Searching for ways to build a better Aryan, he got big into eyeball transplants: replacing lowly brown eyes with blue ones. Unable to connect optic nerves, the doctor left his victims bleeding and blind.

Of his eye transplant techniques: *“Had the wretches been able to see, for but one moment, they would have thanked me for the glorious cerulean blue gracing their faces.”* He tried dyes after that, but the end result was that they remained brown and blind.

These notes went on and on. His biggest passion was twins. Twins held the secrets of fertility and genetic control. His next loves, after *die Zwillinge*, were the deformed, and then dwarves. In his capacity as Selektor, he procured specimens from the trains. Had the Nazis won, this was the Mengele who would appear on his own stamp: the dapper *Hauptsturmführer* standing on the ramp, deciding who lives and who dies. Tallies varied. Mengele ordered the death of either a hundred thousand or half a million. The horror, for the Jews, was that it was Jews who were being exterminated. The rest of the world—including America—was more or less okay with it. Until the very end. In 1939, the United States turned away the SS *Louisa*, full of Jewish refugees. President Roosevelt was concerned about the political fallout from helping Jews. (*“New Deal—not Jew Deal!”*) The ship returned to Hamburg, where passengers were promptly dispatched to the camps. The State Department set up a Jewish settlement in Sosua, in the Dominican Republic. The DR’s president, Trujillo, believed his countrymen were too black. He wanted some whites to move in and improve the racial ratio. I wouldn’t say I was a history buff, but I was an insomniac, and Nazis were a perennial fave on the late-night Discovery, History, Biography and Military Channel menu. Arcane details just lodge in the mind.

The possible presence of the man himself infused the facts (selections, experiments, perfumed scarves) with new juice. I kept reading.

His twin prose degenerated from grandiose to floral: “With what luster doth the womb of a single woman bloom forth with two, three, four identical flowers?” Other times he sounded like a transcribed infomercial: “My goal was to increase the good, eliminate the bad. Say yes to Nordic Splendor. Say no to cripples, Jews, Gypsies, harelips and the rest of the germs that pollute the gene pool!”

Much of Mengele’s “fertility research” work involved genital dissection. He claimed more accurate results when the girls were alive. His ongoing, secondary experiment was the study of how much pain a human could endure. Lessons learned on vermin could extend the life of the Master Race. Why experiment on mice?

I needed air. I stuck my head out of the reeking trailer door. Pretended it wasn’t to scope out my ex-wife—frolicking in the night with her incarcerated hubby—or find out if I’d hallucinated her in the first place. What did that make me—succumbing to personal torments, evidence of the violation of an entire people spread out before me like tarot cards?

I stood outside for a vacant minute. It must have been three-something A.M. There were no signs of life in the conjugal unit. Tower-mounted vapor lights softened the forbidding architecture beyond. Their glow lent the retro buildings an insect-buzzy, Edward Hopper feel. I couldn’t tell if the buzzing came from insects or the electric fence. (I remembered how, when the camps were being liberated, some inmates were so delirious with happiness they ran for the fences. Their first act of freedom was electrocuting themselves.)

You hear a lot about prison rape on cable, but I didn't hear any screams. Just the ones inside my own head.

I urinated—on my shoe, as it turned out—and thought how Mengele had spent his glory years in proximity to high-voltage fences, guards in uniforms, gun towers and inmates. And here he was again. One big difference from his Auschwitz time was that the Nazis kept their prisoners weak. In concentration camps, it was the powerful against the dying. In American prisons, the prisoners were bodybuilders. So it was, more often, the powerful against the buff.

As I zipped and went back inside, I still felt a little ashamed that I'd been too weak to just dive into the files and dig straight for the doctor. It was a shame I was used to. I had wanted, very badly, to find out from the file that this was a hoax, in which case I could be in and out of state supervision in record time. I had not wanted to admit the reality of what I'd signed on for. Whoever and whatever my quarry was, I was going to have to deal with it. And I didn't *like* dealing with things. Which, oddly enough, was a good quality for a cop. But otherwise it made for a life based on avoidance. Every plan I'd ever had was shaped by whatever I wanted to avoid. *The Fear-Driven Life*. I did not have much in common with Pastor Rick Warren. Paranoia, for me, was not so much evidence of mental illness as a side effect of heightened consciousness.

Running a game on criminals is a bad idea under any circumstances. But doing it here made me so nervous I couldn't make myself read about Mengele. I'd had to wait until his file showed up in my hands.

I stress-yawned and turned around. Now all possibility of avoidance was over. Back inside, I sat down at the sticky table and started making big X's next to passages I thought I could use. In one interview, Mengele's son announced that his father felt cheated out of the honor his work deserved. Dad believed this was because he didn't use anesthesia. Small minds could not understand that this was science, not

sadism. They did not know the miracles he'd discovered, the results he longed to give to the world. But the world, comprised as it was of very, very small minds, would rather suffer and die of deadly diseases than admit that Mengele had found the cure. Rolf, who grew up to be a political moderate, claimed to be horrified at his father's deeds.

According to Mengele the younger, his father had lugged three boxes of lab notes from country to country. Dad's last letter to his son, one sentence long, captures his loathsome tone-perfect note of self-pity and narcissism: "History has chosen me to judge, so as not to have to judge itself."

There was more: Mengele suffered from a rare medical condition. Rare for a human, at least. Because of his lifelong habit of chewing his mustache, hair had settled in his intestines and created a growth called a bezoar. He underwent an operation in 1957, in Caracas, to remove what was, when you stripped away the niceties, a hairball.

Where did Zell get this stuff?

I felt unnamable emotions, staring at pictures of naked Gypsy twins: teenage girls whose hands had been amputated and re sewn onto each other's arms, holding lollipops. Shock and pain had blasted all expression off their faces. Then I realized what I was really staring at: their two thick bushes. I nearly passed out hating myself. Who was Herr Doktor kidding? Why were they naked?

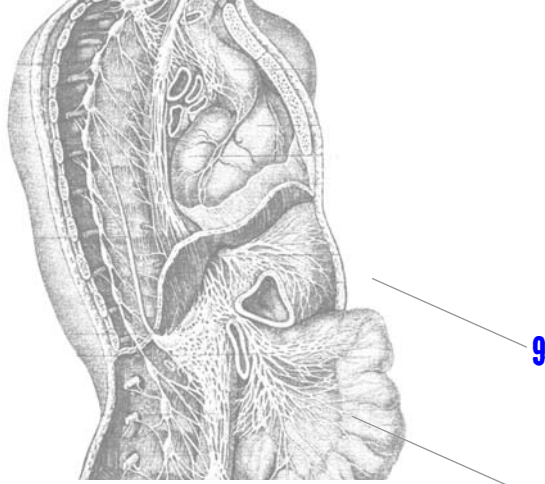
Zell's notes said that Mengele (with the help of IG Farben) had used the skin of actual women to create the seductive and easy-to-clean coating for his "field hygienic love partner." A love doll. The specs were included. "Borghilda is flexible, elastic, anthropomorphic and capable of doing everything your special girl or devoted *mutti* waiting at home can do." She bore the same full pubic forest as the unlucky Gypsies. But blond.

"We Germans wanted mature women. Real women. We did not want them to shave their nether hair. We did not infantilize. Unlike American men, who want their women with outsized breasts and hair-

less vaginas, so they can have Mommy on top and a little girl on the bottom. I made my Rhinemaiden, Borghilda, as nature intended.” I read on: He submerged babies in freezing water. He played Schubert’s *Serenade* on the violin.

He found a Hungarian pianist to accompany him and trained a guard dog to attack her when she hit a wrong note.

The music room was in Building Ten, beside the lab. What was harder to believe: that he transplanted hands? That he actually thought transplanted hands would be able to play the violin? Or that he had all the hands he wanted?



The Red Cross Is There

Feh! HUUU-ACCCHHH!

I lurched awake, soggy, gripped by some kind of death sneeze. Mengele's documents lay scattered all around me. Somehow, during the night, a team of surgeons had entered the trailer and relocated a badly diseased, radioactive hog rectum in the cranial pouch where my brain used to be. From the coating on my tongue, it was clear they'd gone in through my mouth, shoved the thing north through my sinuses, then wedged it behind my own nonblue eyeballs. I could feel it, propped atop my cerebral cortex like roadkill on a stick. I wanted to stick my tongue out as far as it would go and bite it off. *Mengele dreams.*

I needed to hit something. I slapped myself in the head, then banged the top of an antique Red Cross box. To my surprise the top popped open, revealing a pristine batch of metal syringes and sealed vials inside. I grabbed a vial and made out the logo—BAYER, 1919. Back then heroin was legal. Aspirin was the newfangled, not-to-be-trusted devil drug. More Discovery Channel fallout.

I squinted for a better view of the label, and there it was, in curlicued Calvin Coolidge-era lettering: MORPHINE SULPHATE.

I was surprised by the jolt this gave me. Just seeing the words. Until that moment I had not been thinking about drugs. But as soon as I saw them, *I needed them*. And not just because of the hangover. I'd had hangovers before. But nothing, nothing like the throbbing pork butt of death left in my head by the boxed wine and mildew party. I visualized my brain spooned from the skull, floating in a jar, bloodied with fresh tattoos of the woman I once thought was going to save me, naked. Every time I moved, my lungs were punctured by the flattened soup can of grief.

But this is the point: the pain was endurable until I saw the painkiller. That's called being an addict. The craving began on sight. Out of nowhere, an option no normal person would have entertained suddenly made sense. (Normal people don't look at abandoned, half-drunk cocktails in airport bars and think about knocking them back when no one's watching, either. But ask an alkie if he's ever had the urge. (If he answers no, he's not an alkie.) If the feelings were bad enough, and there was a way to obliterate them, it was obliterate first and deal with the consequences later. If you're a junkie, obliteration is your job. You have a hole to fill. Not to mention self-pity and ball-clenching fear to try to relieve.

I heard the distant crunch of tires on gravel. Then I watched my hands assemble the screw-in syringe like they'd gone to nursing school in 1910. Just holding the paraphernalia had my bowels churning. My fingers left grimy prints on the glass tube. I slid it into the metal holder like a shell into a cannon, worked the needle into the slot at the business end. And stared, amazed, at the rig in my hands.

The gravel crunch was getting closer.

I hadn't shot up in years, but my veins were still tough as bark. Breathing slowly, I coaxed a blood register into the old-timey works. Still not sure I was going to do it. And then *BANG-BANG-BANG!*

"Anybody home?"

Without thinking, I pressed the plunger. *Shit!*

“Just getting up!” I croaked.

It took a few seconds for the century-old morphine to detonate. The rush came on with fluid warmth. Like my heart had wet itself.

By reflex, I broke down the rig and stashed the Red Cross box under the sink, where it looked like it belonged.

Rincin knocked again. “C’mon, bub, what are you doing in there?”

My voice came from far away.

“Gimme a minute there, Officer.”

“Sure thing. Mind if I pop in?”

“Wait!”

I forgot that to law enforcement, “Wait!” means “*Come on in!*” I watched the knob turn with dim fascination. Had I also forgotten to lock up after last night’s festivities? Did Rincin have a key? Panic flared and subsided. The drug was working. But I knew that the pain it killed would be resurrected later. Then that thought disappeared with a hiss and the door banged open. Rincin walked in and winked. Maybe I was just feeling the effects of the preservatives.

“I’m early,” said my new friend. “Gotta use the head. Two sips of joe and I gotta whiz so bad I could cry.” He paddled past me, jumped into the telephone booth toilet and grunted. “Hey, buddy? You forget?”

Something bounced off my chest. I groped for it and felt the crinkly plastic wrapping. The piss-test cup. My stomach plummeted.

I turned on the kitchen tap. Unleashed a dribble of fluid that tasted flammable. A drop got in my eye and stung, but I kept gulping. Rincin talked from the bathroom. The CO hadn’t bothered to close the door. His stream banked loudly off the metal bowl and he groaned like the lead in a bad porno, “Oh yeah, oh God . . . Fuck that is good. That is so fucking go-o-o-d.”

I tried not to think what the Model T morphine might do to my

liver. I'd shot up shoe polish once and survived. What was one more toxic drop in Love Canal?

Rincin sighed loudly from the bathroom. "Man, oh Manischewitz!" His high-impact relief ebbed to a mere torrent. He stepped out of the toilet, hitching his balls in his khaki uniform. "You dressed, new fish? 'Cause we got to drop your UA off and get you to class."

"How long does it take?"

"How long does what take?"

"The piss test."

"Why, you worried?"

"Not unless they made beer illegal!"

This seemed like a Regular Guy thing to say. Rincin just stared.

"You got the Parkinson's?" he asked, zipping up. "You got kind of a palsy thing going on."

"Shaky night."

"I used to get those. Boy howdy! Then I cut out the bug juice."

I lurched by him to the bathroom. The black spore that grew on the mirror gave me a face full of blackheads. It was like being fourteen again, except for a haunted yellow tinge in the eye and the deep grooves that time and clean living had carved in both cheeks like initials in a tree. My daughter referred to the parentheses around my mouth as "puppet lines."

At her age, I had no idea that one day I'd be sweating over clean pee. Getting busted at Quentin, on day one as drug counselor, there were bound to be repercussions.

"*Idiot*," I hissed at my smeary image.

"Talkin' to me, Rupert?" Rincin's voice came through more baffled than indignant.

"Singing," I replied, before picking up the pee cup and peeling off the plastic.

Shaking off a century of dust, the post-rush opiate buzz kicked in.

I was ready to give up, but in a moment of devil-may-care ingenuity, I spotted the little urine lakes Rincin left on the floor. Happily, the linoleum had deep divots, deep enough to scoop up a sample cup's worth of pee.

"Okay, let's do this," I said, trying to smile as I came out of the bathroom

"Do what?" Rincin eyed my sample with something less than ardor. "Less you're planning on goin' Gandhi and drinkin' that, I'd put a lid on."

"Gandhi drank his pee?"

"Secret of successful nonviolence," Rincin called over his shoulder. "Make sure you got piss breath when you negotiate, and sit close."

He stepped out of the trailer while I weaved behind him.

"Did you just make that up?" I asked.

"History major. Humboldt Junior College. Speaking of which, you don't think the Holocaust happened, do you?"

"Jury's out." I shrugged with no hesitation whatsoever. "What makes you ask?"

"Oh, I don't know." Rincin unlocked the driver's side of a Crown Vic with CDC on the door. "I work with a guy, I like to know where he stands."

"Who doesn't?" I said inanely.

I wasn't sure if our little exchange was cause for alarm. Or not. Just a couple of regular guys talking Holocaust. By now, the opiate blast had passed. Paranoia was back. Now cut with disorientation and dry mouth. I wondered vaguely if impaired judgment could be carried by bacteria.

"Get in." Rincin slammed his door shut and patted the passenger seat. "You're riding bitch."

A trio of prisoners with rakes on their shoulders stepped by and peered in the car. Rincin shooed them away and squawked into his walkie-talkie. "The package is on the way. Ten-four."

“The package?” The sensation of being set up damped the last embers of euphoria.

Rincin winked. “You gotta package, don’tcha? I bet you’re a regular Johnny Hog-leg.”

I didn’t take the bait. If that’s what it was. Instead, I looked at orange jumpsuits circling the yard in clumps of two or three. Half the convicts looked like they’d gotten off at the wrong bus stop. The other half looked like they’d kill the bus driver for a dime bag of anything. A few of them—pink cheeked and well scrubbed—gave off the impression that maybe they’d eaten their mothers.

“Apologies for the hog-leg remark.” Rincin lowered his head, genuinely contrite. “The quality of people around here, it lowers the real estate, conversationally speaking.”

He pulled into a dirt lot and sat with his hands clamped around the steering wheel. He stared straight ahead, at the back of North Block, the condemned unit.

“Around here the Devil wins more than he loses, you know what I mean?”

“Not exactly.”

“Let me rephrase, Your Honor. Think there’s such a thing as a good prisoner?”

“You’d know better than me. Do *you* think people can change?”

“Oh, they can change all right. I’ve seen ’em. The problem is, they keep changing into the same thing.” This came with a full frontal of the CO’s perma-grin. “Have there been some famous convicts beloved by the outside? Sure. Hell, they’re the ones they make movies about. But the guards always know.”

“My favorite’s *Birdman of Alcatraz*.”

“You have got to be kidding!”

For the first time since we’d met Rincin slid off his shades, revealing pale green eyes of such startling luminosity I wondered if he wore the reflectors to keep from showing them to the lifers. “No knock on

Burt Lancaster,” he went on. “The character’s real name was Robert Stroud. Stroud was at Leavenworth when my great-uncle was a hack. Forget the birds. All he did was write letters to kids, describin’ stuff he wanted to do to ’em.”

“The Birdman of Alcatraz was a pedophile?”

“That part didn’t make it into the movie.”

“Thanks for clearing that up,” I said. “I was going to try and find a guy serving life to babysit my child, but not now. I owe you.”

Shades back on, Rincin shook his grin. “You’re a funny guy. All I’m sayin’ is, you walk out that class today, you might think you met some of the greatest guys in the world. Just remember, they didn’t get here for skipping jury duty.”

“Point taken,” I said, eyeing the low building just off the yard where a group of cons had already gathered. “You know why I’m here?”

“Do-gooder, I guess.” He made sure I saw him spit. “Looks like your students are waiting. Maybe one of ’em brought you an apple.”

He came around the passenger side and grabbed my arm as I got out. “I’m pulling your leg about the apple. They bring you any kind of foodstuff, I was you, I’d check it for feces and ground glass.”

“Will do,” I said, freaked by the mention of ground glass. Was Rincin letting me know he knew how my second wife did her first husband? That he knew everything about me? Did everybody know everything? Was anything accidental?

Fuck.

“We’re in the old furniture factory. We got a li’l conference room in the corner.”

That’s when it hit me: I had made no preparations for class. I’d become so obsessed with Mengele, I had no idea what I was going to say.

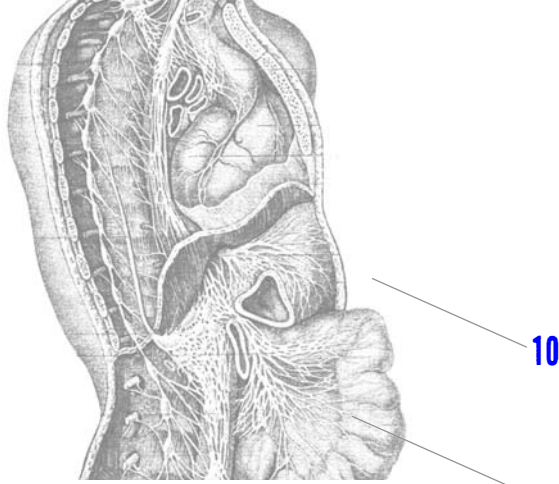
Mister Addiction Specialist.

We passed the open garage of the fire department. A tiny musclemán in big black boots stood on the front bumper of a midsixties

Mack fire truck. He leaned over the hood, one hand inside a chamois mitten. He polished slowly, in tight, soft circles, as if stroking an ass he couldn't get enough of.

“Showtime!” Rincin hissed. “Bring snacks!”

I turned, but Rincin wasn't talking to me. He was talking to the fireman. The mini-Schwarzenegger saw me looking and grinned, giving the air in front of him a few mocking little mitten-spanks.



Two-Hundred-Year-Old Billy Idol

Except for Davey, the guy with the half face, I didn't recognize any of my students. Mengele wasn't there. I hadn't considered that possibility. With him absent, I'd have to fake competence for no other reason than to keep anybody from finding out I was incompetent. If I had to pick a place to get drug sloppy, where better than state prison, after showing up to teach the inmates how they, too, could live the dream of being clean and sober?

I was two seconds from full spinout. A door across the room banged open. A wheelchair rolled in, bearing a slender, slightly hunched old man with glowing skin, perfectly parted peroxide-blond hair, matching brows and mustache. He looked like a two-hundred-year-old Billy Idol. I couldn't take my eyes off him. But it didn't seem smart to show it. Pushing him was Movern Dinkle. The free-for-six-hours guy.

Movern's plump baby cheeks rested on top of a string-bean neck and shoulders, as if his face needed to go on a diet and his body needed nutrition shakes. I nodded at him and he nodded back. Not friendly, not unfriendly. A professional.

The chairs were arranged in a circle. I grabbed the one up front,

next to Davey, whose remaining face appeared strangely chipper. He'd shaved his head.

"Hey, I'm Manny," I said, extending a hand. "You must be Davey."

"How'd you know? My good looks?"

Despite the fact that the bottom of his face was blown off, enough of Davey's mouth had been put back to let him talk normally, if a little Tom Brokaw-ish. He must have been a handsome kid. Above the catastrophe of scars and skin grafts, where his chin would have been, he owned all-American features. Reconstructive surgery had not reconstructed him so much as rounded him off. Up close, I spotted fresh scarring. The last surgeon to have a go at him had tried to fix his lower lip so it covered his gums. But the graft had not quite adhered, and the skin of his lip on one side flapped a little, like peeling wallpaper. He was basically lipless.

I let go of his hand and turned to the other side, where a wiry African-American, middle-aged with old-school processed hair, slunk in his chair, arms crossed over his chest. "Do not even," he said. "I hear you a cop."

My surprise must have shown.

"Ain't no secrets up in this bitch. First thing you be learnin' is how to spot a UC. Right after how to keep your tush cherry and get your womens in here to visit."

This was going well! A paunchy white Rasta in wire-rims dropped in the chair opposite. "No disrespect, but ease the fuck up, Andre."

My neighbor was instantly upright. "Motherfucker, I tol' you, I don't go by Andre. I go by Reverend D."

So Rev. D was the mysterious empty file, Andre Duquesne. The skull of the white kid ragging him sprouted broccoli dreads. A few of them stuck straight up at least half a foot. I didn't recognize him from the files. One more way the warden was letting me know he cared.

The white Rasta covered his mouth with his hand and giggled. "I'm Jimmy. I didn't have dreads in my mug shot. You're a friendly policeman, huh?"

"Was."

"You ever shoot anybody?"

People always ask that. I always answer, "I don't remember."

This bought me a few more seconds to study my new friends. I recognized Roscoe, the Panther turned philosopher. Older by far than everybody else, Roscoe's salt-and-pepper goatee graced a lean, serene and unsmiling face. He might have been a black yogi. A solid *ése* to my left sat tapping his fingers on the desk, chewing his lip. If it was Cranky, the Mexican trying to kick crank, he'd obviously been lifting weights. Maybe that's what Mexican speed freaks did up here. His blue shirt was open over a wife beater, revealing the top half of the Virgin of Guadalupe.

"I was gonna go around the room, talk a bit about who I am, all that crap, but what the hell, let's start with the shooting thing. It's an honest question, and I wanna give you an honest answer."

I glanced at Mengele again. I couldn't resist. Underneath the Rutger Hauer—circa—*Blade Runner* hair, his anthracite eyes were piercing and suspicious, the taut skin over his face weirdly smooth. But what really creeped me was the globe of muscle in his bicep. Not large so much as tight. I thought of the switch-handed twins and wondered, *Can a surgeon transplant his own arms?* Obviously not both on the same day. No way to check for a scar unless he wore a sleeveless T-shirt. But from his ironed, buttoned-to-the-top shirt and buffed fingernails, he didn't seem like the sleeveless type.

Our eyes met and I thought I could see what was in Mengele's head: *Dance, little Jew-monkey, dance.* The race scientist had written his PhD thesis on how to tell Jews from the folds in their ears. Ten seconds with the calipers over a lobe, no need to check for foreskin. He must have been the life of the party.

Tearing my gaze away, I met all the eyes in the room, then went into full blurt: “Toward the end, it was no big deal to come to with blood on my shirt or a clump of hair stuck to my dashboard. Little things . . .”

“If thass what the man call little, Movern gonna shit his drawers he hear what’s *big*.” Movern laughed at his own joke, but no one else did.

“Movern, mouth,” Rincin said from his post in the corner. He jingled change in his pocket and popped his gum. I realized that I was no longer high. I also realized that I’d stopped talking. But I was a professional: I knew how to make a flake-out look like a pause.

“One time I came to with a couple of clips missing from my nine. This time there was a puddle of blood in the backseat. But I never got that knock on the door.”

I looked at each of them individually, wrinkling my forehead to signify depth.

“You know the knock I’m talking about. Like when you drive home in a blackout and next day your bumper’s bashed in, and there’s a flattened high heel trailing panty-hose stuck to the front tire. You’re scared and hungover, so what do you do? What do you think you do? You stick the hoopty in the garage or steal some license plates from a Denny’s parking lot to switch up. Hit-and-run’s a total loser crime,” I said, looking at Mengele, who was in there for it. “Scum of the earth. But some people have no self-control.”

What was I doing, trying to flush out a mass murderer with vehicular manslaughter insults? I rubbed a hand over my stubble and winced at the eau de trailer on my fingers. I didn’t need a shower as much as I needed steam-cleaned.

Roscoe, who thus far had said nothing, regarded me mildly. Non-judgmental. Which only made me feel more judged.

“Why am I standing here telling you the demented shit I did?”

“‘Cause you demented?” offered Andre, AKA Reverend D.

Half-faced Davey glared. I noticed that his eyelashes were thick

as Bambi's, as if in compensation for the tragedy underneath.

"Guys," I soldiered on, "demented is five flights up from where I was. Sometimes it still is, but that's a different story. . . ."

Silence. Neurosis didn't play well in the penitentiary.

Cranky piped up. "C'mon, homes, you a cop." Every few words he had to stop to grind his teeth and chew his lips. "Cops are your gang." *Chew. Grind.* "They ain't gonna snitch you off." *Grind, grind.* "And it ain't like you gonna kick the door down and cuff your own white ass." *Grind, grind. Chew chew grind chew.*

"You sound kinda pissed, Cranky. So, you ever had a problem with drugs?"

"My name is Ernesto, mang. I'm Cranky with my family."

"Me too," I said, "and the Lexapro didn't help. I still hated them. Shit's supposed to be an antidepressant. But how can you not be depressed when the shit turns your dick into a doorbell?"

Shut the fuck up! I screamed at myself in my head, then wondered if I'd been talking out loud.

It didn't matter, at least not to Cranky. He'd twisted around to make sure Rincin was listening, giving me the chance to admire the fresh "XIII" inked on the back of his head. For the thirteenth letter of the alphabet. M. *La eMe.* Which had just made doing meth a beat-down offense.

"Here's the deal," I said, my voice low so it would sound serious, if not entirely coherent. "You want to stop using, you have to find out why you started. You got to look at all the shit you got high 'cause you couldn't face. . . ."

Then the white Rasta threw down a challenge. "This is just me, Jimmy, talkin'. But I didn't get high for none of that, man. I got high 'cause I liked fuckin' two hos all night with that chronic and cocaine. And some Hennessy for when the sun come up."

"That's what I'm talkin' about," echoed Reverend D. "'Cept you should lose the alcohol, son. Womens you can enjoy till you eighty, but

you gotta lose the booze. Man, I had this little Chinese girl once—”

“Hold that thought, Rev.” I knew I had to chime back in or lose the semblance of control. “What I wanna know, Jimmy, is how you felt when you *couldn’t* get the hos or the drugs.” This sounded school-marmy, even to me. I was so ill prepared I was defaulting to Nancy Reagan. I had spent all my time on Mengele. But if anybody asked about real-skin Nazi sex dolls, I’d be all over it.

Jimmy threw his arms out and mugged for the class. “Look at this face. Dude, I always got the hos and the drugs. And when I’m on the outs, I intend to get ’em again.”

“Then why are you here?”

“Why you think? Addiction education’s gonna look real sweet to the parole board.”

“When’s your hearing?”

“Twenty twenty-nine.”

“Well, don’t rush into anything. . . .”

Somebody let out a loud, whistling fart, after which Mengele stirred in his wheelchair and declared, “That’s the first intelligent thing I’ve heard all day.”

This got some chuckles.

“A fart joke, thank you.” I pretended to be offended. Superior. Trying for a tone I imagined a vain man might find infuriating to his vanity. “What took you down, Mr. Burgermeister? Bratwurst and beer?”

Mengele stiffened. “It’s doctor.”

“Of course it is,” I said. “And does the doctor have anything in his past that makes him want to blank himself out when he remembers it?”

Mengele met my gaze steadily. “I have done nothing regrettable. I have had regrettable things done to me.”

“Such as?”

It was just him and me now. The room disappeared. I hadn’t expected to get this lovey-dovey until later on.

"I have been denied recognition for my achievements! I have made extreme sacrifices."

"That sounds like resentment to me. You got a lot of resentments? No need to be ashamed. We all do. Problem is, resentment is like taking poison and hoping somebody else dies."

"You do not know what you are talking about." He slammed a hand down on the arm of his wheelchair, startling Movern, who'd begun to doze.

Rincin eased away from the door. One hand on his billy club. "Easy now, Doc."

Mengele regarded him with a raised peroxide eyebrow, upper lip curled in a sneer of infinite weariness. His accent was comprehensible—once I stopped trying to pick metal shards out of my ear. "No one in this country has a concept of how to run a prison. Do you know the resources you are wasting? The benefits being squandered?"

"Hey, I get full dental," Rincin chimed in. "Even paid for my daughters' braces."

Mengele tensed. "Not those kind of benefits."

"See that," Movern said, shaking his head. "Rincin always playing them head games."

Mengele ignored this and kept going, his voice a guttural mixture of pleading and contempt. He did not so much *speak* words as stab them and push them elegantly off of a balcony. "Your people can still be saved."

"See that? The doc know. He talkin' about the Rapture."

Mengele laughed, a hacking half note followed by a cough. "The Rapture is nothing but a terrorist plot, run by Christ instead of bin Laden. And who is Jesus Christ? The illegitimate son of a Jewish bitch."

"Hey now," said Reverend D, trying to get a word in.

Cranky clamped his hands on his head like he was trying to keep his thoughts from flying out. "Wait wait wait! You ever see that

Twilight Zone episode, where the aliens come down with their special book, *To Serve Man*, and all the earthlings are, like, scrambling their asses to get on that spaceship, except for this one dude, who comes running up behind them, and he's screaming, 'Turn around, fools! It's a cookbook! *To Serve Man*!' It's like the messiah was a cannibal. Oh, shit! Maybe people think they've being Raptured up, and it turns out they're just, like, *ingredients*. . . ."

Movern shook his wide head back and forth, jiggling his Gary Coleman jowls. "Ho no! Ho *no*! Ho *no no no no no*!" He crossed his arms over his pigeon chest. "That is the second time my Lord been slandered in this room."

"Ha! I've read about your Lord in Revelation." Mengele chewed his mustache and scoffed gleefully. "When the warrior Jesus returns, he will invite the righteous to heaven. He will hurl nonbelievers into *a lake of fire*."

"Tell it!" said the reverend, slapping skin with Roscoe, the professorial ex-Panther, who smiled mildly under his wire-rims. "Old man throwin' down theory now. He goin' all Christopher Hitchens."

Mengele basked in the attention, his mustache gleaming from his own spittle. "What is the Rapture but divine genocide? The only difference between Jesus and Hitler is that Hitler showed up. And instead of a fiery lake we had the ovens."

"Dude," Jimmy the white Rasta interrupted, "no disrespect, but Jesus had way better hair."

Mengele angled a glance at Jimmy. The white Rasta blanched. He didn't need to know who the old man was to be scared. The old war criminal's eyes radiated something they did not have words for. You could only feel it. And *yet* . . .

Beholding Mengele, I was struck less by the banality of evil than its chattiness. Mengele had thoughts he thought were important. He talked like he was standing behind a podium—or at a train siding, lecturing a captive audience.

"The Third Reich is a story the new Germans don't want to dwell on. Because it happened. The Rapture is a story the evangelicals do nothing but dwell on. Because they *want* it to happen. It's not the Final Solution, it's the grand finale. How will six million compare to that holocaust in Revelations? *'Those who reject him will be cast into a lake of fire.'* *Mein Gott!* Every man, woman and baby on earth who has not accepted the Good News—hurled into boiling flames. Buddhist monks, adorable unbaptized babies, Jew, Muslim, Hindu, Baha'i . . . All of them." Mengele's eyes bored into me. "You call it End Times. I call it waiting for Jesus to turn on the ovens. Hitler read the Bible, too."

"Uh-uh. No!" Movern wagged his finger. "Now you see that? That right there? *That* is over the motherfuckin' line."

Roscoe shrugged. "The so-called righteous always think they know who deserves to die."

"Wrong," said Mengele. "It was *science*. For the select to prevail, millions must be delivered into flames."

"Been there, done that, huh?" I said. I thought maybe an attaboy would get me on his good side.

"Pops just hurtin' 'cause he ain't at the control," said Reverend D. Mengele seethed. "I am not your pops."

"Come on now," said the reverend. He flashed a smile that showed off his gold dental work. "You sure you never tapped no *schwarze* ass, a sophisticate like you?"

Cranky snapped his fingers, sucking blood out of his chapped lips. "Oh shit, Rev's punkin' an old man."

Even Rincin stopped jingling his keys to watch.

Mengele, if he was Mengele, sat perfectly still, eyes closed to vicious slits. The way he didn't move made you think he was dangerous in some unspeakable old-man way.

Prison was full-up with gangsters and hit men. But these were all small-timers. The real mass practitioners were the ones who ran

the country. I had a feeling the old German was thinking the same thing.

Mengele allowed himself a sour smirk—just enough to show he knew he didn't belong.

"Let's stick to the topic," I said. "We're supposed to be talking about addiction. So let's break it down. In the beginning, a man takes a drug; in the end, the drug takes the man. . . ."

I'd sat through enough twelve-step meetings—either as participant or on the job—to march out my share of lifesaving clichés. For a cop with a quota, church basements full of recovering junkies and drunks were great places to fish for parole violators. A lot of substance abusers washed onto the shores of sobriety with outstanding warrants. Though it was an article of faith in law enforcement that AA and NA members didn't snitch on each other. (SLA—Sex and Love Anonymous—was apparently a different story. My experience with them was limited.)

"One's too many, a thousand's not enough," I said, marching out a sobriety chestnut. Somehow it was deeply gratifying when Movern and the reverend nodded.

I followed that up with another slogan. "We're only as sick as our secrets. What we need to do now is start talking about the stuff that we got loaded to keep from thinking about." I pointed to the man who might be Mengele. "Does that make any sense, Mr.—I'm sorry, what was your name again? Mr. Mongol?"

He seethed. "It is actually *doctor*: Dr. Mengele!"

"Dr. Mendel?"

"*Mengele!* Are you mentally ill?"

"Excuse me. Doctor, what did drugs do for you? What did they do to you? You were a . . . what again?"

He glared and I smiled innocently.

A part of me screamed, *Turn him in! Call the authorities!* Another

part wanted to fuck with him. Not for personal pleasure. For *my race*. But taunting was candy-ass, considering the crime. Left to my own devices, I lacked the moral clarity to do anything more enlightened than rub his face in the dirt, make him scream “*I’m a filthy little Nazi!*” six million times.

Mengele nibbled his lip hair. I could see his conflict: driven to sell himself, but knowing he was casting his master race pearls before San Quentin swine. He stared in a middle distance, as if watching a movie of himself played by Tom Cruise. “Many many years ago, I was an important man. Doing important research. In some very unpleasant conditions. There were times when it was up to me whether this one lived or that one died.”

“So you were in the service industry?” I asked him.

“Sound like he a shot caller,” the reverend said.

“I was a *scientist*.”

“Where did you work?”

“At the end, a little town in Poland.”

I waited, eyes wide with polite interest.

“Auschwitz.”

Hearing the word in real life, in real time, as opposed to in some documentary, set my nerves quivering. La Eme maintained KOS rules for members of the ALS. Kill on sight. What standing orders did Jews have for encounters with Nazi death camp doctors?

“I made the selections. I was the only one who could do my job sober. Others fell apart. They drank. Took morphine and cocaine and engaged in the most debauched sexual practices with prisoners. They had no discipline. The SS demands discipline.”

“You were in the SS?” I asked the way you might ask a neighbor if he’d ever been to Cleveland. I lifted my arm, tapped under my armpit. “Did you get the tattoo?”

I broke it down for the others. “When you get into the SS, they put your blood type under your arm.”

Jimmy giggled into his hand. “Dude, you know a little too much about this Nazi shit.”

“I’m a bit of a buff,” I admitted.

“Don’t take no *buff*,” Cranky snorted. “Gang ink is gang ink.”

“And look,” said Mengele, “what happened to you for having your affiliation on your neck. No, I did not get the tattoo.”

Davey pounded his fist on the desk. “Stop interrupting my doctor!”

“Stop interrupting *your* doctor?”

Mengele beamed. “Thank you, David.” The failed suicide lowered his eyes and batted his Bambi lashes.

“You should have seen David when I met him, right, David?”

Davey managed a no-lip smile. “Ah yooshed to tawk lak ish.”

“You must be very proud of your progress,” I said with no sincerity whatsoever. “But wait . . . you did surgery inside?”

Mengele was happy to accept my awe.

“Doc,” said Rincin from his corner, tapping the side of his nose again, “remember there’s rats in the rafters.”

Mengele sat back in his chair, imperious. Pleased with himself. “Mengele is not afraid of rats.”

He eyed Davey critically, extending a hand in front of him as though already carving and replacing. “I am going to make him Nordic.”

I gulped. “Plastic surgery?”

“Transplant,” Mengele replied almost dreamily, talking more to himself than me. “The things you can do, when you have a *supply*. . .”

“Right on, Kaiser!” Rasta Jimmy pumped his arm. “My man was a soldier. Hey, we all do shit we wanna forget. Without the drugs and alcohol, there ain’t nothin’ to hold the memories down. Shit backs up like a clogged toilet. Same with them old ‘nam dogs, sleepin’ under bridges. Dudes back from Iraq and that there Afghanee-stan.”

“Look at you two,” I said. “From different worlds, but connecting.”

Cranky craned his speed-kinked neck sideways and up, like he was trying to bite the ceiling. “Don’t be goin’ all after-school special, homes. Next thing you’ll be tellin’ us *addiction is color-blind* and all that bullshit.”

“You sound like you’ve heard it all before.”

“Prison ministry come in here, talkin’ about how if we pray, Jesus gonna take the craving away.”

“Uh-*huh!*” Reverend D nodded his head. “That is *exactly* what he can do. I know, ’cause he help me. Prison ministries is a growth industry, too.”

Cranky wiped sweat off his face. “Jesus wanted to help, he coulda come down from heaven and got me an eight ball when I was hurtin’.”

Movern, who’d been resting a plump cheek on his reedy arms, suddenly revived. “I done stuff I cain’t admit to my own self. On the real. There’s thoughts in my head I ain’t even *let* my ass think.”

Mengele reentered the conversation. “None of you understand. You *cannot* understand!” His smirk was superior but mirthless.

“Hey, guten Tag there, buddy!” Jimmy the Rasta tried to high-five Mengele, who ignored him. “Like, I don’t know what kinda gnarly shit you were involved in—but, dude, we’ve all pulled some skeevy shit, be-fucking-lieve me. But, like, there’s nothin’ you can’t unload, man. You won’t have to work so hard to forget once you give it up.”

Mengele gripped his peroxide, sunken-templed head. “I do not want to forget anything. I want to *remember*. But I feel memories slipping away.” The words came out burnished, as if he’d said them thousands of times, millions. In front of mirrors when there were mirrors; in his head when there was nothing but a bed and a chair. “I have records, notebooks. Experiments down to the last decimal. In sixty-seven years, I have never let my data out of my sight. Now I want

the world to know. I have found a way to end congenital diseases, to vaccinate against speech defects, so many things.” His face tensed, neck tendons taut as watch springs. I braced myself for his shouting. Instead, his voice dropped to a whisper, a faint lament. “I have a contribution to make to the world. To the *children* . . .”

“Children!” I repeated. “*Awww!*”

This time his sneer was perfunctory. But his eyes looked like they could squirt battery acid. “They called me a monster, but my experiments can save generations of youngsters! There was a *reason* I removed their organs.”

What made the performance more arresting was that it didn’t *look* like a performance. He might have been standing in a Santiago slum, shilling for the Christian Children’s Fund with Sally Struthers, in bloated but sincere post-*All in the Family* feed-the-hungry mode. He spoke like he believed.

“Holly-cost never happened,” Jimmy stated flatly. “It’s like the moon shot. Fake. ‘Cept, for the Holly-cost, somebody staged them pictures of bodies and smokestacks. Then voi-fuckin’-la, Jews get their own country and more aid than we give to all other countries combined. Read your David Black. Maybe a few thousand died. Tops. And guess what? They probably killed themselves. Just like a Gypsy twisting a baby’s arm so it’ll get more money from saps.”

I snuck a glance at Rincin. He gazed approvingly at the dreadlocked David Duke.

“People,” I said, “let’s stick to addiction. Not history.”

“One and the same, youngster.” Roscoe again. He spoke without rancor. “See, the white man made addiction part of the black man’s history. Part of his own, too. Addiction to genocide, addiction to destroying the planet. Addiction to fear. Addiction—”

“We get it, Roscoe, that’s—”

“Oh, he just warming up,” Movern let me know.

“No thing,” Roscoe continued. “I just read, in *Harper’s Magazine*,

where they laid the blueprint of a slave ship on the middle passage on top of one for the supermax at Pelican Bay. It's almost a match! What's that tell us? Break it down, addiction ain't nothing but slavery—and this country was founded by slavery. That's why I say this country is addicted to addiction."

Movern did his faux call-and-response again. "Tell it, Roscoe. Country strung out on bein' strung out."

"Shut the fuck up," said Cranky.

"Or what, bitch?"

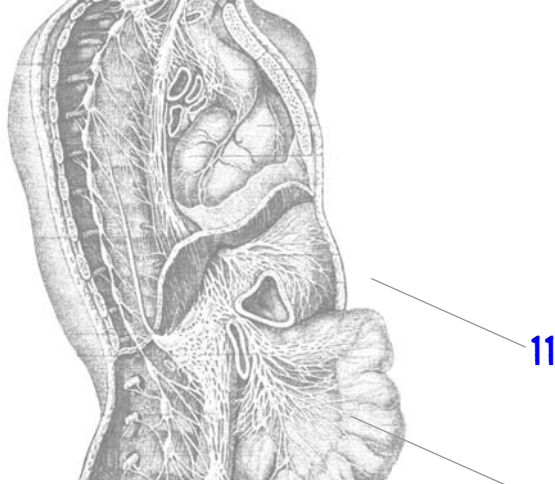
Movern smiled. This was just casual chat to them.

"Fellas." I banged the table. "You can listen to your own bullshit anytime—right now you listen to me!"

The room went quiet. Even Rincin stiffened. If I'd gone too far, there was nothing for it now but to keep going. "Definition of a junkie," I blurted, "guy who steals your wallet, then spends an hour helping you find it . . ."

I felt their eyes on me. Realized I was sweating profusely. I wiped my face on my sleeve. Sensed my mouth going in one direction and my brain in another. The fluorescents hissed like they knew something. Somewhere far away a metal door clanked shut. Suddenly it was hard to breathe as though someone were pressed against me, preventing my lungs from expanding. Like a hundred naked strangers were crammed in a room made for twenty-five. It was a panic attack—except what had me panicked had happened already, and not to me. When vapor wafted from the floor vents, it drifted so slowly that there was time to watch. The mist carpeted the room, floated lazily upward. People tried to climb on top of one another, to escape the rising poison. That's why bodies were found in a pile.

I blinked into the faces before me, realizing that Mengele had probably made the drug, and made it psychoactive or psychedelic. The last thing I remember saying was, "Who's got a success story?"



Pale Blue Eyes

When I came around my lips were moving and I was still standing in front of the Quentin drug class. I seemed to have had some kind of out-of-body experience—or else I'd blacked out and just kept talking. As mentioned, the lush high from my first aid kit had died before I made it from the trailer to Rincin's Crown Vic. But I kept getting residual mini-rushes. Random pleasure shudders. Who knew what kind of residual opiate drift was still in store? Stuff happens when you're your own guinea pig. While I would never experiment on another human, I had a history of injecting bad science projects in my arm.

"Here's the thing," I heard myself announcing. "They want you to be loaded!"

Cranky rolled his eyes. "Who the fuck are they?"

"That's the question, isn't it!"

My insight was met with the blank stares it deserved. Rincin slowly inflated and deflated his purple bubble gum. Who was I kidding?

I badly needed to take a stress pee, but Rincin managed not to catch my plaintive gaze. He blew a bubble gum bubble the size of a baby's head. Suddenly the door flew open and the bubble burst in his

face. A white bodybuilder, flashing ALS ink from neck to leg irons, shouldered into the room as though facing a strong wind. Two guards in full riot gear trailed him, which accounted for the into-the-wind illusion. The guards had flipped down their protective masks, hiding their faces with SRP. Shit-resistant Plexiglas. No one breathed.

“Bernstein,” Movern whispered.

“*That’s* Bernstein?”

The white-power Jew was a ferociously cut five-nine, with a taut, owlsh face framed by black-rimmed state eyeglasses and a perfectly maintained goatee. He might have been pale five years ago. Now even the skin on top of his shaved head shone a translucent, creamy gray. (One benefit of not seeing the sun for years at a stretch was all the UV rays a prisoner avoided—though the baby-smooth faces of aging serial killers could be disconcerting.)

Bernstein turned immediately in my direction, and Movern muttered behind his hand, “Kill you later, son.”

The white guard shot me a concerned expression but the black one scowled. Both tightened their grip on his belly chain. The black steel ran through a metal ring over Bernstein’s beef-slab stomach and dangled between his legs, locking to his leg-irons.

Gritting his teeth, Bernstein strained into every step. If you squinted, it was almost like he was pulling the guards in an invisible chariot. Like Charlton Heston in *Ben-Hur*, if Heston had played a horse.

Here was someone I did not want to piss off: a chained Semite so savage he had managed to maul his way to the top of a gang that existed to exterminate him—along with all his relatives. To my relief, Bernstein began to scan the room. He stopped when he saw Mengele and offered a heartfelt “*Sieg Heil!*” Then, dragging the helmeted guards behind like vassals, he clanked closer. It was like watching some kind of medieval pageant.

“Doctor, it’s an honor. I have come a long way to shake your hand.” Bernstein spoke with formal solemnity. “All Aryan honors!”

That voice! I knew it! I’d heard that voice the night before, barking at my naked ex outside the conjugal visit trailer. So this was the white power fireplug Tina’d shackled up with? I still couldn’t swallow the idea. Tina was not one of those women who liked bad boys, let alone violent bad boys. She had, on more than one occasion, explained her thinking on the subject: only good girls found so-called bad boys interesting, and then only because they were getting back at Daddy. In her opinion, the worst fucks in the world were bikers. All the beer. So why would she wed the white power shot-caller now hijacking my bogus drug class?

Bernstein lowered his shaved head and proffered his twin sleeves of white power tattoos to Mengele. He might have been like a diplomat showing his credentials: runic SS symbols; lightning bolts; the 88 (8 for “H,” the eighth letter of the alphabet, as in *Heil Hitler*); the Nordic warrior with his fair-haired woman, in his and hers horned Viking helmets . . . A Moon Pie-sized swastika graced the top of his right forearm; a matching Star of David showed proudly in the same spot on the left.

Chaos makes sense in chaos.

Mengele pressed his thin lips together. Silent. Bernstein raised his eyes and, gulping back emotion, paid almost cringe-worthy respect. “You, my liege, are the last living link.” He pointed two fingers upward, squeezing his eyebrows together to highlight the Gothic number “14” inked on his forehead. “The fourteen words,” he intoned, and proceeded to recite the pledge. “We must secure the existence of our people and a future for white children.”

I might have appreciated the theater of it, if not for the fact that my ex-wife had been late-night intermission. I tried to see what Tina saw in the guy. Sure, Bernstein was a level-four white supremacist overlord

whose “KOS” status brought Crips and Bloods together in rare unity. But a Jew was a Jew. Somewhere, between the sword-wielding Valkyrie riding his chest and the flaming 666 stamped on his back, his heart pumped blood that flowed all the way back to the shtetl. I knew Tina had a taste for the sons of Moses, but I still couldn’t picture her with Chaim McSwastika.

Mengele studied his acolyte for a minute. Finally he spoke. “The first thing we did to vermin in the camps was shave their heads. The next was give them a tattoo. We branded them. And do you know why? No? Well let me tell you. *Because they were slaves.* And yet, you brand yourself *voluntarily.*” The old man’s chest rose and fell with mounting indignation. “And you dare to call yourself a Nazi? You dare to wear the swastika of the Reich?”

Bernstein’s expression was a pressure cooker of rage and cool.

Rincin had filled me in on the white power Jew. Four years ago, somebody’d slipped him a trazor and handcuff key on the way to the shower. He poked a hole in one correction officer’s aorta and skewered another one’s Adam’s apple. Since then he’d spent twenty-three hours a day locked down in the adjustment center. The *Hole*. Even if he was never going to get out, he had major juice, enough to buy a walk from isolation to the furniture factory classroom.

Whatever it cost Bernstein, he hadn’t shelled it out to be disrespected. Not by a bottle-blond ninety-seven-year-old. He canted his head toward a guard, who reached over and slid Bernstein’s black glasses up his nose for him. He shifted his neutral gaze at Mengele, breathing slowly. Then he suddenly lunged forward in his chains, yanking the guard on the left to his knees. “You’re in my house, old man!”

Mengele’s tongue darted over his lip hair. In the flesh he was less Jack Lemmon than James Mason with a fetid taste in his mouth. He observed the Nazi Jew the way he might have observed an albino

dwarf. In genetic work, anomaly was always valuable. “My life’s work,” declared Mengele, “is to preserve the race!”

“I *am* the race now, motherfucker!” Bernstein shouted as the guards lifted him off the floor. “You’re just a has-been with a scalpel!”

Two more guards grabbed Bernstein’s Popeye arms. Rincin ambled over and, almost affectionately, Tasered him. Enduring the voltage, Bernstein kept his jaw clamped, fists clenched, so it looked like Rincin was not so much shocking as *recharging* him. Then he cracked Bernstein across the shin, bringing him to one knee.

I was watching a generational struggle. The far-flung fallout of history. Aryan Jew Godzilla versus King Kong Master Race Doctor. It should have been on pay-per-view.

“I smell dead sauerkraut,” Bernstein hissed, spitting the words out like razor blades. “*I run this prison!*”

For the first time Mengele smiled, revealing the gapped teeth I’d seen in the photo on my dresser. “You run it? Good! Then get me a key.” He nibbled his mustache, delighted, as Bernstein, now horizontal, thrashed like a fresh-caught marlin. Mengele swept his arm at the hooting inmates. His smile did not so much light up the room as make you want to back out of it slowly. “Get us all keys! The purpose of the race is to multiply. If you have found a way to propagate with the hind end of your brothers, please show me. As a scientist, I would like to study baby-making sodomy.”

“Probably like to watch too,” Cranky said.

Rincin buckled a muzzle over Bernstein’s mouth like you would a rabid pit bull. He emitted snarled curses as a paramedic in tinted shades rushed in to jam a syringe in his neck. By the time they got the living legend out the door, he was slack faced, unconscious. I was almost jealous.

Rincin rattled into his walkie-talkie and a young, jug-eared guard ran in. He spun Mengele’s wheelchair around.

Mengele chose this moment to zero in. “Enjoying yourself, Mr. Rupert?”

“I’m gonna need an incident statement,” Rincin sighed to the ancient but surprisingly wiry and vigorous German. “You know I have to write this up.”

“You want a statement? Fine.” Mengele did everything but click his heels. Face forward, shoulders back, he recited, “I am a eugenics scientist. I believed in improvement of the species, preserved and strengthened by applied biology.”

Roscoe raised his hand and waved the CO quiet. “Applied biology?” His calm demeanor belied the intensity of his words. “I look that up in a German dictionary, am I gonna see ‘genocide’?”

Mengele’s gaze went feral. “If a man finds vermin in his family home and poisons them, does that makes him a mass murderer—or a man who takes care of his family?”

“There it is,” said Roscoe. “Definition of political power—who gets to decide who the vermin is—”

“Oh no!” the reverend interrupted. “Huh-uh!” He shook his head vigorously. “Now you gettin’ into what they call a real slippery slope. And I ain’t talkin’ ’bout no lubed-up Chinese ho. I’m talkin’ ’bout this here. ’Cause this here is some sick-cookie *bullshit*!”

Mengele shrugged. “Maybe so, but the Nazis didn’t bake it.”

“Fuck that s’posed to mean?” Now it was Cranky’s turn to be agitated. “I thought we were supposed to be talkin’ how to not get high.”

Mengele dismissed him. “You wouldn’t have to get high if you weren’t ignorant. Your whole country is ignorant.”

“We back to the cookie thing?” The reverend was not impressed. “You kinda jumpin’ around. I’m thinkin’ maybe you got a little bit o’ that Alztheiny, Doc. You know what I’m sayin’? Maybe you’re sick. What I hear, Hitler was a one-balled lunatic.”

Before I could jump in and play peacemaker, Mengele slammed

his hand on his armrest. “I will ignore the uniball remark. But lunatic? No. I want you to listen to something.”

Mengele closed his eyes and raised his arm like an orchestra conductor waving an invisible baton. ““It is better for all the world, if instead of waiting to execute degenerate offspring for crime, society can prevent those who are manifestly unfit from continuing their kind.”” He dropped the invisible baton and opened his eyes, cupping his hand over his heart to convey his deep emotion.

“No disrespect,” said the reverend, “but that shit is sick.”

“That shit,” hissed Mengele, “is from an opinion by your Supreme Court justice Oliver Wendell Holmes in nineteen twenty-seven. *Bell versus Buck*. The issue was forced sterilization. Should I keep going?”

“Oh, please do,” I said.

““The principle that sustains compulsory vaccination is broad enough to cover cutting the fallopian tubes.’ Is this not poetry?”

“Don’t rhyme,” said Jimmy.

Mengele ignored him. “Where do you think Hitler got the idea that subhumans—drunks, syphilitics, Jews—were a disease, to be wiped out?”

Mengele raised himself up. Decades of perceived wrong infused his words with self-righteous fury, almost enough to hide the self-pity underneath. “You inspired us! America inspired us. Don’t you see! I *wanted* to go to Auschwitz. To conduct research, and preserve the race, in a new way. At Auschwitz, we were able to destroy more than a million germs!”

Mengele’s face colored with passion. “Eugenics was the future.” He tried to smile. “It was the—how do you say?—like your Silicon Valley in the nineties . . .”

Jimmy the white Rasta covered his mouth and giggled. “Right on. Eugenics was the go-go industry.”

“Go-go? Like go-go boots.” Reverend D rubbed himself through

his pants. “Chicks in go-go boots! The reverend get his bone on just *sayin’* that. No lie!”

“Okay,” I said. “We’re getting a little far afield. We’re here to talk about why we use drugs and alcohol. What do they do for you? What did they do to you? We all need to get used to talking about stuff that a lot of us got loaded to keep from thinking about. One way to do that is to see everybody’s secrets are the same. . . .”

“Shit be shit,” said Movern sleepily.

“That’s deep,” said Reverend D.

I couldn’t tell if they were mocking or on board. Or killing time until somebody flashed the “throw the junkie Jew over a chair and ride him like Amtrak” sign. I was swimming in quicksand here. I had to sound like I had a game plan.

Mengele squeezed his hands into fists. With what looked like enormous effort, he willed himself calm and, to my surprise, apologized to his detractors. “I am sorry,” he said. “I have waited a long time for the chance to give my testimony. Please . . .”

He sounded wistful. Almost human. I could think of no more unsavory notion: a human Mengele.

“If you want the world to know who you are,” I asked him, “why didn’t you just announce it?”

“Ah,” he said with a rueful smile. “I was going to, until the police, as you say, delivered that knock on my door. But perhaps . . .” His voice trailed off, then regained steam, like a train chugging uphill, cresting, then picking up speed on the way down. “Perhaps it is better this way. If I can persuade the staff here, I can persuade the world.”

“I don’t think you’d have to persuade them,” I said. “They’d be more than happy to believe they found you alive, so they could execute you.”

“At my age, execution is redundant. Why shoot a plane out of the sky when it’s already in a nosedive?”

The reverend nodded. “I’ll say it again. *Deep.*”

“You want deep?” Mengele seemed hungry to be understood, to share his passion. “I did not quote you the last line of the Chief Justice Holmes opinion. ‘Three generations of idiots is enough.’ Do you understand what this meant? We, in the Fatherland, needed a scientific way to remove the unfit. And here, in the enlightened USA, twenty-nine states passed laws to sterilize the feeble. You showed us the way! America handed Germany the matches, and Hitler started the fire.”

“Give me a .357, I’ll start a fucking fire,” Cranky bragged, missing the import of Mengele’s pitch.

“I’m sick of all y’all’s bullshit,” Movern complained, to audible assent.

“There you are,” said Mengele, disgusted. “America is sick of it. Meanwhile, America’s enemy, al-Qaeda, sends Down Syndrome victims into the market with remote-controlled bombs on their back. This is *genius*! Why kill the unfit when you could use them as weapons! *That* is true ecology.”

“Yo,” said Movern, “what’s German for ‘shut the fuck up?’”

“Let him finish,” I said.

I knew I was taking an insane amount of time with one old man. That was the trouble with undercover. . . . When you were closest to success was the very moment you were at risk of appearing the most obvious. My front was shaky to begin with.

“The camps!” Mengele shouted. “At the camps hundreds of thousands, and more, could be cleansed. At Auschwitz, we were able to destroy more than a million germs. This was my chance to contribute. To learn. To achieve greatness.”

He actually raised his face as he said this, in profile, as though posing for a coin. Then he went back to chewing his mustache, sucking the wet hair with bitter satisfaction. “Five decades I have eluded capture. And now, when I want to be found . . . *Accchh!*”

This was my portal.

“Why do you want to be found now?”

“Why? To claim the honor that is rightly mine!” Spume flew from his mouth. “Wernher von Braun, that whore, ran slave camps and came here because JFK, that priapic, Addison’s-diseased fraud, was more interested in vanity moon shots than the life-and-death struggle to save his own race!

“Because, and this is nature’s cruelest joke, the unworthy populate like maggots. Today, whites have their fertility clinics! Well, *Mengele invented fertility clinics*. Auschwitz was the first! My science as a eugenicist was always striving to increase the good—and eliminate the bad: the dwarves, the androgynes, the deformed, the sickly. Now you have genetic testing. You find the sickly gene—and you eliminate it!”

“Hell yeah!” Cranky nodded and clapped at Mengele’s spiel. I was not sure how thrilled he was to be so enamored of the old-time race killer’s style. “Just like La Eme, man. Hit comes down, they tell you ‘No humans involved.’ That means fuck it, kill everybody, ain’t nobody from the hood, ain’t none of our people. NHI.”

“What is life?” asked Mengele. “Killing the weak to save the strong. If it takes a trial to reveal my accomplishment—get the honor I deserve as a man of science—then so be it! Try me! Try me now!”

There it was. The man did not just want to be caught. He wanted to be lauded. To be—I felt the bulbous visage of Dr. Phil peeping over my shoulder—to be *loved*. Or be Heryet, worshipped.

Mengele’s voice grew higher. “This is America. I deserve a speedy trial! You are violating my rights!”

Rincin signaled the jug-eared younger guard, nodding to the spewing Mengele. “Get him out of here. And find out if he’s takin’ his meds. . . .”

And that was that. As mysteriously as Mengele had rolled in, Mov-ern steered his wheelchair back out again.

For a beat or two nobody said anything, then Cranky wondered out loud. “Who that old freak say he is again?”

Reverend D answered. “He say he was an SS man at Auschwitz.”

“SS? Like in Super Sport? They make Chevies in Germany?”

“Cranky,” said the reverend, “ain’t nobody that ignorant.”

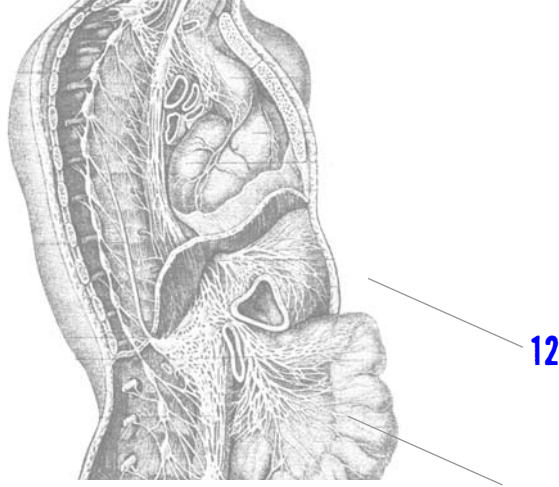
“Ignorant, huh? I know one thing, homes, you don’t fuck with Bernstein.”

I’d always wondered what it would be like to teach. Now I really wanted to rush home and get my credentials. Davey, who’d had his head down for a large part of the proceedings, suddenly roused himself. *“I can’t take this violence.”*

“I know,” I said, “I don’t like it either. Violence is a trigger for a lot of people.”

I had no idea if this was true but needed to say something to reel things back to within shouting distance of a drug education class. I was two seconds from asking everybody to say what animal they thought they were—a rehab staple—when the door opened again and Rincin came back in, grim faced, and crooked his finger at me.

School was out.



Including Los Angeles Garmento

The warden was contemplating his steepled hands when I walked in. He saw me and flipped his fingers forward, aiming the steeple at me.

“Still pointing that thing, huh?”

I could, in my undercover days, pass as drug dealer, seller, hit man, porn purveyor, every breed of sleazebag, including Los Angeles garmento, but the one thing I could not pull off was regular guy. I should have known better than to try.

“Sit,” said the warden. Everything in here was code and signal. He was communicating that he knew something about me I didn’t know he knew. He lifted a cup of tea from a saucer and blew daintily. “Chamomile. Soothes the nerves. Pour you a cup?”

“My nerves are fine, thanks. I can’t even feel them.”

“Ahhhh.”

The warden slurped pleasantly. “I understand you had quite an exciting first day.”

“I didn’t know Bernstein was going to show up. You didn’t give me his file.”

“Uh-huh. I confess, I’ve always been fascinated by UC work. How a man can live a lie. Posing as one thing, doing something else.”

“I guess it’s something you get used to.”

“Is that right? Anything you’d like to tell me, Manuel Rupert?”

I shook my head. But he didn’t move. “This Mengele business, it’s extraordinary,” he said. “It’s like something out of *Reader’s Digest*.”

“I’m just trying to do my job,” I said. “What’s your take?”

“My take? If they really suspected it was him, they’d arrest him. If they’re wrong, let him sue. He’s ninety-seven. But I don’t make the decisions. There’s something else going on.”

“Zell tell you what it was?”

“Zell? I’m not sure—”

I cut him off. “He told me you knew when he hired me. He said you were the only other person in on it. Maybe you can tell me what else you’re in on?”

“I’m not the one with a secret, Rupert.” He picked up a sheet of paper and waggled it. “Don’t forget, we have the results of your UA. We don’t just test for narcotics. You must know that. Anything out of the ordinary triggers a flag. Sure there’s nothing you want to discuss?”

“Could we discuss my living situation? I’m no health nut, but the mold in the trailer sink actually moves.”

“Cute,” said the warden, pressing a button on the desk like an executive in a fifties movie. “Annabel, send Officer Colfax in here. With Officer Rincin.”

The warden savored another sip of herbal tea. “Any problems with your escort?”

“Problems, no. He seems like a great guy.”

The warden regarded me with curiosity. “You know, I walk among deviants and killers all day long. I like to think I’m a reader of men.”

“Oh really?” This was plainly my cue to ask what he read when

he read me. Before I had the chance not to, he offered another Deep Thought. “The more a man has to hide, the more it shows.”

“I suppose so,” I said. “Assuming anybody’s paying attention.”

Colfax strode in and stopped before the warden’s desk. “Ah, Colfax,” said the warden. They exchanged sharp salutes, which was unsettling. “And where is Officer Rincin?”

“Present and accounted for,” said Rincin. He walked in dunking the butt of a cruller in a mug that said SAN QUENTIN—WORLD’S GREATEST PANCAKES! He popped the soggy pastry in his mouth, then took his post to the left of Colfax and saluted with his mouth full. The warden sniffed the caffeinated air. “Still drinking coffee, eh, Rincin? Why not just give your prostate an acid bath?”

Rincin made a show of taking another big gulp and smacking his lips.

The warden squirmed in his chair. “Two hundred toxic oils in one bean. Might as well pluck your man gland out with tweezers and rub it with a cheese grater.”

Colfax cleared his throat and the warden dropped the subject. The acned rookie seemed to function as his boss’s manners consultant. “Never mind,” said the warden. “It’s your body. I happen to like my prostate, but that’s me. I have sex. I love my wife.”

Rincin flushed, his smile never wavering. “Well, sir, mine ran off with the plumber. I wanted to put one of those chips in her neck, like vets do for when your dog gets picked up, so you know where it is. Even found a Korean breeder in Mendocino who said he’d do it. But the bitch left before I could make the arrangements.” Colfax ran his finger across his throat and Rincin flushed. “Sorry! Caffeine makes me a Chatty Cathy. Close that door behind you.”

The warden turned to me, and I felt the same panic I used to get in the principal’s office in high school, back when it was still okay to paddle. The warden was like a principal with armed guards and an electric chair.

“Okay, Rupert. Let’s get right to it,” said the warden. “We did your tox screen.”

Rincin smothered a belch unsuccessfully, and the warden glowered. In spite of myself I glanced at Rincin. It was striking how much he resembled your basic D-movie, belly-over-the-belt-buckle prison guard. I had judged him for that central casting brush mustache, those designed-for-menace reflector shades. But now I was jealous. In situations like this, you appreciate the wisdom of fitting in.

“You know,” the warden continued, “San Quentin was one of the first institutions to recognize transgender inmates. Once they have the surgery, they’re moved to a woman’s prison. Until then, we keep them in segregation.”

“That’s why you see some of the inmates with trainer titties,” Rincin added helpfully. “You know, CWDs.” He planted his hands on his chest and waggled his pinkies. “Chicks with dicks. We call ’em ‘mone-o’s.’”

“What’s a mone-o?” I asked, if only to savor my last moments as an equal in the conversation, before they charged me with something.

“Slang for ‘hormones,’ and in my opinion a pretty disgusting term,” said the warden. He leveled a withering glance at the CO. “It’s not obscene, but it’s nasty.”

“I’ve heard worse,” I said, “but I thought you were talking about my UA. Why are you telling me about transgenders?”

At this, Colfax cleared his throat, looking away. Rincin licked his lips and touched a finger to a fresh-bloomed boil on his neck.

“About that UA . . .” The warden sniffed his chamomile and read his own palms for a while before continuing. “It’s all right, Rupert, we know.”

“Know what?”

“We found the estrogen, son. We found the Dilantin and the Prozac. And we found the naltrexone.”

“Opiate blocker,” Rincin added helpfully. “You’re doing something about the problem, that’s what counts.”

Before I could process that, Colfax chipped in. “Had an uncle took Dilantin. He kept getting fits behind the wheel of his semi. Stuff really helped.”

Rincin grinned a little bigger. “Hey, I got a touch of epilepsy myself. You, me and Julius Caesar, buddy.”

“And, uh, about the other . . .,” said the warden.

I felt my neck flush. “The other?”

“Female hormones,” the warden whispered discreetly. He put his hand on my wrist and screwed an expression of concern on his face. “It’s okay, Rupert. We understand.”

Had I actually *been* a budding transsexual, I would have been touched. As it was, his compassion was mortifying.

“Busted,” I sighed. “I’m an epileptic pre-op trying to stay off the hard stuff. And I’m depressed.”

“Attaboy,” said the warden. “Always better to be honest.”

I was dying to tell them they were discussing CO Rincin’s blood-work. But I couldn’t. I had to play it out.

“Tell you what I’m *not* depressed about,” I chuckled bravely, “I’m not using the same surgeon who went to work on Davey’s face. I mean, no disrespect, but I can only imagine what he’d do with a sex change. Or do you outsource surgery?”

“They don’t show everything on those prison shows,” Rincin said cryptically.

I waited for elaboration. But the CO decided to chug the rest of his prostate burner. A moment of quiet, then the warden snapped his fingers in my face. Without thinking, I grabbed his hand. “Stop doing that!”

I didn’t realize I was clutching his wrist until I saw him staring at it. When I let go, the warden tipped his chair back against the wall and parked his snakeskin boots on the desk. He licked a drop of chamo-

mile from the side of his mouth and beamed. “Whatever you got going on between your legs, you got balls. I’ll give you that much.”

“Not for long,” Rincin snickered.

“Okay,” I said, “joke’s over. For your information, I’m taking the stuff to prevent baldness.”

This was a gamble, but what wasn’t? I plowed on, pulling at a lock of my mouse-colored head fur.

“How do you think I got this crop right here? I was starting to find tufts on my pillow, so I tried, whatchamacallit . . . jeez, I’m blanking on the name of the stuff. . . .”

“Great Day?”

“No, that’s a *dye*.” Was he trying to trick me? “I’m talking about the stuff that makes your hair grow back. See, the reason guys lose their hair is because of excess testosterone. So, you know, to counter the extra male hormones you take some female.”

“And get some nice fun bags,” Rincin chimed in, then saw the warden’s scowl and retracted it. “Sorry, boss!”

I kept my eyes on Rincin. I couldn’t tell if he was avoiding my eyes. Then I began to wonder. Was it me, or were his hips wider? Did that happen?

Rubbing his wrist where I’d grabbed him, the warden broke into my Rincin hip reverie. “The state makes every corrections officer take sensitivity training. Speaking personally, I don’t judge a man by what he is, I judge by what he does. We’ve all got demons. Hell, I used to drink myself silly. My concern is that you do your job and you don’t interfere with us doing ours.”

“Thank you,” I said, trying not to squirm too visibly.

Colfax gave me a supportive thumbs-up. Then Rincin turned his pocked face to mine. “One day at a time, right? I’m in OA myself. Chronic overeater.”

“That cruller count as a relapse?” the warden joked.

“I’m laughing on the outside,” said Rincin, locking his gaze on

mine. Had he figured out I'd stolen his urine? Or did he think he'd met another future vagina owner?

The warden chose that moment to stand up. Colfax took my left hand and Rincin grabbed my right. His palm was soft as a newborn's head. We completed the circle.

"Manny, would you like to kick off the serenity prayer?"

"Me? Uh, sure . . . God," I began feebly, and then a klaxon blasted. Something was happening somewhere, but we kept praying. An attractive Latina with faintly black-haired legs and a juicy birthmark rushed in, then backed out as quickly as she'd entered.

The warden smiled. "It's okay, Dulce's seen me pray before. Bring it home, Officer Rincin."

"... courage to change the things I can," Rincin intoned, sneaking a meaningful glance in my direction. Who was I to doubt the power of prayer?

Until now, I had never contemplated the courage it must take to have your penis removed. Talk about faith! While we a-mened, I wrapped my mind around the fact that these three believed I was a woman trapped in a man's body. I have to say, they were sterling about it. Not even a hint of behind-my-back smirks.

"I tried Jenny Craig," Rincin confided when we dropped hands. "But I was still stuffing my feelings. I *needed* the program." Maybe the hormones were making him emotional.

The klaxon sounded again and the warden clapped me on the back. "Looks like we have a situation," he said. He headed for the door, then stopped. "Forgot to ask, Rupert, have you thought about a name?"

"A name? For what?"

"For the new you, when you make your transition to he-she, or guy-gal, or whatever you all call yourselves nowadays."

"I believe the term is 'transgendered,'" Rincin corrected him.

"*Oops!*" said the warden pleasantly. "Just funnin'. Guess some-

body needs to bone up on his sensitivity training. So what *are* you thinking, name-wise?”

“Mindy,” I lied, out of nowhere.

“Mindy’s cute.” He tapped a finger thoughtfully off his mega-jaw. “But since you started off as Manuel, why not think about Manaloa? It means ‘beautiful.’”

“In what language?”

“Honolulu,” he said, smiling big.

“Wow. That’s nice.”

“My gift to you,” he said.

“Thanks!”

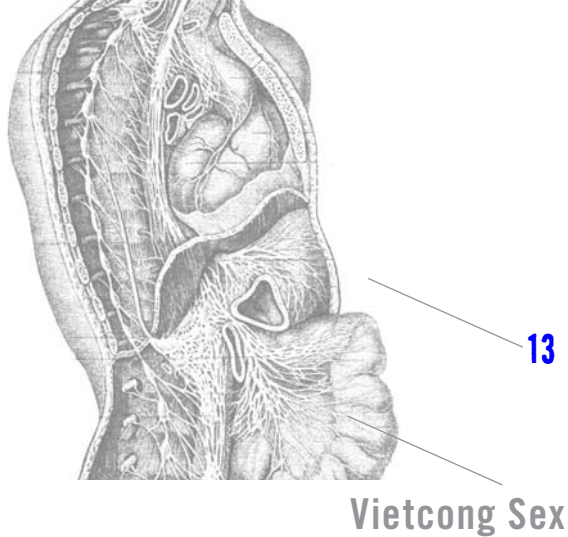
The warden gave a little wave, and I caught a flicker in his eyes. Despite all this PC chitchat, I suspected he was deeply creeped—no doubt fearing I might break into a cancan or start stroking my nipples at any second. It was hugely embarrassing, and it took everything I had not to defuse the whole charade with a little honesty: “For Christ’s sake, guys, I have enough trouble living *with* a woman, let alone living *in* one!” But I’d gone too far down the road to turn back now. What mattered was my mission, not my image. If the head of San Quentin thought I was popping hormones and heading off for a lop job, I’d just have to live with it.

“Okey-doke,” said the warden, waving again. “Duty calls.”

No sooner had his boss gone than Rincin sidled up and planted a hand on my back. “It’s good that we had this talk,” he said, slipping a card in my shirt pocket. “You need help, call me. Twenty-four seven.”

“Do I look like I need help?”

“You know anybody who doesn’t?”



I heard her voice before I got in the trailer. “What happened, they couldn’t find you anything in D Block?”

“*Tina!*”

My ex-wife was kneeling on the kitchenette counter in black fishnets and CDC jersey, backside protruding as she cleaned the windows over the sink. If her ass could talk it would have shouted “Run!”

Before it did, Tina squirmed around and faced me on the counter, idly spreading her legs. She tugged the fishnets tight over her crotch, hooked in a finger and ripped them, then eyed the damage. “Oh, gosh, look at that *nasty* hole!”

Thrilling as this was, it was hard to enjoy the show, on account of the mold fumes. I reached over her head and tried to jimmy the window. At first it wouldn’t budge, then the Plexiglas jerked free and flew out of the trailer. I didn’t care. I gulped in deep breaths of sea air as if saved from drowning. Tina grabbed my face and burst out laughing. “Can you quit the home repair and listen? You’re going to fucking *love* this!”

“If it’s about you and Bernstein, I doubt it.”

Tina boasted a fairly demented personal history. Which made for great stories. But until now, her true-life tales of tragic debauchery had involved people I didn't know—unless you counted Leonard Cohen (when she was sixteen), whom I only knew *of*, and a Belgian performance artist named Zik who used to wear rubber and flog her. These days he managed a juice bar in West Hollywood. We ran into him once when we popped in for a smoothie. Back in the car, Tina told me about the floggings, his rubber suit and the chain he made her wear around her ankle so she couldn't leave his loft. "It paid for the drugs, and he let me have friends over," she'd explained, as if I were a pinhead for asking why she did it. "But the main thing," she'd told me, sucking the last drops through her straw before crushing the cup, "he tipped big and he was kind of famous. That means something when you're seventeen." Somehow, now that he looked like a swollen Barry Manilow, whatever Zik made Tina do all those years ago didn't matter. Which brought us back to Bernstein.

"Trust me, nothing happened," she assured me. "The closest we got to sex, he showed me this photo of Golda Meir in seamed stockings. He kept it in a mahogany box, with a certificate of authenticity that looked forged. He wanted me to *look* at the photo with him."

"Should I even ask if she was naked?"

"God no," she replied, as if I was somehow sick for even asking. "But you could see a lot of leg."

"I feel nauseous."

I leaned on a cabinet for a second, then the wood gave and I cracked my knee on a corner of wall trying to break my fall.

"Oh shit!" Tina burst out laughing and covered her mouth. She had a huge heart that did not stop her from loving YouTube clips of drunks falling off camels or stumbling into traffic with their clothes off. "I'm sorry," she managed as her giggles subsided, "are you okay? You should put some ice on it. Let me get some."

“Tina, *NO!*”

Before I could stop her, she opened the fridge and choked. I kicked it shut.

“Not plugged in,” I gagged. “That’s where the stench comes from.” I grabbed a rusty corkscrew off the counter. “Open it up again and I’ll get it.” She reopened the fridge and, holding my breath, I stabbed what looked like a maggot football with the corkscrew and tossed the whole mess out the missing window.

“Fuck me,” I said. “I don’t even want to know what that was.”

When I turned around, the dead freezer was still open. Tina was staring in at the Technicolor fridge mold, reciting, “‘We are all conceived in close prison; in our mothers’ wombs, we are close prisoners all; when we are born, we are . . . prisoners still, though within larger walls.’”

Tina slammed the freezer door and said, “John Donne.” Then she plopped back on the counter, pulled her knees up and hugged them, facing me, so I couldn’t miss that pantyhose hole, the sliver of puffed-out cunt like a furry earlobe.

This is who we are, I thought. *This is what we do*.

“Hey, stress monster! What’s wrong with you?”

“Nothing’s wrong. Take a sniff. Things are perfect. I’m in a San Quentin snailback that smells like gangrene with an ex-wife I’m in love with. And by the way, thanks for the show last night.”

“Manny, would you try to listen?”

But I kept going, like a dog hunting the pain. “You must have known I could see from here. You’re not a coincidence person. I mean, what the fuck?”

“Are you done?”

“No. Give me a year and a half to punch myself in the forehead.”

“There’s melodrama and there’s Manny-drama.”

Tina plunged a hand in her purse and pulled out a dark prescrip-

tion bottle of Hycodan, hydrocodone cough syrup, and guzzled. Just what I needed.

“What are you, a Houston rapper?” I asked. “Hitting the purple drank now?”

“Okay, so I’ve crossed over,” she said, tipping one back. “How about you?”

“Clean and loving it,” I lied.

“Of course,” said Tina, “I start to enjoy myself, and you go all gym teacher.”

“Did you fuck him? The Jew Gestapo-wannabe?”

“I already told you. I didn’t.”

I touched the top of my head. It still hurt. Twice as much since I had passed out under the rotting trailer.

“I can’t believe I’m having this conversation,” I said.

She screwed the lid back on the bottle. “You really want to hear this?”

“Absolutely not. So don’t leave anything out.”

Tina shrugged. “He said his daddy told him about Vietcong B girls who kept razor blades up their snatches. GI sticks his dick in. *Chop-chop*. I said, ‘Vietcong? Your daddy told you not to have sex ‘cause of something that happened to guys in Vietnam? That was a long time ago, honey.’ I mean, the guy worked so hard for that badass front, but I could see what was under it.” She stopped, took another guzzle of syrup, and kept going. “Guys like that, you just have to stick it to them. I was like, ‘What else did Daddy warn you about? Panty ‘fros? Not that *you’d* know anything about panty ‘fros.’ ‘Oh, I know,’ he said. ‘I know.’ So I said, ‘Son, have you been race mixing?’ As soon as you call one of these hard cases ‘son,’ you’re their mother. Even if you’re younger than they are. So he got all serious, like, ‘Ma’am, I would *never*! I seen pictures. That’s how I know.’ I’m like, ‘Know what?’ And Bernstein—he’s like a little boy—Bernstein says, ‘No, *I can’t*!’”

Tina stopped again, pulled out her Newports, grabbed one and ripped off the filter and lit up. Just remembering, she burst out laughing through a gust of Newport smoke. Though it might have been the cough medicine. “So Bernstein . . . Ah, my God, Manny, you’d have loved it. So Bernstein . . .” She tried to continue but broke herself up again. Finally, waving her hand, she managed to finish the story. “So Bernstein says, ‘That’s how I know you got some Negroid in *you*! ’Cause I know you’re part Negroid.’ Can you believe that? ‘Part *Negroid*!’”

“But you *are* a quarter black. He was right.”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t, you asshole.” She punched the Newport out on the counter and threw it out the window. I half expected an explosion. “I know what I am,” she said, her mirth turning to annoyance. “I’m just saying, nobody ever called me *Negroid*. It sounds like a gland.”

She reached in her purse for another cigarette and muttered, “See, this is what I forget when I think I miss you. What’s happening *right now*. The *bickering*.”

“I’m just saying,” I said.

She threw the cigarette at me. “You should stop *just saying* shit and fucking *say* it.”

“Tina . . .”

She shook me off. Then she reached between her legs. “You ever think about how we met?”

“What do you think?”

I watched her touch herself and thought about praying mantises. Name the thing that makes male mantises fiend for females; they must know what’s going to happen, but they still do it. There had to be rumors. *Hey, man, did you hear about that guy, got his head bit off while he was fucking?* They knew. But they climbed on anyway. That’s what it means to fiend for something. . . . You need it more than you care that it’s going to kill you. . . .

Tina idly stroked herself. “I haven’t done *anything*, baby. Even though I *could*, since we’re not together. I hate to disappoint you, but nothing happened.” I didn’t say anything, which always drove her crazy. “For Christ’s sake, Manny, what are you thinking? You know you’re the best lay in the world. You fuck like you want to kill death.”

“Ferlinghetti? Oh, come on. . . .”

“No, me.” She pouted for a second, then snapped back. “Don’t tell me you’re thinking about praying mantises.”

Being known was an uncomfortable aphrodisiac. “For a second,” I admitted, “yeah. I was thinking about mantis sex. But before that I was thinking about those GIs in Saigon. How many of *them* do you think planned on saying ‘Nothing happened’? Until they ended up with chipped ham in their pants. It’s hard to lie with a bloody package.”

“Oh, you think I’m lying?” Her tone was part amusement, part malice. “What are you gonna do about it?” she taunted. “You gonna clamp your fingers around my neck? You gonna slap me across the face?”

She paused long enough to fish yet another Newport out, rip the filter off and light it. “Fuck! *Put your uniform on!*”

“I didn’t bring a uniform. I’m undercover. At least I *was*. . . .” Then I got struck sentimental. “The first time we fucked, you said, ‘Try to make me happy but don’t leave marks.’ I didn’t know it was from a movie.”

“*I’ll Kiss You When I’m Dead*. A cult classic. Could you please shut up and hurt me?”

“Is *that* you, or is that from another movie?”

Sometimes when I had sex with Tina, I thought of that scene in *The Godfather* where the senator from Nevada cowers in a whorehouse in his underwear, trying to explain the dead hooker beside him to Robert Duvall. “*We’ve done it a thousand times before. . . . She liked it.*”

Just like old times. Until Tina threw a curve and whispered, “Call me Satan’s little whore.”

She slid her hands down the wall, stuck her behind out and shrieked dramatically. “Unless a woman be pure of womb, she may not know the Lord. But the Devil has a portal! Make me a whore of Satan!”

“*What* did you just say?”

She kept her voice low, barely audible. “Do me up the ass.”

“*Up your ass?*”

“You used to love it.”

“I didn’t say I didn’t love it.” Now *I* was whispering. “The last time we committed sodomy as God intended, I got that bacterial thing. Fourteen weeks on Flagyl.”

“Oooh, Daddy!” she shrieked, startling me even more. “Keep me pure! Slap my booty! *Make me your virgin cum-bucket!*”

I saw her check over my shoulder. That’s when I spotted the lens poking out of the unlatched bed overhead.

“What the fuck!” I stood up for a closer look. “A hidden camera? Are you going to blackmail me? Is that why you’re acting like you’re on crack?”

Tina looked offended. “This is *not* how I act on crack! And it’s not a *blackmail* thing. I was going to tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

“Don’t get mad, but there’s this website. Bible Sluts. I know it’s ridiculous. But it’s a paycheck. All you do is quote Corinthians or something while you, you know . . . put on a show. Why are you looking at me that way?”

“You have any other Bible buddies?”

She acted insulted. “Come on, I wouldn’t do it with anyone but you.”

“Were you planning to tell me I was starring in Christian entertainment?”

“I thought it would be fun. I really wanted to fuck you.”

“You left *me*, remember?”

"I had a disease that required my full attention. Can we talk about something else?"

"Fine. You still haven't said why you're here."

"The reverend pulled some strings."

"*Reverend D?*" I backed away—as far away as you can back in a shoebox. "Where'd you meet a walking rap sheet like him?"

"NA. We were both court ordered." Tina bit her thumb. "You know, things haven't been great since we split. . . . I needed to make some money. He had some work."

"*Work?*"

She read my expression and said, "Look, there wasn't any sex. I mean, not *real* sex. That's how I've been paying for treatment. It's not what you think. I thought it would be fun to do something with you."

"Tina, for Christ's sake!" I didn't mean to shout, but it was impossible not to. "I saw you out there, remember? With Bernstein. *Naked.*"

"If I knew you were in the audience, I'd have waved."

"How the fuck did you know I was here?"

"A girl has ways. I told you, I took the job to surprise you."

"I'm surprised. In fact, I'm more than surprised. I'm fucking tormented! Who hired you to spend the night with the kosher Nazi?"

"Didn't I tell you already? The old guy."

She slid her fishnet-pantyhosed calves into knee-high boots, doing it slow, like a cam-girl. That kind of nasty. Then, out of nowhere, I made the connection, blurting, "Golda Meir!"

Tina stopped her show and looked at me. "Not the reaction I was going for, baby."

"No," I said, "I mean Golda Meir's stockings, in Bernstein's fetish photo."

"That was pretty twisted."

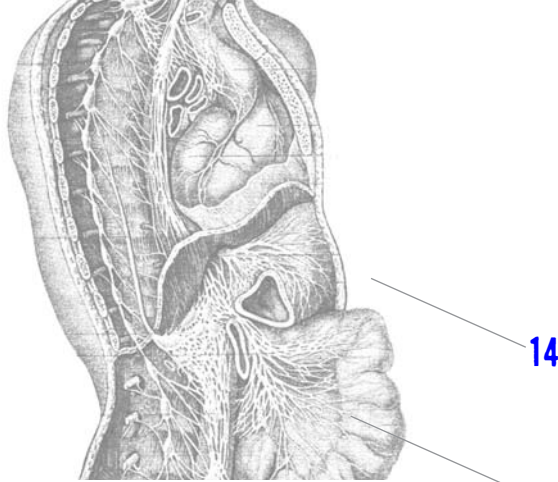
"Exactly. Dead icon perv. Fits right in with the faux candid Zell laid out on my dresser. Sun Myung in his two-piece and the rest of the team."

Tina curled a finger under the elastic of her pantyhose. “Does that tell you something, baby?” She pulled the fishnets away from her belly, showing me the deep diamond impressions left on the flesh underneath, mashing her pubic hair so that it looked like she’d been pressing herself against a screen door. What kind of early damage made that necessary?

“It tells *me* that the same freak who gave you Golda broke into my bedroom and planted a photo of Sun Myung Moon in a bikini.”

Tina let go and the elastic snapped back with a smack.

“Ow!” she cried, touching the fresh red mark on her skin. “Do that again!”



The Addict's Way

An hour later, I leaned back with my head against a folded newspaper—protection from the trailer ooze—and watched Tina dress.

My ex-wife had a way of putting on clothes that was dirtier than taking them off. She was covering up, but you knew what was underneath. When she finished dressing, she applied makeup from a compact at the fetid kitchenette.

“So tell me again,” I said.

“Tell you what?”

“Why you had to meet Bernstein.”

She snapped the compact shut. “I told you, the old guy, Zell, wanted me to give him a message and a package.”

“What kind of package?”

“Cash.”

“I still don’t get it. Why you?”

“I know the reverend. The reverend and Harry do business.”

“Now it’s *Harry*?”

Tina rolled her eyes.

“The old guy’s in financing. Distribution. He’s got a piece of the

reverend's escort agency, Christian Fun Girls. The same ones who do outcall appear in his movies. They've got stuff on the Web—"

"Born-again porn?"

"Don't judge, Manny. You've done worse for less."

"I'm not judging. I'm asking. I want to know. For Christ's sake, Tina. You show up at Quentin. You do . . . whatever you did. Then you break into this dump. Just tell me what the deal is."

"Do you have a memory disorder? I had a message for Bernstein."

"What was it?"

"‘The eagle has landed.’"

"You're fucking kidding me!"

"So it's not original. Look, Zell told me I wouldn't have to screw the Nazi."

"And you believed him?"

"Hey, I'm a big girl. And he wasn't lying. I told you, Bernstein and I just hung for a while. He's really only interested in one thing. No, two things—his right and left bicep."

"What did you get out of it?"

"Besides money?" She ran her hand from the throbbing bump on my head, down over my mouth, across my lips. "Well, Zell told me you were going to be up here. So . . . I figured I could see you. I thought it would be hot. Wait!" She straightened up. "Is it the Alterna.com stuff? Is *that* why you're so paranoid?"

"If I knew what that was, I probably would be."

"You haven't seen that site? Nothing but extreme fetish and depravity. It's like dirty anthropology. These women post pictures with these demented thumbnails. Then, when a guy sends photos of himself in Boris and Natasha drag or a nice note about strap-ons, they get his address and blackmail him. The reverend told me about that."

"Wow. We've been split six months and you're already making a splash. Couldn't you have taken a waitress gig?"

“Are you kidding? I just spent six weeks in an eating disorder clinic. I needed something I could do in my spare time to pay for treatment. It’s not like I have health insurance. I didn’t ask for a dime, if you’ll recall.”

“I wish you would have. So was somebody hacking the server or what? How did you get their addresses?”

“Off their driver’s licenses. When they finally meet for a face-to-face, the first thing you do is check their license. Second thing is leave.”

“Wait! You actually meet? Do you go to bed with them?”

“Where these types go does not always involve bed. The concept doesn’t apply. Anyway, the Alterna.com scam’s a side gig. I love you being jealous, but basically, I’m a dispatcher.”

“For an escort agency.”

“Yeah, but not regular prostitutes. It’s a Christian outcall service. All the girls are saving themselves for Jesus.” She pulled out another Newport, ripped the filter off but stopped before she flicked the lighter. “I light a flame in this trailer, is it going to blow? I’m not sure how methane smells.”

“You’ve already smoked about ninety,” I said, “but the next one could trigger Armageddon.” I snatched her cigarette and threw it in the sink. “Better safe than sorry.”

Tina shot me a look that could cure cancer. She knew fifteen different ways to get on her knees.

“Think of all the guys who’d pay to do all the shit I want you to do to me.”

“I thought you didn’t do sex.”

“I don’t. I said think of all the guys who’d pay me if I did. Now tell me what’s going on with you.”

She aimed her eyes up at me. Eased my zipper down. I pulled it back up.

“Baby, please. I just need you to listen. . . .”

I filled her in on the rest of the saga: from Sun Myung to the warden, my upcoming accidental sex change and the drugs I found under the trailer, up to the subject of my investigation. . . . When I mentioned his name, Tina blanched and slowly slid down the wall.

“Josef Mengele? That’s just . . . That’s just sick!”

Tina stood back up and made her way blindly to the damp mattress and sat down. Her eyes darkened. “I went through a Holocaust phase in junior high. I read about everything. It really got to me. I was a troubled teen.”

“That was your job.”

“Yeah, but I was also anorexic.” She took a puff of Newport, blew the smoke out fast, then raised her fist to her mouth and bit it. “So all those photos of emaciated bodies really got to me. It was like torture porn. *Look how skinny a human being can get and still be alive.* I was so obsessed with the starvation I didn’t know about the other stuff until they showed us a movie at school. They talked about Mengele. The experiments. After that, I was in the library all the time. Do you know what that sick fuck did?”

“Besides shooting typhus into three-year-olds and wearing perfumed scarves to the ramps every morning to decide who got the Zyklon B? I have an idea.”

Tina went even more ashen. “But the other stuff . . .” She pushed out her lower lip and twisted it, as though causing herself pain to counter the pain she was describing. “Like his twin genital fetish. How he’d force twin sisters to have sex with other twins. If the twins were a boy and girl, he mated them. To see which would reproduce twins. He’d start dissecting them while they were alive. . . . It always came back to carving up their matching little things. He’d surgically remove their wombs and preserve them in jars.”

“Twin reproductive research. Mengele would say he was trying to save his race.”

“And I could cut your heart out and say I was researching razor blades.”

Tina began to shiver and I put my arm around her. Her voice had shrunk. “Can we just go to bed? I feel diseased. . . .”

Suddenly I noticed how hollow-eyed she was. “Baby,” I said, as unaccusingly as I could, “have you been taking care of yourself? How’s the food thing going?”

“How do you think?” She threw a cigarette on the floor, looking disappointed the place didn’t go up in flames. “At least being a junkie has cachet. Shooting up in gas station bathrooms is classy compared to throwing up in them. You don’t get to feel like some junkie outlaw. You feel like a pathetic freak. There’s nothing lower than eating a Sara Lee pound cake in your car. Unthawed. Then going to Arby’s for three milkshakes and a place to puke it all. I had nearly nine months, then yesterday I relapsed.”

I know I’ve said it before, but for most of our marriage, I lived in total ignorance of my wife’s secret eating. It was as if she occupied a parallel universe. When I found out, I felt chumped off. *As if she’d done it all to me.* No doubt this is why narcissists make bad ambulance attendants.

Tina’s darkened eyes held on mine. “I ate five microwave Zone meals and a box of cake mix.”

“Quit bragging,” I said.

It was an all-purpose response. But it made her laugh. Until her sobs bubbled up underneath. She threw herself against me and wept into my chest.

Somehow, in all this pain and squalor, I never loved her more. Never felt more alone. I wondered how it was that I had attracted a person in that kind of turmoil. Maybe it was that I never had to explain. With Tina I could relax.

Then an odd thought lodged in my brain.

Tina grabbed my hand. “What?”

“Nothing.”

“*What?*”

“Okay, if you want to know, I was thinking how people like us don’t even need Mengele. We’re our own medical experiments: you emptying your body, me filling mine up with cut chemicals and Mexican smack. Then I thought about my old man. . . .”

“Your father? You never talk about him.”

“He left the motor running in the garage, did himself in with carbon monoxide. I mean, what the fuck? His family saves him from the Nazis when he’s ten, and what happens? Three decades later he gasses himself.” I rubbed my hand over my face. “Does that make him some kind of retro-collaborator? You know, like the Jewish capos in the camps?” I stared off, saw my father’s face—forever wry, sweetly sad—and suddenly the pang of loss tore so deep a knife in the heart would have tickled by comparison.

Her slap brought me back.

“Baby,” she said, “you’re a million miles away. I need you here. What the fuck are you on?”

“Me? Are you serious? We were talking about you!” Nothing fired up my indignation like accusations of drug use. Especially when I was on drugs. “So why do you think you relapsed?”

“Why do you think? I had eight months, twenty-seven days of abstinence. I did everything right—and where did it get me? Stuck in a San Quentin love nest with some cranked-out Kosher super-Nazi, trying to keep my skin from crawling off my body. So yeah, pretty me was off everything. Drugs, alcohol, food—*whoo-hoo!*—and I have this to show for it! I mean, look at *this*.” She swept her arm to indicate the stink box we were sitting in. Then she sighed. “Oh well.”

“Oh well what?”

“Oh well, in fourth grade, I was the girl who drew unicorns on her notebook with condoms on.”

“You drew unicorn dick?”

Tina recoiled. “What? No! Are you *sick*? The rubbers went on their horns. Magnums. Same brand as Daddy.”

As usual, I felt responsible for her difficulties—even the ones I had nothing to do with, including the crime blotter of a childhood that continued to warp her behavior in ways that broke my heart. We hadn’t even talked in six months, and our first nonmarried fight followed the exact curve of all the fights we had when married. “You just love me ’cause I’m damaged,” Tina said. “It saves you having to do it.”

“Okay, I’m sorry your childhood sucked. I’m sorry this isn’t the Ritz. I’m sorry I’m on a case. I’m sorry I have to work for a fucking living. You think I like doing this shit?”

“Oooh, *drama!*” Now Tina was chipper. She thrived on fights. “Hey, at least you *had* a career to dump in the toilet. It’s like I do these things—the fetish con, the Christian sluts, this trip to Quentin—and I keep thinking, *Why can’t I do something better with my life?*”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Self-esteem issues?”

“Hey, fuck you!”

“Fuck *you*! Welcome to the world. You’re an artist, trying to survive.”

Tina brightened. “You really think so?”

“Sure. Who knows what fantastic thing is in your future—but you couldn’t go there if you didn’t go here.”

Tina smiled with genuine surprise. “Sometimes you can be so supportive.”

“Hey, I love you,” I said. “There’s no accounting for taste.” I didn’t mean for my voice to rise. “But what the fuck possessed you to agree to fake-marry a Bernstein?”

“I needed a job that didn’t require a résumé.”

“So where’d you hide the cash you brought up?”

“Where you do you think? Between my legs.”

“Really? I’m thinking even in hundreds, ten grand is a wad.”

"I fit *you* in, didn't I?"

"Cute." I was tired of talking, and there was only one question left. "Did Zell give you your share?"

Tina smacked her forehead, like the shills in V8 commercials. "That's what I meant to ask you. Did you check him out?"

Now it was my turn to squirm. "I dug around," I said vaguely. I *had* taken a stab at the DMV—illegal, but possible, if you had a loose C-note and a state employee willing to tickle a few keys on their computer and slip you a printout. Then it was on to CLC, the commercial license lists; L.A. County tax rolls; AARP; gas and electric; NCIC—he didn't have a record—up the ladder to property tax rolls, military, DBA . . . I hit half a dozen boilerplate skip-trace sites, half-assedly trying to nail down the identity of the man who was paying me.

"You dug around?" Tina repeated. "Great. What'd you find?"

"Nothing."

"Nothing?"

"Doesn't matter. I've always trusted my gut."

"Yeah, and how's that been working out?"

This stung. "*You* seemed to think it was okay to take a job from the guy."

"Exactly! Only people like him hire people like us. Didn't you think you should at least find out what Zell wants to do when you nail down the Angel of Death?"

"I will."

"When? Manny, I'm serious. If there's even a possibility it's actually Mengele, you have to kill him. *Now*. Hit him with a wrench and call 911. Make him pay."

"I'm sure that's what Zell intends to do. He just wants to be sure."

"Really? So he hires *you*?"

"Okay, okay!" Bad as the Doughboy-era dope had made me feel, I already missed it. "Maybe some of the pieces don't fit. . . ."

Tina plucked out her cigarette to make room for her thumb. She

bit on *that*, then stuck the cigarette back in. Busy woman. She lifted her eyes with a plaintive *What the fuck do you expect me to do?* gaze. Her bites made little kittling sounds. I'd rarely seen her in this condition. She was usually the strong one. Now that she was nonpukaholic, all the unstuffed feelings splashed everywhere.

One of life's sorrier truisms: when you think you're functional with an addiction, it's because the addiction allows you to function. Someday I'm going to write a book. *The Addict's Way*. Get a nice suit and go on Charlie Rose. Ask him where he buys his hair. What *he's* on. (Nobody's going to tell me the man's not at least drunk.) Really *engage*.

I yanked my brain back from visions of self-help millions and stealing kisses from Marianne Williamson backstage at Total Empowerment Seminars. Tina stared at me like she was trying to set ants on fire.

"Baby, what's going through your mind?" I asked her guiltily.

"*Mengele*." She pronounced the name like it tasted oily. "To be even peripherally involved with someone like that and not destroy him . . . That's unforgivable."

"I said I'd take care of it."

"And I asked you when."

"What is this? I feel like we're married again. There's another class tomorrow, okay? By the way, are you planning on sleeping here?"

"No."

I tried not to man-pout. "Why not? You meeting another Third Reich Bar Mitzvah boy? You know, the last one didn't get along so well with Dr. Mengele, if it *is* Mengele. Did I tell you that? Guards had to drag him off. Bernstein would have killed the old fuck if he weren't in chains."

"That doesn't make sense."

"Trust me, the chains made sense."

"I'm not talking about chains. I'm talking about Bernstein trying to kill Mengele. He raved about him like he was a rock star."

“How long have you known Bernstein?”

“One night. But one night’s a long time if all a guy does is yammer. Trust me, if that skeek had any more meth inside him he would have talked backward. He idolizes the SS.”

“That’s the trouble with meeting your heroes. They disappoint.”

She didn’t answer. Just took another swig of cough medicine and stared out the missing window. “Look at that moon,” she said finally, licking a few drops off her fingers. “It’s the same one that hung over the death camps.”

It’s the same one that hung over the death camps.”

“And what the fuck did it do about them? Nothing! Look at it. It’s like a blob of white shit stuck to the sky.”

“You shit white when you have liver disease,” I said.

Tina nodded. “Well that’s what you are when you have the chance to clean somebody like Mengele off the planet and you don’t. You’re a white blob of shit.”

“Can we stop with lunar stool metaphors? Why the fuck aren’t you going to sleep with me?”

“I didn’t say I wasn’t.” She peeled herself carefully off the trailer foam. “Just not in here. The smell would make a dead fish sick.”

“I still don’t know what that was in the fridge,” I said. “It might have been a hand in a mitten.”

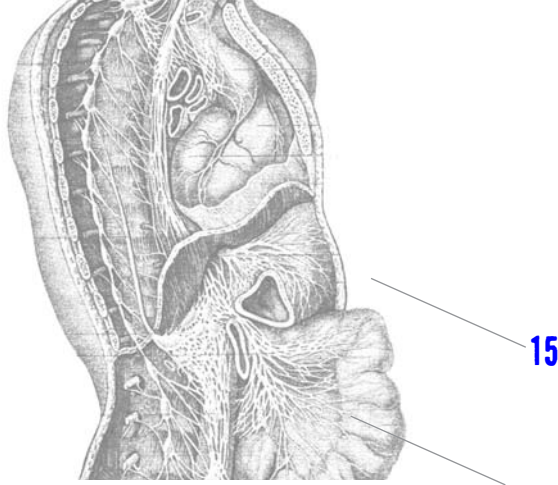
“Let’s go to my place.”

“You have a place?”

“A girl has to stay somewhere.”

“So where are you?”

“Two spaces over. The minivan. Don’t ask.”



Life Coach, Hymen Wrangler

Bathed in tainted moonlight, I made out the cross on the minivan's door. As we crunched closer over the gravel, I aimed a penlight. Tina's ride sported more than just a cross. Depicted, in airbrushed pastel, was the crucifixion. Three buxom, kneeling Mary Magdalenes—black, Asian and blond—clasped their hands in supplication before a very buff Jesus. The Son of God appeared to be peeking down their tank tops. Above the tableau ran Reverend D's flamboyant, curling signature. Below it, in Gothic letters: CHASTITY IS NOT A VIRTUE . . . IT IS A REWARD!

"Provocative," I said.

"And then some." Tina aimed the beeper and the minivan's doors unlocked with a satisfying *crunk*. "If you look close, Jesus is wearing a crown of thongs."

Still holding the key-beeper in front of her, she turned back to me. "One of the girls did an outcall to Mengele. You should talk to her. Her name's Cathy."

"Are you serious? When did she see him?"

"I don't know. Maybe a month ago." She looked away as if seeing

something she didn't want to see. Unlike me, Tina did not get happier on opiates. So of course she did more of them.

"God, Manny, I was clean when I was binging and purging. I mean, I was burning my uvula down to a stump, but I was clean and sober. . . . Now I'm abstinent and look at me."

"Transitional relapse. You're stressed out, you're taking the edge off. It's not like you're holding a gallon jug of morphine and pouring it on waffles at IHOP."

"Can we talk about something else besides food?"

"Sorry. You're right. Insensitive. So, how did you—never mind."

I found the handle and yanked the panel door sideways. My paranoia genes were riled up. Standing in the open talking, even off campus, invited attention, if not outright surveillance. I tried to nudge her into the minivan, but she wouldn't budge. Instead she punched me in the chest.

"How did I what?"

"Nothing."

"Ask it, Manny."

"Okay, but get inside. We probably shouldn't be out here."

She finally relented and got in. I ducked in after her and slid the door shut behind me. It was dead black.

"Tina?"

"Ask!" she said.

"All right." I couldn't see her, which made it easier to talk. "Tell me the truth. The Christian escort thing, the Alterna.com scam . . . Are you, you know, back in it?"

"*It?* No! I told you."

"Thanks, baby."

I reached for her, got an armful of air and leaned sideways to reach for her again. Nothing. *She was gone*. I heard her clump into the backseat. Or the second to back seat. I didn't even know how many rows there were.

“God, it’s darker in here than outside.”

“Smoked glass. People see big tits and Jesus, they’re going to want to peep in. Hang on.” She unsnapped her purse. Cupped the flash of a lighter, followed by orange Newport glow. “To answer your question, Reverend D kept me on to work with the girls.”

“What kind of work?”

The glow deepened; I could hear her staccato puffs. Blowing smoke rings in the dark. “The reverend sold virgins.”

“What? Like nine-year-olds from the Ukraine? He pimped out cherry girls? Fuck! He didn’t strike me as *that* evil. What the fuck were you doing working with him?”

“No, no! I told you. They were evangelicals. And they were all over eighteen. They just wouldn’t let a man put his organ in their vessel of procreation. They were technical virgins.”

“*Technical* virgins?”

“I didn’t say they were innocent. I said they hadn’t been deflowered.”

An odd conversation in the dark.

“So they didn’t fuck.”

I felt her finger scratch lazily across the back of my neck.

“Not vaginally. But they *would* do naked prayer sessions. Along with Greek, Russian, bareback oral or facials.”

“And still leave a customer feeling virtuous.”

“You can’t put a price tag on pure.”

“So . . . your job again?”

I was glad for the dark. It cushioned all this new reality.

“I showed them how to keep their female organs penis free. The reverend liked to say, ‘Takes a man to show a little girl how to make love, but it takes a woman to show her how not to.’”

“Barry White meets Dr. Laura. Nice. So what was your title?”

“Life coach. Hymen wrangler.”

“There money in that?”

By now she was kissing my ear. From behind.

“Don’t laugh. I did consultation work in seven states. The reverend knows how to get the Family Research Council and government abstinence-ed money. He had a little rap for visiting suits, the faith-based financial gatekeepers.” She did a strikingly lifelike imitation of the rev, throwing in a smidge of Isaac Hayes. “‘Virgins in the ghetto. Jesus himself could not work a bigger miracle.’” Evangelicious!

“Let me guess. Then he’d get them blow jobs, right?” I realized how that sounded and corrected myself. “Not Jesus. The reverend . . . The girls would have told him about an old Nazi perv, right?”

“They wouldn’t have had to. Rev D took all the calls. He would have booked him.”

I felt the impact as she crawled back over the seat beside me.

“Wait. Back up. . . . So Zell finds out there’s a war criminal living in Reseda. What does he do?”

“Depends.”

God, I loved what her fingers did with my neck. She pressed her hands over my ears. Now there was no light and no sound.

“That’s so good,” I said, moaning as I answered my own question. “Either he has him arrested or . . . Maybe he wants to do something with him. Whatever it is, he wants to be sure. So he gets Mengele somewhere he can be observed. . . .”

Tina didn’t say anything, just squeezed tighter on my ears till I heard the ocean. Her body pressed mine from behind.

“. . . Then he sends *me* to observe him. Which still makes no sense. If you even suspect, you fucking arrest him. Unless . . . Zell’s pro-Nazi. But if he wanted to help the bastard, he’d sneak him back to Brazil. Before some state-trained Israeli shows up and goes Judah Maccabee on his ass. I keep going over and over this. . . .”

Soft fingers caressed my cheek. I thought I smelled . . . lavender.

“Mmmmm . . .”

The fingers on my face were like a child’s. And so dainty. In spite

of myself, I imagined the grave faces of the Viennese girls after Dr. M removed their arms. The horror of *that*. They looked, on the screen of memory, like little twin Tinas. I thought *hand transplant* and bolted forward with a strangled gasp. “*Tina!*”

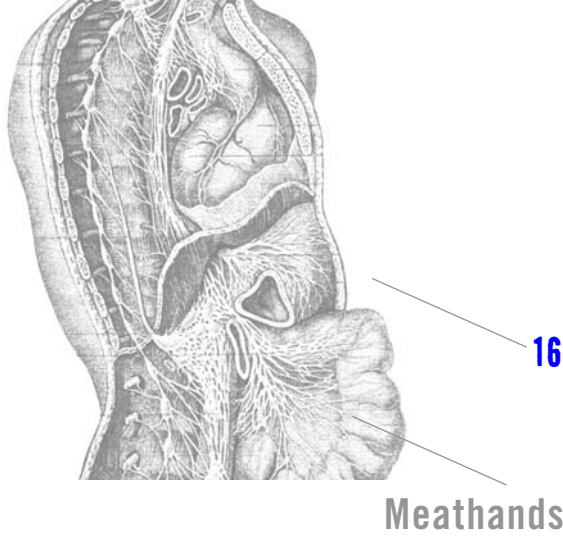
I wheeled around, flailing. A forearm jammed across my windpipe. *Hairy*, I thought stupidly, so I knew it wasn’t Tina. First suspect is always next of kin.

I tried to kick and banged my toe on what felt like a lead pipe, wearing a shoe and wedged against the seat in front for leverage.

I started to scream again. “Ti—”

I heard the top of my head crack before I felt it. Thought *peanut brittle*. My eyes blinked into scalding white. Runny faces floated over me, features contorted, as if enduring savage g-forces. One face loomed close. I flashed on a mustache made of worms. Swinging blind, I connected with a crunch. Blood-spray wet my cheek, so I couldn’t see what I’d hit. Maybe a tomato with bones.

Then I *was* the tomato. Squeezed in a can. Everything dark, cramped. The ringing stopped. Say what you will about vegetables, they’re calm.



I came to, my face wedged under a sink, hands cuffed behind me, in a room too small for me to extend my legs. I tried to move and my mouth scraped cold rust. A slit of light leaked over the top of a door. The ringing in my ears made thinking painful. I focused on the last things I remembered: that white, diseased-liver moon . . . the mini-van . . . talking in the dark with Tina. But this dark was different. Only the fetid smell placed me. And the slime on my arms. Trailer scum. I was home! *Yecch*. When I wriggled, it felt like I'd been dipped in rotten Vaseline. Almost accidentally, my left wrist slipped out of the old-school handcuff. It took more effort to liberate my right. Either they'd clamped it tighter, or I had a case of fat arm. I had to claw off a layer of wall ooze, smear it around the metal, then twist it back and forth. And the bracelet still scraped a layer of knuckle skin coming off.

Free at last, I rolled over and spotted a ball of light through a hole in the floor. I pressed my back to the wall in case the light strayed upward. But somehow my shirt had gotten shoved up to my shoulders, and where my skin hit the slimy wall it puckered, making a sound like someone smacking their lips.

I froze. Then something banged against the trailer floor, bouncing my head off the metal toilet. The blow left me facedown on the marinated linoleum. The stench was hallucinogenic. I came to seeing rotten yellow stars and hearing voices.

“Why’d they stick the shit in old Red Cross boxes?”

“‘Cause they were already here, dumbfuck . . .”

The second man spoke in a crusty whisper I knew I should identify. Only I could not focus. Between the screaming fire alarm in my skull and the struggle not to gag, I had to fight the urge to just break off a table leg and beat myself in the face for the sheer relief of keeling over. I wanted to pray—but for what? My earlier nausea was like a happy memory. Until this moment, I’d never really known what people meant when they said their “gorge” was rising. But now my gorge—whatever it was—was accelerating north, swelling with every breath to some kind of acrid-tasting tsunami of bile and fear. I felt a bird’s nest of ganglia pulsing at my left temple, terrified that the strain of trying to gulp back the rising tide would amplify the throb until my head simply exploded like an overpumped tire from cerebral pressure.

The man with the crusty whisper kept talking, but the words went in and out. “During World War One, convicts”—*wah, wah, wah*—“made these Red Cross boxes. . . . War ended”—*wah-wah*—“Contractors”—*wah-wah-wah-wah*—“storeroom next to dungeon.”

I bit my lip until I tasted blood, but the fire alarm only stopped temporarily.

“Or maybe,” another voice chimed in, this one older sounding, “*the poor fucks in the dungeon required a lot of first aid.*”

Suddenly I had to sneeze—and I was a loud sneezer. I pinched my nose to stifle the volume. And, still pinching, sneezed again, even harder, the pressure searing my eardrums. By the fifth sneeze, I thought my eyeballs were going to pop out of their sockets like bloody comets. After the eleventh, they stopped. But I kept the squeeze on my nostrils, sucking small blasts of air into my mouth, to mitigate the

tang of piss and mildew and sixteen breeds of decay moldering beneath me. When I was upright, I'd just had to inhale the stench. Now, on the trailer floor, I was basted with it, like some kind of hell-glazed ham. Worse, I realized when I looked through the rust hole in the floor that there was no tank under the toilet. It emptied straight onto the ground. And stayed there. One more ingredient in the potpourri that made the snailback such a festival of stank.

"Listen," Crusty Whisper Man declared, "the wrecking ball swings tomorrow on the original lockup, and they threw this stuff out with everything else. On the off chance somebody finds it, they're gonna think it just looks like a bunch of old medicine. I hear the Kraut antiqued the dope. Anybody bothers to run it through the lab, the shit'll test out a hundred years old."

I heard that, and my first thought was *I've been shooting up good drugs!* My second was, *Why the fuck didn't I grab more?* That's what happens when your junkie muscle goes slack. You lose vigilance. Though I knew, from years of research, that it didn't take much to morph back to full-blown junkiedom. I also knew that after the first shot or three, all the time you'd spent on the straight and narrow might as well never have happened. One day you've got it all together, the next you're in a stinking bathroom, living the dream.

"What I hear, shit's somethin' special," said the first guy I'd heard, who I suspected was the youngest. "What I hear, the old fuck makes some kinda Nazi skag that's stronger than street shit."

I heard a smack and then that familiar but still unplaceable crusty whisper. "What I hear, you fuck, is I catch you tryin' to pinch off a taste, you're gonna end up with a rig full of battery acid in your neck so you don't do it again."

That was it. I nosed a flap of dank linoleum to the side and peeked through the rust hole. I needed to see who was talking. But I needed to use my nose, because my hands were still useless from the cuffs. Numb, but not tingly numb. *Meat* numb—hanging like skinned ani-

mals from my wrists. I'd have to make do until feeling came back. But maybe feeling was overrated.

All I could see was a set of white hands, some work boots. The men grunted, venting muffled curses when the footlocker banged against the rotting trailer bottom. With each bump I shuddered. My big fear was that a corner would catch on my fist-sized peephole, peeling the rusted-out metal I was sprawled on like the lid of an upside-down sardine can, sending me face-first into the outhouse gumbo below. I flexed every muscle, trying to levitate. But they dragged the locker way out with no undue damage.

I leaned closer to the hole in the floor. Not just to sneak a peek—I suspected, for some reason, that the men were guards—but to take in a breath. I'd just maneuvered close enough to breathe when one of them said, "Fuck it, dawg!" and dumped a shovel-full of muck back in the hole. Something awful splashed up onto my lip, and I jerked backward.

"Fuck it, dawg. This place stinks worse than a crack ho's panties."

"You oughta know, you did your mother's laundry!"

After this bon mot, they bailed. I heard the crunching gravel as they walked off, trying to wipe whatever'd splashed on my lip. A second later a car started, rolling slowly, almost soundlessly off. I waited a minute, quickly uncurled myself, maneuvered my way upright and tried to work the door handle with my meathands. By now I could kind of flutter my fingers. But it didn't help much, so I kicked the door open. Peeked outside to see if anyone was waiting to brain me again, then tumbled and gulped the air like it was nectar.

Freed from trailer fumes, my head cleared halfway up, enabling me to panic rationally. As I started to breathe normally again, I wondered, *Where is Tina? How is Mengele involved? What else did they stash beside*

drugs? And, just out of morbid curiosity, Who was in that minivan? And why the fuck did they windpipe me and cuff me to the sink?

More or less refreshed, I staggered back inside to consider my situation. Weaving over the kitchenette sink, I turned on the tap and splashed water onto my face. I squeezed my eyes shut, feeling the not unpleasant burn of industrial solvents and PCBs tightening my pores as they ate through them.

Feeling my body sag, I remembered something Roscoe'd said in class: "*When shit gets bad, you gotta find one thing to be grateful for. One thing. Otherwise you go minimal. . . .*"

I wasn't sure what going minimal was, but I had a feeling it was already happening. When life shrank to nonstop calculation about how to make it through the next five minutes, that had to be minimal. Normally I steer clear of affirmations. But this one came from a convicted cop killer with no hope of parole and more serenity than Buddha on Xanax.

Absent immediate danger, the adrenaline drained off and the effect of all the abuse my body and nervous system had taken since signing for Mengele duty began to make itself known. Thankfully, the one mirror on the premises had been shattered before I showed up. So I could only feel the damage, as opposed to having to look at myself.

I touched a finger to the top of my head, expecting bloody peanut brittle. Instead, there was only a minor-league knob. No blood. Right there—something to be grateful for. My bruised windpipe made swallowing painful. So of course I could not stop swallowing. My left temple still throbbed. Here and there my skin burned, courtesy of the chemical gelatin coating my trailer's innards. Something else hurt, farther down, under my right rib cage. My liver. But that didn't worry me. The pain was like an old friend that wanted to kill me.

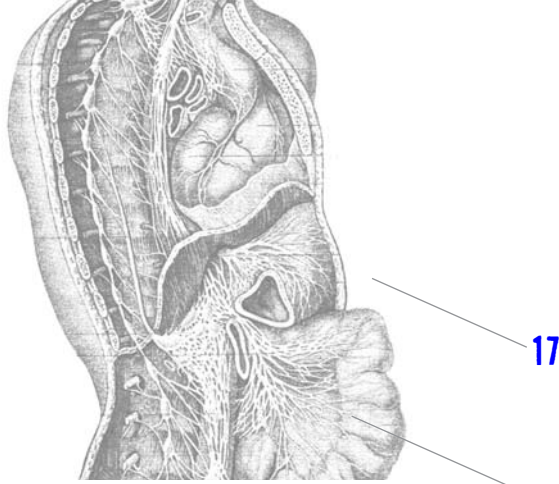
Without meaning to, I sat down at the dinette and passed out. When my watch alarm went off at noon, I was still sitting up. Drug class kicked off at one fifteen.

I had about ten minutes to try to clean up. Sniffing myself, I nearly keeled over. But I found some Clinton-era Right Guard under the sink and sprayed it under the arms of my shirt, the front and back of my pants and up and down my legs. My first choice, needless to say, would have been dry cleaning and a hot shower. But in this life you work with what you have.

I scanned my attire for visible stains and contemplated my next move. I could of course have just sneaked off and gotten as far away from this weirdness as I could. But, having run away too much early on, my tendency in my wobbly thirties was to stay too long. So, as originally intended, I decided to hit the classroom.

It took a few minutes to find my briefcase and copies of the inmate files. When I grabbed them, a scrunched up, slightly soiled napkin floated out of the pile. On it, by sheer chance, was the writing assignment I'd thought up and promptly forgotten: "HAVE YOU EVER MADE A BAD DECISION UNDER THE INFLUENCE OF DRUGS? DESCRIBE."

Who has the time?



Whole-Grain Nazis

Through the twin sets of admitting doors, I stepped toward the lower yard with a new wariness. I didn't know if going back to drug class was the best move after getting knocked out and abducted by someone with doll hands in a minivan. It was, if nothing else, definitely the least likely. Which is sometimes better. People were always trying to be smart. Sometimes stupid got you more.

I held the door open for a long-lashed young guardette with a beehive while she signed in triplicate. The process took her longer than I'd expected. I didn't know whether to just let the door go, which felt rude, or stay there and wait, which felt uncomfortable—would she think I was trying to pick her up?—and could take hours.

I began to wonder if I was drawing attention to myself. Though I realized my perceptions were skewed. Whatever narco-treat had been in my Red Cross box, it had launched me into short-lived euphoria, directly on to mild disorientation, semidepression and itchy nose. Then again . . .

On one level, since checking into Quentin, I'd managed to roll into my fetid guest trailer and reenact my own low-end, mini-Joe Campbell

hero-goes-to-hell-and-claws-his-way-back-again routine. On another, I had already fucked up so badly I'd be lucky if I didn't end up getting mail here for the next ten years.

All I really wanted to do was stare at that Ronettes do. Was it a retro thing or had time stopped at San Quentin, fashion-wise, in 1967? I had seen plenty of sixty- and seventy-year-old James Dean-era juvenile delinquents. They strolled the yard, working pompadours, butch-waxed crew cuts and Chicago boxcars—brushed high on the sides, flat down the middle to a perfect spit curl. My guess was the bouffant behind me read “rockabilly” more than “female peckerwood.”

I was so enthralled by the big hair that I committed one of the cardinal sins in a penitentiary—I collided with another convict. In this case, a Pacific Islander, in a baseball hat and a cut-off sweatshirt that exposed his side-of-ham arms from the shoulder down. The right one was festooned with swaying palm trees on an island. Above which were letters that swayed just like the tattooed palms: 100 TONGAN.

“Jesus, sorry,” I mumbled, hyperalert for the glint of a shiv. But the mountain of Tonga did not even look at me. He just moved on.

I didn't notice the note in my hand till I checked my skull egg, a few steps later, to make sure it still hurt. The paper had been folded several times, down to postage stamp size. Opened, it revealed four words: “VISITING ROOM” and “BRING CANTEEN.”

The note seemed written in two different hands. I studied it while pretending to retie my tie—a last-minute wardrobe addition. The right accessory can cancel out the effects of chemical depravity. (I'd have to write that down and put it in *The Addict's Way*. In the chapter on clothes. “*As an addict, your life depends on continual evasion—so dress accordingly!*”)

I had no idea how to get to the visiting room. And in a place like this, you didn't want to get lost. By chance, I happened to look behind me and saw the Samoan. He nodded faintly. And, keeping his hands down at his waist, he pointed both forefingers east. Toward the con-

demned unit? Back to administration? He did it again, then took off when he saw that I'd reversed course.

There was a line at the visiting room window. I was eleventh, which left ample time to admire the humanity in the orange plastic chairs. Mothers and girlfriends nursed babies, checked makeup, chatted with the other ladies who'd made the trek. Their beauty seemed extreme, maybe because their devotion was so naked. *Here I am, taking a nine-hour bus ride up to see you, baby.* The children colored in coloring books. The men on hand seemed oddly washed out. You didn't see a lot of gangsters. Mostly sad-eyed little boys and proud old men.

One thirteen-year-old black kid, already inching toward six foot, held court for younger newcomers in front of the inmate-painted mural, pointing out details of trees, mountains, deer and other bucolic wonders. It was all browns and greens, like a geography book illustration, but aching lush in contrast to the plastic and penitentiary lighting. One elderly African-American woman, in a pillbox hat and white knit shawl over a patchy fur coat, read a large black book I assumed to be the New Testament. It turned out to be *Blackwater*, by Jeremy Scahill. Under different circumstances, I would have loved to ask if it drove her mad knowing that guys who got high and killed people walked if they worked for right-wing, politically connected security firms. And that men who didn't, most likely including her son or husband or brother or fiancé, were not walking anywhere but to chow.

A starchy, heavily made-up white woman breathed chili fries when I made it to the window. Her nametag read SERGEANT DARNELL. Her plump cheeks, Big Beautiful Woman scarlet lips and painted-on eyebrows registered permanent surprise. "Visiting condemned today? They're in the adjustment center."

Did I look like a condemned visitor? “I’m visiting a, uh . . . a non-condemned. My name is Manuel Rupert.”

“I do not see your name in our files.”

“Try Manuel.”

“Thank you for helping me do my job, sir. Are you sure you submitted your application?” I couldn’t tell if she was being sarcastic or reading from a card taped to her computer screen. I only knew it took under a minute to make her despise me.

“There is a six-to-eight-week processing time for visiting forms, sir. If you have not heard from us, that does not mean you have not been approved—that means we have not yet gotten to your file.”

“Right, right,” I stammered. “It’s kind of an impulsive visit. See, I’m teaching here, a drug prevention class? Then I remembered . . . I have a cousin here, so I thought—”

What was I thinking? How could I waltz into the visiting room without knowing who I was supposed to visit? You can make dumb mistakes at a Taco Bell takeout window. But not in San Quentin. It was an adjustment I thought I’d made but clearly hadn’t. “As I said, sir, there is a six-to-eight-week processing time for visiting forms. All visits must be approved in advance. No same-day.”

“No same-day! You sound like a Chinese laundry!”

Officer Colfax shouldered his way over and interrupted my losing plea. “How goes it?”

“Well,” I said, “to tell you the truth—”

“Roger that, big man.” He clamped a hand on my arm, squeezing just enough, I suspected, to let me know it might be a good idea to shut the fuck up. Done squeezing, Colfax squatted so that his face was level with Sergeant Darnell’s. “Looky here, Darlene.”

He opened his wallet and showed her something I couldn’t see. It could have been a fifty-dollar bill or a monkey paw. “Don’t go by looks,” I heard him whisper, “Manny’s a friendly.”

“Really?” she said, giving me a once-over that made me check

to see if I had pants on. “I thought he was from San Francisco.”

It was clear that this meant something to Colfax and his friend behind the reinforced glass window. And what it meant was something less than flattering. Insanely, I came close to protesting—*Hey, I’m not from San Francisco!*—before I realized there was no percentage trying to persuade prison guards you were cool. As she could see directly into my mind, Sergeant Darnell plucked a few fallen strands off her forehead and tamped them back up into her teased pineapple of red hair. “Mr. Rupert, this is San Quentin,” she said, giving me her most withering Sarah Palin-ish smirk. “It’s not high school with lethal injections.”

“That’s a great line,” I said. “How many times a day do you get to use it?”

For a moment we held each other’s eyes, me trying to exude impassive blandness in the face of her snark, her making sure I knew this was her world, and don’t be fooled by the big boobs and bouffant—she had bigger balls than I did.

“Darlene’s a pistol, isn’t she?” Colfax chuckled.

At first I thought he was helping me out—smoothing out an awkward prison moment—but when I saw the glaze that had formed over the big, acne-scarred guard’s cow-brown eyes, I knew it was something else altogether.

When Sergeant Darnell shifted her gaze from me to Colfax, her plump face softened into discreet affection. Unconsciously or not, she put her thumb over her wedding ring. Just because their office happened to include killers, random violence, incarceration and lockdowns, that didn’t mean an office romance couldn’t bloom. Colfax did everything but float a foot off the floor and bat his eyelashes at his ample amour. I wondered if his ardor was rewarded or more in the realm of chivalric poetry, where the whole point was devotion and unfulfilled desire—as opposed to consummation in a stolen hour of conjugal bunk time. All I knew for certain is that if we kept standing

there, little red cartoon hearts would probably start fluttering from the burly guard's chest. And the line of tired, excited, understandably upset prison visitors behind us might get violent.

"Driver's license," said Sergeant Darnell. I slipped it under the bulletproof glass. She slid it back with one plastic-gloved pinkie and told me where to sign.

When I put down the pen she said, "Inmate nine-six-five-seven-six is sitting down right now in front of the microwave."

"The one with the sign that says 'Out of Order,'" Colfax added, snapping his fingers and pointing a finger gun at his special girl. I saw him touch her fingers as she slid my visitor pass out her slot. "Darlene," Colfax declared, looking around to make sure nobody who mattered was listening, "I am going to pick up the phone and call the governor. You are fan-forklift-tastic."

"Thanks, hon," said Darlene, already smiling past him at the elderly prisoner mom and dad behind us. "How are you two today?" she asked them sweetly. "How are those precious little granddaughters?"

If his sweetheart's sudden about-face affected Colfax one way or the other, it didn't show. He led me from the window without a word and pointed to Jimmy. The white Rasta was waving from the back, arms spread over a couple of chairs, in front of a microwave with the door open and a handmade OUT OF ORDER sign taped to the window.

"I guess Jimbo wants some extra counseling," said Colfax.

"And some extra room," I said. "I have a hunch he put that sign there himself."

"The guys call him WBM. For White Bob Marley. You have to give 'em nicknames."

"And White Bob can just schedule a visit?"

"Hey, I just work here," he said.

I expected Colfax to head straight for Rasta Jim. Instead he cut left and I nearly ran into him. We were going for the vending machines.

"Sandwich, fruit, soda, chips, candy, popcorn," Colfax called over

his shoulder. “You wanna load up on snacks before you sit down. That’s the way they do it. Got dollar bills?”

I fished in my pocket, pulled out a soggy twenty with some kind of white rind hanging off it. I shook the bill, and the rind flew off, then tried to wipe my fingers on my pants without being obvious about it. It’s like I was becoming my trailer. For all I knew I smelled like the snailback and had grown so inured to the odor I didn’t notice. On patrol we called it “homeless nose.”

My hand was halfway to my other pocket when Colfax pressed a thin stack of bills into it. “Thirty singles,” he said, keeping an eye over the heads of the other guests. “They don’t make change. Your best bet is nachos, but put the peppers in before you microwave.”

“Microwave looks broken.”

“They’re not bad cold, either.”

Colfax gave my shoulder a manly squeeze and marched off, no doubt for more dalliance with Darlene. For all I knew prison guards led secret double lives as swingers and cheaters. Who could blame them, after eight hours a day trying not to get hit with piss bags, or worse. The big CO’s exit left me to fend for myself at the vending machines. They all worked—one thing that prison life had to recommend it. I had to walk carefully to keep from toppling my junk food mountain of M&M’s, Mallo Cups, caramel corn, jumbo pretzels and barbecued potato chips. I threw in a mushy apple for nutritional purposes, though it looked more unhealthy than any of the snacks.

Rasta Jim was less than appreciative. “You think I eat this crap? And what were you doing with Dudley Do-Right?” He lowered his voice and leaned forward. “I’m FBI, asshole.”

“If I had your hair, I wouldn’t be calling anybody asshole,” I said. “And you’re not FBI, unless they canceled their dental plan.”

“Prosthetics. You think this is my real hair? I have to take this off at night and walk it.”

“I’m still not buying.”

Playing the role, he let his head fall sideways and gazed up at the fluorescent lights like they were telling him to eat brains. I was afraid he was going to drool. “202-44-EAGLE. Tell him Agent Carol said to call. He’s my top.”

He saw that I didn’t believe him. So, when no one was looking, he slid the dreads on his forehead back, showing cheesecloth underneath.

“Nice work,” I said, “but unless the toupee says ‘Property of U.S. Government,’ that doesn’t tell me much. And you know I can’t call now. No cell phones.”

“Rupert, goddamn it, do you know how many ways the federal government can fuck you?” He held his head askew, still pretending to be tripping on fluorescent mysteries. “We can audit. We can tap your phone, we can read your e-mail, we can send you kiddie porn and then arrest you for owning it.”

I unwrapped a Mallo Cup and took a bite. “You had me at ‘audit.’”

“Asshole.” He spat on my candy. “Now tell me about Zell.”

“You know why he hired me,” I said, fishing to see what my tax dollars were paying for. “What’s that tell you?”

“Don’t play games, okay?”

“I’m not the one playing games.” I plunked a napkin in his hand. “And wipe your mouth. You’ve got white cream on your lip. This is *prison*, dude. Who you really after?”

“A war criminal. You know who?”

“That was easy. You think he’s the real deal?”

Jimmy slipped out of his Rasta bonghead mode long enough to glare at me before going back to character.

Half of me wanted to tell him Tina was missing and get him to find her; the other half did not want to give him anything he could leverage later. I didn’t know how exactly he could fuck me, but he was federal law enforcement. He could do a lot more to me than I could to

him. Even for a chronic catastrophizer, the sudden plethora of awful possibilities was alarming. I switched tracks from emotional to moral consequence—what if, due to some fuck-up of mine, Josef Mengele escaped? *Again*. I started to reach for his collar.

“If you think it’s him . . .”

Agent Carol—slash—White Bob Marley sat up fast. I willed my hands back to the table. Recalibrated my voice from hiss to whisper.

“If there’s even a fucking *chance*, how can you not take him? *Now*.”

In Rasta wack mode, he tilted his head sideways and gave me a fed’s rendition of a ganja giggle before bringing in the heavy artillery. “Ever heard of a threat assessment? Like what are the odds I could give a signal right now and an inmate bites off your finger? The Mos-sad had him in Buenos Aires in 1960 and let him go so they wouldn’t blow the Eichmann snatch. Israelis made an assessment, decided a bird in hand is worth two in the bush.”

Before I could ask why they didn’t napalm the bushes, he went back to business. “We’ve pinned flags on fifty serious Jews who would pay for the privilege of killing Mengele. Word gets out, they’re gonna descend. Ever think of that? The security involved? These are professional Nazi hunters. Plus all the weekend Wiesenthals. Before I could take him, I’d have to do a full alert. IFS-DOUBLE-C. International, federal, state, city, county. We’re talking about Lee Harvey Genocide here. If it means a little wait to stave off some wannabe Jack Ruby—real name Rubenstein—so be it. What kind of hardware you bringing to the party?”

“What are you talking about?”

Nearby, a Sureño—one weeping eyeball and a blood-red “13” turning the back of his shaved head into a criminal billboard—happily scooped up Cheez Doodles for his family. I started to offer him my bounty and Rasta clamped a hand on my wrist. “Don’t.”

“Why?”

“Not done. So tell me.”

“Tell you what?”

“Isn’t that why you came up here? Zell doesn’t seem to know who you are. So if you’re using him as an excuse, then you’re freelancing, and the only money in that is if you bag the target.”

“That’s right. I’m here to shoot him. Dead. But I have to do it one handed, on account of I need to hold my camera steady with the other. I use an Elph. Put it right on the iMac.”

“All right, all right,” he said, rasping back to his weed-creepy blond Bob Marley routine. “Riddle me this: Who’s better off with Mengele alive in prison? Who’s better with him dead? And why hasn’t he already been caught, exposed and shoved on camera as the last living Holocaust perp walk? Unless he knows something. Or has something.”

“Something—I’m just spitballing here—like a photograph of the doctor and some notables taking the air at Auschwitz? Wait—is it Prescott Bush eating a Jewish baby?”

“People know that some of our finest families believed they had a friend in Hitler. There are others things—other individuals—no historian knows about. We don’t know the extent. But corroborating material exists.”

“What *do* you know?”

He fixed me in his G-Man stare, burning right out from under the Rasta wig. But when he spoke, he sounded like a pilot on Southwest announcing delays over Phoenix. “Let’s just say it wouldn’t be good for America.”

“So,” I said, “are you gonna keep me on the hook or tell me what we’re talking about?” I hate other people’s secrets.

“If I told you,” he said, “I’d be bound by law to take myself out on sight. Nobody touches him till I get the word.”

“So what are you saying? He gets a pass? Maybe I don’t want to be a collaborator.”

“Keep it down, Manuel.”

“Who all knows that Jo—”

He put his finger to his lips. “I’m not going to ask you again.”

We did the manly eye-lock thing, then conversation proceeded. “Who all knows?” I continued, my voice reasonably low.

“Theoretically, just you, me, the warden and Mr. Zell. But as you may have noticed, the Man Who Would Be Mengele is dead set on spreading the news. You know what they say, no secrets in prison.” He wagged a finger at my chest. “So, the cross-dressing. I don’t get it.”

“You mean my transgender hormone regimen? Give me a break. Do I look like a guy who wants tits?”

“That’s not a subject I’m comfortable with, Rupert. I hope you can understand that. Whatever sewer world you live in, I respect you for signing on, but I don’t need to know about your personal life.”

“If you were FBI, you would know you’re not the only one working undercover.”

“I did your urinalysis, buddy.”

“That a hobby, or they teach that at Quantico?”

“You have a degenerate nature. That’s not your fault. It’s genetics.”

“Too late to sterilize my mother,” I said. “She had a hysterectomy. Plus she’s dead.”

It wasn’t that I didn’t want to tell him I stole someone else’s urine. I just didn’t want to out Rincin. I didn’t know my compulsively grinning chaperone very well. And I wasn’t sure I liked him. But I still didn’t want to rat him out as a tranny if I didn’t have to.

Jimmy lost interest in my fertile urine and changed the subject.

“Look at this!” He sifted through the canteen food on the table. Sniffed the mushy apple up and wrinkled his nose. “God knows what this is preserved with. One thing Nazis never get credit for is health food. Hitler tried to get everybody off meat and dairy. I’ve seen pictures of his dinner. Looks just like what we used to get back home.”

“Where’s that? The Ruhr Valley?”

“Bountiful, Utah.”

“FBI, right. You’re Mormon.”

“And say what you will about Mormons, we eat fresh. We eat organic. You look like you could stand a little health food yourself.”

“Show me where I can get organic lard, and I’m in.”

“Very funny. I’m not saying I like anything else about them. But they did practically discover whole grains. Soybeans, too. They used to call them ‘Nazi beans.’ Hitler knew his protein.”

“White Bob, or Jimmy, or whatever your name is, I’m not sure where you’re going with this. But Josef Mengele wasn’t Gregor Mendel. He didn’t torture beans.”

“My point exactly. Don’t tar the good people. The horticulturalists. The whole grains advocates. That’s all I’m saying. America does plenty of things in our name you probably don’t like.”

“Pretty risqué opinion. You sure you’re FBI?”

“Affirmative. And as such I like to know what kind of American I’m talking to. I happen to love my country. That does not change the fact that the Nazis outlawed lead in toothpaste tubes fifty years before America. I’m not saying ignore the bad, I’m saying look at the good. World War Two, American housewives were busy dyeing margarine yellow. Meanwhile, Reich scientists discovered butter-yellow coloring was carcinogenic. IG Farben was the number-one manufacturer of food dyes—and they agreed to stop producing. They put purity before profit.”

“Why not? They probably got back what they lost in dye jobs with what they saved using slave labor.”

Jimmy flinched like I’d slapped him—and he wanted to slap me back. Good. I was beyond fatigued. I reeked. If my liver’d had a mouth and telephone access it would have called a lawyer already.

“You’re just a fed with a sinsemilla haircut,” I said.

If he wanted to throw down, maybe I could hit him with a chair. If not, at least it would be over fast. I tensed, letting him know I was ready.

Naturally, I'd misread the situation.

"What are you, crazy?" His whisper was high pitched. "You think I'm gonna start anything in the visiting room? You need to calm down, man. I'm not saying the Nazis weren't monsters. I'm saying the fact that they were monsters doesn't cancel the fact that they were early vegetarians. Bad food and chemicals were outlawed. Hitler was obsessed with cancer. He even forbade coffee. He thought caffeine was poison."

"He didn't need it. His doctor shot him up with amphetamines. Stuck a needle in his ass every morning."

"You're missing the point. Nobody's perfect. Hitler was all about getting rid of the toxins. That's what the camps were for, too! The man even outlawed Coca-Cola."

"No wonder we went to war. America could live with death camps. But Hitler should have known, you don't fuck with Coca-Cola."

"He didn't."

"You just said—"

"What? You don't think corporations can hide? The Third Reich served Fanta. Orange. Fanta was a subsidiary of Coca-Cola. But it was hush-hush. The stuff's still popular in Europe and Brazil."

"Why are we talking," I said, "when you should be arresting a mass mutilator? Is this some kind of test? I need to make some notes for class."

I started to get up. He hooked his leg in my chair so it wouldn't budge. "What now?" I asked him.

"Nothing's black and white," he said, ignoring my question. "You heard of Operation Paperclip? We accepted Nazi scientists if they had something we wanted. Why do you think you never hear about the Japanese Mengeles? Because there weren't any? Guess again. Look

up Colonel Ishi—but not on a full stomach. MacArthur signed away the pursuit of all charges in return for American scientists getting his research. Nice and quiet. No Nuremberg.”

“Why not?”

“We punished the people we couldn’t use.”

“And now you think Mengele’s useful?”

“I’m not saying he doesn’t deserve to hang. But without his early work on caloric intake we might not have your low-carb diets today.”

“We’re back to death camp diet tips? Are you *insane*?”

“Okay, forget carbohydrates. Hitler outlawed tobacco in the thirties. Are you saying that makes not smoking a bad idea? Read your George Bernard Shaw. ‘Ideas aren’t responsible for the people who embrace them.’”

“They teach that at BYU?”

“I don’t know, I went to Yale. Mormons can get educated, you know.”

“You and Mitt Romney.”

“The man on the gay wedding cake. Just ’cause he’s one of ours doesn’t mean we like him. Speaking of Yale, that’s where I met your ex.”

“You know Tina?”

“Knew. Not a lot of Yalies make it to where *she* ended up, huh?”

“She doesn’t talk about that part of her life.”

“Marvin was this guy who used to sell ex in New Haven. I couldn’t believe she married him. She beats all the odds. Gets a scholarship from Nowheresville and what does she do?”

“She never told me any of this.”

“Right. I guess when you met her she was pretty far down the road.”

“Not a conversation I want to have right now. Can we,” I suggested, “restrict the conversation to you not nailing Mengele when you had the chance?”

Jimmy the Rasta ignored the question and pushed the small mountain of canteen snacks my way. “Have some Cheez Doodles or something. It looks weird if we don’t eat.”

I’d been waiting for the right moment. I shoved a handful of popcorn in my mouth and talked around it. “I still don’t believe you’re undercover.”

“I don’t give a shit what you believe. All I want is for you to tell me how you came to have a relationship with Harry Zell.”

The table beside us filled up with an extended Latino family. Four scrubbed-up boys stood in line to show their report cards to Dad. “I don’t have a relationship,” I said, “I have an arrangement. He hired me, with minor coercion, to do a job.”

“So you’re working for him?”

“Boy, you don’t miss anything.”

“Please, Mr. Rupert. Do you know what Zell does? I know you did your private-eye-school skip trace.”

“I could have done more.”

“It wouldn’t have mattered. Zell got a scrub. And I mean the best you can get. Government documents, Google, any kind of paper—all scrubbed. That takes juice and money.”

“I don’t even know what you’re talking about. You can pay to have yourself un-look-up-able? Why not just a fake name?”

“’Cause then people could look up your fake name?”

He had me there. But I still wasn’t buying it. “I don’t know, man. That scrub thing . . . It sounds like an urban legend.”

“That’s what they want you to think, friend.” It was hard to place the expression on my snack partner’s face. “All you really need to know is this: Harry Zell saw the train coming. The man’s a visionary.”

“What’d he do?”

“What did he do? The man invented prison reality shows. He knew prison was the new porn. He got rights to go in before he even sold the idea for *Lockup* to MSNBC, or *Inside* on the NGC.”

“What’s that?”

“National Geographic Channel. You know, they’re not stuffy anymore. No more bare tribal breasts in the African village. Now they show prison gang docs. That’s way more NGC. And every inch of footage is shot, syndicated, supplied and owned by Zell. Zell knew. He was like Bob Hope buying up the San Fernando Valley when all people could see were orange groves. Well, before Zell, all people saw when they looked at prison was . . . prison. Not Zell. He looked, and he saw the future. He was buying up prime real estate in ten B.C.”

“Ten B.C.?”

“Ten years before cable.”

“So it sounds like he did great. I still don’t get why he had to go full scrub, or whatever you called it. Not that I don’t think you’re completely bullshitting me to begin with. What was his beef with Mengele?”

“Mengele wanted to go public, supposedly. The old man wanted the honor due him before he croaked.”

“Thinks he got a raw deal?”

“Victim of circumstance. He’s got this Wernher von Braun fixation.”

“So I gathered.”

“Mind you,” said the undercover agent, “I can’t say as I blame him. Von Braun builds V-2s in slave camps. Ends up palling around with Jack Kennedy like a couple of playboy kings. JFK was more concerned with getting to the moon than breeding pure-blooded Aryans. So what if Wernher developed the V-2 and aimed them at London? Ever hear that Ray Charles song from the fifties? ‘Shoulda been me—with that real fine chick. Shoulda been me—eatin’ ice cream and cake.’ That’s Mengele. He was ahead of his time.”

“I didn’t have you pegged as an R&B fan.”

“What can I tell you? I had you pegged as a guy with no pegs. But I’m trusting you with this. Now give *me* something.”

"Give you what? I still don't get how Zell loses if Mengele's brought in. It's fucking surreal that you even have to *think* about nailing a mass murderer. Lots of guys pretend to be Vietnam vets. Desert Stormers. They want part of the glory. The German doctor's too old for those. So he comes here to play out his senior years as a big shot. Hey, he could do worse than Dr. Mengele."

"You can't be serious."

"Why not? Maybe he wanted a Nazi marquee name. Or not."

"The point is, assuming, for the moment, that Mengele is Mengele, Zell's going to lose money if he gets arrested now."

"Why? No, don't tell me—he's doing a reality show with Mengele?"

"Not exactly. Zell wants exclusive rights to the capture."

"Why does law enforcement care what Zell wants? Why do *you* care?"

Rasta Jim did not honor that with a response. His very nonanswer declared the obvious: Mengele was a death celebrity not even countless A&E *Biography* reruns could diminish. Figure it out.

The guy I still thought of as White Bob Marley sighed and tore open a box of Cracker Jacks. "You know, they take the prizes out ahead of time. No prizes in the joint."

"Why? 'Cause they think felons don't deserve prizes?"

"There's that. Lot of them are plastic is the main thing. Cons can melt 'em, sharpen them on the concrete floor. Pretty soon your little blue X-Man's melted down to a two-inch aorta poker."

"Fuck the Cracker Jacks. Answer the question. So the government doesn't want to arrest Mengele? Is that what you're saying? We're back to what Zell has on them?"

"Somebody went to night school."

"You gonna tell me what it is? Or are we going to sit here until I OD on hydrogenated fats and prove the Nazis were right about whole foods?"

"I'll give you a hint. San Quentin gets a lot of money from Big Pharma."

"They perform experiments on prisoners?"

He gave in, unwrapped a pack of peanut butter crackers and tucked one in his mouth. "I'm just sayin'. And who knows more about human experiments?" He twisted his topmost dread, the one that stuck straight up like the top of a Christmas tree, minus the star. "From what I hear it's been going on since, like, World War One. But of course that's just a rumor. Completely unsubstantiated. Wink-wink snicker-snicker."

"I've heard stuff like that," I said. "I read this book, *Acres of Skin*, about the perfume tests doctors did on inmates at Holmesberg State Prison, in Pennsylvania. They used to put chemicals under their skin. They showed pictures. After a while the poor bastards had backs like checkerboards. Went on for years."

"You read a book, huh? You're not half-dumb for a small-town cop with questionable taste in women and substance abuse issues."

"Should I even bother to ask why you know so much?"

"You should be asking how. The small-town stuff's in your file. The substance abuse, I'm looking at your pupils. You ever think of wearing shades?"

"I was hoping Mengele could dye my eyes."

"Yeah, green really shows the load," he said. "It's all in the pupils. And buddy, I gotta say, you're more pinned than a Baby Doc voodoo doll."

"In that case, you know where I have to go."

"Rehab?"

"Close. I have to go teach a drug class, remember? Where I believe I'll be seeing you. Maybe together, we can lick this thing."

My unlikely FBI reverted to form.

"Listen to me, Rupert. If Mengele doesn't get his shot at the von Braun treatment, he says he's going to spill. They read his outgoing

mail. He's already tried. Certain people are not happy about this. Prison Experiments—if there, you know, *were* such things—would be a state run growth industry. Let's face it, in this economy there aren't many of those. Look at Abu Ghraib. Think the scandal was Lindsey England, the leashes and hoods? No, that was micro. Macro would be the *New York Times* publishes a story that a certain big-ass pharmaceutical company arranged the whole damn mess to test new mood stabilizers. Same thing at Guantánamo. But that's not happening, right? No proof. So hey, its all just crazy talk. No evidence whatsoever. Forget I ever said anything."

"When your whole life feels like the stress position, you need . . . Guantanamox!"

"You done bein' an ass? If Mengele spills, it's gonna be too big to pin on a few bad apples. I'm not saying they couldn't frame somebody. More likely they'd just kill the old prick before it came to that. Too big a deal, you know, with the roots running under a lot of respectable graves."

"That's a lot of information, man."

"What's a lot of information?" He stared at me like I was insane. "Did you hear me say anything? You must be experiencing aural hallucinations. Stress does that. UC work can be hell on the nerves."

"I know," I said, "I could use a mood stabilizer right now."

We got up at the same time. Jim reverted to his UC character, Anglo Rasta man, doing a little jim-jim dance as he scooped up his canteen treats.

When we shook hands he held mine an extra few seconds and looked me in the eyes. "I know what it's like undercover. The trick isn't going under, brother, it's coming back up without getting the bends."

"Thanks for the advice—and the information," I said. "You don't pick that platinum blond old fuck up by tomorrow, I'm going to make a fortune off the *Enquirer*. I don't care who goes down with him."

Jim the Rasta stopped. For the first time I imagined how he would look without the clown hair—beneath that twenty-first-century-hippie façade lurked the chiseled features of a daytime soap star. He let loose a trippy giggle for the benefit of onlookers and spoke the rest low. “Let me give you some advice, drug addict: never show your hand—until you’re sure it’s still attached to your arm.”

“Good advice.”

The man was no joke. I was glad I hadn’t mentioned that I got knocked out and woke up tied to a toilet, or that my ex-wife had disappeared. He might have worried about me.

The UC fed said his good-byes under his breath. “Thanks for the snacks. See you in class, Mindy.”

I stopped. “Who snitched me out? Or did you bug the warden’s office?”

White Bob Marley smiled. “If you do anything to impede, denigrate or in any way, shape or form dingle-butt my case, I promise you, I will make sure everybody knows about the estrogen.”

I shrugged. “Do what you gotta do. Might open up a whole new client base. Trannies have problems too.”

Before returning his hand, I turned it over. The knuckles were thick, sprouting wiry ginger hair.

“What are you doing?”

“Checking for tiny doll hands,” I said.

“Dude, if you’re on psych meds, I suggest you change them. If you’re not, I strongly suggest you consider them.”

“What worked for you?” I asked him.

Our repartee was interrupted by a scream. A beautiful young Filipina had leaped up and hurled hot coffee on her boyfriend’s face. He screamed and tumbled off the chair. She kneeled down and yanked his T-shirt over his head, raked her nails across his exposed back, directly over a phrase tattooed across it in swirling letters: SA MAARI BU-HAY AY SAY MAPOOT.

Jim read it and translated: *To Be Alive Is to Hate*.

"You speak Filipino?"

"Gang detail. I saw a lot of Flips. Watch her left hand."

"Ya-*bang!*" the Filipina shrieked. "Ya-*bang!*"

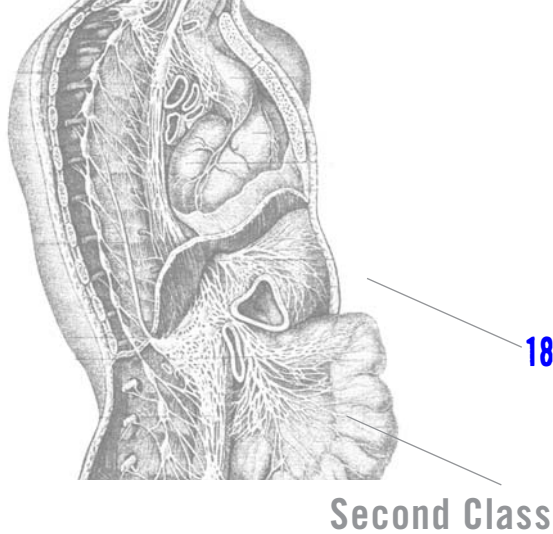
"That means 'pride,'" Jim whispered under the chaos.

With her right hand, the girl slapped and back-slapped her poor boyfriend's face. He didn't flinch, but tears came anyway. Then, with a last slap before the guard arrived, she jammed her left hand up to the elbow in her boyfriend's pants, then slipped it out so fast I wasn't sure I'd even seen it.

By now the whole place was hooting. "See that," Jim cried under their shouts, "she keistered him! Everybody thinks he's a bitch, meanwhile the Flip probably made a grand."

I turned to see two COs carrying the shirtless Filipino life-hater off horizontally. Another CO, the ever-present Colfax, led the angry girlfriend off with a firm hand on her back. I could hear him chiding her. "Now just what the heck were you thinking, missy?"

When I turned back to Jim, he was gone. For a second I stood there, wondering what kind of narcotics the Filipina shoved up her old man. But I had bigger problems. I still had no idea what happened to Tina. Almost as scary, in fifteen minutes I had to walk into a room full of convicted felons, some of whom might actually be law enforcement, and share my wisdom on the subject of addiction and recovery. If I was lucky, I wouldn't keel over from a delayed reaction to the Red Cross medicine. I could handle being dead, but I'd hate to set a bad example.



Regret clawed at my brainpan like a cat scratching a couch. The confab with Rasta Jim was too weird to contemplate. But it did little to mitigate my twin terrors: the fact that Tina remained MIA and that I'd had the chance to grab Mengele by his peroxide hair and drag him off. But I hadn't. And I had to ask myself why. How exactly can you distinguish fear from caution? Was this how Roosevelt felt deciding whether or not to bomb the camps?

With Mengele walking the earth, the blue sky was an affront.

I stepped past a cluster of men with briefcases. We sized each other up. Would they have been standing around if they knew Mengele was there? Avoiding their eyes, I thought of the old race doctor's irises: black and light-sucking. Six hundred thousand he killed. Personally. I imagined the compressed energy of his victims' fear like a swarm of bees. But who did the honey nourish? The dead or the living?

Approaching the classroom, I stopped and took a breath. The FBI Rasta was behind me. He clutched a cup of coffee in one hand and a bag full of visiting room snacks in the other. He put the bag in his teeth so he could clap me on the back. Then he took it out so he could talk.

“You all right, bud? You look a little peaked.”

“I’m great, Jim.” I returned the backslap and bent toward his ear. “So, is there, like, a special department? An undersecretary for not catching genocidal maniacs?”

Rasta Jim returned my back-pat and gave me a man-hug. “Just stick to what you know. Like drugs and hormones. Comin’ in?”

“In a minute. This is when I like to smoke and collect my thoughts.”

“You can’t smoke.”

“That’s one reason I’m nervous.”

I took a last breath, looked around at the yard and the houses scattered on the hill beyond. What fun, having a state prison at your feet. I wondered if residents sat on their back porches, feet up in their chaise lounges, binoculars perched on their noses, nursing a cold one and checking out the shank and riot action. No different than watching NASCAR, waiting for flaming wrecks.

I had not expected to be so happy to see the guys: Roscoe, Davey, Cranky, Movern, Jim the Rasta-fed, even Tina’s AA Christian porno pal, Reverend D. Although the rev and I now shared some awkward personal business. Awkward enough to send me ambling over as I greeted the rest of the fellas, trying to make it look casual when I leaned down and hissed in his face, “*So where the hell is Tina?*” He smiled wide enough to show off the gold trove in his teeth. The Nazis made millions gleaning precious metal from the mouths of death camp residents. They would have loved Rev. D.

“No hello?” the reverend said. “No ‘how are you doing in the struggle to stay clean and sober in an unclean and insane environment’?”

I did my best to freeze an easy grin on my face. “Cut the bullshit, Rev. I need to know what you know.”

“Sex and checks,” he sighed. “Nine times out of ten, it’s sex and checks what drive a man back to the gettin’ high side of town.”

Roscoe approached and stared in my eyes like he was reading the paper.

“Thought you was gonna shine us on,” Rasta Jim haw-hawed from across the room. Back in character. “We was gonna have a riot or something.”

Reverend D backed him up. “That’s right. You best be mindful, bein’ in a room alone with felons and all. You like Siegfried and Roy up in here, without no Siegfried.”

“White tiger chewed Roy’s ass up!” Movern cried, surprisingly passionate. “Can’t tame a white tiger. Big cat do what a big cat do.”

“Dude!” White Rasta waved away the entire notion. “It wasn’t the fucking tiger. It was Siegfried. He gave the secret attack signal.”

Movern slapped the table. “Why the fuck would he do that? You over there all amped up like you dialed into some secret-ass information. Like your stoned cracker ass know shit about shit. You always say this dumb-ass shit that make no fucking sense.”

“Don’t have to make sense. It’s a fag fight,” said Rasta Jim. “You ask any cop. He’ll tell you. Gay dude knifes another gay dude, he never do it just once. He sticks him, like, ninety times, then bitch-slaps him when he’s bleedin’. You’re talking about the body of a man and the emotions of a woman.”

“Sound like you.” Movern pushed back his chair so hard it fell over when he stood up. He pointed at Rasta Jim. “Yeah, I said it. Whatchu gonna do, bitch?”

“Things heatin’ up,” said the reverend. “And here you are, in the same cage as the animals. You lookin’ at worse odds than Roy, son.”

“At least I’m not wearing sequined pants.”

But I saw what the rev meant: *no Rincin* . . . If one of the violent

offenders on hand took issue with my classroom manner—and packed a shank—I’d be hard-pressed to fend him off. The thought started my heart banging on my ribs, like a prisoner hitting his cell bars with a spoon. We both wanted out of there.

“Still a few minutes before class,” I said to no one in particular. I pretended to study some scribble in my notebook. If I ran out now I’d look weak. But if I stayed I might end up ventilated.

Reverend D leaned in close enough to whisper before I took my seat. “Tina told me to tell you she’s okay.”

The reverend was a master of casual menace. But freighted as the conversation was, it was better than sitting there wondering if I could stave off mayhem with a ball-point and a three-ring binder.

“Why did she leave?” My voice had a catch in it.

“That’s nothin’ I know,” said the reverend, eying me sideways. “But here’s somethin’ I do know. Cathy, that shorty who did the doctor? She tol’ me he liked to have her take her clothes off, then walk whichever way he pointed and do stuff.”

“What kinda stuff?”

“Don’t matter what kinda stuff. Ain’t about what she did—s’about makin’ her do it. The old man wanted to remember what power felt like.”

“So it wasn’t about sex?”

The reverend cocked his head at an angle and looked at me. “You playin’ with me, dawg? *Everything* about sex.”

“Sometimes a crack pipe is just a crack pipe,” I said.

“You smoke crack,” Cranky cut in, “you suckin’ a glass dick.”

“No! You suckin’ on *Satan*.” Movern was as worked up as I’d seen him. “The Devil put crack in the ghetto to turn our women into hos.”

I waited for Movern to finish expressing himself before quietly responding to the reverend. “Whatever you wanna call what she did, if little Cathy did it with Mengele, I need to talk to her. But I need Tina first.”

“Every man has needs,” said the reverend. “All *you* need is some faith!”

“No doubt. Thanks.”

I didn’t want to get into a debate about my needs. I had too many to think about at once. I needed to figure out what I was going to say to the class. I needed to figure out if I was hatching a plan or a parasite had entered the bruise on my head and laid eggs. I needed to know more about Zell. I needed to talk to Mengele’s Christian escort, Cathy. Find out about his hit-and-run. I needed to learn more about Bernstein, too. What I didn’t need was the persistent paranoia I’d felt since sharing with J. Edgar Rasta Man. That I was somehow sticking my face into some elaborate interagency web, spun by Jim’s DC handlers, engineered by the feds and Interpol, Scotland Yard, the CIA, MI 5, Mossad and a team of security guards at the Addis Ababa McDonald’s. Who knew who else? I made up my mind. I’d have to find a way to get to L.A. and back by class tomorrow. Assuming I lived through this one. Under and over everything, behind and beside, there was the treacherous mystery of Tina.

The reverend barged into my deliberations, his wink nastier than the magazines that nearly decapitated me. “You like Christian pussy?”

“Never thought about it.”

“Well,” said the reverend, “here’s your chance to remedy the situation.”

If he saw Cranky’s gesture he didn’t acknowledge it. Coming on more pimp than informant, he gave me details about the girl who’d serviced the doctor.

“This one’s nasty, but she clean, too. She keep her pussy pure for Jesus. She still a virgin. But she ain’t afraid to use the Devil’s portal, you know what I’m sayin’? Front door’s locked, but the back door’s open. That girl do love the Lord.”

“I’m not looking for a date. I need to know what she knows.”

"Well whatever you want to call it, she's down in L.A. In the Valley. You want to fly down, I can set up a meeting. Tina knows her. She tell you she was helpin' school the girls?"

"She mentioned it." I had to clamp my jaw to keep from screaming at him. "If you know something about what happened to her, then fucking tell me."

The reverend smiled.

"Let me tell you about a miracle," he said. "I was in the chow line at Folsom, waiting for oatmeal, when the Lord came to me and said, 'Young buck, you need to minister to them fallen women.' Someday, Manny Rupert, the Lord gonna tap you on the shoulder."

"You think?"

Maybe He was tapping me now! For a few heady seconds, I imagined sharing my recent experience, as a cautionary tale. *Take it from me, you may be years from your last shot—but you're two seconds from your next one.* . . . It could be cathartic.

"Addictive behavior," I kicked off, clapping my hands. "Anybody have any problems?"

Three hands shot up: Half-faced Davey—who'd come in late—Cranky and Rasta Jim from the FBI. Cranky wagged his hand back and forth over his head like a second grader who needed to pee.

I gave him the nod. "Bring it, Cranky."

"Okay, I got a fuckin' problem, homes! When I was in Chino, I's supposed to be learning how to dry-clean, right? I'm thinkin' I'm gonna sign up and learn some kinda trade. Meanwhile, them fools in there was soaking lint in dry-cleaning fluid and callin' it PCP." He smacked his chair for emphasis. "I'm serious. They be rollin' that shit up and passin' it off in the yard as sherm. Lemme tell you, mang, sherm was fuckin' pasteurized milk compared to this bunk. But guess what? I knew what the shit was, *and I still smoked it!*"

This got an appreciative chuckle from the clean-livers on hand.

"There it is," said Roscoe, doling out a Buddha-like smile. "What

people don't know: Addiction is not a substance. Addiction is a *be-hav-ior*." He gave it three syllables. "Until we understand the nature of the problem, it doesn't matter what we do. We are never going to solve it."

"Uh-huh," said Cranky. "I don't got a drug problem. I got a *me* problem."

Just then Mengele entered, led by Rincin and Colfax. The wheelchair'd been scrapped. Maybe he found a pair of legs to transplant. By way of not obsessing, I waved to Rincin. "Glad you could join us, Officer. As I recall, whatever we talk about here stays here, right?"

"I am a corrections officer," Rincin said. "When a CO makes a report it's not the same as snitching."

Roscoe smiled his sage smile. "See how they do? Staff always has to mess with a man's head."

Cranky, gripped by sudden panic, clutched his head with both hands. "Hey, man, you ain't gonna write me up, are you? Does dry-cleaning fluid count as a drug?"

"Poor man's PCP," said Rincin. "To tell you the truth, I just got here."

Cranky lowered his head. "So, you gonna charge me?"

Rincin's grin made him threatening and pleasant at the same time. "Depends how my uniform looks when I pick it up. I find soilage, I'm gonna blame you for hogging the chemicals."

"Better watch your ass," the reverend snapped. "Pretty soon you gonna be Martinizing."

"People," I interrupted. "Remember it's not about what you do. It's about why you do it. It's about that hole you're trying to fill."

"You want to talk about *hole*?" It was Davey again. Half a face but a thousand-watt intensity. "With me it ain't even drugs."

"Don't have to be a drug to be a drug," Roscoe intoned, speaking so softly we had to strain to hear him.

"That's what I'm sayin'!" Davey's voice quivered. He teared up. "I ain't talkin' 'bout no dope or pruno. . . . It's like I can't stop—you know . . . another thing."

"Say it," I said. "Once you name it, it loses power."

Davey screwed up what was left of his face. He put his hand to his lipless mouth as though ripping the words. "I'm addicted to porn."

"Good for you," said the reverend. "Own it and bone it."

"Reverend, please," I said.

"I'm not talkin' about regular shit. I'm talkin' about sick stuff. On the Internet. With me it's porn, mang!"

"Beelzebub cast a web, and man called it the Internet," said the reverend.

"Whatchu mean, like JailBabes.com?" Jim giggled, back in character. "Them bitches is tore up!"

"Naw, man, JailBabes is like Little Miss Muffett compared to these sites. I'm talking about them personals websites. On that one, Alterna.com, jeezy-fuckin'-peezy, I saw a video of some blonde wrapping rope around her tits. She made these Japanese knots so tight her mama-bags swol' up blue like they was going to burst. It was horrible, man, but, like, at the same time it was *hot*. It was like I had a demon."

I stopped listening. If I found out Dave was jerking off over my ex-wife, then what? I went over the films in my head from our time in the trailer, but I didn't remember any rope burns on her breasts. If you look hard enough, there's always something to be grateful for.

Davey rushed on, dabbing at his lipless mouth and shifting on his chair, mega-agitated. "It's that one with the personals, with ladies who want to put clothespins on their titties and all like that? Man, it's like sick hot, 'cause, you know, it's not posed, it ain't porno porn. It's like, this is what they're into. . . . And it ain't even that the stuff they do turns me on so much, you know. . . . *It's that they wanna do it!* I'm sitting here, trimming my toenails, and there's some lady in Kentucky who looks like my mom on the webcam, squeezin' an avocado out of her

ass. In her profile she says, 'All holes are the property of Master Don from Hollywood, Florida.' I guess he's the guy who got to put the avocado in. And right at the end, it says, 'Will do doghouse.' I don't even know what that means, but I know it's super-fucking-nasty. And it's like, these are regular folks. They ain't models. Spankhappy72 wants to meet a dude for kennel training." Davey looked genuinely scared. "I'm serious, man, this stuff is all real. I thought my head was gonna explode!"

"Your head already exploded," said Cranky.

"Cranky," I said, "come on, okay?"

But Davey was too deep in it to hear anyway. "Naw, man, I'm serious." Sweat coated his face, somehow rendering the cosmetically enhanced patches more waxen. "It's so wrong-like, but at the same time, it gives me some weird kind of hope. Like, Jesus gumdrops, there's chicks out there who wanna drink mailman pee, get tea-bagged by fat guys. Maybe there's a girl out there for me."

Reverend D let out a sigh. "A romantic. Ain't that the shit?"

Things got quiet, except for Jimmy giggling behind his hand. Davey whimpered. "It's killin' me, man. I'm on the computer, supposed to be preppin' for my GED. . . ."

"So," I said, "should I even ask how you get the computers?"

Rincin shook his head. I said, "Forget I asked."

"I can tell," Davey sniffed. "I get three hours a day, on accounta my educational status."

"And they're not monitored?"

"I think maybe the guy who's supposed to be monitorin' gets off on that sick-ass shit as much as I do."

"See that?" said Roscoe. "And you want to stand there and ask *this* black man how he knows there is an all-powerful, all-knowing Creator—bless him by any of his thousand names. Don't even! 'Cause depravity is a virus that comes in every color."

Davey stared straight ahead, his jaw sliver working furiously. He

worked a bony fist in his eye, dislodging some unspeakable image of online personals degradation. “*Caramel cutie craves party-fist. . .*”

Now everybody was talking. Except Mengele. He had his eyes closed. But that was okay. Tribes who didn’t easily interact were interacting. Maybe that was the ticket to world peace: the universal language of nasty ass and pussy.

Finally Davey got down to the real problem. “I got a chafe like I been rubbing my johnson on a screen door.”

“Son,” said the reverend, “how long you been down? Ain’t you heard of lotion?”

“Can’t use lotion, stupid. That shit gunks up the keyboard.”

Taking pity, Jim slipped Davey a Twinkie from his canteen stash. But the half-faced porn dog was so wound up he squeezed it in his hands, crushing the cream out. “Look at that, he even chokin’ his Twinkie.”

Davey wiped his hands on his pants, too desperate to take offense. “You don’t know, man. Fiendin’ for crack ain’t nothin’ compared to this, ’cause it’s endless, man. . . . You get on and you start lookin’ at freaky shit, then that links to some other freaky shit, and that links to some other freaky shit. . . . It’s like the broom in ‘The Sorcerer’s Apprentice,’ you know, in that Disney movie.”

“*Fantasia*,” said Rasta Jim.

“Yeah, yeah. Fanazia. And before you know what happened, you’re goin’ bug-eyed over some big-ass ho from Hueto, North Dakota, tit-clamped to a shower nozzle with a ham sandwich hanging out of her kitty. . . . It’s like, it ain’t even sex no more.”

Now Cranky pulled up his shirt and slapped his stomach. “Man, I’d love me a ham sandwich. Meat in this place taste like it come from raccoons or somethin’. They say it’s ham but only thing hammy about it is it’s bein’ served by pigs.” He turned in his chair. “Just kiddin’, Officer.”

“Well, see if I am,” the CO said cryptically.

"I'm still sharing," Davey whined.

Reverend D jumped out of his chair. "Give somebody else a chance. Fuck's wrong with you?"

"Ain't nothin' wrong with me. You the one jumpin' out your chair."

Roscoe interrupted. "Son, how old were you when you come into the joint?"

"Seventeen."

"How many women you have?"

Davey looked over, fighting back tears. I quickly stood and clapped my hands. "I think what Davey did here was pretty brave."

"The fuck he do but whine and get pervy?"

"He made the link between addiction and behavior," I said, feeling *Welcome Back, Kotter*-ish. "He got that addiction isn't a substance, it's an action."

"You said that last time, hoss." Movern opened up a magazine stuffed in his notebook. It looked like a *Modern Bride*.

"I'm addicted to saying it," I said. "An addiction is any action we take, compulsively, over and over, even though we don't want to, and even though we know it's gonna make us feel horrible, we are powerless to stop. Might be drugs, might be sex, might be lookin' at sex, might be anything—as long as we don't wanna do it and we don't stop."

Cranky cackled. "Hey, mang, that mean my grandma's an addict? She's always fiendin' for churros, you know? She's this skinny old lady, but she's, like, scarfing down churros from morning to night."

"Sounds to me like she has an eating disorder."

"Nothing funny about that," said Reverend D. "I know plenty of girls, size minus-three, they look in the mirror they see Queen fucking Latifah. I blame the media."

Suddenly Mengele, who until now I'd been successfully blocking

out, aimed his gaze at me and slapped the desk, infuriated. “What I don’t get is the Nazi stuff.”

What an opening. “You mean like *Ilse, She-Wolf of the SS*?”

“Yes! You have seen that?”

“I have. As a matter of fact, it was shot on the set of *Hogan’s Heroes*, on weekends.”

He ignored this bit of trivia, clucking his tongue. How was Josef Mengele supposed to know about *Hogan’s Heroes*?

“Ilse was nothing like that . . . that character. This is what I’m saying. The American ignorance of my work. The continuing insult.” He sputtered as if the sheer quantity of wrongs done him were too vast to mention. “You always get it wrong. Something as simple as Waffen-SS insignia . . . The uniform. Always the lightning bolts, the women in leather boots . . . *Accch!*”

“I ain’t got nothing against women in black leather boots,” said Movern.

Mengele winced. “I cured influenza. What you call the flu. Your so-called flu vaccines? You might as well hang flypaper to catch machine gun bullets!”

“Sound like somebody gonna be winnin’ that whatchamacallit prize,” Roscoe teased.

“What prize?” Mengele wanted to know, hungry for anything.

“You know, the one that don’t ring—the No Bell!” Roscoe scoffed out a laugh that sounded like *kick kick kick*. “The No Bell Prize.”

But Mengele was sincere. “I don’t want the Nobel Prize. I want to help. . . . I want my notes to be read! I want my work to be recognized.”

Fourteen words kept blaring through my brain: *Get out of your chair, walk three steps, stick a pen through his heart*. Why not? I already had friends in prison.

Mengele’s frustration came out like a whimper. “I want to do good!”

ingless. But if you know the Wehrmacht, or the SS, that's like sewing a Doberman's head on a goat."

That analogy alone told me he was the man. But I needed more.

"Have you tried that?" I asked. "The goat and Dobie?"

"Is that a joke?"

His rage was only terrifying because I knew history. History was terrifying. Especially when it was still happening.

The ball of shame lodged in my gullet: Was I a collaborator at heart? What would I do to save myself? What I would do to save Tina? If you were a Hungarian Jew in 1943, was it better to get on that train knowing where you were headed? Or was it better not to know what would become of you?

"There are thirty kinds of lightning bolts!" Mengele barked. He raised his hands for emphasis. His palms glowed the same translucent blue as his temples, wafer thin. He combed his long pianist's fingers through his hair. Not the kind of fingers attached to doll hands. "These people could not tell the difference between the Waffen-SS hat badge and the Iron Cross First Class that Hitler gave to Henry Ford. In your insidious war movies, one moment the SS man will show up in the gold pin of the Norwegian railway fighters. In the next, he's wearing the death's-head insignia of the Totenkopf!"

"That like an English muffin?" Movern wanted to know.

"For your information, the Totenkopf were the SS who guarded the camps. This was not, sadly, a prestige position."

"Does it really matter?" I wondered what Mengele would look like if he blew a gasket.

"Does it matter what's tattooed on the rump of some performing whore in a Gestapo hat? Yes, it does! This is America! Nazi S&M films may be the only history lesson they ever get. For this reason, it pains me to see the inaccuracy. I saw a piece of pornographic trash where, just before the strapping Gestapo lad favored a hausfrau with

his essence, the camera moved in on a close-up of the Himmler Lebensraum Mutter brooch on the soldier's lapel. *A Mutter brooch!* Bestowed upon racially pure Rhinemaidens for coupling with SS men and giving birth to heroes! It signifies the wearer has borne babies of highest racial purity. *'Every mother of good blood is a sacred asset of our existence.'* This is a travesty!"

He may have been right. But it didn't help me any. The only way I was going to confirm his identity was to talk to the born-again hooker. But I needed to keep him on the hook until I could sneak off.

"Did you ever think," Roscoe asked politely, "back in the day?"

"Did I ever think what?"

I expected Mengele to treat African-Americans like talking dogs. But he was no more contemptuous and sneering than he was to anyone else.

"Did you ever think," Roscoe asked pleasantly, "that the entire ideology of the Reich was going to be reduced to a bin in porno stores? How does that feel, having your most cherished symbols end up as white trash prison tats? Ol' Adolf thought the whole world was his bitch. Now who's wearin' the red dress?"

Rasta Jim bit the back of his wrist, bobbing up and down. "Oh, shit!"

"Cold," said Movern.

I wasn't sure if Mengele would respond. He had a way of making himself still. Learned, I suspected, from years spent staring at lizards in São Paulo, running a coffee plantation. I kept trying to fix him in my mind. To reconcile the well-preserved blond with the Puccini-whistling lady killer who could make a Jewess swoon on her way to the gas.

"No," he said. "I foresaw defeat, but not degradation."

Along with the baby-smooth skin and punkish dye job, I noticed that his neck didn't sag. Maybe he'd lifted his own face. But his left

hand rocked from side to side with subtle palsy. Just like Bunker-era Hitler. And occasionally his lips smacked together, seemingly of their own volition, as if they were fed separately.

“Okay, let’s cut the bullshit, Doc. What were you addicted to? That’s all we deal with in here. So what was it?”

“What do you think? A stimulant. Germans invented amphetamines. The very first was called Pervalit.”

Movern shivered. “Y’all Pervy about everything.”

“Would you forget the Germans? The forties are over. Let’s get specific. Where did drugs take you that you never thought you’d go? What was your bottom?”

Mengele raised his chin. He took a sneering chew on his mustache to show the esteem in which he held me and everybody else in the drug class.

“This is it,” he said. “Talking to you. This is worse than the Paraguayan shit shovelers I had to live with in Asunción. I stayed in some pile of sticks near New Germany, this hellhole founded by Nietzsche’s sister Elisabeth and her husband, Bernhard Förster. They thought being Aryan and hating Jews was enough to keep them alive in the jungle. The whole colony starved trying to raise llamas and grow yerba maté. South America is not a place for Aryans! Only impure races can tolerate that kind of sun.”

“Albinos must be gods,” I said.

“Hah! No one recognizes greatness!” He stammered, “You—your whole country—would rather die of the diseases I could cure than admit they were wrong in not letting me cure them! I offer myself, now, with all the risks such an action involves. And look! Look—look where they have me! With this,” he sputtered, indicating the class. “With this and this and this and this!” Voice rising, he pointed to Roscoe, who seemed bemused, then, one by one, to half-faced Davey, Movern, Cranky, Reverend D, Rasta Jim and Rincin and back to me.

Done raving, Mengele checked his watch, pulled out a tiny con-

tainer and removed a brown pill and a large red capsule. “Ha!” he cackled. “What I have in this pill could save a generation from heart disease and diabetes. I have arteries like a fetus. But because of ignorance, you suffer, and I breathe the flatulence of subhumans!” He ate the pill with a flourish. Delusional or not, his performance was riveting. No wonder Zell thought he could make a fortune on the old genocider. His preening self-regard made it impossible not to watch.

“Subhuman flatulence,” I repeated, with nothing in particular to add.

“Look like a motherfucking cold capsule to me. Time-release Contac,” the reverend sneered.

Since the talk with Tina, I was only half-worried whether it was him anymore. But I needed the hooker to make sure. I was more worried about what Zell wanted with him. And why I’d been selected as go-between. I was shy on specifics. But a scenario in which the smart move, all around, was to dispense with him would not have been implausible. God knows, it would have been easy to arrange. Half the men under the San Quentin roof were professional dispensers. Tina was right. I’d jumped in too fast.

There was only one way to find out who was protecting who. I got out of my chair and moved toward Mengele, reaching my hand in my pants like I was pulling a shank out. Before I made two steps Jimbo was on his feet, Cranky had launched himself out of his chair, Rincin had whipped out a blackjack and three members of the extraction team burst in armed with stun shields. They were usually brought in to pry ab seg prisoners out of their cells when they refused to leave for a shower. “Everybody down!” one of them shouted.

The rest of the room dropped. I managed to spin around to the extractors, flashing the pack of gum in my hand, so all six Mengele defenders could see.

“The fuck,” said Rincin, putting his weapon away, then moving in to put six words in my ear. “Nothing happens to the old guy.”

“Sorry,” I said to the room in general.

The extractors raised the front windows on their helmets, uniformly pissed.

“My bad,” I said. “I just wanted to offer the doctor a piece of gum.”

Jim didn’t look too happy either. Rincin seemed to seethe under his grin. I wasn’t surprised about smoking those two out, but Cranky, the La Eme speedster, I didn’t see coming. For all I knew, everybody in the room was UC something. Except for Mengele. And he might have been a fake . . .

“Okay, excitement’s over,” I said, waiting for the extraction team to clank out. “Let’s get back to work. I want to start with an exercise. Everybody think about what kind of movie their lives would be. A lot of what fuels our drugging and drinking is a need to project a certain image. So, if there was a movie of your life, what would it be?”

“*Patch Adams*,” Mengele said at once.

“*Patch Adams*? Really.”

“I love the children, like Patch,” said Mengele. “I have also heard that your Jerry Lewis made a movie based on me.” He sniffed. “‘Der Tag der Clown Weinte.’ *The Day the Clown Cried*.” He ran his tongue along his mustache as though tickling himself. “I have done research. Jerry Lewis’s real name was Jerome Levitch. Like me, he is obsessed with childhood disease. Muscular dystrophy. Every year he raises millions. I have research I believe he would find very very hopeful. I imagine he would pay for it.”

Without changing expression, he mimed playing the violin for a moment, then explained himself.

“Sometimes, with *der kinder*, if I knew an experiment was going to be painful, I would play the violin for them. A waltz could be so soothing. I did not use anesthetics. On special days, I dressed like a clown to perform the surgery. A Jew clown from a circus in Budapest showed

me how to apply the makeup. Moishe Moishe. He was kind enough to leave it to me when he expired. Of the influenza.”

Suddenly his face went dark. “Thanks to Moishe—and his generous lungs—I found the cure.”

“You a great man!” said Rasta Jim, the white Bob Marley.

Mengele accepted the compliment with a grimace.

“It was not just influenza. I had the cure for cancer too. A vaccine.” He pointed a manicured, slightly palsied finger at me. “When any American dies of cancer, he should blame you for not allowing me to present my cure in this country. They call me evil? What about the people who prevent me from sharing cures—the millions they condemn to die? They are the killers now—who knows how many millions?”

“I’d call my congressman,” I said, “but he doesn’t even believe in abortion.”

“You joke!” he snarled. “You joke!”

Mengele’s smile was thinner than onion skin. He stood up and placed his hands on my shoulders, letting one finger stray to my throat. It felt bony, fleshless, but made of steel and—this is what made me cringe—*warm*. That Mengele gave off human warmth made being human feel revolting.

He seemed eager to see my horror, so I tried to look bored. Squelched a yawn. Up close, his shirt gave off the scent of lavender. His breath was minty. I could see the white roots showing under his Billy Idol hair.

I shook off his hand and he raised it to my face. “You Americans love to judge. But let me give you a little lollipop called the truth.”

He pretended to hold out a sucker. I role-played, eying his hand with disdain.

“A lollipop? Do I look like a three-year-old who hasn’t eaten in a week? You think conning traumatized pre-pubes makes you powerful? Why don’t you put on a clown nose, see if anybody in here lets you cut their balls out and transplant ape testicles.”

"I operated on plenty of grown men. I am a doctor of medicine."

"Is it called medicine when you don't care if they die? Okay, let's get back to drugs."

I could have done more to reel the discussion back to recovery. But how often do you get to insult one of the vilest characters on the planet? It was addictive, which felt fairly vile to admit. Reverend D whispered behind his hand to Jim. Once again, natural enemies suspending their enmity to share. Be still my heart.

"Okay," I said, "who wants to talk about the bad decisions they made on drugs?"

Mengele glared. "You are a rude young man."

"Feeling slighted, that's another addict trait. Thank God you're here, Doctor, you're better than a textbook."

Movern had some wisdom he wanted to add. "Soon's I sniff me some of that 'caine, I used to think people was talkin' about me. Soon as I sniff me a bit more, I start to feel like they sayin' bad things."

"Turd at the center of the universe," said Davey. "It's, like, a syndrome."

Movern sniffed. "Who you callin' a turd, white boy?"

Rincin ran his finger across his throat. My heart skidded, then I realized he didn't mean my throat was going to be cut—he meant *time's up*. At least I hoped so.

"Gentlemen," I said, "I hope you're cured and ready to spread your healing insights to others. If not, I'm back here tomorrow."

Roscoe stood up first. "It's been real," he said. I waited for him, or anybody, to say a few words before leaving. As though I'd actually offered some kind of solution for anything. But nobody seemed inclined to share one-on-one. "Okay, guys," said Rincin, "Officer Colfax will meet you outside."

I had to get to San Francisco, catch a flight south. But first I needed to speak with Reverend D. During class, I'd managed to keep the lid

on my Tina fear. Now it was simmering. “Reverend,” I said brightly, for the benefit of anybody listening in. “I wondered if I could talk to you for a second, about that thing you said.”

“What thing is that?” The reverend wasn’t going to make it easy.

“You know what thing,” I said, turning my back to keep it from Davey, who was lamely pretending to tie his shoe. “What happened to Tina?”

The reverend regarded me with something like curiosity. “If she’s your woman, she’s your business.”

“She was working with you.”

“Yeah, and when she was working, she was my business, but it was strictly business, understand?”

“Look, Reverend, somebody knocked me out, and when I came to, she was gone.”

“Turn your back on a woman,” said the reverend, “the fuck you expect?”

Rincin stood by the door, watching. His smile never wavered.

“Are you saying Tina knocked me out?”

“I’m sayin’ be a man. Ask her your own damn self. If she wanna be found,” he said, not unsympathetically, “you gonna find her.”

“Okay,” I said, “here’s what you do . . .” The idea dropped out of the sky. Like most junkies, whether or not they still used junk, I fought best on my back. Ass on the griddle. When every day is a zero-sum struggle against bone-shearing pain, creativity becomes an adrenal function. The good old days.

“Tina gets in touch,” I said to the reverend, “tell her I’ll be in L.A. Tell her I’m going to take care of a thing, then go to Zell’s place. Tell her to meet me there.”

The reverend did not look thrilled. But he didn’t blow me off. “Where’s that at, playah?”

“I don’t know,” I said, my heart sinking as I heard my plan out loud. “I’m going to find it when I get down there.”

“Look at you go,” said the reverend.

I hadn’t realized until now how badly my stomach was churning. I was glad to finally get out of there. I hadn’t gone five steps when Rincin fell in step. “A fascinating day in the marketplace of ideas,” he said.

“Officer Rincin, I really have to use the men’s room.”

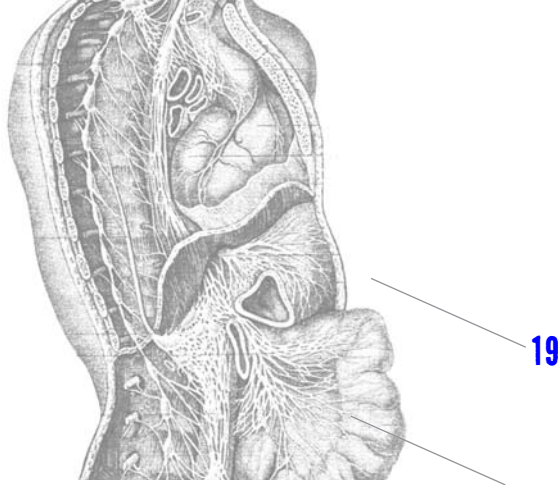
“You don’t mind urinating outside, you can go in the trough right by the yard.”

“Unfortunately,” I said, “there’s a little more involved.”

Rincin sighed. “This is something civilians don’t understand. On this job, you train yourself. Your body can’t pinch a loaf whenever it feels like it.”

The way he said it, I wanted to take my body aside and slap it around a little for being so undisciplined. But I was on a schedule. I had to get to Burbank, interview a Christian hooker and find out if Harry Zell had offered me a job or a suicide mission. If there was time left, and I didn’t get killed, I planned to pick up some clown feet and a big red nose for Josef Mengele. But my real mission, much as it pained me, was to find Tina.

Now that she was my ex-wife, and M.I.A., all I could remember were the good things.



Big House Chasids

A gaggle of prison employees clustered at the east gate under a glassed-in tower box. A crusty old guard, who might have been there when Governor Reagan visited, walked into the road and stood there with a handwritten sign: GUN TRANSFER. I wasn't sure what that meant, but to the naked eye no one was transferring anything, unless you counted the jumbo takeout Taco Bell bags two young COs were hauling. While I waited, heads rotated fast. I followed in time to see the warden leading a delegation of cameras and suits, one of them huge, into H Unit. Doubtless to show off the wall-to-wall beds that gave the place the rehabilitation-friendly warehouse feeling. Rincin told me the warden didn't mind fund-raising, he just wished he didn't have to give so many tours. After *Oz* and all the prison docs, civilians wanted to experience the magic. "What folks never count on," Rincin'd chuckled, "are the fumes. Cram in a few hundred guys, you're talkin' about a lot of ass and feet. It's stinky enough down there without marching in the pols from Sacramento." From the oohs and aahs, I wondered if the huge man was Schwarzenegger. (Did he know Mengele? Did his Nazi father?)

I was a pawn. But I didn't know what the game was. I only knew

what it wasn't: a simple ID job. Not anymore, at least. Tina once told me that when her back was to the wall, she'd try R.T. Reverse thinking. Assume everything you know is wrong, and start from there. Maybe the point wasn't me finding big M. Maybe the point was letting him get his hands on me. That felt suitably paranoid. Was it Zell I should have been worried about all along? One more delightful reason to get my ass down to L.A. and do some digging.

There was an old-fashioned phone booth beside the gift shop. I called the number on Rincin's card. Left a message about my mother's heart attack, which I'd just found out about. I said I would be back in time for class tomorrow. Then I stood at the bus stop and tried to decipher bus schedules. A group of schoolgirls was already there, in identical blue uniforms. The one white girl, a pigtailed redhead holding a Bible and a *People* magazine, blew a bubble out at me and yelled, "Fag!"

There was no reason to risk anything to save face with a homophobic twelve-year-old. So I didn't pick up a shovel and hit her in the face. Instead, I ducked into the gift shop to wait. According to the schedule taped to the door, the next bus was in fifteen minutes. Twitchy the clerk peered up from his Word Find, over his state bifocals, not all that happy about having a customer. I stared at a painting of a red barn and he went back to finding "of" and "ten" in "often."

Keeping up the Tina reverse mode, I rolled out every fact I had and tried to peek behind them. As in: maybe Zell's documentary stuff was a front. Why else would he make himself so untraceable? Huge as his prison doc franchise was, maybe it covered something bigger. The documentaries got him in and out of penal institutions all over the country. Maybe he was shooting Mengele's prison experiments. Cable gold!

Before I could go further down that road, Twitchy stepped from around the corner.

“You the drug guy?”

Before I could congratulate him on his intel, he pushed up his ironed denim sleeves. “See that? Clean as a daisy.”

“Congratulations, how long’s it been?”

“What time is it now?” His laugh morphed into a hacking cough that had me ducking out of spume range. “I did the RD last week. With the sauerkraut.”

“You lost me,” I said, peering out the window to see a Chasidic man, clutching a briefcase to his chest, fumble with the keys to a black Mercedes.

“Rapid detox,” he said. “They bring in the old German guy. The doctor. Strap you down, knock you out, and ding-dong-ding, you wake up desmacked. Unstrung. Not so much as a craving.”

“The old German did that? Really old, with blond hair?”

“Straight-up Nazi from Nazi-town,” said Twitch. “Got the accent to prove it. That’s why I trusted him.”

Rapid detox. One more piece of the warped-around-the-edges Mengele puzzle. I considered telling him the doctor made his bones injecting malaria in babies, among other things, before Twitch was a twinkle in his mother’s eye. But I decided to keep it upbeat. “And you feel good, huh?”

“Never better! Scuse me.”

He whipped around and puked into a small bucket behind the counter. When he was done he tamped his mouth with a Kleenex Junior and smiled beatifically.

“Still gettin’ my sea legs.”

“What I hear, they grow back, buddy. You take care of yourself.”

Somebody was letting Mengele practice in a state facility—if knocking some poor bastard out, pumping him full of Narcan and squeezing the dope out of his cells even counted as practice. That same somebody had to be giving him a room and instruments.

"Keep it up!" I said, and backed out the door with one eye on the Chasid now struggling with the trunk of his Benz. "One bucket at a time!"

Twitchy grabbed my wrist before I could get away. "Thing is," he said. "I got a funny feeling he left something inside. Here, look."

He grabbed my hand and pressed it to a postage-stamp-sized square on the back of his neck. It felt hard and metallic.

"Could be a locator chip," I said. "You try and escape, they can track you by satellite."

Twitchy nodded, taking that in. "I bet the president has one of those."

I didn't like where this was going. I waved good-bye, stepped out of the shop and jogged down the small hill, startling the Chasid as he was saying a prayer over his rental car.

"Scuse me," I said, trying not to sound like an escapee. "You going to Auschwitz?"

"What?" The young Chasid twisted his payots nervously.

"Airport. I mean the airport." What was wrong with me? "*The airport*," I stammered, and pointed to my throat, as if that would explain my behavior. "Holocaust Tourette's."

"The heartbreak," he said. His eyes swelled behind his glasses.

"So you are going to the airport, right?"

"I am. Yes. But . . ."

Clearly the prospect of bringing me along thrilled him more than pork chops.

As we spoke he kept trying to get his trunk open. He aimed his key-beeper from different angles, squatting, then standing up, then reaching over his head. He reminded me of a bullfighter.

"It's not a geometry problem." I stepped over and snatched the key chain out of his hand. "Battery's dead," I said.

"That can't be. The radio works."

“Not that battery. This one.” I bent down to insert the actual key in the trunk and open it.

My new Orthodox friend may have been dressed for shtetl success, but I was the pushy Jew. “So, when’s your flight?”

He threw his briefcase in the back, closed the trunk. Back on the driver’s side, he gripped the handle without opening. He plainly wanted me to leave but had too much conscience to say so. Guilt was such a useful emotion.

“I really appreciate this,” I said. “I’ve got a family emergency, in Los Angeles.”

He didn’t ask, which was just as well. As giddy as I felt making my escape from San Quentin, I wasn’t exactly headed for a fun getaway. I had less than twenty-four hours to locate and grill a born-again hooker, try to unravel Harry Zell’s reality TV–Holocaust connection, and, most embarrassingly, find out the real reason I’d been offered the job of verifying the identity of the Nazi doctor. That, of course, and find the woman I wished I hadn’t divorced.

“So,” I said as we floated over the Golden Gate Bridge, “where do you guys get your suits?”

“This?” He pulled up the flap of his long black jacket. “It’s a *rekel*.”

“It’s not that bad,” I said.

“No, it’s called a *rekel*. This one’s got the concealed button, in the Bobover tradition.”

“You don’t mind my asking, how do they treat you at Quentin, you walk in like this?”

“The one lady, in visiting, a Latina—”

“Officer Darlene?”

“You know her?” he said, crestfallen, as if the girl of his dreams had been exposed as a bag of herpes.

“Know her? Naw. I just remember her face. She’s got the *cholita* brows? Right? Painted on? She’s very attractive.”

"I think so, too. She's exotic, you know? Not like the Lubavitcher girls. She always wants to touch my tzitzit."

He saw my look and waggled the little fringes at his waistcoat. "The knots in the waistcoat. This blue thread, from an animal called the chilazon, you cannot even find anymore."

By the time we exited the freeway, I'd gotten a course on Chasid fashion.

"Not a lot of guys can pull off the fur hat. But you're one of them."

I already regretted the plan forming in my head. But there was no other way.

"Hey, there's a gas station," I said. "Let me fill it up."

"Really?"

He seemed a little surprised when I went around to his window with the gas nozzle.

"Tank's on the other side," he said. Then he saw the lighter and put it together. His reaction was less surprise than resignation.

"Roll down the window," I said.

He shook his head. I didn't want to shout our conversation, so I put my face close to the window, squishing my lips on the glass.

"I want you to know, my friend, this is not a hate crime." I didn't want him to think I didn't like him, even though I was about to fuck his world up very badly. "I just need some clothes. I don't *want* to squirt gasoline on you and set you on fire. That's not *me*."

"You want my clothes? Why don't you just ask?" He seemed mystified. "What are clothes?"

"Really?"

"I am happy to help a fellow Jew."

I ran around to the passenger side and jumped in. The Chasid had a .22 out and pointed at my stomach before the door slammed.

I tugged his gun hand into my stomach. "Pull the trigger," I said, keeping up a friendly smile. "Go ahead. I've got a vest on. That pea-shooter won't make a dent."

I'm not sure what movie I stole that from. But I believe the line was uttered by Elisha Cook, in black and white. It was not enough to make him lower his gun. But I saw his eyes go wide and punched him in the face before he could regroup.

"Park behind the air pump. Give me everything."

"Owww . . . okay! I'm sorry about the gun."

"Don't be," I said. "I don't like punching people I like. The piece made it easier."

A family of tourists pulled up beside us, and I realized how it would look stripping an Orthodox Jew in a gas station. "Change in plan, Rebbe. Pull behind the bathroom."

Now that I had the gun, things were a lot less complicated.

Still, when he was down to his tallith, I started to feel bad. He held up the tasseled fringe and smiled sadly.

"This was my grandfather's, from Lithuania."

"All right, all right," I said. "You know where I can buy one? In L.A.?" He pulled out a business card and scribbled an address on the back. "Tell Solly I sent you." Then he looked up. "But why am I writing it down? I could show you. Give me my clothes back, I'll take you myself. Get you a deal."

"Cagey," I said, "but I'm sorry, I can't drive around with a guy in his underwear."

"You can in San Francisco."

"Funny," I said.

"You think? I'm an attorney, but I also do some stand-up. You know, a chomedian. *Chomedian*, get it?"

"I get it. You're the new Seinfeld. Now listen. There are things I have to do, things you'd probably approve of but I can't talk about. What were you doing at Quentin anyway?"

"I represent Larry Boiget. He's a Jewish fellow, wants to eat kosher."

"Fighting the good fight," I said. "In the tradition of an Orthodox prisoner named Mosher."

"You know about that?"

"Indeed I do. So I can just get a tallith off the rack?"

"Yes, yes, but what about—"

He stared down at the spindly legs extending from his boxers, as if just discovering what his body looked like, and slunk further down in the seat. I realized I should have done all this in the men's room. But this was the first time I'd ever stolen a man's clothes.

"You're going to leave me here? Like this?"

"You shouldn't have worn all those blue Massengills."

"They are called *chilazon*."

"Chilazon. That's what I meant." I pointed his own peashooter at him. "Out."

A minute later, he was out of the car, crouched between Super and Supreme. I could see the disbelief stamped on his face, as if nothing in life had prepared him for a Jew lying to his face.

"I know, it's a drag, being shoved out of a car in your boxers. But maybe this'll make you think next time before you wipe some species off the planet 'cause you need some tallith dye. Extermination is extermination."

"Are you kidding me?" he said. "What do you know from extermination?"

"Just give me the hat," I said.

"No hat."

A couple of bikers had roared up. One had a fat girl riding behind him, her tramp stamp visible where her jeans rode low over her butt crack. She spotted the Chasid and squealed as if she'd found a unicorn.

"Hey, Ernie, look! It's one of *them*!"

While my new friend was weighing his options, I grabbed the *spodik* off his head. To my surprise, the sidelocks came with it, attached by safety pins inside the hat. Without them, the crew cut lent him massive insignificance.

“You really are a comedian,” I said.

“It’s a long story,” he replied.

“I hope so. But I don’t feel as bad now leaving you in your underwear. What about the beard?”

“I can’t just yank it off.”

I reached up to grab it—a fraud, in my mind, was fair game—but he quickly rubbed his hands together, worked up some kind of friction and ripped the beard off in one piece, like a slice of hair rind.

“That’s not sanitary, sticking it right on yours,” he said.

“I’ll spritz with Bactine later.” A small crowd was starting to gather. I grabbed the thing, which felt uncomfortably warm. “Maybe you can work it into a routine,” I said before jumping in the Mercedes.

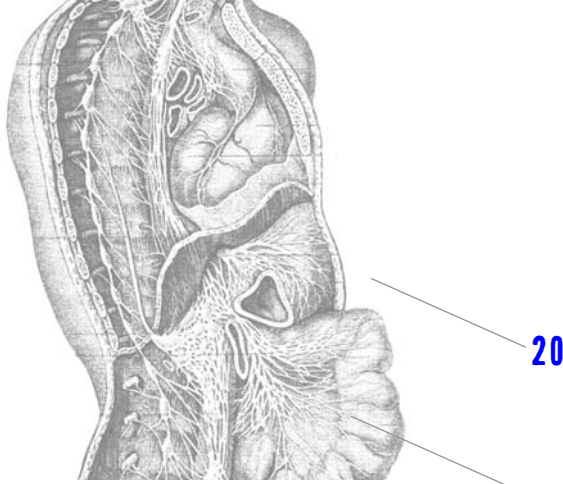
Two blocks away, I parked and adjusted the rearview. I planted the *spodik* and Chasid hair on my head. It was magic. I was transformed. From unshaved fortyish seedy guy to grown-up Yeshiva boy. I wanted to pinch myself on the cheek and give myself a macaroon.

At the airport, I checked myself out in the men’s room. The Chasid who stared back from the mirror was as interchangeable as all the others I’d seen strolling Beverly Boulevard in satin overcoats on ninety-degree Saturdays. I was suddenly invisible. Perfect!

As a bonus, I’d picked up the faux-Chasid’s wallet. Myron Goldman. The best crimes are the ones you don’t mean to commit. *Improv.* The Second City approach to lawbreaking.

Presenting Goldman’s ID and ticket to security, I was struck by the barely muted hatred aimed in my direction. Full-on Orthodox, I looked like the Jews Julius Streicher caricatured in Nazi propaganda cartoons.

A freckled little towhead saw me in line and pointed. “Look, Mommy, a *devil*!”



What's Under All That Satin and Fur?

I felt the eyes of the passengers with open seats, the expressions of naked dread and loathing as I passed, a walking bundle of hot-day satin, fur and frills. *Please don't sit here. . . . Please don't sit here. . . . Please don't sit here. . . .* But a big creamy blonde, I guessed a not-so-long-ago cheerleader, licked her lips when I parked my shtetl-stud self beside her in 9A. She put down her copy of *Exodus*, by way of broadcasting her Semitic leanings. Her teeth were health-book perfect, her blue eyes blasting troubled smarts.

What's under all that satin and fur? my seatmate's eyes seemed to be asking. No sooner had I opened my free *USA Today* than she canted sideways and whispered, "Is it true?"

"Beg your pardon?" My head itched but I was afraid to scratch for fear my locks would fall off.

"You know," she continued, "is it true about the sheet? That you only do it through a hole in the sheet, once a week? Is your God kinky or what?" I watched her twist her wedding ring, trying either to keep it on or yank it off.

"You have no idea," I said.

It turned out she'd already had a little gin party in the airport lounge. Three Beefeaters later, on a fifty-minute flight, she'd told me her name was Dinah, after Dinah Shore, which was her first inkling that her mom was gay. Gay Dinah-Mom dumped Dad and moved in with the mail woman, Denise, who had three older daughters, Daisy, Dot and Deborah, who all hated her. People's lives. Dinah also let me know that she was forty-two and formerly married to a "beefneck" named Ned who worked in her father's sportswear emporium, and she really really wanted to try some "sheet-holin'." A term with which I was unfamiliar. "You know," Dinah giggled, tamping spilled gin off her beige pantsuit, "Jew sex. Gettin' my Orthodox on. Doin' it kosher style."

"Is kosher style the same as kosher?"

"Better be." She dipped her finger in a gin puddle on her tummy, raised it to her lips and licked. I was enchanted. This was what Davey'd been ranting about—why he went spewy over the Alterna.com fetish Betties. It wasn't what they *did* that made them hot—it was that they *wanted* to do it.

"Do you stick it through the hole and then lay down, or do you cover me with the sheet, then move the hole till it's right over my cookie?"

Mistaking my silence for shock, she grabbed my arm. Concern flashed from her Aryan blue irises. "I am a big, big supporter of the Israeli people."

"Thank you."

What else could I say? Was there a wave of blonde-on-bagel sex I had no idea about?

She reached for my *shmidok*. "Can I try it on?"

"No!" I said, seizing her hand.

"What are you doing?"

"It's a man hat. Only men can touch it."

"Wow . . ."

We both stared at my paw wrapped around hers. Then she withdrew and parked her hand on her chest, as if to express her virtue. “*Wow!*” she repeated.

“Yes, it’s in the Bible,” I lied. “Only men!”

I shuddered to imagine what would have happened had she lifted my locks off, found out I was in Bobover drag.

Her thigh pressed mine. “I know a hotel near the airport. I can’t stop thinking about that *sheet*. Egyptian cotton—or is that too . . . Muslim? I bet they have percale.” She clasped my shoulder with new urgency. “Do you cut the hole yourself, or do they have kosher party stores?”

It didn’t matter whether Dinah was “my type.” The fact that she had this thing that got her hot—the specificity of her freakdom—would have flicked my switch, in some *Wild Kingdom* kind of way.

While I passed up a date, I did take the opportunity to peek in the port-o-pharmacy, disguised as a Marc Jacobs purse, that Dinah left on the seat when she went “to tinkle.” Depakote, lithium, Lexapro, Boniva, Valium. I thought about filching her Valium. But the way she’d spilled her drink, it felt criminal to deny the woman her relief. I had to live with myself. I still had the piggish reflex to steal drugs, even if I didn’t intend to use them. My first year off of everything, I continued to raid medicine cabinets on general principle. I wasn’t proud of it. I was so miserable, I did not even *want* the drugs. I just didn’t want anybody else to have them. *Drug Grinch*. I knew, if I wanted to survive with any kind of serenity, I had to unclench the fist that was my ex-dope-fiend heart, just so I could live in a world where other human beings got high and I didn’t.

Dinah staggered back and passed out on contact with her seat cushion. She drooled prettily until we landed.

Eating at Quentin had been problematic. I'd purchased a small suitcase in the SF airport and dropped a minor fortune on fruit salad, stale Starbucks sandwiches and a few bags of cashews packaged when I was in grade school. I stuffed all my provisions in the case and zipped it up. The thing had wheels, but I carried it by the handle. I'd had one in Cincinnati that got stuck in the up position. I couldn't get it in the overhead on a puddle-jumper to Akron and had to leave the plane and go by bus. So now I just carried. I assumed they were all broken.

The first thing I did at Burbank airport was find a pay phone and call the five numbers I had for Tina. (I'd given up on cell phones, which ended up like sunglasses, lost, smashed or left somewhere within seventy-two hours of purchase.) The first three had greetings in other people's voices—two female, one male. I left the same message at all three. *Tina, pick up.* Then I said I was "in town to meet our friend." The fourth number picked up, said nothing and beeped, which seemed like Tina's style. And the last one just rang. Also her style.

I put the phone back in the cradle. I didn't expect to find her that way. But the important thing was faith. (If you didn't have anything else.) And right now I was manufacturing the belief that if I could track down Zell and find out what made his clock tick, the cosmos would reward me with Tina. If I could sniff out Zell, she could, too. What I could not do was stay still.

Without knowing where I was headed, I stepped out of the Burbank airport and a fellow Chasid, somewhat older than me, tried to grab the suitcase out of my hands. He stood back when I resisted. He stared at me in horror, while passengers swirled around us, as though I'd sprouted horns and a tail. "What?" I said, playing the indignation card. "Aren't you my driver?"

"My name is Jack," he began, in a Russian accent so thick I could smell the borscht. "I was told to meet—*wait!* Where's your tallith?"

He clamped his hand over his mouth, horrified.

"My tallith?"

I looked down. No fringe. *See what happens?* I thought to myself. If I hadn't gone all Good Samari-Jew with Myron, I'd be fully tallithed and in a car by now. I didn't know where I'd be going, but it would be somewhere. Nineteen hours isn't very long, and that's all I had before I had to turn around. I hadn't worked out my ports of call. No matter. Now I was in the airport, lying to a man I'd known two minutes. I had not foreseen the consequences of going fringe-free.

"Stolen," I said, "long story."

I fought the urge to yank out a picture of Tina and start shoving it in the faces of arriving passengers.

"Stolen?" The driver stared at me.

"It's no big deal," I said, picking up the bag and nudging him on.

A crowd of passengers I recognized from my flight passed by. Jack and I were dressed identically, standing face-to-face. "Two Jews arguing over a nickel," I heard a red-faced exec in a Burberry raincoat say into his cell phone. His eyes met mine. He knew I heard. But he didn't flinch. Jews are not known for bouts of sudden and impulsive violence. I assumed the man had never seen Bernstein in action. I did nothing about the insult and he kept walking.

"What kind of man," asked the driver, "takes another man's clothes?" And then, as if from a well of bitter personal experience, he answered his own question. "A schmuck, *that's* what kind of man. A *schmuck*."

The way he kept scrutinizing me, I wondered if he could tell my *shmidok* was hot. It was arrogant to think I could fake my way through a world I didn't know. But it still made sense to try. If anybody saw me, they'd see an Orthodox Jew. That's what *I'd* see. I was going to show up places where I had no business showing up. Places with receptionists and housekeepers and security guards. If things went south, let them remember *Fiddler on the Roof*. It's not like anybody's heard of a Chasidic burglar.

"A schmuck," the driver declared again when we got in the car,

cementing my intention to make good on my earlier *rekel* theft. I remembered the card Myron Goldman had given me and pulled it out.

“Mendel and Mendel,” I read, before he could ask me anything about who I was supposed to be, “serving the Fairfax district for thirty-seven years.”

“Solly Mendel? You getting married?”

“Why?” I opened the stolen wallet and saw a wad of hundreds and closed it fast.

“Solly does wedding suits. Groom. Best man. His father must have kept sewing till he was a hundred and twenty. Eyes like a kosher hawk.”

“No wedding,” I said as we headed for short-term parking, “just a suit.”

Nearly two hours later—half of that in single-file on the 10 East, slowed by looky-loos shooting cell-phone pix of a jackknifed beer truck—Solly Mendel was stroking his four chins and frowning. He was a round man whose own shiny black *rekash* fit him as snugly as sealskin fits a seal.

“That’s not you,” he said, reaching for the *shmidok*. Why was everybody interested in taking my hat off?

“It’s me enough,” I said, holding the brim with both hands. “I want the same thing, but new.”

He frowned down at my sleeves, which stopped just below my elbows, Johnny Knoxville style.

“And this time, it should fit?”

“A man can dream.”

Tina, where the fuck are you?

“Uh-huh,” Mendel grunted. “Tallith?”

“That too. I’m surprising my great-aunt,” I said, as if that explained everything. “I just want it to look right.”

"Maybe you'd like a yarmulke too. We do the best yarmulkes in the city."

"*All the big Jews!*" an old lady warbled from somewhere.

I spotted her in a folding chair, behind the counter, between racks of pants.

"Mama, please," Solly pleaded. "The man doesn't care. I'm trying to do business."

He Zero Mostelled his shoulders up to his ears, a parody of a shrug. "My mother. What are you gonna do? I want you to take a look at something."

Solly extended his arm and bowed his head, as if introducing a dignitary. "Maybe something like this." He stooped and eased a hat-box out from a shelf underneath the cash register. "Open it," he said. I did, and saw a lush satin skullcap, wine colored, set on an upside-down golden bowl. "Better than all the Beverly Boulevard *alta kockers*."

I tried to imagine appearing in public with something like that on my head.

"Not every day," he said, reading my mind as easily as if I'd texted him. "High Holy Days. Now flip it," he said, making a motion with his hands. I turned the hat over and saw what he was talking about: inside, tucked discreetly to one side, in Hebraically stitched English letters: NEVER AGAIN.

"You wear it so it's right on your temple," he said.

Our eyes met in the mirror, his sad for two thousand years, mine yellow and blurred.

"Do you need that to remember?" I asked.

"Not to remember. To honor."

Just hearing the word "honor" made me wince.

"*We do all the big Jews!*" the old lady yelled again.

Mendel snatched the yarmulke back, slapped the lid on the box and the box back behind the counter. He rolled his eyes to show what he had to put up with and yelled back at her.

“They were big twenty years ago, Mama.”

I smiled at her, just to do something with my face. What I was thinking was, *If I were Tina, where would I go?* It all depended on whether she thought she was being chased.

My Chasidization was painless. When he found a coat, Solly held it up, extended his arm and bowed his head. Same with the pants and tzitzit. Miraculously, everything fit.

Solly wrapped the clothes I'd worn into the store with brown paper from a roll overhead, like a butcher. He tied the paper with string and checked on his mother, who was still muttering. “She doesn't get it. Today, if you're not making a jockstrap for Stephen Spielberg's godson, you're nothing.” He smiled sourly. “They don't want to buy suits from Mendel and Mendel. Fine. But you know what they *do* buy? Hugo Boss. You know Hugo Boss?”

“Above my pay grade.”

“Good. Hugo Boss designed the SS uniforms. Famous for their slim fit. And guess who did the sewing? That's right. In the morning, a Gypsy or a Jew might sew the epaulettes on the shoulders. That night, the Gestapo pig who drags him out in the snow and kicks him to death might be wearing it. Hugo Boss. I went to the *Shoah* premiere. Half the *machers* in the theater had their *tuchises* in Nazi suits.”

When he handed me the bundle, his face had an appraising expression. I wondered, for a nervous second, if he was actually undercover himself. Maybe the Russian mob was moving in on Chasidic haberdasheries. Maybe it was a front, like the medical supply stores in West Hollywood, with their windows full of dusty prosthetic limbs. When the vodka dons took over, suddenly you could buy a fake leg on every corner.

Solly pulled the stub of a pencil from his shirt pocket and made

some calculations on the back of a paper bag. He talked without looking up. “Mister, I don’t know what kinda trouble you’re in. But from the way you’re *schvitzin’* over there, it’s nothing good. Tell you what I’ll do,” he said, “I’ll give you the Full Jew—the coat, hat, pants, yarmulke, tallith—for eighteen hundred dollars.”

“Fourteen hundred.”

“Fifteen,” he said, “and I’ll throw in *payots*. You need some side-locks.”

His mother got up off her chair, the same height standing as sitting, and waddled back through the store. She disappeared through a door from which floated the scent of brisket. Sense memory! My own grandmother secretly made bacon at three in the morning and ate it alone.

I pulled twelve hundred-dollar bills out of my wallet, followed by a fistful of fives and ones that I slowly unfolded on the counter.

“Thirteen eighty-five,” I said. “Unless you want to follow me and check for quarters under my cushions.”

I’d stashed the rest of Myron’s wad in my socks in the changing room, so it looked like my wallet was empty. But Solly was sharp. He indicated the limo outside. “In that thing maybe it’s worth it.”

“You think I’m paying for the limo? Chasid, *please!*”

Thieving was not, in general, my MO. But the wallet came with the coat.

Solly scooped up the bills fast. “Mazel tov. Wear it in good health!”

Transaction done, I put the string-tied bundle back on the counter. “Do me a favor,” I asked on impulse, fishing Goldman’s card out of my sock. “Send this stuff back to the address on here.”

"You want to explain?"

"Not really. Except it's the right thing to do."

"The right thing? In that case I'll do it," he said, "just for the novelty."

I found two more hundreds in my pocket. "This is for FedEx. Keep what's left."

"Next-day morning or next-day afternoon?" Mendel stepped away from the counter and pulled a battered metal lockbox from a shelf of yarmulke boxes.

"Afternoon's fine."

I figured it would take Goldman—or whatever his real name was—a little while to get home.

"Big Jews," Mendel mumbled, locking the money in the box. Anybody that lax about stashing cash had to be connected. "All day *mit* the big Jews. Twenty years ago, maybe, they were big Jews. Now, not so much."

The way he said this reminded me of Zell. *There's* a Jew who must have been big twenty years ago. From his brown-bag arithmetic shtick, I had a hunch Solly Mendel did not input names and addresses in a BlackBerry. Sure enough, I reached behind the counter while his back was turned and pulled out a black and white speckled composition book marked CUSTOMERS. Even with my limited technical expertise, I knew they had not yet found a way to scrub names out of people's address books from afar. In that way, if no other, pencil and paper were still superior to the Internet. I quickly flipped to the back. Found the Z page. Coughed to cover the sound of ripping it out and slipped the book back under the counter.

Solly slammed the metal box back on the shelf and made his way toward me, unsmiling. Maybe he had secret cameras. But then—wouldn't he have been holding something? Like a phone? Or a gun?

When Mendel son of Mendel was a foot away, I braced myself.

Only he didn't hit me or shoot me. He opened his arms and gave me a brisket-smelling hug. "To quote the rabbi of Lunt, 'It is a good thing to help a man in trouble, a bad thing to have him move in.'"

"Did he really say that?"

"Those old Talmud jockeys were blunt."

I caught my reflection in the mirror and felt a prickle of sweat. Who was I kidding? Solly's eyes met mine as he stepped around the counter and held the shop door open.

"'The first shekel I give is to make you feel welcome, the last is so you never come back.'"

"The rabbi of Lunt?" I asked.

"No, that's me," he said, and shut the door in my face.

The driver listened when I gave him Zell's address, then hit the ignition and jerked the limo onto Fairfax in front of a bus with a giant Bruce Willis painted on the side, cuddling a monster rocket launcher that seemed to sprout from between his legs against a background of red, white and blue. Sometimes it seemed too bad that America wasn't born with a bigger penis, so it wouldn't have to keep wagging the junk it had all over the planet.

"You see Solly?" Jack the driver asked.

"I did," I said. "Why didn't you come in?"

Jack made a clicking sound with his tongue to convey his disgust and resignation. "Solly makes a good yarmulke, but he's a schmuck."

After this unbidden assessment, he began to bite his nails feverishly. At the first red light, he twisted around in the driver's seat like a bearded owl.

"I just started with the company. You *are* Goldman, right?"

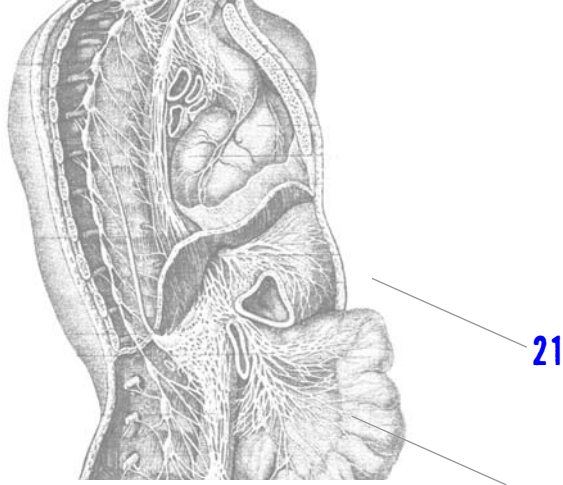
"Right. That's me," I said, and then blurted, "I'm looking for my wife. My ex-wife."

The driver met my eyes and held them for a second. Now he understood. What man didn't? He untwisted his owl neck and faced forward again, meeting my gaze in the rearview. "Is complicated. Life."

"So I've heard," I said, meeting his soulful Russian gaze until the light changed and the car behind him hit the horn.

We didn't say another word until he dropped me off in Brentwood, on Carmelita Drive. I closed my eyes and tried to send out psychic SOSs the entire ride. *Tina, pick up.*

I gave him \$500 cash to park and wait.



Matching Blue Lips

Zell's housekeeper buzzed me in after no more than five minutes of crackly back-and-forth on the intercom. I said I had an appointment. She said he was running late. I said he told me to. She said she wasn't sure I should. I made sure to smile into the security camera, and finally she opened the gate.

I thought I heard giggling as I walked up the drive. A car cruised by behind me. A Crown Vic. Universally recognizable undercover cop car. Maybe this wasn't even the right house. The housekeeper opened the front door. I was surprised that she was white. Maybe Russian. Kind of drifty on her feet. She paddled off with a vague gesture toward a corridor off to the right.

I hiked through the living room, which was vast enough to make me feel lonely and featured a white fur, sunken conversation pit that might have been airlifted intact from 1970 and not used since.

The housekeeper's giggling echoed from somewhere in the house.

Either the acoustics were skewed or I was. The living room opened onto a gently sloping hallway flanked by glass walls and a view of the tropical splendor on both sides. Zell had hired topiary wizards to trim his hedges into Hebrew letters and naked nymphs, as though he planned on throwing a party for swinging Kabbalah scholars or rabbis who liked the ladies.

I didn't know what I was looking for—or where I was going to eat my next meal. What I did know was that the man who hired me collected bent celebrity pix, had a foot in born-again porn, and harbored the dream of starting an all-prison reality network. Premiering—if the showbiz, law enforcement and penitentiary stars aligned—with the official on-screen arrest of Josef Mengele. But something in my gut told me there was more. And whatever secret was buried in the bowels of San Quentin had drawn me here, to the Brentwood McMansion of Harry Zell, I hoped against hope that Tina would show up. She had a history of surprise appearances—but nothing to surpass her sudden, naked, near-stroke-inducing presence in the Quentin love nest the night before.

The glass hall fed into a hushed bedroom, done floor-to-ceiling in an almost disturbingly soothing powder blue. Powder-blue carpet, powder-blue walls and powder-blue ceiling combined to create the illusion of stepping into a waterless ocean. I was already feeling seasick when I saw something move on the powder-blue bed. I tiptoed closer and threw back the blanket. There was Dinah. My flightmate from seat 9-B. She hadn't mentioned that, after her beef-head husband, she'd traded up for Harry Zell. She'd also traded in the beige pantsuit for—what else?—a powder-blue silk robe with some kind of fur collar dyed the same shade. Her blue eyes were open but by now they were just decoration. There was no blood. But her tongue protruded alarmingly.

It looked like some viscous, tide-pool amphibian had crawled halfway into her mouth and given up. Below that, things got less attractive. Strangling generally crushed the hyoid, but this went beyond strangling. What had been Dinah's throat was now wide as a thigh, purpling over her massively shattered hyoid bone and ruptured esophagus. Strangling was puppy love compared to the damage I was staring at.

I urged the blanket further south and gagged. Mrs. Zell's head had been twisted the wrong way round. She faced the same direction as her own buttocks, staring up at me over the top of her intact scapula and spine. She might have been a doll some very strong, very sadistic child who'd seen *The Exorcist* had decided to play with, then gotten bored with and mutilated.

I heard a flush in the bathroom and jumped. The door opened. Out walked Tina, like we'd been married twenty years and she'd just put down a magazine to go pee. "Hi, hon," she said, as if we'd planned a picnic.

"*Tina!*" My voice couldn't find a register.

Not for the first time in our relationship, I had to combat the impulse to simultaneously slap her face and plaster it with kisses. My joy was so deep, I cupped my mouth with both hands in the manner of speechless game show winners. All I could say was, "Tina, Tina, Tina," until some semblance of cognitive function returned and I could patch together a sentence. "Baby, what are you . . . I mean, I can't believe . . . you're *here!*"

She stepped into my arms and kissed me, then touched my rank beard and lifted my hat off. "Love the look. But you picked a strange time to go fundamentalist."

"I thought it might be a good disguise. But look at you. . . ."

For the occasion, she was dressed in a pinstriped business suit, with plastic baggies on both feet. Nobody else could make foot-baggies so alluring.

"*Tina Tina Tina . . .*," I began to babble again. Her name was *me*.

Amazing how desire could roil up at the most inappropriate moments. *Especially* at inappropriate moments. I'd almost forgotten the screaming cranial pain, my constant companion since the last time Tina and I had crossed paths. I had to will myself to do more than gawk and babble, to salvage enough rubble from my crumbling psyche to assemble a question, something beyond "How?" or "Why?"

My words, when I was able to form them, came out like butchered haiku translated from some dyslexic Croatian subdialect. "I wanted . . . Last thing . . . That white-shit moon . . . Doll hands . . . What happened in the minivan?"

"Baby, this is the wrong time to lose your shit," Tina said. She slapped me across the face and I slapped her back. After that we were both more relaxed.

"My shit has been found," I told her. "So, did you talk to the rev?"

"What are you talking about?"

We both glanced at Mrs. Zell, then back at each other.

"I'm talking about telling the rev, right before I left, that if he talked to you, to let you know I was going to try and check out Zell's place."

Tina rolled her eyes. "I didn't need to talk to the reverend. After you told me the shit Zell pulled to get you to work, I figured the prick might not pay. So then I figured if I put in a visit to his place, he'd get that I wasn't the don't-have-to-pay type."

"The what?"

By now the blue room had begun to spin. Choppy seas. My vision clouded and I felt such sudden, quivery affection for my ex-wife I wondered if I was having a stroke. I grabbed her and kissed her again, unable to resist the taste of her. I breathed in the scent that gathered in the damp in the back of her neck. . . . I could have eaten her skin.

Tina sighed like she wanted this but needed that, then pushed me off. "For God's sake, Manny, have some respect for the fucking dead."

She was right, of course. I turned back to Dinah, whose blue lips matched the walls and bedspread. Why shouldn't death be color-coordinated?

I knew it was pointless, but I could not stop wondering what would have happened if I'd taken her up on the sheet-hole offer. The whole notion was a myth—like Jews burying their dead standing up or drinking the Christian baby blood. (Well, maybe on Passover . . .) But for Dinah, a.k.a. Mrs. Zell, the facts didn't matter anymore. Tina watched me watching and stepped away.

"You knew her, didn't you." She didn't even say it as a question.

"Yes. No. I just met her," I said, surprised by the choke in my voice, "on the plane from San Francisco."

"Well what the hell did you say to her?"

"What do you mean?"

"She swallowed a pharmacy." Tina snatched me by the wrist and led me along the perimeter of the sea room to the open door of the bathroom. The toilet seat and the floor around it were splotted with vomit, whole pills still visible in the chunk and bile. Even the pills were blue. Those Valiums. The same prescription bottles I'd scoped in her purse flying down were dumped in a small trash can inlaid with some kind of ancient gold coins. From where I was squinting, the profile on them might have been Zell's. But I had to close my eyes to remember the pharmaceutical highlights in her purse. I recited them like a conductor announcing stops. "Depakote . . . lithium . . . Lexapro . . . Boniva . . . Valium." I was jokey because the tears in my eyes freaked me out.

Seeing them, understandably, made Tina even more suspicious. "How close were you?" Her left eye closed to a slit the way it did when she was mad, as if she were aiming down the sight of an invisible gun. "Manny, tell me now. Are they going to find your DNA in her throat?"

"That's not even funny."

“No, what’s funny is you dressed like Joey the Dreidel Boy. What’s funny”—her voice edged toward the border between edgy and hysteria—“is you knowing what pharmaceuticals a dead woman, who happened to be living with Harry Zell, stuffed in her purse before she killed herself.”

“I wanted a disguise.” I touched my tender scalp and stole another eyeful of the victim. “Does that look like suicide to you?”

“She could have convulsed. I’ve seen people break their own backs.” I knew how my cunning and beautiful ex-wife skewed the universe. She was unwilling to lavish any sympathy on the departed now that the dead woman had been identified as competition. Tina rattled the empty prescription bottles in the clamshell trash can to make a point. “The lady of the house wasn’t trying to get rid of a headache. She wanted out. Which maybe makes sense, if you’re married to Harry Zell.”

“I keep going back and forth on Zell,” I said.

“It’s black and white,” said Tina. “Whatever his ends, if his means involve working with Mengele, he’s the enemy. I’m guessing Dinah knew. She was probably pulling a Clara Haber.”

“Clara who?”

“Clara Haber. She was married to Fritz Haber. He invented Zyklon B.”

“Death camp gas. I hope she was proud.”

“Not exactly. Fritz was Jewish. And his wife was so mortified at what her husband did she took his service revolver and shot herself in their front garden. After that Fritz renounced his Hebraic roots and tried to join the Nazis. They wouldn’t have him. He lived long enough to see his relatives die from the chemical he invented, then suffered a massive heart attack fleeing the country.”

“Jesus. That’s kind of the gold standard for self-hating Jew. How do you even know that?”

“I told you, I was a morbid child. I wanted to be Jewish.”

“So you read this when you were a kid?”

“Okay, I lied. Sort of. I was fascinated with that stuff growing up. But after you mentioned Mengele, I went on the Web. It’s like, there are the horror stories you expect—the big stuff, like the camps, like genocide—and then there are all the twisted sideshows. Like Fritz fucking Haber. When I saw Mrs. Zell, I flashed on Clara Haber. What woman wants to be married to a collaborator—even fifty years after the war?”

“You think Dinah knew?”

“She could have.”

As we talked, Tina handed me two plastic bags and pointed to my shoes. “It’s too late,” I said. “I’ve already walked around.”

“Just put these on. It’ll hide your prints. Give the forensics team one more thing to think about. *How did the guy disappear from the middle of the room?*”

“You really think that’ll work?” I held on to Tina’s shoulder and still nearly lost my balance putting the bags on.

“It’s science,” she said, handing me two pink rubber bands to keep the baggies from falling off.

“Oh well, never mind,” I said, sealing my pants around the ankles. “But I don’t buy the convulsion theory. Unless she strangled herself, it doesn’t hold up.”

“So maybe somebody interrupted her suicide and killed her. Like in *Magnolia*, when the guy jumps out a window and gets shot on the way down. Which still doesn’t explain how you know what’s in her purse, sweetheart.”

“For Christ’s sake, I told you. We met on the plane. She was some kind of Chasid groupie.”

“Hole-in-the-sheet, right?”

“Is that something women fantasize about?”

“There’s nothing somebody doesn’t fantasize about.” Suddenly her face lit up. “Wait, it’s perfect!”

I knew that look, and I wasn't thrilled about it. "*What's* perfect?" I asked.

By way of reply, she hooked one baggied toe on a corner of the blanket and tugged, dragging the baby-blue bedding onto the baby-blue floor. Then she worked her foot into the sheet and pulled it back onto the bed and over the body. Sure enough, a tennis-ball-sized circle of skin was visible over Mrs. Zell's wrong-way ribs.

"You know," I said, trying to ignore the body beneath and focus on that perfectly scissored hole, "this isn't actually the way the Orthodox do it."

"Her bed," said Tina, "her fantasy."

"It's really Mrs. Zell?"

"Third of three. You should have checked her driver's license when you were scoping her drugs. Her pictures are all over Zell's study."

"So you really think she killed herself?"

"Well, you do have an effect on women."

A thought elbowed its way into my brain: Tina somehow gets wind of me and Dinah on the plane. Tina gets wrong idea. Tina heads over and kills Mrs. Zell in horrible fashion and, now that I'm here, has the chance to take it a step further—to either frame me for Mrs. Z's homicide or go "full Marvin," i.e., murder me the way she'd murdered her first husband, the ill-fated Marvin.

"Baby," I said, "you didn't . . . you know?"

What's the sensitive way of asking your ex-wife if she savagely mutilated and killed a dead woman you're both staring at?

"Do this? No." Tina pointed to my feet. "Honey, your baggie's slipping."

Her tone was matter-of-fact. I might have asked if she ate the last slice of pie.

I felt a strange kind of admiration as I watched Tina pluck a few Kleenex out of a box by the bed and start to wipe things down: the

nightstand, the headboard, the light switch. Then the bathroom, where she attacked the sink and toilet.

“Under the seat,” she said, lifting and lowering, “the one place bad guys always forget. I saw it on *CSI*.”

“How would people fight crime without prime-time television?”

“I don’t know,” she said, “but one wrong move and I’m going to be on Court TV explaining why I’m in Harry Zell’s house. With you as my character witness.”

“Is my character that bad?”

“I think it’s sterling. But on paper you’re a little sketchy.”

“Forget I asked. What are you really doing here?”

“I told you, I *really* wanted to find out about the man who hired us—make sure he pays.”

“No, I mean now. What are you doing? Why are you fucking around with the body?”

“Why are you asking me so many questions?”

“You don’t think it’s questionable?” Whatever calm I had was beginning to curl at the edges. “And speaking of questionable, I still don’t know what happened to you in the minivan.”

“What happened to *me*? You’re the one who disappeared.”

“I disappeared? Is that what you call getting hit on the head, dragged out of the Christian ho van and locked to my trailer toilet?”

Dinah’s still-open eyes held me fast. There’s nothing quite like the feeling of being judged by a corpse. I stepped over to close her eyes, but the lids wouldn’t stay down. They kept flying back open like tenement blinds. Finally I closed them again and pressed down on her lids, but not too hard. It felt a little like pressing on a chocolate-covered cherry. I imagined the lifetime of horror in store if I accidentally caused postmortem eyeball burst. But I couldn’t take her unblinking stare. I eased my fingers off the lids and they stayed shut for a few seconds. Then the left one opened up halfway and stayed

there, so it looked, despite her fatal mutilation, like she was only pretending to be dead and was trying to keep an eye on things.

I heard myself gulp and tore my gaze away from the peeking dead woman, back to Tina. “This is the wrong place for a fight,” I said. “We need to think.”

Tina stopped what she was doing and nodded. “I agree.”

“Okay, good. So what do we have? Basically, the guy has a dead wife with a kosher sex fetish.”

“That’s not all we have.”

Tina opened her purse and pulled out a framed photo. Twin brothers. Pimply thirteen-year-olds. Teenagers. One buff, one slender, in matching talliths and yarmulkes. They flanked their father and his new bride, the late Mrs. Zell, in an elaborate powder-blue dress. The buff brother held a Torah in his arms, resting the scrolls against his shoulder like he was burping a baby.

“Look familiar?”

I squinted. “I’m not sure. I think that’s Temple Beth El. The one where you have to know Barbra Streisand to get seats for the High Holidays. I’ve seen it in the paper.”

“I’m not talking about the temple, you idiot. I mean the boys. Remind you of anyone? Check the one on the left.”

“Bernstein! Jesus Christ . . . I’m surprised you recognized him with his clothes on.”

“Manny, let it go,” she said. “It was part of the job. Anyway, that’s not what makes him hard to recognize. He’s got hair. And no glasses.”

“Not to mention no neck ink.”

“I think they save the neck ink till after the Bar Mitzvah. Or maybe Reform’s different. It *is* his Bar Mitzvah, right?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s their dad’s wedding.” I searched the photo for clues. The rabbi wore a *shmidok* just like mine, a fellow

tribesman. “That’s a pretty fancy dress. Maybe it was a Bar Mitzvah/wedding combo. ‘Today I am a man—and my father just married a sheet-hole-crazy shiksa.’”

“Imagine what that must do to a boy.”

“Well, in Bernstein’s case, it set him on the happy road to San Quentin and the ALS. But the other one.” I tapped my finger on the second brother’s face. Something about the tilt of the head, the cast of the eyes, how he peered up at his brother . . . the perpetually unheralded second son.

Then it clicked.

“*Wait!*” I took the photo and studied it closer, angling it to catch the light. “That’s Davey! He’s in my class—or what’s left of him. He tried to blow himself away but only got the bottom of his face. He’s a medical miracle. Mengele operated on him.”

“Mengele does surgery in prison?”

Tina had just finished wiping the place down. I observed her, fighting powder-blue seasickness. “We really should leave,” I said.

Tina took a last swipe at the bathroom doorknob. “We are leaving. Answer the question. Do they let that genocidal freak do surgery?”

“Yeah, I think he gets to operate. There’s a whole other world in there.”

I grabbed a Kleenex from the “designer” box by the bed. It showed a Currier and Ives–inspired winter scene: a covered bridge in New England, a wagon with Mom, Dad and two towheaded children on the way to Grandmother’s house. NO JEWS HERE might as well have been inscribed under the sheet count.

“Did you say something?”

“Mumbling.” I covered the sliding lock on the garden door with a designer Kleenex and unlocked it. Then I remembered. “He’s also doing RDP.”

“Rapid detox? He’s curing junkies up there?”

“He got one of them off junk. I don’t know if that’s the same as curing. Nobody I know ever stayed clean without kicking. Anyway, we need to leave. Someone’s bound to wander back here.”

“Who? The maid’s high as a Ping-Pong ball, and the boys are in San Quentin.”

“What about Zell?”

“He’s up there, too,” she said. “I saw a receipt for a plane ticket.”

“Man, how much more of that place is there to film?”

“Maybe he’s not shooting prisoners.”

“Then what is he doing?”

“Mengele,” we both said at once.

Tina eagle-eyed a piece of white lint on the carpet—anything not powder blue stood out boldly—and crouched to pick it up.

“You’re really wearing the full Jew, aren’t you? I’d kind of like to fuck you in it. This is the closest you’ve ever looked to innocent.”

I stared over Tina’s head back at Dinah—still sprawled on her blue bed, body down and face up. I was conflicted, to say the least. Then the phone rang. Tina pulled away. I shook my head “*No!*”

Tina ignored me and answered.

“Zell residence,” she said, sounding Russian. She put a finger to her lips. “Mmm-hmm. Mmmm-hmm. All right, I tell him.”

She hung up and shrugged. “Somebody named Mendel. Zell’s yarmulke is ready.”

“Nice accent. You’re so good at this.”

“First thing they tell you in acting class. Pretend the situation is real.”

“What’s that like?” I said, cracking the garden door a little wider. A stone path led through the beits and alephs and zaftig topiary ladies. I wondered what the gardeners thought.

“Anybody home?”

I recognized the halting Russian accent of my driver, Jack. Tina grabbed the clamshell trash can over her head and rushed behind the

bedroom door. He walked in and she slammed the can down on his skull. Jack blinked at me, perplexed. As he crumbled, Tina pushed him. He landed on the bed, on top of the late Mrs. Zell's middle.

"Why did you do that? He's my *driver*." Tina ignored me and went to work on Jack's black wingtips. "What the fuck are you doing?"

"What's it look like I'm doing? Untying his shoes, then I'm going to take his pants off."

She unbuckled his belt and popped the buttons on his pants.

"You could help, you know."

"Wait! I *like* the guy."

"That's nice. When this blows over, you can go bowling together."

"Tina, what the fuck are you doing?"

"You have to ask?"

"I don't know what to ask first."

Why am I even here? That was the thing about being attracted to a borderline personality. I found myself doing things normal people didn't do, and going along, because *I* was a borderline personality.

This was the woman I loved. We pulled the driver's pants down in tandem, our heads nearly above him. I wanted to get out of there, but Tina was Tina.

"I'm sure there's a good reason you're messing with a crime scene."

"What do you think?" She wiped a bead of sweat off her arm. "Maybe Zell hired somebody to kill her. She might have flipped out and told him what she thought about him teaming up with Mengele. Or maybe she was so upset, she wanted to check herself out."

I gave up and left the driver's pants at his knees. "Or somebody killed her to get back at Zell."

"Please. You think one wife more or less makes a difference? The man's been married five times."

"Three. You always embellish."

Tina aimed a gaze of pure uranium.

"Harry Zell deserves to hang for doing *any* kind of business with

Mengele. And believe me, when word gets out his wife died in the saddle, riding kosher, he's going to squirm."

"You're doing this to make Zell feel worse? It's not bad enough his wife's dead—he has to hear she went out riding Chasid?"

"Believe me, it will hurt him more than her fling with the club tennis pro."

"How do you know she did that?"

"They all do."

I leaned down to my pal Jack. He was still breathing. Unconscious, but among the living. Thank God.

"You know," I said, "if Zell's behind this, what's he going to think when he hears his wife had an affair after he killed her?"

"What would you think?"

"I don't know, but it would make me nervous. I'd think somebody knew something."

"Well then. Let's do this and get out of here."

Tina's cheekbones shone with the effort of moving two full-grown humans around. Her concentration was fearsome.

"This doesn't freak you out, Tina?"

"The world freaks me out. All I'm trying to do is control a little bit of the freakdom."

"Yeah, well," I said, "Jack here may have a different opinion."

"Hey, he's in it, too." Tina flashed me her *man up* look. "The good news is he's never seen your face when you weren't Orthodox."

"Tina, for fuck's sake, I'm not talking about him ID'ing me. I'm talking about him waking up naked next to a dead woman. He doesn't deserve this."

"And we do?" Tina threw up her hands. "C'mon, Manny, like this is your first time at the dance?"

"What the fuck does that mean?"

"It means we need a smoke screen. Or would you rather be the prime suspect?" A sleep bubble of saliva appeared between Jack's lips,

and she reached down to pop it. “Do you *want* an APB out on your ass? ’Cause I guarantee, if we’d let your boy just walk in and find a dead lady, the first thought in his head would be that you did it.”

“I told you, he thinks I’m somebody else.”

She glared. “So do I—’cause you didn’t used to be this dense. What are you, on crack? How hard do you think it would be to trace you back to the airport? How many Chasids do you think flew in today? They’ll track you all the way back to SF—or wherever the hell you got the bright idea of dressing up like the Baal Shem fucking Tov. You ever think of finding a disguise that blended in?”

“They didn’t sell wigs in the Quentin gift shop. I had to improvise.”

“Oh, baby.” Tina sighed and touched my nose, the one part of my face that didn’t have hair sprouting out of it. “I can’t believe we’re bickering. Open his mouth.”

“What for?”

“For these.”

Tina opened her fist on a handful of white pills. “Rufies.”

“Why are you walking around with Rufies?”

“I’m not. They’re Zell’s. Or hers. I guess they liked to party. You think you’re the only one who raids medicine cabinets?”

“I don’t do that anymore.”

“You’re a credit to your race. I just thought they might come in handy. And see that, they have! C’mon, hold his mouth open. We shove a couple of these down his gullet, it’s gonna look like date rape.”

“Right.” I didn’t move. “Why don’t we slaughter a chicken and write ‘Kill the Pigs’ in blood on the wall, too? Just to throw ’em off. Make it look like some kosher Santeria Manson thing.”

“You’re missing the point.”

“The point doesn’t matter. If we try to stick them down his throat while he’s out, he might choke to death.”

“And?”

Now I was doing the glaring, and Tina backed off. “And any third-

rate coroner would find the things undissolved in his thoracic tube and know they were shoved in postmortem. I can't believe I'm even *having* this conversation."

Tina closed her fingers back around the pills and crossed her arms. "Okay, Rabbi, then what?"

"Then nothing. Let's just finish this and get out of here."

"Man of action," she said. "That's why I love you."

It took us another minute to reposition poor Jack on top of the hole-y sheet and the late Mrs. Zell naked underneath.

"I'm surprised her pubes aren't baby blue," Tina said. "Do you want to put him through the hole?"

"Are you kidding me?"

Tina started to reach for the driver's crotch but I pushed her hand away. The only thing more revolting than grabbing his johnson myself would be watching Tina do it. I knew that she'd banked on my reaction. She knew it, too, and smiled.

"Look at you, manning up!"

"Tina, please. Not now."

Holding my breath, I tried to grab Jack's organ. But somehow it had gotten wedged between his balls and his thigh, and when I tried to move his scrotum, the spongy dampness gave me a shock. "*Yec-chhh!*" Either Jack suffered copious testicle sweats, or he'd urinated when Tina knocked him out.

"What's the matter?"

"Sweaty," I managed to say without gagging, and jammed my hand back down for a second try. This time I got a grip on his organ—and thought I felt it stir. I wasn't sure, but as I tried to extract the thing it began to swell. "Oh, Jesus!" I said, and let it go.

"Now what?" Tina snapped.

"I don't know," I said. "Can the comatose get hand jobs?"

"For Christ's sake," Tina replied, "I know you liked the guy, but this is ridiculous."

“Fuck you,” I said. Biting down on my lip, I guided the now rubbery organ, which felt like a dog toy, through the opening in the fabric, in the general proximity of Mrs. Zell’s landing strip, then rushed to the bathroom.

“I have to wash my hands.”

“Not there, I cleaned.” With her baggied hand, Tina eased open a bed-stand drawer. “You’d get more germs on a doorknob. Now where do you think they keep the handcuffs?”

“No!” I ass-bumped the drawer shut and grabbed my ex by the arm. “Baby, *enough*. We’re leaving.”

The first stab of sun was startling after the aquarium light of the bedroom. As we darted from sculptured nymph shrub to six-foot aleph, I kept wiping my hands compulsively on my pants and complaining. “I still don’t see what posing the driver accomplishes.”

“Could you stop whining for one second?” Tina hissed.

I stopped and faced her. “I am not whining. I’m just saying, now that we’ve done it, making a crime scene look like Jewish fetish sex gone wrong might not even help us that much. It’ll take a good criminalist three minutes to figure the scene was staged.”

“Maybe, maybe not. But if you’re Harry Zell, and you already know your wife’s proclivities, you probably don’t want the rest of the world to find out about them.”

“That,” I said, “or he comes back with a crew to get it on film. Mostly I just feel bad about the driver.”

“Enough with the goddamn driver!” Tina stopped beside a buxom sprite hacked from a juniper tree. “Did you even know him? This jim-jim picks you up, lets you think he believes you’re someone else, and just drives you around? Really? How do you know he wasn’t biding his time, waiting for orders?”

“From who? Diva Limousines? I’m just glad I tipped him big.”

“Don’t be. That just makes you more suspicious.”

Tina stopped and looked around. Dust motes circled in the shafts of light that made it through the overgrown shrubs and trees. “I keep expecting a fucking unicorn to come trotting out.”

“Jew-nicorn,” I whispered back as we started moving again.

Tina punched me in the stomach.

“*Owfff* . . . What was that for?”

“Fuck, Manny, if we’re going to be together, I need to feel like you can protect me.”

I contemplated a ten-foot bush carved into Hebrew letters: **ברשית** (in the beginning). The first line of Genesis. I recognized it from my Bar Mitzvah, where I’d had to sing it right out of the Torah. I had no idea, at the time, I’d be cashing in my Israeli gift bonds for drugs.

“First of all,” I said, willing myself back to the present as we started moving again, “I didn’t know *we* were together. You left, remember?”

We hadn’t gone ten feet when we faced a black metal gate. Tina reached for the handle and I grabbed her, spinning her back toward me. “Second,” I said, holding her by her shoulders, “knocking somebody out with a trash can is not the same as protecting. Shit like that creates more problems than it solves. And you don’t want to leave prints on the gate.”

“Yeah,” she said, her voice suddenly sultry, “tell me what to do, Daddy.”

She stood on her toes to kiss me but I pushed her away. “Not here.”

“Why not?”

“This is Brentwood. We probably triggered ten kinds of motion detectors and a silent alarm crossing the yard.”

I ripped a fern leaf big enough to cover my hand and unlatched the door.

“You know what I wish?” she said, before stepping through. “I wish we could just talk about normal stuff. Like normal people.”

“Such as?”

“I don’t know, that’s the problem. We’re in the black Prius.”

“What happened to the Virgin pussy wagon?”

“I got tired of that giant-ass carbon footprint. A girlfriend loaned me her Prius.” By “loaned,” I suspected, she meant “left the keys in.” But this wasn’t the time to press.

Sure enough, the black Prius waited like a cute puppy on the other side of the Hebrew jungle. But before Tina and I tiptoed out of the copse, she pulled me back. “I’m with you now, Manny. But where the fuck are you?”

“Meaning what?” I was getting sick of dramatic pronouncements.

“Meaning, I love you, but you shouldn’t do drugs. They’re not your friends.”

“And you think they’re yours?”

“Hey, I’m not the one in a beaver hat and a Bobover makeover. I’m functioning.”

I had nothing to say to that. The limo I’d arrived in was still parked kitty-corner on the lush street. Some men in suits milled behind it, conferring with their backs to us. We ducked silently out of the shadows to her Prius. Tina started the soundless engine. She U-turned out of the mega-upscale Brentwood lane and aimed us back down to Sunset.

For a minute and a half I steamed with indignation, but that passed by the time we made it to the first stop sign. “Shit, Tina. You’re right. I am fucking up. I got into some strange powder I found up there under my trailer.”

“Under your trailer?”

“Don’t ask. It came in a Red Cross box. But I was fucking up before that. I should have gotten more on Zell in the first place. Scoped

out his home and office. That's the reason I came back to L.A. But I didn't expect to find his wife dead and you in his bathroom. I'm just"—I knew I had to dial back the emotion, but I'd been numb for a while—"I'm just really happy to see you."

Tina took her eyes off the road and scrutinized me while she steered. "Look at us, huh? Maybe we had to pull a Burton and Taylor. Split up just so we could reconnect."

Somehow the prospect sounded as tiring as it did exciting. I said, "I don't know, baby." But when I stared at her, I did know.

Today, from a certain angle, she looked Björkish. Critical cheekbones and straight bangs over her eyes. The sirens closing in made the moment movie dramatic. Maybe the ditzzy housekeeper finally checked on the lady of the house. Or maybe the driver came to.

"Zell's got an at-home office. His den," Tina said quietly. I groaned, realizing I'd forgotten to check. Tina read my mind. "That's all right. *I* remembered. But he's one of those guys who keeps everything in his head." Then, not bothering with a transition—mutual ADD made transitions unnecessary—she added, "You need to lose these."

She snatched my fur brim and forelocks and flipped them into the backseat.

"There, Detective, you look better already."

"Detective. What lifetime was that?" I said, tugging my tallith off. "But I like you in a Prius. You make it look dangerous."

"I'm all about saving energy, sir. But the smart money's in solar vibrators. You want to talk about where we go next?"

"I was just thinking about that," I lied. "I was hired to get information on the doctor, but so far I've found out more about the guy who hired me."

"Hey, somebody hires you to identify Josef Mengele, you want to know all about your employer."

"A life tip I only wish I'd have heard earlier. I get impulsive."

"It's funny, him having twins in Quentin. Especially with the king of twin dissection in the house. Maybe it's coincidence, but it's still weird."

"Not as weird as him having a big Jew son who's a shot-caller in the ALS."

"Which reminds me." Tina fished in her open purse between her legs on the seat, then gave up, muttering to herself. "Fuck it, I can live without a cigarette. . . . I think. But I forgot to mention. His second wife's maiden name was Bernstein."

"Good work."

"Not really. I found his canceled checks."

Just then we heard peals of laughter. A car full of white teenagers whooped it up at a red light beside us. The driver wore his L.A. Kings cap sideways. He worked a gangster lean and gunned the engine.

"BMW M6, convertible," Tina said. "A hundred and thirty-nine thousand dollars."

When the driver saw Tina staring, he flipped her off.

"Oh yeah, baby," Tina moaned, "my daddy runs a studio and I'm all pimped up and I take biology at Crossroads with Dustin Hoffman's nephew."

I glanced past her. The acned Romeo behind the wheel started smooching a cheerleader, holding his extended middle finger behind her head. The hip-hop consumers in the backseat hooted appreciatively. A whiff of weed drifted up at us.

Tina looked over at me. "I bet if he had some kind of little accident, he wouldn't file a police report. Even if the kush was medicinal."

When the light changed, Tina sharked the car forward a length and cut left. The Beemer swerved to avoid her and jumped the curb, clipping a trash bin and a mailbox before screeching to a bumper-dragging stop a few feet from a bus bench.

Tina continued at the speed limit, composed as a soccer mom on Xanax.

“Was that necessary?” I said.

“I’m helping the economy,” she replied. “The front end alone is going to give a body shop work for a week. So what were you saying?”

“You might want to get on the freeway. I doubt Ferris Bueller and his pals got your license number. But it might be a good idea to put some distance between you and your moving violation. For fuck’s sake, Tina!”

She rolled her eyes. “Could we just go back to what we’re talking about?”

“Fine. I was saying I still need to do what I said I was going to do. Find out more about Mengele.”

“Have you Googled him?” Tina shuddered. “The fan sites are really creepy.”

“How’s his Facebook page. That’s what I need to know about. The new Mengele. The one who’s up there bragging in Quentin—and the people colluding with him, for whatever un-fucking-godly reason. We have him picked up, we might never know what his deal is—and who he’s got deals with. It might be Zell, the warden . . . who the hell knows?”

“It’s pretty easy to discredit a ninety-seven-year-old war criminal who’s been taking meth.”

“If it is meth. As opposed to, say, crystallized Gypsy adrenaline.”

“Nice.”

“I’m not making it up. But why discredit the prick when you can just kill him? Anybody with something to hide gets wind Dr. Death is on the hook, all they gotta do is blow on him and he’d keel over. I only have till tomorrow morning. I wanted to see you; now we need to meet with what’s-her-name, the born-again hooker who did Mengele.”

“Cathy,” she said. “Only . . . there may be a problem.”

Tina chewed her lip and clamped the wheel a little harder.

“I know you, baby. When you say ‘little problem,’ grown men duck. You have a previous engagement or what?”

“Not me, but Cathy, the girl . . .”

“All I want to do is meet her. Ten, fifteen minutes.”

“You can meet her,” she said, “she just might not be there, if you know what I mean. . . . After her date with Mengele, she started hitting the crank pretty hard. Oh!”

As was her manner, Tina changed the subject on a dime. She unclamped her purse, digging through God knows what, and held up a black T-shirt.

“You like?”

“Please tell me that isn’t Zell’s.”

“Of course not. It’s James Perse. Come on, take the coat off. And lose the face beaver.”

“What, you don’t think I look biblical?”

“You look,” she said, “like what would happen if Lincoln had unprotected sex with Bette Midler.”

This seemed like a good time to try chewing my mustache, just to see what Mengele got out of the practice. But I stopped as soon as I started. The lip fur got wet right away, and after that it was like nibbling a damp sweater. Tina saw me chomping and made a face. “That is really disgusting.”

“I’m just trying to see why *he* does it. What’s so disgusting about it?”

We swung into the freeway on-ramp and got in line behind a Hummer. Tina took a sidelong glance and considered. “You know how hypnotists in movies are always telling volunteers to act like chickens? You look like some hypnotist told you to eat pussy.”

“Only you,” I said, and fingered the tainted fur away from my mouth. “Maybe it’s different when it’s your own hair.”

As the Prius idled behind the tank-sized Hummer Tina gunned the engine, an eager puppy snapping at a bear. When it was our turn to go, she reached over and ripped off the beard, then floored it and shot onto the 405. For a few seconds it hurt so much I went blind. Then I

saw pain stars on the inside of my eyelids. I had to wipe tears off with my sleeve.

“You enjoyed that,” I said when I could see again.

Tina cackled. She changed lanes with abandon and recited like a schoolgirl, “‘Bliss like thine is bought by years / Dark with torment and with tears.’”

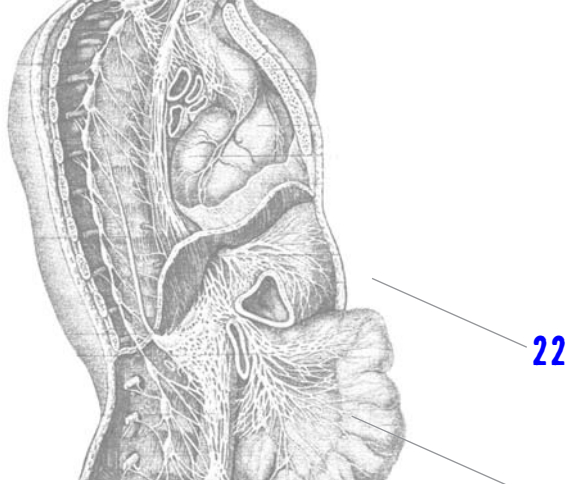
“Now you’re busting out Def Leppard lyrics?”

“Close. Emily Brontë.” She ran her fingers down my cheek and I winced. My face felt like it had been dragged over a cheese grater, then steam ironed and doused with hot sauce. . . . When I could speak again, I remembered the shirt I was twisting in my hands and held it up. “So who’s James Perse—and why do you have his shirt?”

“It’s not his shirt, you idiot. He’s the designer. They sell him at Barney’s. I found an old credit card and got myself a gift certificate. Then I bought something for you.”

“Thanks,” I said, gingerly touching my cheek to see if I was bleeding. “Sometimes I forget how thoughtful you are.”

Tina leaned over and kissed me, right where it burned. “You’re welcome, baby. Now relax. They can’t arrest you for wearing something that costs over twenty dollars.”



Christian Fun Girls

Reverend D's Reseda crib was a two-story slats-falling-off-the-roof semi-dump next to a 7-Eleven in Van Nuys. The rev financed it with joint grants from ex-president Bush's Abstinence First Foundation, the Family Research Council, and State of California Prop. 486, which allocated funds for halfway houses and prison work-fare programs.

"Four girls bunk upstairs, four down. Two to a room," Tina said, giving me the tour. "Then there's the reverend's office-slash-bedroom."

"Sounds very Hugh Hefner."

"Yeah," said Tina, "it's just like the mansion, except skanky and in the Valley. With no grotto."

Stepping over a teddy bear with a cross on his chest—"Watch out for Jesus Bear!"—we entered the reverend's spiritual headquarters. I AM CHASTE! was painted on the cottage cheese ceiling, directly over a water bed with a giant Ten Commandments scroll propped behind it. Two cameras on tripods rested against a backdrop of Golgotha on the wall opposite.

On a battered metal desk I found a stack of Christian Fun Girls video offerings, old-time VHSs. On the first box, a buxom Latina in a toga stared off the cover, her collagened lips parted suggestively as she stole a sloe-eyed glance over her shoulder at a manly Roman soldier. I saw the title and held it up for Tina. “*Spermin’ on the Mount*? Are you fucking kidding me? This is a genre?”

“Hey, I’m not saying it’s on par with *Rapture Babes*, okay?” She indicated the boxed set underneath. *Rapture Babes* I through IV featured a bevy of wholesome, panty-clad Midwestern girls who would have been carded had they tried to buy cigarettes. And the director’s comments. The corn-fed talent gazed heavenward, arms over their heads and clothes in a heap at their feet, as though ready to ascend and back that thing up for the Lord. The back of the box showed one doe-eyed blond believer, on her knees in front of the Son of God, who resembled Steve Railsback playing Manson in a TV movie. “Tina, listen to this. ‘What girl wouldn’t want to give a lap dance to Jesus? Well, Tammi Nelson is about to get her chance.’”

“I’ve seen that one,” she said. “Jesus tipped big.”

I tossed the videos back on the desk, beside a motel Bible. “How much money does he pull in turning out young churchgoing girls?”

“He doesn’t exactly turn them out. He’d tell you he was putting the shield of Christ between their legs.”

“*Ladies—why settle for regular old panty shields when you can get . . . the Shield of Christ!*” Actually, that sounds pretty good. *I’d* buy it, if I had a Christian vagina. I didn’t even know He had a shield.”

“You haven’t read the New Testament. Anyway, he makes most of his money from downloads. I mean the reverend, not Jesus.”

“Either way. Religion’s kind of like the ultimate free download.”

Tina gave me her patented eye-roll. “Heavy. We supply content for a dozen different Christian sex sites, including a bunch we run out of here. Studio’s upstairs.”

I unfolded a glossy brochure featuring thumbnails and titles. “So

if I'd sodomized you in the snailback, I'd have ended up in one of these?"

"‘The loins, the place of the Last Judgment.’ William Blake," she intoned. "There are a lot of ways to be saved."

"I'm getting that. You didn't answer the question."

"Okay, then. No. You would not have ended up on video."

I was ready for some righteous indignation; now I felt shunned. "Why not?"

She hesitated, then closed the file drawer with a bang. "Because the lens cap was still on. I was so excited to see you, I got sloppy."

I didn't say anything. Sometimes it was enough just to watch her. Tina raised her chin, flicking her bangs out of her eyes, something she did when she wanted to make a point. Especially when the point was *Fuck you*. Tina stood on her toes and plunged her arm in the top drawer of a filing cabinet, up to the shoulder. She retrieved a few catalogues and tossed them over her shoulders. Finally, finding what she wanted, she yanked her arm and yelped, "It's a girl!" before throwing a vividly veined, fur-clefted dog toy in my direction.

I caught the thing, which was as nauseatingly moist to the touch as my San Quentin trailer mattress.

"Porta-pussy," Tina explained helpfully while I held the squishy device away from my face.

"Tell me it's not damp because it's been used," I pleaded.

"Not in a while, anyway," she replied reassuringly.

I studied the tawny, disembodied fur slit, trying to figure out which side was upside-down—if there *was* an upside-down. "This must be the ultimate dream date for guys who really want to fuck rubber chickens with hair."

"Don't knock it till you try it," Tina said.

"Who's knocking it? I'm surprised he's not selling them for fifty a pop on the yard at Quentin."

"The Doc Johnson people made a fortune on them in the eighties. But the reverend was first into Christian sex toys."

"Born-again dildos. Who knew? The man's a trailblazer."

"Baby," Tina huffed, "that stuff's just for Christian freaks. Once he got the idea of pimping sanctified live vaginas, he forgot about the rubber ones."

"The only Christian freak I'm really curious about is the reverend. I've met him, remember? And now you're living under his roof."

"Just while he's gone. I'm getting five grand a week to play den mother."

"And doing a hell of a job. Come on, what else? He let you direct?"

"I was going to. We were actually working on a script. A feature. He got financing for race porn. Basically triple-X with an Aryan message."

"An Aryan message? Look at you, Leni Riefenshtup!"

"Fuck you, Manny. It's not like they're really Nazis. I mean, the producer's a black man, and they're written and directed by an ex-addict and prostitute with some Canuck in her blood."

"And let me guess, featuring the ever popular stock character *der Geile Jude*."

"What's that?"

"The Libidinous Jew. One of the only things I remember from my brief stint in a college."

"Come on, we wouldn't shoot you from the waist up. Where's your sense of humor? Porn is more mainstream than the Special Olympics. I figured I could do something subversive. We could bill you as 'the Lion of Zion.'"

"I prefer 'Hebrew National.'"

"I don't care if you call yourself Shecky Mazeltov. I just think we could do something subversive."

"I'm sure that would really impress the cineastes on D Block. Let me give *you* a quote, baby. 'Self-delusion is the key to happiness.' Voltaire. It's the only one I know."

"Then how come you're not happy?"

I must have looked stricken. She burst out laughing.

"Just kidding. You're right. It's a stupid idea. *Mein Cunt*. Anyway, it's not going to happen. Not with me. The rev's shot a lot of white power porn, but usually just sex scenes strung together. He finds film school geeks to work on them."

"The world's full of sleazy gigs. They're the only ones left." I went back to riffling the reverend's drawers so I wouldn't be looking at her when I asked what I was about to ask. I couldn't help myself. "Tina," I said, "just tell me you weren't turning tricks."

"Honey," she replied wearily, "do you know how many times you've asked me that? I'm strictly in administration."

"Administration? You make it sound like it's the gas company."

"Come on, Manny! I did the hands-on stuff when I was a teenager, okay? You never had a job that made you hate yourself?" She saw the look on my face. "Dumb question."

"Forget it," I said. "You know me, I don't acknowledge my feelings. I just fall off the wagon, then wake up in Cleveland with a bag full of toupees and blood on my pants."

"So what feelings are eating you up now?"

"Besides what happens in my chest when I look at you? It's Mengele. Dinah Zell. The whole thing."

"Gotta learn to compartmentalize, baby."

"Is that what it's called?"

I dumped out an envelope of smudgy receipts for "love offerings" made out to Foundation for Christian Love Ministries, another of the reverend's DBA names.

I stole a glance at Tina. The Björk resemblance disappeared. Pissed off, her face shape-shifted. Took on that that Susan Tyrell/Faye Dun-

away kind of scary beauty. Cheekbones of death. Savage in repose.

"I like the water-bed-next-to-the-desk arrangement," I said, scooping up a batch of canceled checks and pre-stamped U-Serve money orders. "But the bookkeeping's a little shaky."

The top drawer, when I tugged it open, spilled a small library of Thai takeout flyers. The drawer beneath was stuffed with sanctioned twelve-step booklets, mixed with homemade pamphlets containing the reverend's inspirational thoughts and sermons. The pamphlets were hand-assembled, folded-over pages copied on a Xerox machine that needed toner and hand-stapled on the crease. The first pamphlet I grabbed featured a sketch of a long-haired girl with one hand propped on the wall over a toilet, one hand shoved in her mouth. Over the picture was a line of Gothic script that I read to Tina: "The Second Word in Heaven Is Heave."

Tina stiffened. "That one's about bulimia. Most of the girls have eating disorders. There's some wing of OA in the Valley that donates bed and board for Christian overeaters."

"Whatever helps."

Tina slammed the bottom drawer shut. "This is pointless. We need his computer for addresses."

"So the rev cranks out white power porn and born-again jerk-off fodder. I still don't get exactly what business Zell did with him."

"I'm pretty sure it had to do with distribution."

"Of course. Zell's a big Jew."

Tina gave me a funny look.

"It's an expression," I said. "I heard it from Mama Mendel, mother of Solly Mendel, the yarmulke king. . . . Long story."

"You do look good in kosher," she said, smiling.

"Enough, okay? Let me think. We already found out Harry Zell's son is a card-carrying star of ALS. It's no stretch to imagine Daddy bankrolling white supremacist sex-ertainment. Maybe he sells it to the Aryans exclusive."

“What if Bernstein’s just in with the Aryans to do family business?”

“In that case I hope those swastikas on his neck wash off.”

“He can wear a tallith.”

“How do you know about talliths?”

“Client wanted a girl to dress up.”

“Like a rabbi?”

“Cantor. He wanted her to sing. One of the girls knew ‘Hava Nagila’ from interfaith camp.”

“You know, I’m dying to find out more about your thing with Reverend D. But I’m dying even more to know about your friend Bernstein. He did everything but kiss Mengele’s ring when he met him. And Mengele shined him on. That’s what doesn’t figure. You look at the old fuck for two minutes, it’s obvious he’s this craven, narcissistic, dried-up praise sponge.”

Tina shrugged. “Did you forget? Bernstein is Jewish.”

“I didn’t forget, but in prison Jews are white and whites stick together.”

“Maybe in prison, but not in concentration camps. Think about it,” Tina said. “Mengele came from eugenics. Caucasian or not, at Auschwitz, Jews weren’t even considered human.”

“I love that you know this stuff,” I told her, and meant it. “I’m crazy about your looks, and your body, too. But I really fucking love you for your brains.”

“You better,” she said, but I could tell she liked hearing it.

I dug into the pile and plucked out another pamphlet. In this one centurions whipped Jesus while he held up a Holy Bible. A thought balloon over his head said, “The Jew calls this a dirty book!” Historical Jew-hate, disturbing as it was, was at least history. The sight of anti-Semitic literature as modern as *Gossip Girl* triggered a much more visceral fear. Not because it could happen here, but because it was happening.

An involuntary shudder made my lip twitch. “Business or no busi-

ness, it's one thing for a Jewish dad to have a son in San Quentin, it's another to have him join a white prison gang and drink the Third Reich Kool-Aid."

"Otherwise known as Powdered Hitler," said Tina, "but Zell has *two* sons." She kicked me in the shin. "What about brother Davey? Zell could be paying Mengele to give the poor kid a jaw. I hate to say it, but you probably do get mad scalpel skills when you practice on living flesh instead of cadavers."

"That would mean Mengele takes money from a Jew."

"Oh, please," said Tina, "money's green, no matter who touches it."

"Color me naïve," I sighed, and settled back to watch Tina pick a nurse's uniform off a rolling rack full of them. NANCY was stitched over the left breast.

"Don't tell me, he's running a home health care service, too?"

"That's one way to describe it. Nurses are the number-one fantasy."

A shoe rack, like you'd find in a bowling alley, took up most of the wall behind the uniforms. Half the rack was full of nursing shoes. I stepped over and picked a pair at random. The size was shocking. Eighteen, triple E.

"Who's this for, Nurse Shaq?"

"Some of the T-girls run big. You'd be surprised at the special requests."

"I doubt it." Then something occurred to me. "I wonder why Davey didn't honk on being Bernstein's brother. Having a bro who's a wheel in the Aryans could make life easy."

Tina stopped. "Maybe Davey is the modest type."

"Or maybe Davey and his dad weren't so sure Mengele didn't care who touched his money. Nazi doctors viewed Gypsies and Jews as two-legged tumors. So maybe they figured Mengele might accidentally forget to sterilize his instruments if he knew he was transplanting

a jaw into a Jewish face. That's a pretty big reason to conceal Bernstein and Davey's fraternal bond. I'm gonna be looking over my shoulder till we figure out if Mengele and Zell are partners or enemies."

"Don't drive yourself crazy; plenty of people are both."

Tina hung the nurse wear back up and plucked a gingham dress off the rack. The collar was high and lacy and it buttoned up to the chin, in the pervy-wholesome fashion favored by schoolmarms in Westerns. "So how's your daughter, by the way?"

"What makes you ask about Lola? The schoolmarm dress?" It was a look I never got. "She's over her granny phase. Which I kind of miss. I had lunch with her a month ago and she showed up in a body stocking and hoodie. One of her friends saw us. Later she asked Lola what it was like dating a cool old nerd."

"That's sweet."

"Don't," I said. "I don't even like talking about her in a place like this. We should go."

"Fine. We can leave now if you want." Tina rehung the gingham and selected a white leather coat with a fur collar. Then she put that back and grabbed a tight gray coat that buttoned from the ankles up. It fit like it was happy to be there. "The thing is, we're fucked without the computer. We're gonna have to depend on Cathy to remember where Mengele lived. Come on."

"Where to?"

"Well," she said, "Reverend D calls it the guest bedroom, but that's kind of a stretch."

Upstairs, I saw what Tina meant about the bedroom. We walked in on three female residents. The trio were all in ratty panties, smoking crystal from a glass-bulbed pipe and sprawled on a stained shag carpet. It was hard to say what the original color might have been. The

air had a chemical tinge. From the doorway, the girls seemed to be marooned on an island of Romilar DM bottles, empty forty-ounce Cobras, spilled-over ashtrays, odd bits of circuitry and shiny metal parts and cereal bowls brimming with yellow-gold liquid.

“Tell me that’s apple juice,” I said.

“You pee, you lose your turn,” Tina explained. “The good news, on crank you don’t pee much. You forget.”

“It’s the little things,” I said.

Sheets had been tacked over the windows and a “Viva Viagra” commercial played on the unwatched fifty-inch flat-screen propped against a wall with the sound off. A few mattresses, minus sheets, were shoved in a corner. Beside the leaning TV stood a wooden podium with CHRISTIAN LOVE hand-stenciled on the front and a red Bible on it. None of the tweakerettes so much as noticed when we entered. Two of the young ladies, one Latina and one black, fought lethargically over the glass stem. “Pipe is mines, bitch.” “Bullshit. I will kick your funky black ass right now.” You had the feeling they’d been arguing for five years.

A few crumbs spilled from a baggy on a cracked dinner plate between them. But neither appeared energetic enough to do more than bicker. The Latina, who might have been under thirty if she lied on her driver’s license, owned a pair of impossibly firm torpedo breasts. They stuck straight out, titanium solid and far too large for the popsicle stick Darfur rib cage saddled with the task of supporting them. It occurred to me that maybe she couldn’t stand up. She’d just have to loll on the ground, victim of crank and gravity, until somebody hauled her off or she smoked herself down to nothing, leaving only those twin towers and a pair of cracked lips to show she ever existed. The black crank fanatic trying to snatch the pipe was just as sucked up, but a foot taller, with deep-set eyes and a big crucifix dangling between her much daintier bosoms. The way Jesus dangled in her cleavage, it looked like He was dying to stretch out his arms on the cross and squeeze her

nipples. She kept crying, “*Mine mine mine, mine mine mine*,” as if she’d forgotten what the word meant or how to stop repeating it.

“Fucking perfect,” Tina said after we took in the tableau. That’s when the third girl, the white one, noticed us, and Tina pointed. “That’s her.”

Cathy was rocking on her side, carpet fetal, but sat up fast. Still rocking, she gazed at us with the slack-jawed, cracked-glass stare of an alien abductee.

“Psychotic?” I wondered out loud.

“On a good day,” Tina said. “Crank does that.”

Tina turned on the light, and all three girls skittered in place like roaches on glue. In the one-hundred-watt glare, I could make out the red tide of tiny bumps up and down Cathy’s arms and legs. I stepped back instinctively, fearing contact. “Are those fleabites?”

“Not even,” Tina replied. “Crank does that, too. You get enough of that shit in your system, it finds a way to get back out.”

The piles of clothes and makeup scattered around the room made me think of a plane crash. But it was hard to say if there were any survivors.

Cathy stuck her thumb in her mouth and scooted backward. I noticed something shiny, electronic and broken on the carpet behind her. Something with its innards plucked out and arranged according to a system that probably made sense if you’d been up for three days, really concentrating. Gink work. The idea, generally sparked when all circuits were firing, was to take something apart, figure out how it works and put it back together—which no one since the invention of going without sleep had ever done. Cops trawling for tweakers pull over and put their vests on when they spot a driveway full of engine parts.

Tina kneeled and picked up the silver tray. “Well, now we’re fucked,” she said. Somehow, in her hands, the thing more resembled what it was: the gutted husk of a laptop, piled with colorful bits of

circuit and wire that once made it possible to Google “methedrine + psychosis.” “The rev had all his addresses in his PowerBook.”

“And there’s no backup?”

Tina rattled a few of the larger pieces around, retrieving a black box the size of a pack of Camel straights. A scissored USB cord dangled from it, still plugged in. Tina sighed. “External hard drive.” She held the box to the light to show me the holes where it had been pierced clean through. They formed a perfect cross.

“It was Satan!” Cathy screamed. Her eyes jittered wildly in their sockets.

“He must have used power tools,” Tina said.

“He was in the computer! I saw his face. His eyes were words. The screen was *bleeding*!”

Suddenly she leaped to her feet, flailing, like somebody trying to climb air. Then she dropped, both hands scratching frantically at the red letters spelling SAVIN’ IT FOR JC over the crotch of her formerly white panties. The panties rode low, tragic and saggy beneath the protruding plates of her pelvis. Somehow—maybe it was the bagged-out JC undies—her body gave the impression of having been recently plump.

“The screen was *bleeding*! *Tell them!*” Cathy screamed to the pair on the carpet, who were still feuding in desultory fashion over the next hit. “Roxie, *tell* her. . . La-tee-sha! *Help me!*”

“Huh?”

Roxie, the one with breasts that made me think of armor-piercing depleted uranium shells, amassed the energy to turn her head. When she did, Lateesha snatched the pipe out of her hands. She fished a questionable chunk out of her own thong, jammed it in the business end of her stem and tried to light it. Before Lateesha could catch a

flame, Tina leaped up again and kicked the pipe out of her mouth. It hit the wall and cracked, scattering speed crumbs. Lateesha let out a high-pitched *reee-owwww*, like a feral cat with a nail in its eye, and all three girls dove for the drugs at once.

Tina broke into the scrum and grabbed Cathy by the hair, leaving the other two to salvage what high they could from the shattered glass.

I helped Tina get our target out of the room. In the hall, she propped her against a wall and slapped her. “Cathy, stop being such a tweaker!” Tina had a way of saying this kind of thing with genuine tenderness. She wanted to strangle the girl but she’d also *been* her. And she remembered. Her own life made her kindness genuine. Not for the first time, it occurred to me how lucky I was. Lots of guys wanted nice girls. I had a woman who’d been as far down the chemical bad behavior ladder as I’d been. Farther, in Tina’s case, since I’d never murdered a spouse or added a side-dish of eating disorder. I didn’t judge her, she didn’t judge me. She wasn’t nice, but she was knowing. Which made me much more comfortable. I didn’t do well with nice. I never knew what to do with it.

Cathy rested her head on Tina’s shoulder. Love was a demented negotiation. Or maybe we just find people demented the same way we are—so as not to feel . . . demented. Or—*Shut the fuck up!* Clearly, I’d breathed in some eau de methedrine. But it only made me think *more*, not better, the way speed always did.

Cathy began to vibrate. I watched Tina stroke the shaking girl’s face. She rocked her and murmured, “It’s okay,” over and over, whispering to the black roots of fried blond rat’s nest. Cathy might have been sixteen or forty-six, depending. But when Tina held her she was five.

“Cathy, honey, when’s the last time you went to sleep?”

“I don’t know. Is it today?”

“Help me get her out of here,” Tina said.

I danced with the stars through the obstacle course of shit and piss bowls and knocked-over bottles. “Maybe we should come back in hazmat suits.”

“Too late,” Tina said, “I’ve already breathed the fumes.”

“Me too. The sick part is I like it.” I took one of the girl’s arms, and Tina took the other. “That’s the beauty of drugs,” I said. “Who needs Mengele when you can turn your own body into a biohazard?”

It did not cheer me up that Cathy was our best hope.

Suddenly we heard a scream, and Tina left me holding Cathy to hopscotch across the room and open a closet door. Inside was a Chinese girl with a bowl haircut, naked, chewing her lips and smoking speed.

Seeing her, Cathy came to life, eyes wide with jangled reverence. “Lee-Lee! We thought you were in heaven!”

Lee-Lee clamped her hands over her ears, then waved them in front of her, batting away the flying things we’d let in with the light. She was frantic to explain but could only string words together with difficulty. The corners of her mouth were caked in white paste. When she managed to speak, tiny speed feathers puffed out of her mouth. “Bitch! . . . My feet are like . . . *the Devil!* . . . You stole my candy cane!”

“Cathy, make sense or shut up,” Tina said, offering her hand to the Chinese girl. “Lee-Lee, come on.”

The naked girl hid the pipe behind her back like a five-year-old. I watched Tina gently unclench her fingers and remove it. She threw the pipe to me and I nearly dropped the thing. It was still hot.

“That’s my candy cane!” Cathy shrieked, blowing out more whites. “God is like . . . *You better* . . .”

“That’s okay, sweetie. Manny will hold your candy cane,” Tina said. “He’ll make sure nobody takes it.”

I grabbed a pink halter from a pile in the closet and wrapped it around the scorching glass. Lee-Lee stared like she was waiting for

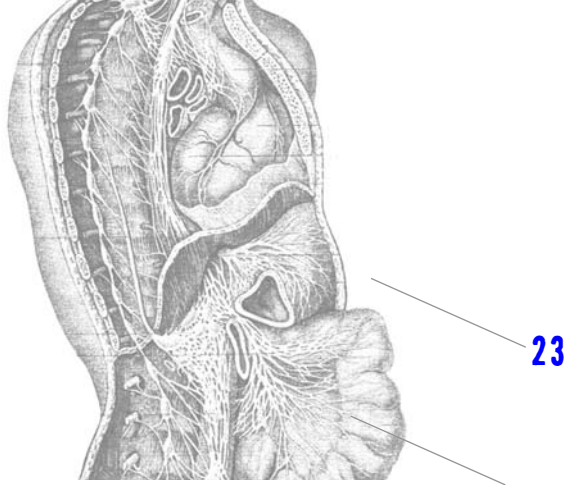
the commercial to be over. Tina excavated a pair of moderately stained Juicy sweats. Tina helped Cathy put them on over her three-day panties, talking softly as she tugged them up. “Lee-Lee, how long have you been in here?”

“In where, Mami?”

She spoke like she was on TV in her head. Tina shot me a glance that said *You can't save them all*. I tossed her a dingy wife beater. She maneuvered Cathy into it while I dug up a pair of flip-flops and a shiny blue jacket with CHRISTIAN FUN GIRLS fake-graffiti'd across the Jesus-in-a-crown-of-thongs logo across the back. Marked with a little TM in a circle.

“So the reverend has his own clothing line?”

“Everybody has a clothing line,” Tina said. “Why not a religious pimp?”



“Yea Though I Walk Through the Condo of Meth”

Tina sat sideways in her Prius, holding hands with Cathy, who vibrated in the backseat. I drove aimlessly down Van Nuys Boulevard while my ex tried her patented tactic of compassion and slaps to try to get the girl talking. She was still trying after half an hour.

“Remember the German doctor, honey?” *Slap.* “Cathy!” *Slap.* “Sweetheart, you really need to pay attention.”

“Fuck!” I interrupted. “It’s already six o’clock.”

“Manny, please. Just drive.”

“Yeah, *Manny-pants*. Just *drive*.” Finally inspired to speak, Cathy lapsed into a bad Marilyn. “The hair doctor,” she giggled.

Tina laughed along with her. “You mean he asked you to call him ‘Herr Doctor’?”

“Unh-huh. He’s the *hair* doctor.”

“What color was his hair?”

“I dyed it blond.”

“He lived close, right?”

“Reseda.”

“You remember the address?”

"On Seaview. I remember. Seaview Apartments."

Time was passing. "I'm sure there's only a few hundred of those."

"She'll remember," Tina snapped. "Just go."

"Maybe we should give her a Valium," I suggested. Now I wished I *had* stolen Dinah's Valiums. I kept seeing her wrong-way face in the windshield instead of the traffic of Van Nuys Boulevard. The last flashback, I had to hit the brakes to keep from rear-ending a Hummer. Then something thumped on the back of my seat. I whipped around and saw Cathy banging her face off the upholstery.

Tina tried to grab her. "Cathy! Sweetie, stop that!"

The light changed and I had to watch the road again. Suddenly Cathy screamed, her voice charged with passion. "*My vagina is a gift from Jesus!*"

I nearly swerved into a bus.

"One of the reverend's slogans," Tina said.

Cathy had begun to sway in the backseat like a human metronome. The swaying got faster and faster, until Tina reached under the seat and pulled out a short dog of Old Mr. Boston. Cherry brandy. "I keep it for colds," she said before taking Cathy's face in her capable hands. "Come on, honey."

Cathy sank backward after a blast of brandy. She coughed some up and gagged. Then she swallowed and let out a long sigh, like she'd remembered how to breathe again.

"Yum," she mumbled, just south of a slur. "I took the virginity pledge four years ago, after Laura Bush came to our high school and opened her white first lady Bible to First Thessalonians four:three to four. 'God wants you to be holy, so he shall keep thy female chalice free of sin and foulness.' That's why I remember the hair doctor's address. 'Cause it was four-three-four-four."

It made sense to her. Which is all that mattered.

The rest of the drive, Tina slapped and cherry-brandied Cathy.

She cooed her down off the methedrine ledge, dialed her crank-fed psychosis back to simple mania. Cathy relaxed. She got chatty and let us in on Christian escort tips. I wanted to know if her clients were born again or disciples of Satan. “What kind of man wants to defile a nice Christian girl?”

“*Defile?* That’s what you would do,” Tina said, though she didn’t sound mad about it.

The day got dark. Dusk showed up and left. Traffic crawled. The night was a slow drive through drying concrete. We watched a blue-haired matron in a white Eldorado apply depilatory to her lip while her husband, whose eyebrows barely topped the steering wheel, snuck hateful glances at her.

“Marriage,” snorted Tina. “And yet, I look at them and I’m jealous.”

This set Cathy off again. “Marriage is why I save my maidenhood,” she recited. “‘Believing that true love waits, I make a commitment to God, myself, my family, my friends, my future mate and my future children to a lifetime of purity. I promise sexual abstinence from this day until the day I enter into biblical matrimony.’” She took another taste of Old Mr. Boston and snorted. “Like, that *sounds* nice, okay? But, like, all the girls at Reverend D’s talk about is Jesus and sex. Sometimes—I shouldn’t even say this—we talk about sex *with* Jesus. Well, think about it! We *are* saving ourselves for capital-H Him, right? We say it’s for our future husband—*Oh goodie, a beefy UPS man with butt acne!*—but we hold on to the secret desire. Like, sometimes at night, I think about Jesus, in a tank top, with bulging muscles. He has long golden hair like in the Bible pictures. Fabio hair.”

Cathy’s story didn’t add up, but I didn’t press her. Lots of stories don’t add up. Or else they add up but the math is wrong. Especially when there’s a lot of bathtub stimulant sprinkled in.

We passed a minivan that reopened my San Quentin minivan

wounds. I caught Cathy's eye in the rearview. "I don't mean to be crude. But about the chastity thing? Is it true? You do everything with tricks except—"

"I don't call them tricks. I call them love partners."

"That's what I meant," I lied. "So you do everything with your love partners including . . ."

"Anal?" She tossed her hair sideways and hugged her knees. "Why don't you just come out and say it, doofus?" She suddenly rolled the window down and stuck her head out of it. "Anal!" she screamed at the top of her lungs. "*Anal anal anal anal!*" Until Tina grabbed her by the arm and slapped her.

Cathy sat back and began talking normally again, as if the smack and "anal" hollering were just what she needed to relax. "You think born-again guys don't like the back door? Well let me tell you, most of them are mouches—half-man, half-couch. Like, anal makes them feel all *gangster*."

Talking about it got her metronomey again. Her vibrating made me dizzy. Tina pulled her close and held her. When she stroked her hair, Cathy regressed instantly. "I need to sleep or do more, Mommy."

"Then you go to sleep, honey. Just lie down and let it happen." Tina spelled words on her forehead with her finger. "You're going to be f-i-n-e."

Cathy pouted, then tipped sideways, apparently unconscious, mouth agape and snoring gently.

"Nice work," I said to Tina.

"I used to have to say that to myself," she said.

A second later Cathy bolted upright, ripped open the door and tried to fling herself out at a crosswalk.

"Anal!" This time she wasn't screaming so much as wailing. "Anal, anal, anal!"

Tina managed to reel her in quickly. Either nobody'd heard the outburst or nobody thought it was that odd.

I kept my hands on the wheel, staring straight ahead. “For Christ’s sake, Tina, either flag down a cop and ask him to arrest us, or put a lid on her.”

“Hey, be glad I put her in a seat belt. Besides, nobody cares.”

Tina sat back and closed her eyes. She was more tired than I was, and I’d been too tired to notice. “It’s YouTube,” she said wearily. “People are hard to shock because so much that’s supposed to be shocking is staged. And the really shocking stuff nobody looks at.”

She rolled her head sideways on the headrest and sighed. “I’m sorry I blabbed. I have to tell you something. The reverend did come on to me.”

I pounded the steering wheel. “I knew it!”

“No, listen,” she said. “I told him there was nothing he had that you didn’t have bigger and better. After that, I never had a problem. I just do the work. The reverend’s not a bad guy for a pimp. It’s okay till I find a less fucked-up gig.”

“You went to Yale,” I said.

“I know, baby. I also went to my dealer’s house. And then I married him.”

“The ghost of Marvin rears its ugly head.”

“I’m just saying.” Tina gave Cathy’s hair an idle stroke. “I know I’m not great at making a living. I’m not the only person in the world with that problem. You take these gigs to survive and be an artist, then the gigs get big and the art gets small.”

“And here we are,” I said, “four-three-four-four.”

A chain slung between two posts held up the graffitied announcement:
RENTING NOW—BACHELORS AVAILABLE!!!

“It’s all about those three exclamation points,” I said as Tina eased

Cathy sideways on the seat. “They really convey the excitement that any bachelor would feel about moving in.”

The place was identical to thousands all over the Valley: two stories of painted-over cinder block, sky-blue washed to rancid mayonnaise by sunlight and acid rain, swimming pool visible through glass double doors in front.

High on the faded wall, in a carefree 1970s come-on-in-and-live-the-dream California swirl, was the name the original owners had seen fit to give the building. Sea View Apartments. The Pacific was seventeen miles away, which was still a lot closer than it was to Buffalo.

“Smart place to hide,” said Tina, locking the door on Cathy after we stepped out of the car. We hadn’t gone two steps when the reverend’s voice blared behind us. “*Man washes a bitch’s feet, that’s a man ain’t afraid to act like somethin’ LESS’n a man. . . .*”

I ran back and banged on the passenger window. Tina beeped the doors unlocked but Cathy, holding one of the reverend’s CD boxes, hunched over the CD player as if trying to drink the words. “. . . *Jesus act like a foot-washing little puss, ’cause he know, he SO MUCH A MAN ain’t nobody gonna call his ass out. Jesus was bad enough to be a BITCH!*”

“You babysit her,” I said. “I don’t have time for this shit.”

I walked into the grubby lobby, if you could call it that, and studied the names on the directory. It was the old-fashioned kind in a glass case, with plastic white letters pressed onto a black plush background. “What name . . . What name?” I glanced back at Tina. She appeared to be speaking into the window and banging the roof, I guessed for emphasis. I was glad I could keep an eye on her, thanks to the parking space I was lucky enough to grab by a fire hydrant.

Reading down the directory, I spotted *Ullman*—5A. And pressed

his buzzer. I pressed again and heard a squall of babies over which a thick Latino accent tried to communicate. “*Quien es?*”

“Is Dr. Ullman there?”

“*Nadie en casa!*”

Nobody home. Perfect. He might have said something else, but the babies drowned him out. I could imagine no circumstance in which Josef Mengele would let Latino babies crawl on his floor. Sweeping a pile of Thai takeout menus off the windowsill, I saw a dozen letters scattered about unclaimed. Not many people would use this entrance. Anybody visiting or living there would park underneath, take the elevator up. In most parts of the Valley, walking was suspicious. I leafed through the abandoned mail.

Near the bottom of the pile, there were three letters rolled in a rubber band. Addressed to Fritz Ullman. The name was visible in a transparent window, across which someone—maybe someone busy with an apartment full of screaming children—had scrawled *MUVED*. All three letters were mailed from L.A. Small Animal Rescue Shelter. I memorized the address before I put the envelopes in my back pocket, in case someone stole my pants.

I ran back to the car in time to grab Cathy, who’d managed to jump out. She was weaving on the sidewalk, reciting in violent singsong, “Yea though I walk through the condo of meth.”

Seconds before I snatched her, Cathy danced into the street and hiked up her T-shirt, flashing her rashy, malnourished tits and screaming at passing cars, “*Who wants Christmas?*” I had to hold my hand up like a traffic cop and snatch her, then pin her to the passenger door until traffic thinned enough to open it. Misreading the gesture, Cathy screamed, “Rape!” and started whipping her head from side to side, making a scene. Tina banged on the window. *Open the door!* But I couldn’t—cars were shooting by so close behind me the door handles grazed my jacket.

Until traffic thinned, opening the door would be suicide. Between

four and six in the Valley nobody cared what they hit. Finally I saw a lull. But just as I opened the door, a VW Beetle changed lanes. The driver braked hard. I saw the Rottweiler in back stick its head out the window a second before it hit me in the face. The next I thing remember is a terrified yelp and the sloshy *thwop* of dog tongue. The impact stunned me, until Cathy, who had no idea I'd just been Rottweilered, stopped screaming rape and started grinding her skeletal buttocks at me. Her horrible Marilyn morphed into horrible black Marilyn. "Want me to wiggle, Mister Man? You know you wanna tap that ay-uss!"

After that I didn't even look. I just grabbed her, ripped open the passenger door, pushed her in and slammed it. Brakes squealed behind me. I managed to jump behind the wheel and get the key in the ignition before anything else hit me. But I was too mad to drive.

"How did that happen?" I yelled at Tina, gripped by retroactive panic.

She barely shrugged. "How does anything happen? Her parents fucked at a truck stop; twenty years later their baby girl is flashing her rack for strangers."

Tina's tone was as lackadaisical as mine was agitated. "Tina, that's not all that happened! I was nearly decapitated by an Escalade door handle. . . . I almost bit off a dog's tongue. . . . Little Miss Jesus was out there screaming rape."

"Uh-huh. Poor thing's going to crash hard." Tina stroked Cathy's head in her lap, gently brushing hair out of her eyes. "You find anything inside?"

It was always like this. The kind of calamity and chaos she'd survived left her inoculated; I could never get Tina to share my panic. The preceding near-death-in-rush-hour-Reseda experience might as well have never happened. I gave up and got back to business.

"Yeah. I found something," I said. "But I want to talk to her first, I want to know what he asked her to do."

"I'll ask. She doesn't like you." Tina ran a gentle finger over

Cathy's fluttering eyelids. "Honey, tell me again, what did your old German do?"

Traffic had picked up. A Benz whizzed by, leaving a trail of NPR. I had an odd awareness of strangers listening to news of atrocities that didn't happen to them.

Cathy talked like her voice belonged to somebody else. "Like, first he had me strip and walk whichever way he pointed. Then he, like, wanted to examine my hymen? I told him how Reverend D says after Jesus prayed, he didn't say 'amen,' he said 'hymen.' But he had, like . . . *instruments*. He told me in his country they had baby factories, where perfect women went to be pregnant after they were impregnated by perfect men. He really wanted to talk. A lot of guys do. But they don't talk about this stuff. He said he had a very important job. Half of it was keeping the impure races from multiplying, half was trying to help the pure races multiply *more*. It's like he wanted to save the world or something. I told him, 'Hey, Daddy, don't worry. Jesus is coming!'" Her gaze was solemn as a nine-year-old's. "That's what global warming is. It's Jesus, getting closer. Giving off His holy heat."

She trembled and scratched a scab on her neck.

"Reverend D said after the Rapture the world's going to have to fill up again. Girls are going to have to breed. And who is Jesus going to want?"

"Let me guess," I said, "virgins?"

"Yes! The Bible is so *hot*! When the old man saw my coochie, he said it looked like a hairless chihuahua. I shave it, but that was kind of gross. When I told him my vagina belongs to the Man Upstairs, he got really confused. 'The man upstairs? Mr. Wong?'" She erupted in a giggle, then stopped just as suddenly. "He told me if I ever lost my hymen not to worry, he could get me another one. 'Not even the Lord would know the difference.' Like, is that *creepy*!"

Cathy's words came faster and faster. Her scratching got more feverish. She raked her nails over her scab-dotted wrists.

“So I said to him, kind of teasing like, ‘What do you have, a box of hymens under your bed?’ And then, the old German guy, he was really *old*, he says—*HICK!*”

She stopped, covered her mouth with a scabby hand and hiccupped again. “*HICK HICK!*” The hiccup turned to a spasm and the spasm brought a shock of clear vomit, which she wiped away as she sputtered. “He says, ‘Not anymore. I had to get rid of them.’”

That was enough. She was on her stomach, flopping in the back-seat. I twisted out of my jacket, still driving, and threw it over her. “God, look at her. . . .”

“You had to start!” Tina said. She pulled my jacket up to Cathy’s chin. Blue TV light shined out of condo windows.

Tina put her thumb in her mouth and bit into it. “So what did you find out?”

“Somebody’s already moved into his place. But I found out where he worked.”

I tossed the banded envelopes in her lap and hit the blinker.

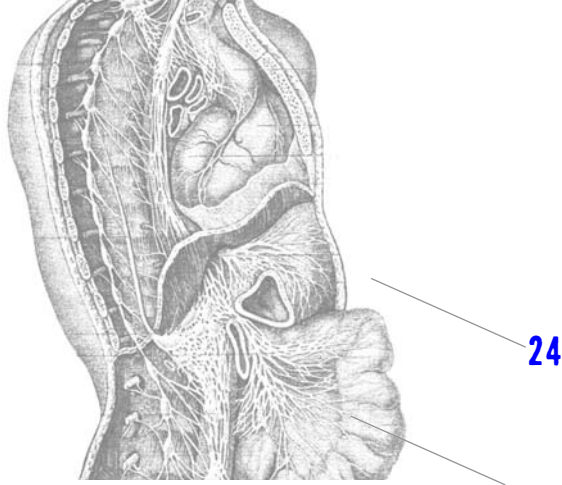
“L.A. Small Animal Rescue Shelter?”

“The pound,” I said, pulling out. “He’s still gassing undesirables.”

Part I



Part I



So Charles Mingus Says to Mother Teresa . . .

Tina dropped me off at my house so I could grab my old Lincoln. I found it parked in the street, under a layer of dirt, bird shit, swap meet flyers and eleven parking tickets, ten of which turned out to belong to somebody else. Somebody who owned a Kia. What kind of scam was that? Did they think I'd pay? The whole notion made me unaccountably happy. It was refreshing to think about old-fashioned, everyday malfeasance, as opposed to sick, mind-cracking, destroy-your-faith-in-mankind-on-the-off-chance-you-had-any derangement.

After allowing myself that little pleasure, I returned to the real world. *My* real world. The one in which I could not stop thinking about how much I wanted my wife back. Or what I'd do for the rest of my life if she wasn't in it. Did the possibility of being alone hurt as much as the Holocaust? That in itself was painful to think about. But pain only hurt if you could feel it. Maybe the problems of two people did amount to a hill of beans. Inside of a much bigger hill.

What I had meant to do was MapQuest the address of the pound. I let myself in, MapQuested, found the right freeway and, instead of taking a piss, which I was dying to do, stayed at the computer and

Googled Mengele. It turned out that was one of his experiments, too: denying urination. Testing how long Jehovah's Witnesses could hold it, as opposed to Gypsies, as opposed to Jews Jews Jews Jews Jews.

But fuck that. I knew enough about what he did. I wanted to know what he *was*. . . . I needed a portal to get inside the man.

EDUCATION. *Don't care.*

MILITARY SERVICE. *No.*

SOUTH AMERICAN EXILE. *Not that either.*

I figured I'd know it when I saw it. But by the time I did I was sweating and tapping my leg and taking short, choked breaths. I had made not-urinating a holy test, as if God commanded it.

To squirt one drop meant that thousands might die.

I began to vibrate. The pain came in sheets. Waves of sudden perspiration. Don't let a man urinate. It was that easy. You'd think we were designed for torture. Maybe mankind, in the end—and in the beginning—is just a prolonged experiment on man. It made sense that God was more like Mengele than Gandhi. If God were like Gandhi, we wouldn't need Gandhi.

The pain was making my brain sweat.

I kept Googling.

RELIGION. *No.*

My eyes watered. I chewed through my bottom lip.

I needed to relieve myself so badly my feet were swelling. I thought I could hear them squish when I crossed my legs. Then it felt like I *was* peeing. But I was dry.

I linked to a Mengele quotation on the same page as quotations from Charles Mingus and Mother Teresa. *The Wit and Wisdom of . . .* Josef Mengele: "*The more we do to you, the less you seem to believe we are doing it.*" Charles Mingus: "*White man? No such thing as a white man. He pink.*" Mother Teresa: "*God's love touches the lowest first.*"

I belched and swallowed back what I hoped was bile. Could I have somehow pissed my mouth? Can that happen? Without thinking,

my fingers typed in “Mengele + Mother.” Then I saw her: Walburga. Mengele’s mom, in black and white. A hard-faced, obese woman with eyes that could hate through steel. Squeaks escaped my throat. I saw another name: Wilma. Mengele’s Jewish mistress . . . Every racist liked a little verboten on the side. Look at Strom Thurmond. Wilma was too obvious. But Moms Mengele really grabbed me.

I stood up, still reading. I was going to squirt. I read, “Mrs. Mengele brought his father’s lunch to the family tractor factory every day, and often chided the men who worked for her husband for their slovenly manners at table.”

You looked at her and you knew: every day Daddy got the big shame strudel. His employees must have thought he was married to a tank. Maybe some were jealous. But Mommy doted on Joe. “Walburga’s pet name for her little Josef was Beppo.”

Beppo.

I knocked the chair over scrambling to the bathroom. When I got there, I couldn’t go. I put the seat down and sat. Turned on the tap and stuck my hand under the hot water. Finally—*Thank you, Jesus!*—a trickle, the relief almost worse than the pain. Sitting there, peeing, I had to lean forward and hold on to the hamper. I rested my head on the wicker lid and remembered the pills I’d stashed. I was always stashing shit so I could surprise myself someday when I was in bad shape. Although since Tina left, the surprise would have been a day when I wasn’t.

I reached down and dug through a week or three’s worth of laundry. Felt something hard. Dug up a bar towel I didn’t recognize—who’d name their joint the Tsetse Fly?—and unwrapped a prescription bottle. Percocet. I counted twenty-two. Surprising myself, I stood up and dumped the pills in the toilet. Flushed. Then I dropped to the floor so fast my kneecaps cracked and stuck my arm in the bowl. My hand scrabbled over the porcelain bottom like a crab, trying to rescue some pills before they dissolved. *What the fuck?*

I stood back up, pants at my ankles, and stared at myself in the mirror as I washed my hands. *Look at you, champ!* I knew people who did affirmations. But that's what came out.

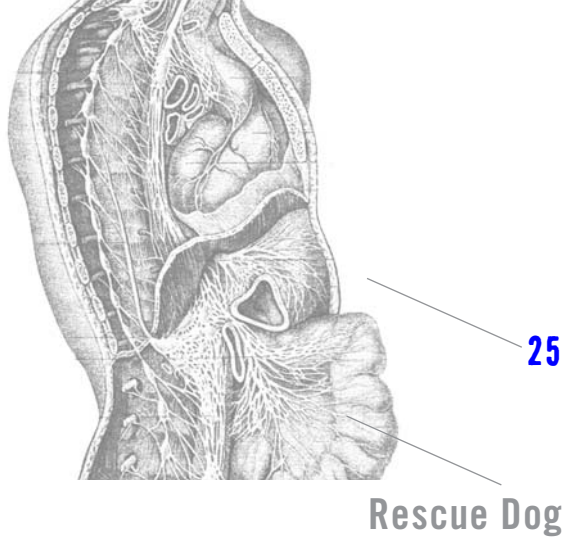
Minutes later I realized I was still washing my hands. And stopped. Still staring at myself, lips moving.

Mengelosis . . . Mengeloid.

I felt some kind of curdled twitch in my mouth and my own smile scared me.

I grabbed my jacket and keys and ran out the door, forgetting all about MapQuest. But I knew I'd get there.

Mengelomaniac.



Karala was no more than an alley running alongside the Metro Rail tracks between Avenue Fifty-one and Avenue Fifty, a half a block up from Figueroa in Highland Park. Turning off Fig onto Fifty, I made a quick left into the lot behind Chico's, a yellow concrete box of a restaurant with a mural of a red chili in a poncho riding a burro out front. Multilayered graffiti graced the back wall, some fresh, some freshly crossed out. RESPECT YOUR HOOD was black-lettered over the door.

I hadn't eaten in so long I'd forgotten you were supposed to. The overpriced airport grub was long gone.

A waitress watching a *telenovela* popped out of a booth when I entered.

"*Hola.*"

"*Hola.*"

My Spanish consisted of twenty words, and *hola* was five of them.

The waitress had straight black hair and a flat face that might have gazed off a frieze on a temple to Quetzalcoatl. She didn't bother to ask if anybody would be joining me, and I could tell she didn't think I

was half as beautiful as I thought she was. But she was kind enough to recommend the enchiladas *verdes*.

A blue and red plastic parrot hung in a cage over a mural of a man fishing and a woman pounding maize beside an ocean that continued over two walls. The only other customers were a toothless *viejo* who mad-dogged me over his soup and a table of laughing women in green scrubs and hospital tags enjoying beer with their guacamole.

It was twenty to eight. I wondered if the beer was to help the hospital ladies get over their shifts or get through them. Of course, people who don't have substance issues don't obsess about what other people do with their substances. Some people preferred to bird-watch. I figured I'd give that a try and focused on the plastic parrot. Maybe it would suggest a plan, since I didn't have one. What I did have was a burglar's all-access pass, a pair of bolt cutters, under the spare tire in my trunk. And a loaded .38 in an oily rag underneath that. This was not a neighborhood where anybody wanted to be caught breaking and entering. I was a white man snapping the locks off an animal shelter. If I got caught, I'd just say I was on the trail of a war criminal. *Hola!*

The parrot held his mud. But the enchiladas *verdes* were good enough to renew my faith in humanity. I got two more to go, just in case, and asked if they had anything for my dog. The waitress came back with a paper bag inside a plastic bag, brimming with bones. She pointed. "*Pollo . . . Puerco . . . Goat . . . Beef. Is okay?*"

I said, "*Muchas gracias,*" and gave her two twenties for the enchiladas and dog treats. Told her to buy a couple more rounds of Corona for the Kaiser Permanente health care professionals. What the hell, I used to have health insurance. I hoped they were brain surgeons.

Thanks to perpetually failing tire pressure and blown-out shocks, the black Lincoln rode low, which in this neighborhood was a plus.

In my trunk, along with those bolt cutters, I carried a crowbar, cuffs, Ex-lax, Sominex, a switchblade and two-hundred-watt police

“blind ‘em” lights. It wasn’t that I was prepared, I just never took anything out of my trunk once I put it in. I also had a suitcase with a change of clothes, empty water bottles, a blanket, towels and an air mattress. In the tire well I hid a high-powered telescope and paper bags full of crumpled-up sweats, work boots, tennis shoes and Tiger’s Milk bars.

On my last job (as a needle wrangler for a Lifetime pilot about a junkie ballerina who secretly didn’t know how to read, and her love for an Iraqi talk show host), the studio guard who checked my trunk said he didn’t know Lincoln made trash compactors.

Unless I wanted to go full ghetto and wear a down jacket on a ninety-degree day—hiding the bolt cutters underneath like a sawed-off—I needed something to put them in. I owned a briefcase that looked fairly professional. But the last thing I needed to look in a Highland Park alley was professional. I settled on a burlap bag.

I was eyeballed when I walked out of Chico’s. The lookout squatted in front of an open door, peering through the wrought iron that ran along the top-floor walkway on the three-story apartment fronting the parking lot. He was a skinny shaved-head kid in a white T that fit like a muumuu. In black shorts so baggy they hung around his stick legs like lampshades that stopped at the tops of his white socks. It’s not like gangbangers wanted to hide their occupation. They were as easy to spot as FedEx.

I got in the Lincoln, made a right on Avenue Fifty, a left on Figueroa, then cut back up Avenue Fifty-one from the other direction. One stoop had some occupants whose heads all turned at once. But nothing more eventful.

The pound was a low cinder-block building with a half-dozen slanted spaces out front. I parked in the handicap spot, close to the entrance, marked only by a small sign on the door with HOURS OF OPERATION and a faded sticker: IN CASE OF EMERGENCY, DIAL 911.

A retaining wall ran across the alley to the dead-looking house.

The homeowner had ceded in the war against graffiti. As a result, the wall was nearly solid with stylized letters and numbers whose import was as arcane as Kabbalah—except for the odd 187. Police code for murder. As any wannabe who'd listened to more than three tracks of a rap CD since 1987 would know.

I tried to look purposeful, keeping the bolt cutters close to my leg. Made my way past the front entrance and up the small broken-glass path that ran between the shelter and the back of a quiet house. This was pit bull territory. Once a dog lost a fight, the fellas liked to toss it out of a moving car. I imagined the ones that survived the bounce ended up in the shelter, and they probably weren't happy about it. Just in case, I'd mixed up a knockout paste in the car, in the lid of a Kiwi shoeshine can, and smeared it on Chico's dog treats. My old partner Razetti had taught me how to make the stuff. He called it *Somi-lax*, after its two main ingredients, ample helpings of *Sominex* and *Ex-lax*. It worked on humans, so I assumed it would do the job on dogs.

I reached a fence in the back but heard no snarling. Nary a bark or whimper. Odd. Streetlights weren't a problem, either. They'd all been dismantled for copper. All I had to do was climb the six-foot cyclone fence without dropping anything. Somewhere inside was a bigger clue to Mengele than anything Google could produce. I just didn't know I was going to have to wash it and feed it.

I clawed my way to the top of the fence, tried to shimmy sideways so I'd land on a pile of tires on the other side. Before I made my move, my Chico's bag tipped over. Bones and meat chunks landed with a splat, followed by a fevered "*Pendejo!*" I was so startled, I slipped. The right pocket of my leather jacket ripped on the fence and I dropped on top of a truck tire. The tire moved, then morphed into a jumpy older version of the kid I'd seen doing lookout behind Chico's.

"The fuck you doing, mang?"

He stood up and wiped a blob of chicken parts off his grimy face. I

didn't see the knife until he waved it at me. "He sends a gringo to kill me? My ass is green-lighted, right?"

I smacked the blade out of his hand. He scrambled for it, ranting.

"I didn't even rat him out. I said he hit the bitch. Thass it, I swear. I didn't say what really happened. They had my *ass*, mang. You know what I'm saying? I got two strikes."

He stood up again, knife in hand. This time I grabbed it. He didn't resist. "I didn't know they was gonna arrest him, okay? Somebody saw the shelter's name on the side of the van. I ain't no snitch. I didn't say nothin' 'bout the shit we did."

"What shit?"

He didn't answer. Just kept talking.

"It's my ass, too. He thinks I'm gonna rat my *own* ass out? I ditched the van, too. I told the lady who runs the shelter somebody stole it, at gunpoint, like, she doesn't even ask me to make no police report or nothing, just fires me on the spot!"

"Hey, slow down," I said. But he just talked faster. Was there anybody who wasn't enhanced with bathtub crank?

"That's the thing. Once you're in a gang, nobody ever believe shit you say. I don't care who the fuck he say he was, I ain't goin' down for that shit. It was his idea, mang!"

"Shut the fuck up!"

I needed to straighten him out, so I backhanded him. But not in a mean way. He staggered a few steps and sat down hard on the ground.

"Listen, compadre, nobody sent me to do anything. And who are you talking about . . . with the van?"

Even though I knew already, I needed him to tell me. But my new friend was more interested in those chicken and goat bones. He was the same height as me, six feet even, but if I'm two hundred he had to be pushing one forty-five. I knew, because I used to be that skinny, when I was young and strung. Homeboy was sucked up and grimy.

The haunted whites of his eyes contrasted with the black film covering his face and hands. He snatched up a half-eaten chicken leg and ripped into it. “This shit is good.”

I knocked the Soma-fryer out of his hand before he ate any more. “That shit’s for dogs,” I said.

“Think I care? I am so fucking hungry. But I can’t show myself. I seen what he can do. I know his skinny ass is in Quentin, but—”

“Who is he?” I repeated. “Maybe we’re looking for the same guy.”

“I’m not lookin’ for nobody, he’s lookin’ for me.”

“Goddamn it, who?”

“The old German. The freak.”

The back of my neck tingled, the way it does when I’m *close*. Even if I didn’t know what it is I was close to—or how close it was.

“What kind of freak we talkin’ about? He some kind of *chomo*? A diaper viper?”

“Naw, dawg. He’s no diaper viper. He—naw. Never mind. I don’t even want to talk about it.”

“Can you get us inside?” I put my hands on his shoulders, talked to him like he wasn’t as crazy as he looked. “Let me get you something to eat.”

“*Food* . . .” He lit up at the idea, then dimmed, sagging, as though eating was an exotic dream, like talking about what you were going to do with the cash when you won the lotto.

“Is this the key?” I asked, slipping the ring out of his pocket while he hallucinated chorizos. He nodded, then grabbed my arm. “They come in at six. Is it nearly morning?”

“Relax. It’s gonna be night for a while. What’s your name, hombre?”

“Fuck you wanna know?”

“So should I call you ‘Fuck’ or ‘Fuck you’?”

“Carlos,” he said.

“There an alarm system, Carlos? Some kind of code?”

“Keypad’s on the wall. Four two one oh five.”

“Hitler’s birthday,” I said. “Your boy ain’t hidin’ his tracks.”

“Whatever. I need to eat.”

I found the keyhole in the dark. I didn’t know what was behind the door. Inside it was pitch-black, except for a blinking green light. I pressed the Führer’s digits. The light beeped and went out.

“Good lookin’ out.”

He reached for the switch and I stopped him. A pair of lights swept the window. “You heard of B&E, Carlos? That’s what we’re doing. Right now. You and me.”

“Hey, I got two strikes!”

“You don’t keep it down, this is your last night on the outs.”

The headlights blasted the room and we ducked. They wobbled and swept the other way. Whoever was driving was turning around, not parking. The lights swept back through the shelter reception, reflecting off the chest-high metal counter that cut the room in half. Red footsteps painted on the floor led to one end of the counter, over which a sign said ADOPTION HOURS. The light moved before I could read them, briefly illuminating green footsteps to the other end. DROP-OFFS MUST FILL OUT FORM. NO EXCEPTIONS.

“Enchiladas *verdes*, Carlos. I’ve got two, from Chico’s.”

“That place is good.”

“They’re still hot. Wash up.”

“You a faggot?”

“You lonely?”

He muttered something and dropped to a crouch like he was threatening to wrestle.

“Why you want me to wash?”

“’Cause the enchiladas are in my car and we’re gonna get them together. And you look black. You walk around lookin’ that black in this hood, one of your boys will put you in the ground.”

His eyes went wide. He hoisted himself over the counter and pushed through the black double doors behind it. The stench broke like a wave of cat piss and industrial-strength cleaner fumes. I hit the flashlight and saw the cages, some wolf size, some cat or beagle compatible, lined up along one side of the room. The creatures curled three or four to a cage. I couldn't tell what they were. Nothing moved. It was beyond disturbing.

Carlos doubled over from the exertion of walking eleven steps. I talked while he panted.

"That's what you gangsters do, right, to keep the neighborhood clean? Kill blacks?"

"You know?"

"Come on, Carlos. It's been on the news."

"It has?" His voice cracked high with panic. "When?"

"I don't know, a year ago."

"A year? Oh, ha! Fuck, you're talkin' about—ha, that's good."

"What did he say he was going to do to you?"

"Who, the German? He didn't say shit. But he was always talkin' about his connections. I'm like, you got connections, why the fuck you gassin' dogs with a ninth grade dropout? Man, he got so mad. He was always fuckin' with the machines, you know? 'Makin' improvements.' That's what he said. So, after I disrespect him on his connections he says, 'Come on, I want to show you somethin' I'm workin' on.'"

"What was that?"

Carlos stared in abstract confusion at the dials and hoses. "I been givin' flea baths to dogs and cats for two and a half years, now I'm blankin' on how to work the sink."

"Carlos, what was he working on?"

I pulled the hose down and twisted the blue faucet. A stream of water thick as a fist hit him in the face. He staggered backward with his hands up. I sprayed his arms.

"Come on, Carlos."

"I can't. . . ."

"What was it, Carlos? Is it here?"

I hosed him again. He spun around and I shot the tire grime off the back of his skull. I took no pleasure in this. Anybody who'd been deloused at County knew the ball-numbing misery of it.

Carlos straightened up. I handed him another towel. His dried off from tattoo to tattoo, watching each materialize from under the grime: a full-lipped, doe-eyed chola; a low-rider in wraparound shades, bandana and droopy mustache at the wheel of a '68 Chevy; and on his chest, in the position of honor, a skull wearing a fedora with a bullet hole in it—insignia of L'Avenida, the Avenues.

"Carlos? Talk to me."

He held his hands up and squealed until he realized I'd stopped spraying. When he was done washing, the towel was black. Now he looked like a clean young banger—the "18" on the back of his neck as crisp as the number on the side of a plane.

"It was the van. The dog-catchin' van."

"What about it? What'd he do?"

"I can't. . . ."

"Carlos!" Now I stepped closer, letting the nozzle dangle, loosely swinging a foot of rubber hose. Letting him know I wasn't asking anymore.

My flashlight caught a tear, squeezed from the corner of his eye. His chin quivered, but he was trying to stay macho. "Gas."

"What?"

"We—no, *he* rigged it up. . . . Then, the first day, he showed me. We picked up some strays in Mount Washington. Except they weren't straying anywhere. He straight-up dog-napped these motherfuckers. Till we had seven. Then he says, 'Don't worry, it's ecological.' I'm like, 'What's ecological?' He says instead of goin' into the atmosphere, the exhaust goes back in the truck, and we can use it. Me, I'm sayin', 'What?'"

“So you gassed animals in the van? As you were driving?”

I found the Big Dog water-absorber towels under the first sink and threw one to Carlos. He caught it and stood there, grime dripping down his face like runny mascara. He opened his mouth to explain but nothing came out. I helped him along.

“Yo, Carlos, why are all the dogs sleeping?” I leaned close to a cute little Pomeranian. He scratched himself.

“They’re not all sleeping, homes. Some of them are dead.”

“*Dead?* Why are they in a cage?”

I stepped back quickly and bumped into a ceiling-high cabinet. Beside that was the cleanest appliance in the place. It looked like a medieval washer-dryer. The dull metal door and steering wheel handle had been polished to a sheen. On impulse I turned the heavy steel O. The thick door swung open without a squeak. I don’t know what I’d expected or what I was after. But Mengele had worked there, and this was an oven.

I stuck my head into the sparkly clean interior. Twisting my neck, I could see the pipes above and below the door, each with eight rows of sixteen holes. White bits of what looked like popcorn stuck to the top and sides.

I banged the top of my head popping out, the same spot where I’d been whacked in Tina’s minivan at Quentin, and by Harry Zell before that.

I reeled backward, wiping grime off my hands.

“Know what I used to trip on?” Carlos asked.

“Can’t say I do.” I checked the top of my head for blood. What *I* was tripping on were fascinating facts I recalled from the Discovery Channel. It took twenty minutes for a human body to burn in the oven at Auschwitz.

“What tripped me out,” Carlos said, “was thinkin’, like, *Why can’t we use the microwave?* I always wondered, you know? But, check it out, when I mentioned it to the old German, you know what he said?”

Carlos's lips were so cracked they bled when he laughed. "He said, 'Microwaves cause cancer.' You believe that shit? I'm like, 'How they gonna get cancer, they're dead?' But this dude, I'm tellin' you, he got this look on his face, make you feel like shit, you know? He starts chewin' on that raggedy-ass mustache and smiles, clownin' me off. 'I'm not talkin' about who's *in* the oven, Herr Carlos, I'm talkin' about who's *runnin'* it.'"

On the way out, I stumbled over something—an Adidas tennis shoe. Odd. But, in the grand scheme of things, not worth noting. Not then.

Back out front, I hopped over the counter first, accidentally switching my light on when I landed. The beam caught a tacked-up flyer for Reconcile, a canine antianxiety drug. In the photo a golden retriever gazed sadly by a picture window. *Reconcile—because pets have stress, too!*

"He said *man* in the oven?"

Carlos averted his eyes. "Yeah."

My nerves were on red alert. I craved a little Reconcile myself. I swept the flashlight over the wall of caged, unmoving animals, then forced my attention back to Carlos. One nightmare at a time. "All dead," I said. "It's unbelievable. Why does he kill all the dogs?"

"Not all. Some are drugged. He gives them another injection in the morning and they're usually okay. Unless they're crippled up. Or dead."

"So they're knocked out at night? Cranked up in the morning? If they're not . . ."

"Dead or so fucked up you know they wished they were."

"You think animals get suicidal?"

"When the doctor gets through with them? Fuck yeah. I seen this one kitten, nothing but a head on a pink tube . . ."

I wondered if Carlos was completely out of his mind, maybe hallucinating the whole thing. I drifted to the nearest cage, reached in

and poked at a reclining mutt. Cold dog belly. It felt like a cement bag with teats.

Carlos was getting squirrely.

I tried to keep it casual, as casual as you can be when you're discussing rolling pet genocide.

"Did the old Hun say why he wanted to kill the strays before bringing them back to the shelter?"

"Hell yeah." Carlos bent to adjust his socks. "He wouldn't shut up about it. He was runnin' his mouth 'bout Darwin. Like, the dogs that got caught deserved to get caught or some shit. And what's the other fuckin' word he always sayin'? Oh yeah, 'ecology.'" Carlos did his best Mexican-tinged version of a German accent: "'This is ecological.' Fuck, the dude was freakalogical. Freak-tagious. Freak-tagious," he repeated, pleased with himself. "Damn, I should write that down. I rap, you know? Kinda like Lil' Cuete or Kemo the Blaxican."

"Kemo, yeah," I nodded, like I knew what the fuck he was talking about. "How 'bout you gimme your CD later, okay? Finish what you were saying."

"About what?"

"Jesus, Carlos! About the German."

"Yeah, yeah. Right. He said it saved energy. He's a weird dude. Can we get some food now?"

A few cages were stored by the door, on top of a minifridge. An overweight basset hound lay on its side, one plaintive eye open, following us. I had a feeling the hush puppy knew something I didn't. Right before the double doors I stopped. There was something else that bothered me even more. One specific thing. I was about to say something when Carlos spotted me grabbing a mint from a bowl between the employee log and plasti-glove dispenser. "Oh shit," he cried, pointing at my hand. "They're for dog breath."

"In that case it's probably not strong enough." I tossed the mint

back in the bowl. “But there’s one thing I still don’t understand. Why do they let him do this? The pound people.”

Carlos grabbed a handful of candy and tossed it into the cages. “Something they can take to heaven,” he said, which made me like him.

“That’s nice, man, but the people who run the pound, who are they?”

“It’s a lady. But she don’t know. Nobody knows. Old dude’s last out, first in, you know? Plus I think she likes the old fucker. He’s dapper, you know. Mrs. Gutierrez is forty or somethin’, but I think he’s fuckin’ her. He’s, like, a hundred and seventy-five or some shit and he still fucks.”

“Guess he takes his vitamins.”

“He calls them ‘formulas.’ He says he can extend life. But what he mostly do is bitch. And brag. Whatever it is, he can do it better. Like when we transition, you know, when we bring the dogs from the van into the pound? He’s always bitching. Like, why do we go to all the trouble of getting them out of the van and inside the cages? Transition’s the most dangerous time, ’cause you just took an animal used to roamin’ free, then cooped his ass up in a broiling tin can with a bunch of other animals. Think about it. After a couple hours, you don’t know what you gonna get when you open the doors. I seen chihuahuas lunge out the van straight for a motherfucker’s juggler.”

“Bad way to go,” I said. “Killed by a chihuahua. Nobody’d be able to keep a straight face at the funeral.”

“Ha-ha-ha. Laugh laugh. You ain’t seen what I seen. He retooled the dogcatcher vans. So when you get back all the dogs and cats are already *muerto*.”

Carlos stared absently at his now-clean hands.

“Used to be you hear their claws and shit, scrapin’ the floor, slidin’ around when we took a curve. I used to imagine, you know, what if

I was the animal? I'd think about skidding across the van floor in the dark. Every time the driver makes a turn or stops your little paws just slide. You and the other cats and dogs are all slammed into the wire mesh. . . . They'd be barking like crazy, whimpering, meowing, howling like you wouldn't believe. Then he rigged the van. Had me solder all the cracks, made it airtight. Now we don't gotta worry 'bout getting bit or clawed. We just empty 'em out."

The vision was grim. For a moment neither of us spoke. Then Carlos yawned and grabbed his stomach and muttered, "Fuck." I heard volcanic rumbling. Maybe he'd dipped back into the Chico's party bag. Maybe I'd used too much lax in the Soma-lax. There was an audible *blorp* from Carlos's pants. He gritted his teeth. "You ain't a cop, right?"

"No."

"And you can help me get this old dude off my back?"

"Yeah."

"The first time, after he rigged the hose? After ten minutes, all we hear is bodies clunkin' in the back. No barks, no meows. Nothin'. So quiet, it scared me, homes."

I checked my watch. Carlos saw me and said, "What?"

"We need to go. Don't worry, I have clean clothes."

"I don't know, man," Carlos mumbled as I followed him back through the swinging double doors to the reception area.

At the front door, I spotted that keypad again and thought of baby Hitler. Born 4/21/05.

"Gotta reset the security code," Carlos warned. "Let me do it."

"Be my guest."

The street was dead. I waited until Carlos pressed the last number. He said, "Okay." I opened the door. Five different kinds of floodlights blasted on. The alarm was so loud it hurt my hair.

Carlos froze. "Guess I fucked up."

"You think?"

The Lincoln was backed to the shelter door. I popped the trunk, moved some crap around, found a pair of U Miss sweats and threw them at him. They'd come with the car. Then I grabbed the enchiladas. Once Carlos had them in his hands, they were gone in under a minute. While he scarfed, I slid the .38 in my waistband. Then I slammed the trunk and unlocked the car.

"Shit, man. Where we goin'?"

"I don't know. Why don't we stand here and talk about it until the cops show and you get that third strike you been dreamin' about?"

"Don't fuck with me, homes."

I rolled us down the street with the lights off, giving it enough gas to slink onto Avenue Fifty just as the blaring cherry-tops nosed off Avenue Fifty-one into the alley. I cut ahead of a line of cars, made a left onto Figueroa and swung right again, onto Avenue Fifty-two, down the ramp feeding the 110. The avenues were numbered like that up to sixty. I slipped south to the on-ramp and steered my mushy tires onto the freeway.

"You shouldn't make fun of me," said Carlos, fighting off a yawn.

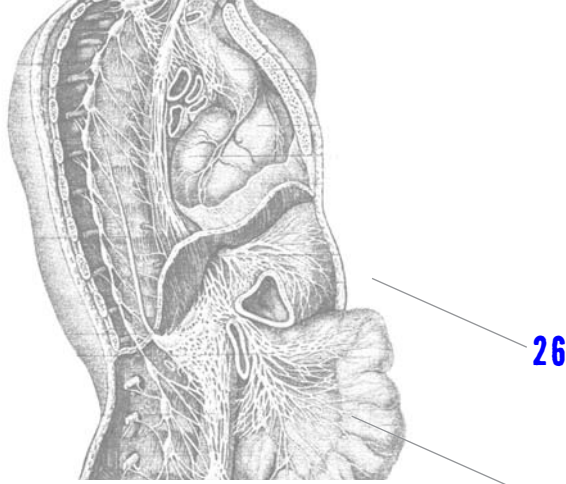
"I'm not. I'm trying to save your ass," I said as he tugged on the sweatshirt. "Jesus, Carlos, are you that sensitive when you're doin' drive-bys? Now where's the van?"

A trio of black-and-whites raced past us in the other direction. "I never did that shit. That's been all blown up by the media. Avenues got a bad rap."

"Whatever you say. Just tell me where the van is."

"You're going the wrong way. Go back and get off at Avenue Forty-five. The Southwest Museum, where they keep all that Indian shit."

I checked the rearview. Nothing. The good thing about driving a thirty-year-old car was that it looked like it belonged to somebody in the hood. It would have been a problem in Beverly Hills.



Qué Coche Más Chingo!

We crossed the tracks at the top of Avenue Forty-five, then made a hard right beside a big art deco building flying a U.S. flag—the Southwest Museum.

A row of sawhorses and NO ENTRY and CONSTRUCTION VEHICLES ONLY signs blocked the entrance. The winding driveway curved behind the museum, up the steep hill beyond.

“Van’s up there.”

“Then get out and move the fucking signs.”

Carlos jumped out and did what he was told. As he moved the last NO ENTRY out of the way I imagined what would have happened if the cops had caught us in the pound. With enough dead dogs to make Michael Vick look like Saint Francis of Assisi. I could almost picture the public defender’s face when I gave her my alibi. *Josef Mengele did it.*

I always get nervous *after* things go down, when the adrenaline curdles to strychnine retro-panic. I kept the motor running. Carlos stopped to admire the Kennedy-era Lincoln.

“*Qué coche más chingo!*”

“Say what?”

“Cool ride. I love them suicide doors.”

I slapped the Lincoln into drive. “But we’re not talking about suicide, are we, Carlos? We’re talking about homicide?”

Carlos gulped audibly and clutched his stomach. He licked his cracked lips as we crept up the closed-off road. He pointed when we came to a weedy dogleg. Beside the husk of an old truck, under a ramshackle lean-to, was the animal protection vehicle. I killed off the ignition, waiting for Carlos to speak.

“S-s-s-so,” he stammered after a little while. “You know?”

“I know everything,” I lied, and held out my hand. “Keys to the van?”

“Under a rock, *hijo*. . . .”

Carlos bent forward as he walked, clutching his stomach. It had startled to drizzle again.

“S’matter, Carlos, you scared ’cause you gave him up?”

He stopped so suddenly I slipped on the wet mud trying not to bump into him. Carlos caught me before I fell.

“You don’t know shit, do you? You know if I’m a stereotype to you, you’re a stereotype to me, fool!”

“What the fuck’s that supposed to mean?”

“It means you don’t know shit!”

He could have let me go down, kicked me in the head and stolen my car keys. Instead he held me up and laughed in my face. “I’m scared cause I *didn’t* give him up, *whetto*! I told the cops about the hit-and-run. I didn’t say nothin’ ’bout the other stuff.”

“So now you can tell me about it.”

We huddled behind the van, under a big leafless tree that dropped some breed of itchy fluff down the collar of my shirt. The shelter van looked normal enough, a battered gray box roughly the size of four porta johns stacked two on two, a single door in back and no windows.

Carlos kneeled down and groped under a clump of leaves and branches. He scooped up a key and got back on his feet.

“Tell me about the other stuff, Carlos.”

This time, by way of reply, he just pointed down, under the bumper. The hose, painted the same drab gray as the van, snaked from the exhaust pipe up under the back bumper and into the container like a wily boa. “You know, homes . . . The gas.”

Carlos doubled up. Maybe from the bad dog paste, maybe from the memory of what he and his shelter buddy had done together, in this vehicle. A Santa Ana blew scratchy fuzz down from the tree overhead and I thought, inanely, *If they give the wind a name, why not smog?* Something to make airborne particulates—the local brew that turned L.A. babies into adorable asthmatics—sound really exotic. On very rare occasions, the Santa Anas actually brought rain. And this was a very rare occasion. “I think I gotta shit,” Carlos groaned. He fought back serial yawns.

“Unlock the van first.”

“I only have the key for the front.” Talking was a strain. “Can’t hold it, mang.”

For his sake, I hoped Carlos passed out before he soiled himself. I took the .38 out and jammed it in his back.

“Unlock it, now.”

“Damn, mister!”

Sweat beaded on Carlos’s shaved skull, so it looked like the eyeball on the back of his head was crying. He lurched forward, arms coiling his waist in pain. “Why you pointing that thing at me? For serious, I can’t hold it, mang.”

“You’re gonna have to, *mang*.”

“Yeah?” Fighting cramps, Carlos straightened up and hissed at me. “You don’t know who you’re fucking with. I could green-light you, too, you know.”

But there wasn’t much heart in it. He grunted and squirmed sideways, squirming between the van and the tin wall of the lean-to. I aimed the flashlight at the door. He jerked the key back and forth,

then yanked it out, wiped both sides on his pants and tried again. This time it opened.

"You ride bitch," I said, grabbing the key and muzzle-shoving him. I waited until he got in before hoisting myself behind the wheel.

I didn't need to hold a gun on him. Carlos jerked forward and grabbed the dashboard, grunting. I yanked him back in the seat by the collar. "I'm sorry," he squealed, "I can't—"

The wave passed. I needed him to relax.

"It's okay, Carlos. The *pistola*'s for insurance. Just tell me what you two did in the van."

"It wasn't my idea, I swear. . . ."

"So what happened? He hear how your homeboys like to do their own racial cleansing?"

"You better watch it, *cabron*."

"What's your crew?"

"Avenue Forty-three, Tiny Locos."

"No shit? I remember when your homeboys made the headlines: 'Street Gang Race Murder.' Blowing your African-American neighbors away in broad daylight. Keeping Highland Park brown and down."

"Street cleaning."

Race murder—what the hell else were an SS doctor and a Mexican-American gangbanger going to talk about?

"Must be tough," I said. "Feds put a gang injunction on the Avenues in 'ninety-nine, right?"

"Gang injunction is bullshit," Carlos said. "I bump into my cousins at a birthday party, they take us in 'cause we're not allowed to meet in groups. You think they ever pull that shit on white people?"

"White people weren't your problem, Carlos. You were trying to keep blacks away. Mengele help out with that?"

Carlos hung his head.

"How many?" I asked him.

"I'm sick."

"I know, I got a nose. How many?"

Carlos groaned. "Three."

He opened the door and slid off the seat again. I held him up by one ear and rolled down my own window.

"How many?"

"Four . . . Five," Carlos squeaked. "I'm the one who told him."

"Told him what? Talk normal."

"About killing the *mayates*. The blacks. The old man said he knew a better way. He said we wouldn't have to worry about them tracin' the bullets, finding the knife. And no bodies. He told me about the war. Them concentrated camps—"

Carlos strained to stay awake and stave off the projectile diarrhea.

"Old man said, before they opened the big joint, Ouchwiz, they drove around in vans, pickin' up retards and Jews. He got real scientific. Hemoglobin and shit. How the fumes fuck up your oxygen, so—"

"Forget the science. How could you stand it, hearing somebody suffocate five inches behind you? Didn't they scream? How many did you kill again?"

"Six, all right? Seven. *Seven!* I don't know, I was high!" he shouted, and clutched his guts. "I had to be high, man. They fucking screamed." His voice grew quiet. "But that wasn't the worst."

I stuck my hands between my knees to keep them from hurting him. "What was the worst?"

"The worst was their lips." Carlos's eyelids drooped. His voice went dreamy. I spotted the nail, pinched between his thumb and forefinger, slowly slicing his arm from the top of the elbow down the wrist. "I'm tellin' you, mang. When we opened the van, their mouths were open, like this"—he pushed his own cracked lips into an exaggerated kiss—"and they were super-red, like they had lipstick on. That hemoglobin thing. It was like, these two niggers didn't just die—they died and went gay. We did a gringo after that. I guess it was

a contract, I don't know, but it was even worse. We put him in, he's some regular jim; we take him out, his face is the color of a chili pepper and he got a mouth like a tranny. Like them dead motherfuckers put lipstick on."

"But," I croaked, building a wall between that visual and the rest of my brain, "you did it again."

"One time, I had to—*Ooooofff* . . ."

Carlos clawed his stomach and angled sideways, seizing up. His face mashed on my shoulder as he farted helplessly.

"You had to what?" I shoved him back to his own side, trying to speak without breathing. "What did you have to do, Carlos?"

Carlos jerked back the plaid shirt collar, exposing a tattooed "13" I hadn't spotted at the pound. He saw me eyeing it.

"You know what that is?"

"Thirteenth letter of the alphabet. M."

"We gotta keep going over this, motherfucker? La Eme runs the Avenues. Just like they run forty-seven other gangs." His voice sounded like it was squeezed out of a small animal. "FL thirteen? Florence and Normandy? They're the ones took out a buncha Crips in 'ninety-nine. It's all prison gang bullshit. The order came down from Pelican Bay. KBOS."

"Kills blacks on sight."

"That's what I said, fool. Straight-up NHI. No humans involved."

"I bet the old guy really loved that concept."

"Matter of fact, he smiled." Carlos broke it down—sitting in his own shit, explaining gravity. "Mexican Mafia same as the ALS same as the Black Warriors. Don't matter if I think it's penitentiary bullshit. I'm just a soldier. They wanna put that race bullshit in the hood, to make a point inside, you gotta show scalps or get scalped."

I was still thinking of those red lips.

"Your pal, his real name's Mengele. I met him up at Quentin."

"You were inside."

"I was there. And believe me, the color brown is scum to him, but you know that, right?"

"Whatever. He like the color green. Shot callers want all the *negroes*"—he pronounced it "nay-gross"—"out of the hood. But see, that's a hate crime. That's federal. The German, he knew all this shit. He's like, 'Why shoot the schvartzes'—he always called 'em that—in front of witnesses?' We put them in the van, we can gas them while we're going through a McDonald's drive-through, buyin' Quarter Pounders. We did, too, man. Every time, we'd go get food. He even took care of the bodies. So what the fuck you gonna do, shoot me?"

I was easing the .38 into his neck. *Never pull a gun out unless you don't plan to use it.* I just wanted to scare him. When he kicked the door open, trying to jump, I dove across the seat and grabbed his collar. But he wasn't trying to run. He was ripping his pants off, bowels spray-painting his thighs. I plucked out a wad of Taco Bell, McDonald's, and KFC napkins jammed between the seats and threw them at him.

"I guess you're not lying about the fast food. What aren't you telling me?"

"You think I'm leaving shit out?"

I let the barrel nuzzle his ear like a friendly pony.

"Okay, there was some drugs."

"What kind?"

"He say it was crank. But I don't know . . . it ain't like normal *bombita*. One hit and you start running like your fucking heart is pulling you down the street. I remember once, this *hyna* was suckin' my dick. . . . My homegirl, you know? And right in the middle, she's like, 'What's up with that?' So I check out my cojones and they're all, like, boom-*BOOMP*, boom-*BOOMP*. Like I had a fucking alarm clock in my sack."

"What was it?"

"It was my *balls*, man, they were like big ol' jumping beans."

"I meant what was the drug?"

“He called it, like, ‘dreen’ or some shit.”

“But not methedrine?”

“No, man, I know methedrine.”

“Of course you do. What about . . . Adrenaline? That sound familiar?”

“Adrenaline?” Carlos tried to clean himself, then splattered the ground again. “Oh, Mama . . . Yeah, that’s it! He said it was all natural. But I don’t . . . It’s like the crank was on crank, you know what I’m sayin’? And the shit made you hungry. We go down to IHOP and put away two, three plates of them Belgian waffles, with whipped cream and all that shit.”

“You on it now, Carlos?”

“Ask my PO, motherfucker. I fill a cup whenever my number comes up.”

I figured he had to be on *something*. Either way, how could you not respect a man who could still give attitude half-asleep and blowing his insides out of his sphincter?

“Just curious,” I said. “Let’s get to work. How do you unlock the back of the van?”

“Below the blinkers. Orange toggle switch.”

I flipped a switch and an ominous clacking filled the cab, as if the van had backed into an MRI machine. The soles of my shoes vibrated.

“Not that!” Carlos darted a hand under the steering wheel to flip it off. “That’s the floor sealer. It’s sheet metal.”

“Floor sealer?”

“Keeps the fumes in, man.”

He bit his lip, reached back under the wheel and hit another switch. This time there was a simple click.

“Just unlock the fucking back door.”

“Gimme a second,” Carlos said in a choked voice. He unbuckled his pants and shoved them down to his ankles. Then he opened the

passenger door and clung to the armrest, covering his package with his hand and making his own little mountain. I stepped out of the van, facing the other way when I talked to him.

“You’re going to be fine,” I said with no conviction whatsoever. “Walk it off. Come on, open up the back.”

I helped Carlos to his feet. He doubled up and farted, groaning as though passing chunks of his own flesh. He was in bad shape. But I couldn’t pop down to the twenty-four-hour Sav-on for Kaopectate and man-Pampers.

I helped Carlos to the back of the van, zigzagging the shrubs and blue-tarped construction site with the flashlight. I didn’t see anything, but I knew. The way you know somebody’s watching, when the bad dog tongue of intuition laps the back of your neck.

Carlos bunched the sweatshirt over his flat belly in pain, trailing liquid panic. By now I was used to acrid odors. They followed me like dolphins behind yachts.

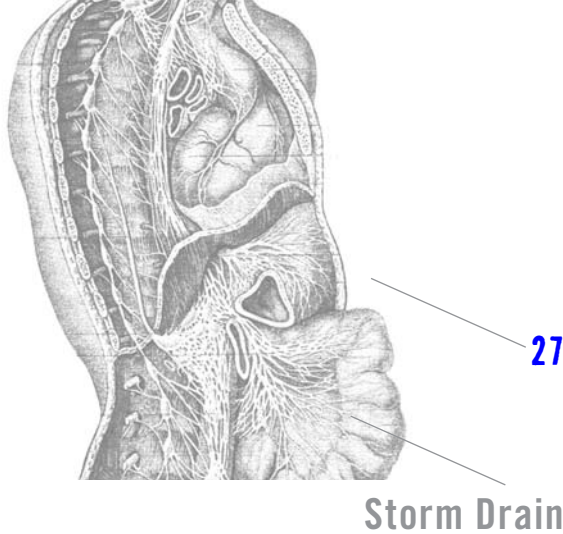
Then that dog on the back of my neck threw open its jaws and bit. The thought almost made me bleed: if all the animals in the pound were dead for the night, that meant somebody had to have dosed them. And, according to Carlos, nobody did the dosing but Mengele.

“Open it,” I said, willing my voice calm.

Carlos dug a hand into his stomach and muttered. “I ain’t your bitch, bitch.”

I let it pass. If this was a setup, I did not want to be the one standing in front of that van door. Backpedaling as Carlos stepped forward, I felt a tingling in my head wound. Maybe I’d suffered a cerebral hematoma. Or maybe I’d become clairvoyant.

A second before he grabbed the handle I turned and dove.



My face crashed into branches. The van door swung open and somebody fired a gun. The bullet ripped Carlos's ear from his skull. It clung to my pants like a feral scallop. Carlos froze. He touched the spot where his ear had been with an expression of vague confusion, as if he'd misplaced his cell phone. Then he screamed, whipping his head back and forth, giving the clump of dying grass beneath his feet red highlights. "Fucking *cabron*! I knew you were a pig!"

I'd barely made it to a gully five feet from where Carlos was screaming. I wanted to scream back at him: "*It wasn't me!*" If I did we'd both be dead. If I didn't, whoever shot him would figure out who he was screaming at.

Another blast spun him around. It looked like a dance move. Dead man's salsa. A black car roared around the curving drive, lights sweeping the trees. It parked hard, twenty feet away, aiming its lights at us. Carlos stumbled a few steps into the high beams, in my direction, one arm coiled over his shoulder as if trying to scratch his back. Then he uncoiled. He studied his bloody fingers like he'd never seen them wet and fought his way out of his sweatshirt.

Shirt off, lit by headlights, Carlos was so skinny he looked two-dimensional. The second bullet had punched a smoking nipple over his ribs. Exiting, it blew out a ragged pancake of back. Carlos was liver-shot, bleeding brown. It looked like he was hemorrhaging A1.

Two more shots tore through the meat of his right and left palms, leaving matching stigmata. The bullets were a smaller caliber. A .22. I wondered if the palm shots were a fluke or the shooter was a dead-eye who hated hands. All speculation, however inane, was preferable to focusing on what was right in front of me.

Carlos dropped to his knees. He laid down on the side of his torso that had not been ventilated, one bleeding finger uncurled and pointing to my right. I couldn't leave him there. His eyes were rolled back in his head. Somebody killed the headlights and I grabbed his arm and dragged him out of harm's way. I figured whoever opened up on Carlos would want to know what happened to him. When they came looking, I could double back and get to the van.

This wasn't much of a plan. It needed fleshing out. But before I could start fleshing I scrabbled backward, then tumbled down a gully into a muddy storm drain, slick as a toboggan chute. Carlos and I slid downhill for what felt like half a mile but may have been fifteen feet. We stopped when we hit a giant metal screen, the kind they put in to keep small dogs from washing down the storm drain out to the ocean. The impact stunned us both. We came around at the same time, blinking into the floodlight drenching us from a nearby house. The lights went out in thirty seconds, which was long enough to take in Carlos's drooly grin. "That was just like the Matterhorn!"

"Just like it," I whispered, amazed he was still alive and chatting. But glad he was happy. Maybe I'd misdiagnosed the severity of his wounds. I couldn't tell if he was still bleeding. We were submerged in a puddle of wet leaves. Carlos grabbed my shoulder and squeezed, proving the palm shot had missed his tendons. I expected the shooter to come screaming down the chute, guns blazing. But Carlos had this

thing he needed to tell me. How do you tell a corpse to shut up?

“My best friend, Lazy, he tol’ me dyin’ was just like Disneyland.” Fighting for breath, Carlos giggled and blew a taffy apple blood bubble. Red and sticky. It burst and he squeezed my shoulder. “He got it in the neck two blocks from school. Drive-by. We were nine, man. Lazy, he was lying on my foot. I was afraid to move, so I just stood there. I asked him what it was like, and he said, ‘It’s just like the Matterhorn, Carlito. Just like at Disneyland.’ I thought he was bullshittin’.” He grinned through bloody teeth. “I guess he wasn’t.”

Now I felt like the nine-year-old Carlito, with Lazy on his foot. I didn’t want to move but I couldn’t stand still. As gently as I could, I eased him off my legs and out of the wet onto a bed of plastic bags and beer cans, site of some long-ago party.

“Carlos,” I whispered, just to see if he was live meat or dead.

“*Sí, señor,*” he said, mugging feebly up at me. Dead man mocking.

I didn’t know what else to do. Carlos was humming. Until now, I’d managed to compartmentalize the fact that the Boy Scout beside me had helped to run a mobile ethnic-cleansing operation. I’d even managed to put Tina’s behavior on a shelf. But you couldn’t compartmentalize bullets—or playing human luge in an L.A. storm drain, pursued by the famous, mysteriously undead Holocaust doctor.

Carlos stared up at the smog-tinged stars.

“How you feelin’?” I asked.

“Oh, mang, I am beautiful.”

I picked a twig off his face. Dying seemed to agree with him. “What I don’t get,” I said, “if you had this successful gas thing going, why would you run over an old woman? It doesn’t make sense.”

“She dissed him.” Carlos pulled himself up by my shoulder. He spoke with mild surprise. “S’funny, mang, in the movies, guys who get shot always say ‘I can’t feel my legs.’ My legs feel fucking fine, man. So I can’t die, right?”

“Right,” I agreed, feeling a pang of guilt that maybe I should have called an ambulance. I thought he would be dead by now. If he lived, I’d apologize. “Carlos, maybe I should—”

“Fuck that,” he said, “ain’t nothin’ you can do now.” He sneezed blood and continued. “We were in the Superior Market on Avenue Forty-five. It’s this cheap-ass discount supermarket. You know the kind, big as a football field, where you gotta bag your own groceries? Hombre Viejo, he don’t know this. He standing there, holdin’ up the line, waitin’ for some bagger to bag him up. So the checker, this middle-aged white lady, a real *gordita*, she say to him, like, ‘This is a megastore, sir, we keep prices low. You have to bag yourself,’ the lady says, real slow, like he’s retarded. ‘Is there someone outside to drive you home? Did you come in a senior van?’” He laughed more blood spray, then passed out, coughing.

I crouched there, cradling him. . . . Cough. Blood. Barking. Mengele in a Hispanic discount market. I raised my eyes, hoping to see something that would make sense. The sky looked like it was painted with lead.

“Wait,” I said suddenly, “*gordita*. What is that?”

“Fat. Big, white and fat. That’s the thing.”

Visions of Walburga swam before me.

“Two minutes later, we’re at the train crossing. Waiting for the Metro Rail to pass. The gate was down. This fat Mexican lady, I don’t know if she’s homeless or what, she pushes this shopping cart in front of us. He starts wiggling, spitting all this crazy shit. ‘I’m sorry, you blubber bag. You cow! But I have to kill you.’ I’m like, ‘What?’

“Then the old man hits the gas. Knocks her down, and the whole time he’s screaming, you know? Really goin’ off. ‘*You fat cow . . . You stinking sofa!*’ Stuff in German, I don’t know what the fuck. I couldn’t believe it, then he backs up, watches her struggling to get all her shit back in the cart. And when she gets back up, he starts screaming, ‘See, see! She’s a parasite. Look how she won’t stay down!’ And as soon as

she pulls herself up he hits her again, mang. Before this, I never seen this side of the dude, you know?”

Carlos coughed, blood staining his hand. “Then—this really freaked me—the old man looks over and goes, ‘Do you believe I can roll over her head without putting a scratch on her body?’ And I’m like, ‘Chill, Doc, there ain’t no hit out on the bag lady.’”

“What did he do?”

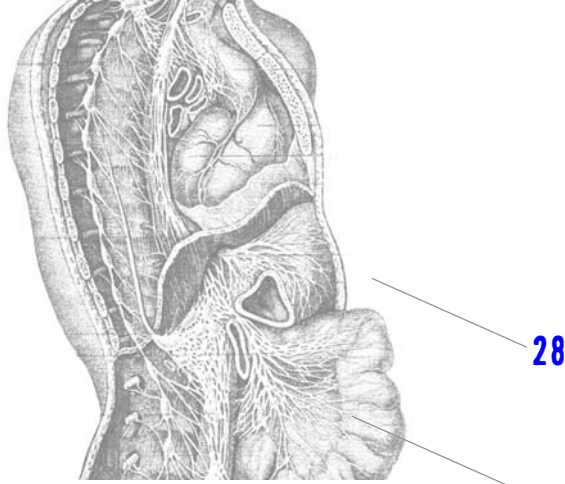
“What do you think? He slams it in reverse, knocks her down again and guns it—so you can feel this *wa-BOMP*, like the opposite of when you drive into a pothole. I felt sick, man.” Carlos coughed and channeled Mengele. “‘This is a skill I developed at Auschwitz. If I needed a jaw, I could back a Mercedes up over a forehead, not even scrape the probiscum bones.’ That’s what he say, mang, *‘probiscum.’*”

“You’ve got a great ear,” I said to him. “You could do dialect in voice-overs. . . .”

“‘You could do dialect,’” he mimicked, talking white before going East L.A. again. “Next thing, we hear the sirens. All I’m thinking is if cops check the van for DNA, that’s it. . . . Game over. I’m gonna be playing handball with Richard Ramirez. So I say, ‘C’mon, Doc, she’s still alive, let’s throw her in the back and take off.’ But the old man, he’s like, ‘We’ll have to drive halfway to Vegas to gas her fat ass. . . .’”

Carlos burped exploding cherries and barked out a bloody last laugh. That was it.

I had heard that a man’s spirit flies out when he dies. If this was true, Carlos’s flew into a storm drain. And he died laughing.



Get in the Van

I couldn't cut through yards. Dogs would bark. Lights would go on. The sidewalk was out of the question. No one stole the copper out of the streetlights in Mount Washington, so they worked. I hugged the storm drain, moving low, following the concrete gully back up the hill to the rear of the museum.

At the top, under a streetlight, was a distinctive silhouette. You don't see many profiles missing half their profiles. It was Zell's other twin boychick, Davey.

Either no one had told him about Dinah or he was taking his mind off his loss doing muscle work for Mengele. I wondered what he and bro Bernstein would do when they found out that Tina and I had rear-ranged their stepmom's corpse to make it look like she died having Sabbath sex with a Chasid. If I were a praying man, I'd pray that my driver woke up and got out of her bedroom before he was arrested for strangling her. I didn't expect God to do much for me, but what had the driver ever done?

The family Zell had enough juice inside San Quentin to arrange conjugal visits, plastic surgery, L.A. getaways. God knew what they'd

do to my driver if he got sent up for doing Dinah Zell. Assuming he lived long enough to get sent anywhere. If anything happened to Russian Jack, it would be on me.

Davey leaned on a utility pole tagged top to bottom. He scratched his head with the muzzle of a Beretta. *For Christ's sake!* I wanted to shout at him. *Didn't you learn the last time you put a gun to your head? Accidents happen!*

I found a rock the size of Davey's missing jaw and thought about braining him. I'm not a tough guy, but I watched a lot of violence on TV as a child.

I knew men on the force who spent years learning martial arts, each with its own particular philosophy of Tao or Chi or harnessing the flow of the universe against your opponent so that he ultimately defeats himself. My approach was more basic: sneak up from behind. You could do anything to a man if he didn't see you coming.

A gun butt to the head would have done nicely. But my gun—a sturdy and inelegant .38—had popped out of my hand in the storm-drain slalom. It wasn't registered to me, but still, we went back a long time. This being America, the gun would no doubt wash up next to a grade school where a twelve-year-old would pick it up at recess and shoot his cousin. Then again, things never fuck up the way you think.

I had a dozen attack-from-the-back moves, all variations on “sneak and strike.” One involved the guitar string garrote in my sock. But garroting could be tricky. Once, in Manhattan, I'd tried to wrap a wire around the throat of a crackhead who had half a foot on me. He must have been six-six. Instead of killing him, I got my finger caught under the wire at his throat and I rode him from Eighty-sixth and Broadway to Eighty-third, where he knocked me off trying to get on the number five bus. I'm still missing the tip of my right middle finger, forever ending my chances at becoming a Mason—they only take “whole men”—and denying me the chance to give anyone the two-handed finger.

I couldn't decide whether to move in on Davey or sneak around to see who else was behind the museum. I just hoped they didn't have night vision. I crouch-walked a few feet left, trying not to break any branches. From this angle, I could make out the car: a 2002 Cadillac DeVille. Room for six. The perfect vehicle if my whole drug class decided to take a school trip to L.A. to kill me—and wanted to travel in style.

Then Davey made things easy. He ducked toward me into the bushes, glanced over his shoulder and opened a prescription bottle. He tipped his head back, tapped a few pills into his lipless mouth, and started to gobble them dry. No doubt it hurt being him.

I waited until the first pill hit his gullet. Then I jumped up, palm raised, as though planning to spike a volleyball, and popped the plastic bottle down his throat. A prescription bottle cap had been enough to take out Tennessee Williams, so I pulled my spike. I didn't want to kill anybody, just put him out of commission. That's why I only shoved the bottle midway down Davey's esophagus.

Davey reeled backward, choking louder than I'd expected. Now I'd have to do something else to shut him up. I snatched the gun out of his hand and swung it off his temple. He crumbled. We were already in the bushes, so I didn't have to hide him. But I didn't feel good about any of it. I pulled a thin wallet out of Davey's pocket. It was still stiff and shiny. The kind somebody's grandparents would give a ten-year-old before he needed a wallet. Touching. Until I opened it up and saw the twin lightning bolts embossed on the pocket. Maybe it was a gift from his brother.

"Must have been exciting," I said to him, "getting to use your wallet and all." For the moment, he wasn't responsive.

The only card, a driver's license, said "David Zellkoff." How many names did these people need? His twin brother was Bernstein, he was Zellkoff and his daddy was Zell. On his license, Davey stared at the floor like he couldn't meet the camera's eyes. I looked down

at him. Even out cold, he radiated pain. “It’s hard, huh? Some days you wake up and say ‘Why fucking bother?’ Believe me, I’ve been there.”

Nobody listens better than the unconscious. Except for the dead.

I pocketed the license and slid the wallet back in his pocket.

Walk a mile in another man’s chin . . .

Locking the safety on Davey’s nine, I took off at a low trot around the perimeter. Somebody lit a cigarette in the cab of the van. They must have gotten out of the car and hopped in. I stayed in the shadows, angling toward the van from the right. I was holding the Beretta with both hands. Before taking off again, I checked myself for red dots. Halfway there, I had to stop and check again. One of my biggest fears was spotting the infrared dot from a sniper’s sight on my torso. I’d only seen them in movies, but that didn’t make my fear less real. What could you do if you *did* spot the dot on your crotch? The instinct was to strike a defensive posture—cover the spot—thereby explaining the high percentage of sniper victims who die with bloody paws. My plan was to keep low to the ground until I was directly behind the van, where I wouldn’t show up in either side mirror. I didn’t want to end up in dead man’s Disneyland with Carlos.

When I saw the van’s back door was slightly ajar, I eased the barrel of Davey’s Beretta inside. Slowly pulled it back. Nothing. Darkness. I didn’t realize my flashlight was gone until I reached for it. “You fucking idiot,” I said, louder than I meant to.

“Who you calling an idiot?”

I recognized the reverend’s Isaac Hayes drawl, then his hand snatched the gun out of my hand and the door flew open. Perfect.

“Reverend! What the fuck? I was talking to myself.”

A gun barrel gently introduced itself to my forehead. “Nice piece,” he continued pleasantly. “Bad day, huh? We all have ’em.”

That was the definition of a hustler—stick a gun in your face and still sound like the best friend you ever had.

“Man named Jesus Christ had a bad day,” the reverend continued. “He ended up on a cross. You look like shit, my man.”

“Spare me the fucking sermon,” I said. “I go all to hell when people shoot at me.”

“You wet yourself?”

“No, why? You want to get that on film? You branching out? You could put a robe on me and call it Paul pissing his pants on the way to Damascus.”

“I was shooting at you, you’d be shot. How about you get your drug-counseling, talk-it-like-he-walk-it white-boy ass in the van?”

“Who *were* you shooting at?”

The reverend laughed and showed off his gold grill. “Whoever got hit.”

As soon as we stepped in the van, the interior light went on. The van’s walls glistened like shiny tin, with burnished whorls of blue and green like you’d see in a puddle of gasoline: beautiful enough to be what gassed souls left behind. I was sure if I stared long enough I’d see faces in the whorls.

Sitting stiffly, in the exact middle of a bench that ran along the back wall, was Mengele. He was in full SS wear, from the insignia on his SS-*Hauptsturmführer* cap to the shiny black boots. His skin looked remarkable. There was none of that Dick Clark Naugahyde vampire bloat you see on old men who’ve had “work done.” (I saw the real Dick Clark once in an elevator at Sony, and his skin had the sheen of a hydrated car seat.) Mengele’s face actually glowed, which only made his rheumy eyes more unsettling. His mustache grew in a doggy pewter, contrasting strangely with his Billy Idol hair. The fresh air outside of prison seemed to agree with him.

The reverend nudged me with the gun and pointed at him. “Check it out. Looks like an aging leather queen, don’t he?”

But my attention was drawn to the figure beside him. It was propped against the wall, wrapped head-to-toe in a blue blanket. I had a feeling about who was under it. I could have drawn Tina’s silhouette from memory: hair, shoulders, waist, hips, off-kilter breasts. Or maybe it was some extra sense that lets a man know when his wife is under a blanket. He can’t see her, but he knows.

Mengele raised one hand, as if he’d rehearsed, and slowly peeled the blanket down from the top. Just far enough to reveal Tina’s face. I willed myself still. Studying her there-and-not-there gaze.

I thought, *Don’t show him you want to kill him. Wait.* Mengele smiled like a celebrity backstage, a man used to having the right props at the right time. “Former policeman Rupert. Good to see you again.”

“So what is it?” I said, peeling my eyes off of Tina. “If you had a drug problem, you could have called a hotline.”

“You Americans. Always tough. Germans are not tough. Germans are strong.”

He tilted his head toward Tina. “An attractive woman. Experienced.” I vowed again not to show him what the sight of her in this condition did to me. Power to generate fear was all he had. Zell had mentioned how much he wanted respect. But the doctor, apparently, did not just want it for his scientific prowess.

“You can touch her if you like,” he sneered.

“You mean if *you* like, don’t you?”

Reverend D muzzle-tapped a warning on my back, but I kept going. Disrespect was the only weapon I had. At the moment.

“Pretend it’s an experiment so you can watch us fuck. That’s your thing, right? Like when you’d mate brother and sister twins. Or make starving Gypsies copulate in a freezing room to measure how much heat they could generate before their hearts gave out?”

“Results of my hypothermia studies have saved many lives—including those of your Navy SEALs.”

“Maybe I don’t want to be part of your experiments.”

“Too late. You already are. The antique heroin you pilfered? It’s a serum designed to grow ovarian tumors. I mixed it with a compound of dolphinex—the most addictive opiate ever invented.”

“Dolphinex? Never heard of it.”

“You wouldn’t have. Though you may be familiar with its cousin, Dolophine. Both names derived from Adolf. Dolophine is better known in your country as methadone.”

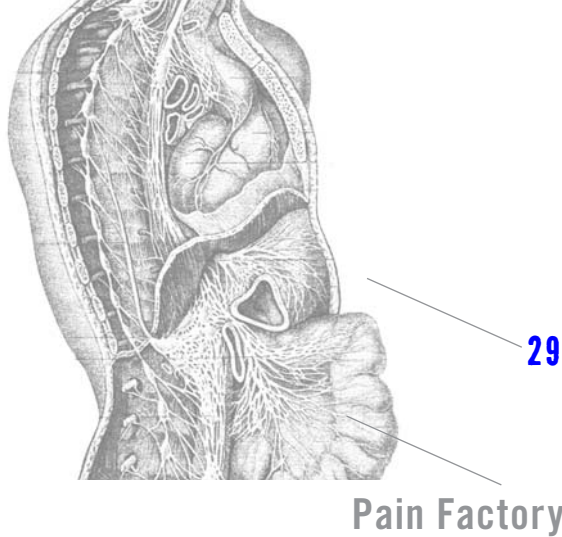
“We’ve met.”

“I assumed as much. Dolphinex was never distributed commercially. It was too effective. One shot and the user literally wants to die if they cannot have more. A result I was particularly pleased with. But then, you know that feeling.”

“You’re talking about the crap in the Red Cross boxes? It wasn’t that great.”

“For a tough number like you, of course not. But addicted prostitutes, whom the state would like to prevent from breeding, will willingly inject it. When they do, they die. Childless. And young. I can hardly wait to see what effect it has on you. In a week or two, I suggest you check for breasts.”

That’s when the floor decided to hit me in the face.



Sweat prickled down my back. I breathed as slowly as I could to counter the blood sloshing around my head. If Mengele had pumped Tina full of cancer juice, I'd take a bullet just to die with my hands squeezing his throat. And I'd die happy.

But the reverend was a step ahead of me. Before I could lunge, he caught my collar and hoisted me up off my feet as if for the doctor's inspection. Tina's glazed stare registered nothing.

"So she's going to have tumors now? In her ovaries?"

"You have no need to worry," said Mengele. "I gave the Fräulein something else. Also one of my discoveries. It's very clean. I am proud to say the advances we made at the camps are still bearing fruit today." Mengele beamed. "My goodness! I've gotten so wrapped up I forgot to set us on our way. That's what happens when men of science begin to talk."

"*You're* talking," I said. "I'm just trying not to puke or laugh in your face."

"Easy," Reverend D whispered in my ear. Mengele banged on the

roof of the van and I heard the engine turn over. That meant a third person driving. Maybe a fourth riding bitch.

The van lurched downhill.

Rage singed the edge of my vision. I saw Mengele through a tunnel of smoke. He gave off a faint odor. The kind that made dogs bark. “What did you give her?”

“Adrenaline. The finest quality. I use it myself.”

“Adrenaline? The stuff you were selling to gangbangers?”

“Ah, our little detective has been working. Well, let me educate you, Herr Detective.”

“You do that, Hair Doctor.”

“With pleasure. Let us go back sixty years.”

“Dr. Mengele and the Wayback Machine.”

“Excuse me? To get the highest quality, I needed glandular discharge generated in extremis. The more terrified the victims, the more potent the adrenal broth I tapped with my little friend *der Shunt*.”

“A shunt?”

“Ja.”

Mengele tapped his own Adam’s apple. I thought, *What if I bit him? Left his throat exposed the way someone left Dinah Zell’s? Would the rev shoot before I got to chew his larynx?*

“I inserted it just so, in the throat,” said Mengele, pride lighting him up like a letter from home.

“Aw, look at *you!*” I cooed. “If there’s anything more pathetic than an old man kvelling about who he used to be, it’s an old Nazi man. Newsflash: you *lost*, Doc. Not your country. *You*. All these other scientific geniuses landed on their feet. Von Braun brought his whole team to New Mexico. Even Erich Traub—Himmler’s mad virologist—got set up on Plum Island. Just him, a forest full of infectable mammals and a lab full of global bacteria. Think they didn’t ferry in a few Fräuleins when the old germ warrior hit them with Lyme disease?”

I had a hunch he wouldn't hurt me till I stopped. Something you learn when you're a cop: criminals are narcissists. And Mengele had the narcissist's hunger to be talked about. Praise was gravy. I wasn't usually this chatty, but the prospect of imminent death will do that. You want to get it out while you can.

"Then there's *you!*" I got snarky because I was mad. But not at Mengele. At myself. The man deserved to die, and I was throwing him a one-man roast. "Golden boy Beppo—goin' all gooey over glandular shunts! How's it feel to be one of those guys, when you die, people say 'Gee, I didn't even know he was still alive.' I mean, is that really the best memory you have—freaking out slow Gypsies and milking their fear?" I turned to the reverend and shrugged. "You believe Dr. Party-shunt here?"

"Hey, *fuck* shunts!" The reverend gave a little shiver and rubbed his face. "Man, an hour ago, I didn't even know what a shunt was. Now I'm ready to stick one of the motherfuckers in my own damn jugular. Bleed out fast, not have to listen to this."

"Come on, Rev," I said, "I know you and the old shunt-meister do some business together. I'm sure you're used to the Master Race routine by now."

The reverend raised his eyebrows, more amused than defensive. There had to be more in it for him to take orders than to blow a payday and save me. But I guessed I'd find out. "Hey," said the reverend, "I was you I'd—"

"*Stop!*" Mengele shouted, pounding his leg with his fist like a five-year-old. He looked ready to drop to the floor and start kicking it. He might as well have screamed *Respect me! Respect me! Respect me!* "I am telling you something important. If you weren't so ignorant, you would consider yourselves lucky you get to hear this!"

"'Lucky' ain't the word that comes to mind," the reverend said, but Mengele was too entranced by his own fantasies of medical mastery to notice.

"I said quiet!" he yelled, and started up again. "Rather than collect the fluid in a tub I hung a small container on the end of the shunt."

The reverend groaned. "Oh, here we go."

"Enough! This I did in honor of my new country, of its Vermont, where I have seen calendar photos of natives tapping a tree and collecting buckets of syrup."

"If you tell me you put it on pancakes," I said, "I'm going to throw up."

Mengele glared at me and nibbled his mustache, now so frayed it might have been assembled from schnauzer hair. He made no secret of his enthusiasm for his subject, but at the same time his attitude was detached. "When you revive a man into a situation of complete terror, the spike in his adrenal output is astronomical. That initial spurt is the purest. Unlike semen, where premonitory squirts may be nothing but fluid, adrenaline starts off strong. Zero to a hundred, as you Americans say."

"We don't say that about glandular fluid," I said.

Mengele ignored this, caught up in his own drama. "Let me tell you something else I think will amuse you. Carlos knew I was using the van to kill his race enemies. What he didn't know was that his enemies were not killed right away. No. I would bring them back to the shelter. Terrorize them. Which I did, in the back room, at night. The walls were already soundproofed. The specimens were intact and easily revivable. Do you want to know what I did to them?"

"What I want to know—and don't take this the wrong way," I said. "Back then, was everybody like you?"

The question caught Mengele off guard. "Like me how?"

"You know," I said, "the other SS guys, the other doctors—did they all wake up every day and click their heels 'cause they were so happy to be working in a death camp?"

"Proceed with caution," said Mengele. "For me, Auschwitz was a living laboratory. In which, among many other achievements, I devel-

oped efficient methods of adrenal harvesting. Synthetic equivalents, for reasons mysterious as God, never possessed the same force. Each adrenaline-generating device—

“Otherwise known as victims, right?” I interrupted.

“Each adrenaline-generating device,” he repeated, “had to be kept in a state of highest terror.”

“Whoa, hold up,” said the rev, who more and more seemed to be feeling his oats. “I’m with Manny on this. Them poor folks you be scarin’ to death—you callin’ them ‘devices.’”

“They owned human organs,” the doctor replied drily. “But scientifically applied terror can weaken a human with such ferocity the system simply collapses. You would be surprised how few ways there really are to generate fear! Oh, I could tell you stories.”

“Nobody wants to hear them!” I shouted. This was a lie. Which might explain why my knee kept pumping up and down on its own until I had to lean on it, like *The Thinker*. Hateful Knee Syndrome. Rage made me want to slam him face-first into the van wall. Some terrible fascination made me want to listen even more. This was the guilty truth, and Mengele seemed to count on it. He waited calmly for further interruption, sneered when there wasn’t any and paraded more stories.

“There was this feisty young Jew from Hungary.”

I had to dig my nails in my palms to keep my hands occupied. The tension seemed to feed him. He needed to make people uncomfortable.

“One day, after he’d heard I had operated on his brother, he saw me. He was on a work detail, cleaning the ramps. No more than a boy of fifteen. He saw me and he spit in my face. The guard grabbed him and I showed him my scalpel. Again, he spit in my face. I cut off his tongue, and even then, before passing out he spit blood at me.”

“Boy had heart. He woulda done well at Q,” the reverend said, to no one in particular. “Say whatchu want, there’s Jews got big *huevos*.”

“For as long as we let them have them.” Mengele smiled, making his little joke. “But this one had a soldier’s will, I admit.” The memory gave rise to a chuckle. “He was fast enough to pick his tongue out of the dirt and throw *that* in my face before the guard could stop him. For that, the capos were furious and showed no kindness as they dragged him, at my request, to my laboratory in Building Ten. But I needed to know: what is the source of this will? I suspected amphetamines. But when I performed the autopsy—for reliable results, of course, the subject must still be alive—his system was clean. Not just of drugs. I mean devoid of calories or stimulants. This made the chemical composition of the work camp resident easy to quantify. He was a churning pain factory. And pure pain made for pure adrenaline. It was almost as if his fear nourished him. So of course, I nourished the fear. It was the least I could do.”

I was starting to feel dizzy. The closeness of the van, the unnatural light, just standing on my feet for so long . . .

“What’s more powerful, hate or pain?” I heard myself ask. Availing myself of a killer’s opinion was not condoning it. It seemed all right to ask him a few things if I knew I was going to kill him later.

“Pain or hate. The eternal question,” Mengele replied with something like approval. “A question no one who wants to understand the human race can afford not to ask.”

“See that,” said the reverend, “the man’s game better than yours. He makin’ it look like you ’n’ him be about the same shit.”

“Peas in a pod, is that not the expression?” Mengele took out a hand mirror and checked his hair. “Science does not care who calls it science,” he said as he slicked down a patch up front. “You may ask, did I give the spitting Jew an anesthetic? Well, does nature? *No!* And yes. Suffering was essential. The threat of it. But then, what fear and pain produce, in any man, is a way to handle fear and pain.”

“Oh, that’s deep,” I said.

“Perhaps,” said Mengele, “you will appreciate the concept when

you experience it. The adrenal glands are like jet engines. When they have fuel, they can choose their course. When they're out of fuel, gravity chooses for them. They have no choice. For truly broken men, just the chance to lie down—even if it comes with knives attached—is a tremendous blessing.”

“I'd like to lie down,” I said. “Does listening to you count as torture?”

I actually tried to kneel, hoping to just tip sideways, but at a nod from Mengele the reverend grabbed me again and hoisted me up.

“Mr. Rupert, I have not finished with the Hungarian.” Mengele sounded a little hurt.

“I can't fucking believe this,” I said.

“Nor could I,” Mengele continued, “but that was the pleasure of camp work—the sweep of cases you encounter.”

“Pleasure?” I said.

“Let the man talk,” the reverend snapped. I decided he was playing it smart—backing Mengele one minute, me the next. Covering the angles. As Mengele slid his mirror back in his pocket, the reverend winked.

“You will appreciate this,” said the doctor, aiming his comment pointedly in my direction. “In the middle of surgery, I saw this Jew look down at his own exposed liver, and the sight of it made him weep with joy. Later, as he sputtered prayers on his deathbed, I removed the liver and held it over him, and I understood: to his pain-maddened eyes, the organ was a newborn baby in my hands. His tears were tears of bliss that he had given birth. *Mein kindel!*”

The reverend groaned again. “You never hear of a brother pullin' this kinda ill shit.”

“You like giving people pain, doctor? Just between us girls.”

“What I was giving him was a chance for *glory!*” Mengele straightened in what I imagined he considered a display of his full and imposing power. “Even a parasite can have his moment of honor.”

“Finally,” I said, “I know what to put on my headstone.”

“Mockery is understandable.” Mengele smiled, no doubt knowing the last thing I wanted was his understanding. “The Jew’s hallucination moved me so much that, in the end, I *did* administer morphine. To myself. It was a treat I allowed myself on special occasions. Did I mention he spit in my face—again!—before he expired? He died honorably.”

“With you holding his liver.”

“As I would a beautiful baby.”

“Wait,” I said, knowing before I asked, “now I get it. You have this on film.”

Mengele jerked sideways as if struck. He stopped talking.

“You do, don’t you? How much did Zell offer?”

Again, silence. The sound of our collective breathing. And the muffled *womp-womp-womp* of the van’s overworked valves.

I pushed. “What’s the problem? You don’t want to sell? Or Zell won’t pay what you want? Or wait. *Fuck!* This is perfect! He won’t pay anything at all? Let me guess. He threatened to expose you if you wouldn’t give the film to him?”

“Damn,” said Reverend D. “Man’s gettin’ his PI on.”

Mengele just stared, calculating. “A Jew is a Jew. He saw a bargain.”

I thought I saw Tina blink. But I wasn’t sure. Everything was too close and too far away at the same time. The van seemed to be swaying.

Mengele tightened his thin lips. “This is science, not commerce.”

“You know what they say—one man’s science project is another man’s torture porn.”

Mengele bristled. “You—you are truly a Jew. You smell like a Jew. You think like a Jew. Yes, the prisoner suffered and died from my ministrations. But this wasn’t torture. It was humanitarian research.

Thanks to his secretions, I discovered the means to generate and harvest something that could help the Fatherland win the war.”

“Yeah?” The reverend suddenly punched the wall. “How’d that work out?”

Mengele faced him, unfazed. “Mercenaries do not get to have opinions,” he said calmly. “Now listen, because we are coming to the sixty-four-thousand-shekel question. If our own bodies generate a substance, is it technically a drug? If it isn’t, does it become one when we remove it and give it to someone else?”

“Today,” he said, head held high, “the human body is the future of drug manufacturing. It’s like God was waiting for man to discover this final glory. We needed the freedom of the camps to see it.”

“I’m not thinking about God’s glory,” I said. “I’m thinking how much you could get for your hormone formulas. And how much Zell wanted to get them from you.”

“You think that is what this is about?” He raised his eyes to whatever swastika’d demigod resided in the ceiling of the gas van, then stood and weaved his way toward me. “Let me put it in language you can understand. Fear turns on the epinephrine faucet. Fear is a biological delivery system. Try the spinal fluid of a man reduced to jelly by flashing lights and Wagner.” His mustache nearly scratched my eyes. “Adrenaline has a sweetish taste.”

“Swedish?” the reverend asked. “Like Swedish meatballs?”

“Dummkopf!” I said it is sweet.”

Tina lolled slightly sideways. I thought she was waking. Mengele smiled at my concern. “Speaking of sweet,” he said, no doubt seeing himself in a movie as the epitome of old-world charm.

The idea of Mengele and my ex-wife . . . There were so many things in this new world I had to focus on not thinking about.

“You gonna tell him about the horse?” Reverend D asked.

“Horse? Like in heroin?”

“Ah, the horse,” said Mengele, moving his tongue in his mouth, as

if the memory were delicious. “You see, the horse is what gave me the idea,” said Mengele.

“For what?” I asked.

“For the whole process.”

“Yeah, yeah,” said the reverend. “I had to listen. Now you gonna have to.”

“If you’re through bickering,” said Mengele, chastising the reverend and me. “One of the few intelligent characters I met in São Paulo was a Mexican horse butcher. He’d committed some *indiscretions* in his home country. He, too, was an exile, so—”

“Wait,” I interrupted, “a horse butcher? Is that code for something?”

“It is not code. Europe, if you would let me explain, has retained its taste for horse. But America has outlawed horse butchering, so the animals are sent south of the border. Where—this I learned from Rudolpho—master butchers practice the art of pithing. A skilled operator slips the knife above the withers, in the spinal column, precisely at the base of the neck. Properly done, the procedure leaves the animal able to move its head and nothing else.”

“So what?” I said.

“So this minimizes the risk of injury to the knife artist when he butchers the animal alive.”

“You want to tell me why I’m listening to you drool over horse torture?”

“Ignorant!” Mengele shouted. “If you would stop with your stupid interjections, you would know. Why do devotees prefer to slice the meat off a conscious horse? Because—you see, there is a connection—the adrenaline generated by its terror sweetens the meat.”

The reverend elbowed me. “Nasty, right?”

“You’re the one working for him,” I said.

He snarled. “Reverend D don’t work for nobody but Reverend D.”

“Gentlemen!” Mengele curled and uncurled his tongue, showing

what he no doubt thought was his playful side as he sat back down. “I told Carlos and his friends that I turned men into dogs and showed them the cages. They thought I was a *brujo*.”

The old narcissist sat back and crossed his arms. As if allowing me suitable room to be wowed by his story. I yawned in his face.

“Let me ask you something, Doc. Have you found the gland that makes you delusional? The one that excretes hormones that make people think they’re interesting?”

Mengele glared. “Where are you, and where am I? Who is the delusional one?”

I didn’t reply.

“I thought so,” he said. “We have a ride ahead of us. So why don’t I tell you what happened when I tried grafting additional adrenal glands into the glands of healthy males.”

“Oh, Jesus,” I said. “Can I just request the gas?”

“That ain’t even a joke you want to make,” the reverend warned.

“On this, I would agree,” said Mengele. “I will choose to ignore it. As I was saying—”

“Just answer the question.”

“I will, but not that one. You see, I had far fewer resources at the pound than I did at Auschwitz. But as the degenerate composer Stravinsky once remarked, ‘The more limitations I have, the more creative I can be.’ So . . . I managed. I got rid of the gang’s enemies—and I used them for what I could before destroying them.” He stopped to aim his rheumy eyes in my direction. “And I know what you are thinking.”

“If you knew what I was thinking, you would have killed me already.”

“Oh, please,” said Mengele, “if you would stop trying to be so heroic, you might actually learn something.”

“From you? I doubt it.” My mouth had gone dry, but I worked up just enough saliva to spit. “I don’t plan on starting a human hormone farm any time soon.”

"I am talking about ecology," he said. "Nazis were green! We wasted nothing! Unbeknownst to them, the gang members were like pygmy headhunters, eating their enemies' hearts."

The reverend fought back a gag. "Bullshit. No way them bangers gonna eat nigger heart."

"What the fuck, Rev?" I couldn't believe what I'd just heard.

To my horror, Mengele shared my revulsion. "A disgusting locution," he said, looking genuinely disgusted. "You are talking about your own people."

I snorted. "You're going to lecture us about disgusting?"

"Ain't no us, motherfucker!" The reverend glared. "There's just you, me—and the German."

Mengele cleared his throat. "Forgive me. I assumed you both grasped the concept of metaphor. The gang was not, of course, consuming the hearts of what you call 'African-Americans.' They were consuming their glandular discharge. This is a nice symmetry, no?"

"Nice?"

I kept thinking of that Adidas tennis shoe on the floor of the pound. What its owner must have endured. But now was not the time to dwell on past horrors, with the one in front of me.

"Tina!" I hollered, cupping my hands as if she were across a far abyss. "Tina, can you hear me?" Her mannequin gaze gave back nothing.

"Adrenaline?" I screamed at Mengele. "That's bullshit. She looks like she drank shellac."

"Ah!" The remark seemed to please him. "I was hoping you'd notice. People forget adrenaline is not just the fight-or-flight hormone. But when the fight is over, the animal surrenders. Endorphins flood the system, the balm before the claw."

"Tina!" I yelled again.

Nothing. Her eyes looked like they were placed in their sockets by taxidermists. I stared at my ex-wife and imagined the things I'd say if I ever had the chance. The anger I would promise not to display. The love

and kindness I would never again take for granted. I was losing my grip.

“Where are we going?” I yelled.

Mengele slumped. “Where do you think? We’re going to hell,” he said sullenly, “with the rest of your ignorant nation.”

The reverend took offense. “Who you callin’ ignorant, Doc?”

Not for the first time, I wondered if maybe Rev D was on my side. He’d stopped jamming the gun at me twenty minutes ago. I considered shoving him into the old man, then grabbing Tina and leaping out of the moving van. But if the door was locked, I’d be fucked. Even if the reverend *did* seem sympathetic, it didn’t mean he wouldn’t shoot me for the right money.

“You want to know what I never imagined?” Now all pretense of calm was gone. Mengele was steaming. He was roaring. “After holding my breath for decades in shitholes a goat would be ashamed to be seen in, I never imagined I would move to the United States and find more Spanish. Then I arrive, and what do I see? More brown people. I see they are allowed to live, uneducated, ill housed, in order for your country to maintain a supply of restaurant workers and hotel toilet cleaners. A different solution, but just as final.”

Mengele blasted something from a spritzer up his nose and perked up. “But life is imperfect! I love America!” he exclaimed. “Hitler himself understood that without America, there would have been no Reich.”

“You blaming us?” I asked.

“Blaming? I am thanking. Listen to me! My earliest hero was J. Marion Sims. In eighteen seventy-five, he did experiments on African-American slave women in Alabama to find a cure for vaginal fistulas. *With no anesthetic!* And this man is considered the father of gynecology. Oh yes! Americans showed the Germans how to apply eugenics. How to use the inferior man to serve the superior. Would you like another example?”

“No,” said the reverend and I at the same time.

Mengele ignored us, swept up in his own saga. “Let’s discuss the

environment. German scientists practiced recycling before America even had such a word.”

“What are you talking about,” I asked him, “making lampshades out of skin?”

“I am talking about this van!” Mengele declared. “What truer example of recycling—a self-contained germ elimination vehicle, designed to keep the race pure and the air clean at the same time. Nazi genius.”

For an instant, after he said that, the reverend and I both fought back nausea. It was not so much that death was all around us. It was that we were *inside* of death. Mengele reached behind him and tapped a fine-meshed metal vent. I spotted a single long black hair in the grate and thought my knees would buckle.

The reverend spoke deliberately. “This where you pump the shit in?”

“The *shit*, as you call it, is carbon monoxide. Which would be pumped out there if we did not pump it in here. Instead of harming the lungs of innocent citizens, it goes into the lungs of scum. And it does not even require a chemical engineer to do the job. Even Carlos was able to do it.”

“No need for the past tense,” I said. “Carlos is still alive.” I tried to sound matter-of-fact, or as matter-of-fact as I could locked in a van with a mass murderer. “Carlos is probably back on Avenue Fifty-five by now, rounding up homies. You didn’t know he’s a shot caller?”

“Shot caller?” Mengele smiled his hideous smile again. “Is that like *capo de tutti capi*?”

I smiled back at him. “Keep laughing, Doc. You have no idea of the shitstorm comin’ your way.”

“You see,” said Mengele, not without a hint of admiration. “The Jew is a natural liar.”

He was right. Carlos was probably dead. But why not make the old prick sweat if I had a chance?

“Carlos is hard-core, Doc. You disrespect him, he’s gonna come after you. There’s probably a dozen low-riders right now, full of twelve-year-olds with shotguns lookin’ to make their bones. All lookin’ for this van. Soon as they spot this van, they’re gonna start blastin’.”

Mengele didn’t even pretend to listen. He waited for the words to stop, studying the reverend and me with eyes that absorbed the light like black sponges. “Do you know why I wanted to go to San Quentin?” He blurted the answer immediately. “Testicular transplants.”

“Don’t want to know about it,” said the reverend.

Mengele tongued his lip fur with delight. “This makes you squeamish? Relax. This was a while ago! In nineteen nineteen, military surgeons were experimenting with new solutions for genital trauma. And so they came to San Quentin and inserted testicles of recently executed inmates and goats into the scrotums of living prisoners.”

“That is wrong,” said the reverend.

“What is wrong,” Mengele sputtered, suddenly erupting, “is that every time some so-called medical atrocity is uncovered, there are the inevitable comparisons to Dr. Mengele. Well, I have news. Prisoners have always been like two-legged petri dishes. You think I invented the idea of using incarcerated subjects? True scientists have always known their value.”

“Doctor, excuse me,” I said, “but if you’re going to keep talking, I’m going to need some adrenaline. . . .”

“You do not fool me,” he said. “You’re fascinated.”

I didn’t reply. If he was right, I was not going to admit it. So Mengele just kept going. “Merck pharmaceutical infected four hundred prison inmates in Chicago with malaria. Did anybody take Mr. Merck’s company away? No. As a matter of fact, your *Life* magazine, in June 1945, detailed medical experiments conducted on state prisoners by the American Office of Scientific Research and Development in *their* effort to develop a vaccine for malaria. A noble effort. And yet,

after the Allies emerged victorious, three Nazi doctors who did death camp malaria studies were hung. Why?”

The reverend shook his head in disgust. “’Cause they were fucking Nazis—and the Nazis lost. Why the fuck you think?”

But Mengele was not to be stopped.

“Where America led, Germany followed,” he rhapsodized. “How to comprehend a country so crude, yet so advanced! Ninety years ago, California adopted ‘pure race’ laws. Public health officials were trained to be on the lookout for oversexed women of lesser races. The signs: extra-large labia and meaty clitori in the inferior races.”

“Maybe I’m just an ex-pimp,” said the reverend, “but all that science sound like an excuse to do nasty shit to me. The whole damn thing stink like perv sex.”

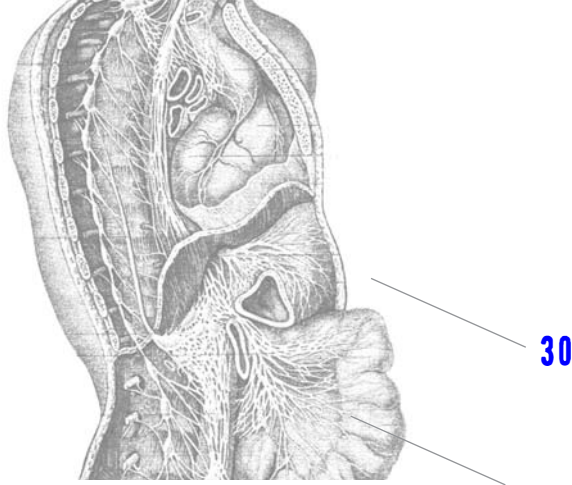
“I shall not even dignify that,” said Mengele, “and if I were you, I would consider my attitude very carefully, Reverend.”

“You let him bitch you out like that?” I said, causing the reverend to shift his wrath to me.

“I ain’t the kind of preacher you get to call a bitch, son.”

While the rev and I bickered, Mengele went from menacing to sentimental. “Hitler wrote something deeply meaningful in *Mein Kampf*.” With that, he closed his eyes and recited, “‘There is today one nation which was the model for the Reich—the United States.’ Today, perhaps, I believe the Führer would have liked to retire to America. Don’t you see? The entire purpose of Nazi science was to keep the unworthy from polluting our pure Nordic blood. Then, lo and behold, a week ago I go to a Whole Foods market, and what do I see? An entire aisle stocked with *blood purifiers*. If only the Führer could see how his work is being carried on. I have no doubt he would have liked to retire to Los Angeles and take up yoga. He swore by homeopathics!”

“Who needs Zyklon B,” I said, “when you can bore people to death?”



Fear Eats the Soul

I focused on not losing my nerve. Fronting. I couldn't tell if I was carsick, paranoid, starving, crackling with fear of what my captor would do to Tina or fear that, whatever he did, I'd have to watch. Helpless. Impotent as a shtetl Torah scholar watching a Cossack rape his wife.

When had I not been in this van?

I didn't know if Tina was coming back from wherever Mengele had chemically launched her. Her once-in-a-while-blinking eyes met mine with no more affect than a statue. *Where was she?*

The van banged up and down. The driver must have been taking potholes at sixty. Something dragging from the chassis scraped the asphalt. The racket filled the metal box, then stopped. I made out a thought in this chaos, like a far-off light in the fog: *Maybe fumes have been seeping in all along.* There were smoky fringes in the corner of my vision, as if film were being fed through a projector straight into flames.

I wasn't scared. I was working my way up to fear. What I felt was a kind of inchoate vagueness. Maybe Mengele had transformed his own body odor into an anesthetic.

The road smoothed out and the van hummed as it picked up speed. Mengele droned on. The guy at the party you had to listen to because he had the drugs. Or the gun.

“By the end, World War Two wasn’t even a war. It was a custody battle. Operation Paperclip. America competed for scientists with the Communists. The Russians and Americans were like pedophiles in an orphanage, stabbing each other in the back to get to the camp scientists and all their knowledge. It makes me sick, all these years the Jews and everyone else decrying the Holocaust.” He imitated what I supposed he thought to be a lisping Jew. “‘Oi oi oi! How could it happen? How could it happen?’ When the Jew knows the truth more than anyone: it is all business.”

“I can’t imagine why they wouldn’t want your ass,” said the reverend with equal parts sincerity and sarcasm.

“Yeah, why didn’t they want you?”

“The Jews made me a symbol; why do you think? IBM did more to kill the Jews than I ever did! They invented the computer to keep track of death camp inmates. But does that keep anybody from buying their products? Look!”

He reached in his pocket and carefully slid out a plastic-covered card the size of a credit card slip. He read it out loud.

“Prisoner code eight was ‘Jew.’ Code eleven was ‘Gypsy camp.’ Code zero-zero-one was ‘Auschwitz.’ Code five was ‘execution by order.’ Code six was ‘gas.’ And who made the gas? IG Farben. Parent company of Bayer pharmaceuticals.”

“Can I see that?”

I reached, but he quickly pulled the artifact back, close to his chest. “Are you brain damaged? Do you have any idea what this could get on eBay?”

The reverend shot his cuffs. “I believe I could help you with that.”

“Not now! The point I’m making is, *nothing has changed*. Bayer and Rockefeller paid me to inject typhus into babies; why? Was it torture?

No, fever relieves certain conditions. When his temperature exceeds one oh six, a Mongoloid can read the Bible.”

“So what’s the deal, man-to-man? Do you just, like, make shit up and believe it?”

“This was world-changing science, believe me. After the war, I can tell you, I found out what was what. There are no countries, there are no wars—there are wardens who run the world and inmates who live in it. One nation runs all nations: Business-land.”

“And all these years, you still can’t get your passport stamped.”

“Enough!” Mengele shouted, producing a peculiar old pistol.

“Jesus, is that a Luger?”

“It is.” He put the gun away and sniffed. It was getting very close in the van. “If I wanted a new gun I could get one. Now listen to me: there are Jews who will tell you of the good things Mengele did. But do you hear about them? No!”

“I’ll bite,” I said. “Tell me something good.”

My plan now was to wait till he fell into some swoon of heroic memory, then stomp on his foot and knee him in the face when he fell forward. I’d just have to take my chances with the reverend. You had to die of something.

“I developed something sweet,” Mengele declared. “Exitotoxin, so that the Jews would eat their gruel. You know it as aspartame.”

“You invented aspartame?”

“As more than a sweetener, I’m afraid.”

“What’s that mean?” Tina lived on Diet Cokes. Now I had to worry about sugar-free Nazi pop?

“What it means,” the doctor explained, “is that once consumed, it breaks down into amino acids and methanol, degrades to formaldehyde, morphs the brain of whoever consumes it into a neurodegenerative stew of multiple sclerosis, Parkinson’s, or Alzheimer’s. Sometimes all three. But did I get a patent? Do I get residuals? What do *you* think? In nineteen sixty-seven, IG Farben and Monsanto started a joint ven-

ture to put aspartame in drinks—using my formula. Your Donald Rumsfeld pushed it through the FDA for his friends at IG Farbenfabriken—whose own palate was sweetened with General Motors money during the war. The fruits of the Holocaust!”

“You sure you’re not taking more credit than you deserve? Just a teensy bit?”

“What?” Mengele went red-faced. “You don’t understand. For America and Germany, eugenics was our arms race. A race to save the race! Grateful Americans sent me a gold-plated bust of an Aryan youth for my work with irradiated benches. I found a way to sterilize fifty inferior males at once. Sit them down on my irradiated metal, pretend they were there to fill out a dental chart, and before you could say Richard Wagner their sperm would be as useless as toothpaste.”

He closed his eyes, his voice now weaker. He fumbled in the pocket of his waistcoat and pulled out the bullet-shaped canister. He sprayed it up his nose. And sat up again, re-revived. “Why do I mention the radioactive gonads? Because one of my counts, at Nuremberg, centered on this very breakthrough. Which I had planned on coming to the States to market. But never mind. I was the evil radiator. Meanwhile—this is the injustice!—since the twenties, in America, children had been slipping their feet into shoe-fitting fluoroscopes. Every shoe store had to have one. *Scientific shoe-fitting*. What fun to see your foot bone there in the radioscope! Do I need to tell you that a decade later there was an epidemic of deadly cancers and genital deformities? But did anybody prosecute shoe salesmen? Was the inventor of the foot fluoroscope forced to abandon his family and migrate south of the border? Quaker Oats paid Harvard to feed retarded children oatmeal spiked with radioactive tracers. The object was to see how preservatives move through the body. Were any Quakers hung? Was anyone from Harvard charged?”

Reverend D responded without smiling. “Remember, Doc, an-

ger is a luxury we can't afford. Right, Manny? You're the recovery guy; *tell 'im!*"

"Reverend's right," I said, unearthing another nugget of recovery: "You're angry 'cause you're afraid. And what is fear? False Evidence Appearing Real!"

The classes in San Quentin might as well have happened in another galaxy. There was Mengele and pre-Mengele. And right now there was Maximum Mengele. I waited desperately for Tina to blink again, to give some sign that she was alive. I'd seen her like this once before, attractively embalmed and propped up, when she'd scored us some ketamine, then done it all herself when she got tired of waiting for me to come home. I walked in to find her in a total K-hole, flat on her back on the kitchen floor. Her eyes were open but her body was stiff, as though plucked prematurely from the pod where she'd been deanimated until arrival on Saturn. I tuned back to Mengele's ranting.

"Was I angry when von Braun, who ran slave camps and developed the V-2, was flown to Hyannis Port?"

"Rocket man again? You must be mad," I said. "You won't shut up about it."

Jimmy the Rasta had been right. The von Braun thing killed him. It was almost worth the unpleasantness just to listen to his torment.

"While I was being condescended to by brown-skinned cretins, kissing President Stroessner's cankered ass to stay in Paraguay, Wernher von Braun was rubbing thighs with Jackie Kennedy, listening to Pablo Casals at White House dinners. So he used Jewish prisoners as slave labor to build V-2 missiles. What did JFK care? Dead Jews don't matter when you need to go to the moon. One small step for man, one giant step for Nazi science! The president painted von Braun's swastika red, white and blue and made him a hero. Americans are so self-righteous because they do not even know their own history."

"Somebody be sittin' on the pity pot," said the reverend. "You

had your run, *Swasti-cuz!* Have a little dignity. Don't be dyein' your hair an' shit. Makes you look like some bathhouse toad ain't heard the eighties is over."

I still didn't know the deal the two had worked out. But mutual respect was plainly not part of the contract.

"Am I kidnapped," I asked to annoy him, "or do you just need to lock people in vans to get them to listen to your life story?" Mengele stiffened. Still unaccustomed to mockery from subhumans. "I guess Auschwitz was the high point, huh? And I don't mean 'cause it looks good on a résumé. I mean 'cause of all the research opportunities! The *freedom!* Spot a fresh set of mixed-sex teen twins? March them back to the lab for your famous climate study. Plunge Ugo and Uta naked in a vat of freezing water. Then march them outside, dripping wet, in the Polish winter, so they have to do things to each other to keep from dying of hypothermia. If you take notes, it's science."

How often does anyone have the chance to chat with a living nightmare? There was so much to ask.

"Did you follow," I heard myself ask, "in 'eighty-five, when your victims had a reunion in Jerusalem? They tried you in absentia. The saddest was the man who only appeared behind a curtain, because you had removed his penis when he was a boy. He was still ashamed."

"They were not victims. They were subjects. No one expects a layman to understand science."

"Really? How fat was your mother to make you need to do that?"

"My mother?"

Reverend D reached over and slapped the back of my head. "Boy, like my toothless grandma used to say, 'If I was you, I would put my *mouf* in the *mouf* garage and shut the motherfucking garage door.'"

I let that go. Some other time I could parse the reverend's loyalties. For now, my mouth was all I had to hurt Mengele. "Was Walburga proud you followed in her footsteps?"

Mengele stiffened, as close to confusion as I'd seen him. "My mother? What are you talking about?"

"You both made cripples."

"Oh, snap!" laughed the reverend, earning a Mengelic glower.

"So," I continued, "there's no mandatory retirement age for mass murderers? You just switch to pets? How could you even be who you say you are? You were declared dead by drowning years ago."

"Please. The São Paulo coroner was bribed. It is not hard to persuade an international committee that wants to be persuaded."

"And so you survived to go peroxide and put down schnauzers."

"That," he said, "is unfortunate."

"Yeah, especially for the schnauzers, huh, Beppo?"

This alone seemed to sting him. But it wasn't the Mama's-boy nickname that wound him up. It was accusing him of hurting animals.

"I love all God's creatures," he protested. "Which does not include the vermin—the Jews, the Gypsies, the Slavs, the homosexuals. We were doing what needed to be done to save humanity. We were willing to be beasts in the eyes of the world. To save what was finest in us. But animals. Oh no! With them we have a sacred bond. In Germany, you know, we passed the *Tierschutzgesetz*."

"Sounds like it hurt," the reverend chuckled, in no way cowed by the old bottle-blond's glare.

"For your information, that means the Animal Rights Act. Germany," Mengele proudly declared, "was the first country in the world that defined rights for animals. *Tierschutzgesetz* declared that they, too, have souls."

"Then how can you stand there in Highland Park and kill them?"

"Quite easily. The *Tierschutzgesetz* applied to German dogs. Let me explain to you one of my greatest discoveries, Mengele's Law. By definition, every species contains within it the best strain of itself. Think of it as the species equivalent of the master race. My triumph is the development of Mengelatin, a substance so powerful it can only

be described as ‘the elixir of life.’ This contribution—and its race-saving applications—would be salvation enough to make up for the so-called six million. Fellow scientists would reward me for the formulaic elegance as for my patent and the sweep of its applications. I am not without compassion,” he pronounced grandly. “Even those breeds below master race could benefit.”

“So what does it do?”

I hated to admit it, but I was curious.

Mengele chewed a few wet mustache hairs before he answered. “Why should I tell you? What I will say is that every race, from subhuman to superior, produces its own best of breed. Its valuable essence. A by-product of adrenaline, which can be generated and gathered.”

“You honkin’ on that shunt again?” The reverend was getting less ambivalent about his affections.

“The science is complicated,” said Mengele, pleased to have been asked. Then he turned to me, his sudden friendliness more disturbing than imperious repulsion. “I lied,” he said to me. “I didn’t just give her adrenaline. I shouldn’t have teased you.”

“What?”

For the second time, I was ready to lunge, but the reverend caught me.

Mengele, meanwhile, had gone weirdly mellow. “No, you’ll like this,” he said. “It’s a *good* thing.”

When the insane sound reasonable, the ground always gets shakier.

“A couple of months ago,” he said, a little wearily, “there was a headline in the *New York Times*: ‘Scientists Develop Love Serum Oxytocin?’” _

“Oxycontin? The Rush Limbaugh drug?” Now I was the one so nervous I sounded like a chatterbox. “Man, I gotta tell you, anybody don’t believe in evolution, take a look at the American dope fiend. From Charlie Parker to Rush Limbaugh. That fat fuck should get an award for makin’ dope uncool.”

“Maybe that’s why he does it,” the rev said. “For the kids. Who wants to be a junkie when the poster boy is a pasty Republican fat-ass looks like he skated on a MSNBC *To Catch a Predator* bust?”

Mengele took another hit off his pocket vial. The blast left his voice slightly warbly. “Not oxycontin, *oxytocin*. It’s a hormone, mostly found in vaginal secretions when a woman climaxes. It induces bonding by decreasing cuddle inhibitors.”

“So I guess you can see how I might be able to help out with that,” said the reverend, surprising me again with his shifting alliances.

“Not really,” I said, putting no finesse in it. “Can girls even get moist when they’re that tweaked?”

Reverend D flashed the gold in his grill. “When I’m on the case, there’s a smile at both ends.”

Mengele harrumphed. He wanted the attention back. “Johns Hopkins found that oxytocin injected into cerebrospinal fluid causes spontaneous erections and weeping. Your CIA thinks it might be useful to spray at political rallies. To sway opinion. And your Pentagon wants it for chemical warfare. One spritz and Moishe puts down the rocket launcher and kisses Mohammed.”

“Wow. I wonder what an OD would look like,” I said.

Mengele looked pleased. “That’s a very important question. That’s what we’re here to find out!”

Apparently this was the reverend’s cue to open a locker on the back wall. He pulled out a hazmat suit and green rubber booties that Velcro’d over the ankle. When he handed one to Mengele my mouth went dry. The reverend and Mengele stepped into the gear like they dodged toxins together all the time.

So there it was. No matter how you divided “they need gas masks” by “I don’t get any,” the result was not good. Mengele cracked an ampoule and filled a narrow-gauge syringe. The reverend tightened and retightened his Velcro bootie.

I could think of no compelling reason to let myself and the woman

I loved, whatever condition she was in, be fumigated in a van in front of masked men. I would never call myself brave, but given the choice between a protracted death and a fast one, it hardly seemed heroic to go for slow.

“It’s been fascinating, but we’re gone,” I said.

I launched myself off the bench and screamed in Tina’s face. “Get up!”

Nothing registered.

I shouted again. “*Tina!*”

Still no response. I slapped her face and pulled her off the bench. Nobody stopped me. Both men, now in masks, watched with mild insect-interest. I tried the door handle. I kicked and punched at it. “You think I’m gonna stand here and get exterminated? Open the fucking door!

“Whose side are you on?” I asked the reverend. He pointed to himself. Big surprise.

Then Mengele yelled through his mask, so that it sounded like he was talking on a cell phone, “Nobody’s exterminating you. On the contrary, I’m going to make your life worth living.” For one weird moment, he sounded like a televangelist. Jimmy Swaggart with a Colonel Klink accent. “I am going to infuse your existence with emotions few people ever get to experience. The feelings of love oxytocin generates—”

“You’re not doing shit,” I said with all the bravado a thimble could hold.

I felt the reverend’s steel grip on my shoulders as Mengele approached with a syringe.

“You’re going to thank me,” he said, going for “soothing” despite the grinding, fork-in-the-garbage-disposal unpleasantness of his voice. “It makes women want to cuddle. In men, feelings of love are magnified. Introduced into the cerebrospinal fluid of rats, it causes spontaneous erection.”

“Sounds like MDMA,” I said, babbling to hide my panic. “I tried that once in the nineties and French-kissed my mailman.”

“MDMA and Ecstasy are pale imitations of a hormone we produce naturally during orgasm. What I’ve done, as I did with adrenals, is harvest it.”

“You’re the Mr. Green Jeans of glands. Do they make a lab coat that comes with bib overalls?”

Mengele was too busy to listen. He began to whistle, some grating mash-up of “Raindrops Keep Falling on My Head” and Wagner. Then, biting the orange cap off the syringe, he tapped three times on Tina’s throat, like it was a secret code, and plunged the point in her neck. I wanted to pounce, but not when he had a needle in my soon-to-be-ex ex-wife’s neck.

He got a blood register, then thumbed the plunger back down while the reverend held me in place by the shoulders. “Somebody,” he said, “is going to have a very wonderful evening.”

I tried to stomp the reverend’s shoe but he moved his foot.

“So you shoot up her up with O juice, and she goes mad?”

“Actually, I just injected her with superadrenaline. Oxytocin is delivered nasally, in a mist. You’ll both be getting the love.”

Mengele nodded and took his seat on the bench beside the reverend, who kept a pincer grip on my shoulder. He banged a few times on the front of our rolling party pad, to whoever was in the cab. Then he pulled a video camera from the compartment where the hazmat suits had hung. He fiddled with the lens, then pointed the thing my way. I wasn’t thrilled about it, but at the moment, acting without a SAG card was the least of my worries.

The floor began to rattle and hum, building up to a brain-rattling epic MRI. *Clack . . . Clack . . . Clack*. I wanted to eat my arms. But Tina showed no reaction. Mengele—and again, I tried to remind myself, it might not be Mengele—refastened his mask. Then the clacking stopped. Replaced by a hiss. Mist rose from a grate in the bottom of the van.

Time went sideways. Adrenally fired up, Tina's eyes focused. She took in the pair in gas masks and slowly rising fog at her ankles and screamed at me.

"They're gassing us, and you're standing there?"

"You were out of it. It's not that kind of gas. It's oxytocin. The bonding hormone. It—"

"I know what oxytocin is!" she shouted over the rising fog. "I read it in *Jane*. I just can't believe you believed him!"

She stepped around the rising vapor, seething, and punched me in the face. I thought the veins in her eyes were going to bleed. She swung again, connecting with my neck. Then she tried to slap my face. I grabbed her by the wrists and she tried to head-butt me.

I tried to dodge her, more pissed at the reverend for filming the assault than at Tina for launching it.

"Well, I guess—ouch, ow, *hey!*—I guess the adrenaline's working."

She dropped her arms to her sides, literally snarling. "Josef Mengele puts on a gas mask and tells you he's pumping love gas? *And you believe him?* Are you on drugs?"

"The wrong ones. But the oxytocin's on the way."

Tina kicked me in the knee. "So why do they have gas masks on? They don't want the love?"

The fumes rose in slow, expanding circles.

I let in a staggered breath of almond-flavored vapor, expecting the worst. Instead, I crumpled against the wall, in the sudden grip of a wrenching, up-from-the-toes swoon. Suddenly I wanted to lick the color out of Tina's eyes. Longing was almost like a drug—and borderline unbearable enough to make me need one.

Tina glared. So I got the love and she got the hate. That would be an experiment. I pressed my hand over my chest like I was pledging allegiance but was testing to make sure I could still breathe.

"There's a second oxytocin receptor in the heart," I heard Mengele say.

I needed to kiss her so badly I didn't care if we were going to die. The need dragged me toward her, like a dog tugging on a leash. I stared at her mouth, recalling how Carlos described the mouths of men who died from carbon monoxide: like they were wearing cherry-red lipstick. The stuff didn't just kill you, it turned your corpse gay. I didn't care. I didn't care about anything. The love coursing through my veins crowded everything else out. Because there was no everything else. Or everything was love.

I know how this sounds. *Today*. But in that whirling moment, I had no thoughts at all. Some Big Bang had happened. I had been blasted apart and reassembled with delicious new ingredients. Gripped by the delirious, inchoate sensation that some obvious, beautiful, terrifyingly perfect thing had been missing all my life. And now it had been revealed. If I could just remember what it was . . .

The universe vibrated with happiness. All I had to do was let it. But buried under the cosmic bliss was the dim sensation that my past had been amputated. Fear was like a phantom limb that was just beginning to itch. Somehow, I knew that if I scratched, I would make it real.

Then I opened my eyes, and Tina's face was better than never dying.

We charged toward each other. *Yes!* I opened my aching arms. *Oh, God, thank you, yes!* Tina moved in to meet me. She raised her eyes. I parted my lips. She opened her mouth. "Oh, baby," I groaned. Tina clutched my face. Her fingers shot knee-wobbling pleasure rays straight to my heart.

She stared in my eyes. "*What the fuck is wrong with you?*"

I backed off, shattered. "What do you mean what's wrong? You don't feel it?" My voice degenerated to a desperate rasp. "The love?"

"The *what?*" Tina slapped at my tears like they were flies. "You fucking asshole!"

By now the cloud was floating up to our faces. We inhaled, as if by

mutual consent, and breathed into each other's mouths. I wanted to sew myself to her back, like one of Mengele's demented twin experiments.

Then I began to choke. I could not tell dying from love.

Tina's words made puffs of vapor: "Son of a bitch!"

Her teeth ripped at my lips. My lungs needed her lungs. We kissed like people trying to kill each other with mouth-to-mouth resuscitation.

Suddenly—I had forgotten we were even *traveling*—the van swerved. The reverend slid sideways on the bench, slamming into Mengele as Tina and I crashed into a whorled metal wall.

I couldn't tell if the wailing siren came from inside my head or leaked in through the airtight gas van. Tina kept tearing at me. I tried to pin her arms. She fought by kissing harder. Then we swerved the other way. And—

BOOM!

Something hit us. Metal crunched but the walls held. The van was spinning. My head slammed the floor inside the almond gush of mist. A fire extinguisher fell out of its wall brace and clanked on the floor. I thought, *What was that for?* And crawled on top of my never-more-beautiful ex-wife.

For a long time, maybe years, Tina and I clung to each other. The van spun like a plate on a stick. I ended up underneath her. Tina, to my dizzy surprise, positioned herself with legs apart, producing her own batch of oxytocin. I felt her slide down onto me. *Grinding.* Then the van tipped over and floor became ceiling. The fire extinguisher sailed past my head, then clanged by me, bouncing the other direction and crashing into the whorled metal wall.

Stillness. The silence that only comes after a crash. Eyes closed, I

waited for my cosmic bliss to reintroduce itself. I tried to stay positive, to be grateful I'd had the gift of knowing such a feeling existed. But I knew the truth: now I had the curse of knowing it was gone. Joy had become the phantom. As ever. And fear was real.

I slowly opened my eyes. Before me, the reverend lay still, face-down. Mengele, crawling slowly and muttering in German, was reaching for his mask. Then someone banged on the van door and he froze.

I heard voices. Gunshots, or a car backfiring. Or somebody firing back at a car. I rolled on top of Tina, done moving but still inside her. Carlos had not said if Mengele had bulletproofed the van when he customized it.

I was in the mood to take artillery for a woman I loved. Mengele pulled a gun from inside his hazmat suit. His hand shook, but a gun's a gun. Before I could go for it, Tina kicked it out of his hand without taking her lips off mine. She always had scary reflexes. "*Growing up*," I suddenly remembered her saying, "*the family motto was 'Nobody moves, nobody gets hurt.'*" Somehow, in the crash, my amputated past had become reattached. Now I remembered everything.

The van door swung open, sucking out a whoosh of love mist. My vision was blurry. But my ears had stopped ringing for the first time since Zell brained me with his walker. I heard a cackle I recognized. White Bob Marley's. I blinked until I could see the head full of exploding-squid dreads. Rasta Jim, with a blue windbreaker with an FBI shield dangling on a chain around his neck. He took a whiff and backed off, keeping his eyes on Tina as she held on to my shoulder with one hand, tugged clothes on with the other. "Some people can party anywhere," he said, coughing into his hand.

"I wouldn't call it a party," I said, feeling weirdly compelled to defend my wife—or ex-wife's—honor. "More a command performance."

"Thank you, honey," said Tina.

Rasta Jim put his hands up, conciliatory. “Don’t explain. I’ve been following you since the museum.”

He opened the door wider. A Mexican vendor rolled up in his corn-on-the-cob cart and peeked in. A small crowd of curious faces pressed behind him, some munching carne asada, others eating pineapple on a stick. I recognized the cart. Jesus . . .

I’d thought we’d driven a hundred miles. But we were only on Avenue Sixty, about ten blocks from the pound, maybe a mile or two from the Southwest Museum, where I’d left my car a few thousand years ago.

“Baby,” Tina whispered. I moved into her kiss, cells still humming with hormone-triggered empathy. I was astonished—and maybe ashamed—that I’d managed to forget myself in front of an audience. Let alone one that included a digital camera and Josef Mengele.

Mengele!

I swung back in time to hear the shot and see the bullet explode from the White Rasta’s throat. In the back of his neck and out his Adam’s apple. A through-and-through.

But I couldn’t see the Angel of Death. Instead, expressionless as ever under his state-framed black eyeglasses, Bernstein stepped sideways into view, where Rasta Jim had just been shot. He worked his jaw at the sight of Tina. For a moment, affection for the neo-Nazi bloomed inside me. Despite the fact that he’d just killed a man I liked. Despite the fact that he had been with Tina two nights before. Clearly, not all of the oxytocin mist had left my system. I had to restrain myself from grabbing the Aryan killer in a bear hug. That oxytocin delivered the love.

“You didn’t have to do that!” I cried.

“Do what?” Bernstein spoke quietly. “Do’s over. We talkin’ ’bout *done*. This is goin’ down how it’s gonna go down.”

I spotted Mengele pinning himself to the side wall of the van, trying to hide by the door. No one would see him until they stepped

onboard. His palsy had progressed to a steady fluttering. He was either pointing his gun at Tina or trying to swat flies.

I figured I could block him long enough to shove her out to safety. But before I did anything, another voice boomed into the van.

“Boychick, what did you do?” Harry Zell shambled up to Bernstein, grabbed his face by the cheeks and kissed him on the forehead. When he noticed me, he pointed and roared. “You! Did you think you could double-fuck Harry Zell?”

“What are you talking about? You wanted me to find out if this freak is Mengele? Like you didn’t know? There’s been a whole other movie running since you hired me, hasn’t there, motherfucker?”

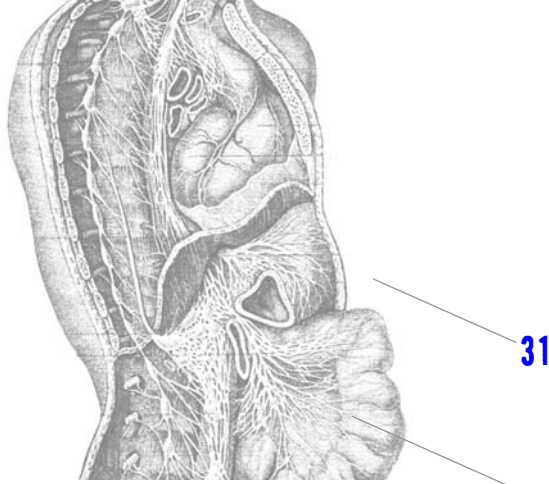
“You should know,” said Zell. “You’re starring in it.”

“Enough!” Tina banged on the van wall. Whirling red and blue lights swept in and out of the open door. “You jerks want to stop measuring dicks? Somebody just put a fed in the ground, and his friends are here.”

Zell hoisted his heavy bulk into the van, followed by a shirtless Bernstein. The Nazi-inked Jew started to close the door, but somebody pushed it open again. That’s when I spotted the smaller figure, in mask and protective suit that hid his face, sitting very still on the bench. The reverend was slumped against it, bleeding from his middle.

Hazmat man said nothing. He remained still when an arm curled around my throat from behind and plunged in a syringe. It was oddly painless. I remember thinking, as soft black smoke began to fill my skull, *What is that, my thyroid? Mengele always goes for the glands.* I was almost grateful to go unconscious again. At least he didn’t hit me on the head again. That wound was almost beginning to heal. And I still felt a lot of oxy-love.

The last thing I saw was a pair of little hands making a church and steeple.



Hemingway's Vagina

In the baby dream, I stand on the platform, quirt slapping smartly off the tops of one polished boot. Steam billows from the guts of the train as it slows. The stench arrives before the cargo itself. An acrid air-bath of urine, rank sweat and feces infuses the clean wind from the forest with something secretly sweet. My eyes tear, not from that stink of confinement, nor from that pink-black nonstop meat smoke belching from the towers. From sheer joy.

I touch a manicured finger to the high starched collar of my uniform. Breathe. Feel the tingling in my groin. The sky looks ready to drip lead. My boots shine. I sniff the lavender water sprinkled on my collar.

Now the labored hissing slows. A final gasping blast escapes from the train's brakes. Nothing else will escape. I could kiss every battered slat in the freight car.

*"Soldaten! Die Tore!"*¹

I clap once. Twice. The officers nearest, bull-necked blond boys, hop to. One snaps the lock off the sliding doors. The second wrestles with the handle, frozen in place. It gives with a violent *clack*.

1. "Guards! Doors!"

Before they slide the giant doors open, I can see, through the myriad ragged holes—metal clawed apart or chewed—shining eyes in the dark. Each car a rolling constellation of fear, full of germs with faces.

I raise my chin, legs apart, boots planted firmly on Reich-occupied earth. Ready to select. My favorite moment.

Except—is the God that does not exist taunting me?—except instead of men, women and children, the usual clutching families, there is nothing inside the train but babies. Babies. Their faces the faces of old men. Pain-suckled, wizened; giant, hollow eyes accusing. A mountain of babies topples and spills over the siding, onto the tracks, out to the platform itself. As each hideous infant hits the earth it begins to crawl toward me. Together, they form a single mewling, vicious mass. And yet—

The guards shout, as if nothing were out of order. “*Beeilt euch! Komm Schon!*”² As if this infant militia were the norm. The guards scream what they always scream. “*Bewegt eure dreckigen jüdische arsche!*”³

I step backward, appalled. Unable to take my eyes off those awful, obscene features. Old men’s heads on naked infants whose genitalia, too, are fully grown. Organs the size of plucked chickens drag through dirty snow as they crawl in my direction.

I back away, swinging my quirt, to no avail. I kick, and the crunch of boot through skull stops nothing. I stomp and I stomp. There are so many, I cannot step. They are a moving carpet. I try but cannot wipe the smear of baby-face from under my sole, nor knock off the clumping brain and eye that clogs my boot heel. They surround me now. A tiny ragged fist grabs my pant leg. A second pinches.

“*Hör auf!*”

I unsnap my holster. Remove my Mauser. Point it at the crawling army.

2. “Move it! Come on, get out!”

3. “Move your filthy Jewish asses!”

"I'll shoot! I'll shoot! You think I won't!"

But babies are not men.

I fire. The first swollen head explodes. But what does death mean to a newborn? They are not afraid to die. It is useless. They are braver than men. The baby beside him does not shudder. Does not slow.

*"Zuruck! Zuruck, ihr dreckigen giftzwerg!"*⁴

My starched collar wilts. The sun leaks blood. Why do they hate me? You want to know the biggest serial killer in the world? It is life! The second we are born, life starts sharpening its claws. Life is there laughing.

"Americans!"

Suddenly I hear him.

"The Norse gods lived for eternity. But Americans don't care about racial purity—they want thinner thighs."

That wheedling voice penetrates my skull. The doctor is not in my dream—he is *here*.

I wake up annoyed—actually just *dreaming* I'm awake—and discover I am not the Selektor. I am a baby. And I am crying because something happened to me. A pain like teeth in my scrotum. A rat? Another feral tot?

"NO!"

I bolt upright. Or try to. I rise up half an inch, then stop, restrained by the fat leather strap across my chest and arms. I am flat on my back. On a gurney. Or no. *Worse*. An operating table. But—scarier than the pain—now there is no pain. There is no feeling at all.

I blink upward. The water stains and fluorescent lights are familiar. In drug class, I stared at the ceiling when I had nothing to say. It was

4. "Get back! Get back, you filthy poison dwarves!"

an old cop trick—it made you look thoughtful while a perp squirmed. Now *I* was the squirming party. Mengele's respect-craving old-man voice leaked into my ear like mercury. "If America wanted to keep from being overrun by immigrants, they'd sterilize them at the border. How? I have the solution. Radioactive benches. In the camp, we could do fifty at a time. I know; I invented the benches. Give the folks a form to fill out, a few bowls of chips, and by the time they list all their relatives and their favorite dinner, their ability to reproduce—to make what you call 'anchor babies'—has been zapped. Ten minutes, with no immediate side effects. In the beginning, true, there was some burning. Yes, *flames*. But I, Mengele, smoothed out the kinks!"

Jesus. I'd been dreaming I was *him*, dreaming that *he* was a baby—a baby *he* killed. Somehow it made sense when I was dreaming it. . . . Maybe I had some kind of oxytocin fallout.

I strained to see down the length of my body—and made out only white. My knees, apparently, were bent and spread and—this wasn't good!—I was in stirrups. Like a woman visiting her gynecologist. Tina used to say she never understood women who felt violated at their gynecologist. "*If that's being violated, I don't know what you call my daddy's moves. . . .*" But to feel violated you had to feel. And I felt nothing.

The worm of panic swelled to an electric eel in my chest. My toes tented the sheet high over my middle. I couldn't see under and I could barely see around. On either side of the Linen Curtain, I made out faces. I sensed, though their features blurred, that they were staring raptly, maybe with horror, at what I couldn't see. But why was everything a blur? I fought back waves of fear. A tsunami of worst-case scenarios. Beyond the mystery between my thighs, my eyes. I knew too much about Mengele. Now I wished I didn't. Wished I had thrown the mad old man out of my house when he blindsided me, ripped his phony pictures up and thrown them in his face. But it was too late. Because I knew: those on whom Mengele bestowed blue eyes he also left half-blind.

I rolled my head back, opened my mouth to scream. A hand clamped my mouth before I could. I recognized the texture. The scent. This missing divot under her thumb. Tina. But how? Why? Thankfully—or not—the more I blinked, the more my vision unblurred. The world looked more waxen than I remembered. More disturbing was the breeze that tickled my wishboned and elevated thighs. *Was someone touching me?* I tried to wriggle and reencountered my restraints. I still did not see Mengele. I heard him, on the other side of the sheet tent, but the flicker of the overhead fluorescents distracted me. Somehow I was confusing sound and light. Maybe my brain had been tampered with. Then I heard a pair of words and that made me forget my brain. At least I thought I heard them—and tried to scream them back against the palm on my mouth.

“Sex change!” The palm pressed hard, then softened.

Had it happened? Was it about to happen? Would I be out of surgery if I'd had a lop job?

I wondered if I had a vagina and thought of Hemingway. Not Papa, Gregory. *Gig*. His youngest son. Who had a sex change in Florida, when he was sixty, then got drunk by himself to celebrate and ended up dead in the Biscayne County women's jail. Ask not for whom the bell tolls. . . . Ask who surgically removed your bell.

“Turn on the TV, the first thing you see is a doctor selling a pill designed to make men bigger between their legs. Between their legs!”

Mengele's forced jocularly only made him sound more Teutonic and hectoring.

“You Americans and your size fixation. With your Extenze and your MaxiDerm. Let me tell you about *my* breakthrough, gentlemen. What I am about to tell you will revolutionize the penile implant industry.”

He paused, and I could almost hear the noxious slurp of his tongue on the rogue hairs of his mustache. “Let me put it in terms you Americans will understand. It is not the length of the baseball bat—it is the size of the baseball balls!”

Whoever he was talking to was silent. I groaned. It wasn't bad enough I was strapped down with my legs up and my ass and package on view to an audience in San Quentin. The Angel of Death was *tum-mling*. Trying to make a joke. And he was tanking. His spiel sounded stiff and memorized, a parody, if it's possible—or even morally advisable—to parody a genocidal murderer.

"The size of baseballs!" Dr. Mengele repeated, doing his own little callback. "This is true!"

"Say what?" came a voice I recognized as Colfax. "I'm supposed to forget my cannon and get my ammo bag all swoll?"

"*You are not listening!*" Now the doctor was angry. I hoped he didn't have a scalpel in his hand. "I myself conducted studies at Auschwitz and the women's high-security unit in Lexington, Kentucky."

"They closed that down in nineteen eighty-eight!" Was that the warden?

"I had nothing to do with that!" Mengele protested, getting right back on message. "What I am telling you can make all of you supermen! My work with anthropologic brain sensors reveals that the female is conditioned—in her primordial mind—to mate with the largest pair of testicles. The most *voluminous*. This is the discovery that can change the life of every man. Our species needs the pomegranate with the most seeds."

What had he done to me?

Every possibility burned like battery acid in my brain. I felt a dull thud somewhere between my legs. Had Josef Mengele numbed my privates and had his surgical way with them? Had he added or subtracted? Or had—*no, God!*—had he engineered one of his patented man-to-animal, animal-to-man transplants? Was I the before or the after?

"Mmmpphh!"

Tina clamped my mouth in warning. Why didn't she say something?

I tried to *feel* myself. *Nothing*. Out of nowhere, I remembered getting Novocain for the first time, when I was nine. How much I loved it. For hours after I got home from the dentist I stood at the mirror shooting staples into my gums, blithely spitting out blood and bone chips. Now I was elsewhere Novocained. Who knew what travesty Mengele had implanted for the amusement of his audience?

Maybe I was wrong about Zell and his prison docs. Maybe they were a cover—what he was after now was torture porn. Nazi science on parade. With me as unwilling stand-in for all the unwilling victims whose gruesome and brutal demise would have—had Harry Zell been magically on hand to film it—supplied the kind of next-level cable viewing jaded viewers were smacking their lips for now that jailhouse sodomy and medical procedurals no longer packed the impact they used to.

I worked my wrists till the skin burned in my restraints. Tried to squeeze a word past Tina's pressed-down palm. As far as I could tell she stood behind me. I rolled my eyes up to my forehead. I could just about catch the tip of her nose.

Thrilled as I was to find her up and functioning, it was disturbing in these circumstances. I could not imagine why she'd sign on for nurse duty with the doctor. But I knew her well enough to know she always had her reasons.

"At Auschwitz," Mengele remarked, "I experimented endlessly on ways to advance the master race." He chuckled like a man who practiced chuckling in front of a mirror. "Did all of the experiments achieve genetic perfection? *Nein!* But in science we have what we call the Law of Unintended Consequences. So, I confess to you, I discovered many, many secret methods for achieving cosmetic, eugenic and reproductive excellence by happy accident."

Not so happy, I thought grimly from my trussed-chicken perch, for those who accidentally found themselves in Building Number Ten. Imagine being five, lying on a pallet, full of candy after starving for

weeks, listening to Mengele play Puccini while he decided if he was in the mood for inducing gangrene or extracting eyeballs. I wondered again about the man at Mengele's victim reunion in Jerusalem. Too ashamed to show his face after all those years. Not even to those—victims themselves—who would surely understand. At what depth of sadness could a human being no longer breathe? I didn't realize I was crying until Tina dabbed my eyes.

I have never been brave on purpose. There was still some backwash of psychoactive swill sloshing around my system. Otherwise the shamefest of ending up as a naked lab monkey in the Joe Mengele show—the prospect of being his last victim—might have had me screaming like a little girl.

A piercing howl nearly blew me off the gurney. Followed by a doleful whimper and the enormous panting bulk of an Irish wolfhound being wheeled by on its flank. From my prone position, I could see that the trustee pushing the dog had traded prison blues for lime-green OR scrubs. The color nicely set off the CUT HERE tattooed on the back of his neck over a dotted line. Maybe he had the right idea.

When the dog yelped again I vomited in my mouth. Gulping back bile, I had a simple revelation: my pre-sex mutant existence was about to end. I wanted to rail and gnash my teeth. But how dare I obsess about *my* calamity and not the Mengele victims whose agonies preceded mine? The Holocaust lent their suffering dignity. Imbued it with inherent historical import and shattering profundity that spoke to all humanity. My death would have all the gravitas of a bum fight on YouTube. I was an idiot for ending up here. If my own life was any indication, it was no surprise that I would die idiotically. Ask any vulture; what's past is protein.

Apparently, every step I'd ever taken had been leading here: to the rolling display table of a celebrated Nazi sadist. What did it matter if I'd been gelded, gifted with a uterus or had the head of my penis surgically removed, sewn on and replaced with a chicken beak? I was a

prop in Josef Mengele's pitch, rolled out to help him market himself as the go-to genital alteration, transplant and enhancement ace. Which, as far as I could tell, was how he intended to make a living until history decided to show up and offer him an apology.

I considered biting my tongue and spewing blood to get Tina's hand off my face. I knew Tina wouldn't let anything too extreme happen to me. But I really needed to double-check. I'd done too much reading. What wasn't documented history was fevered speculation: Mengele did not just operate on the body. To establish the mental inferiority of the lower races, he went for brains. He'd wanted at them since 1934, when the Canadian Wilder Penfield claimed to have ended epilepsy by cauterizing the nerve cluster that controlled seizures. There were side effects—ex-epileptics smelled burnt toast—but what did Mengele care? If you could stop fits then you could cause them too. Heaven.

As I thrashed in my straps, I tried to reassure myself. Tina was the toughest person I knew. There was no way the doctor could have intimidated her into collaboration. Unless, say, he'd gone into her frontal lobe and cauterized the synapse that governed free will? There were rumors of death camp zombies. Physical restraint had unchained my paranoia. What if, since the last time I'd seen her, he'd had at her cerebellum, surgically made her a slave? It was no secret that the CIA adapted Nazi techniques, along with Korean, in developing its MK-ULTRA mind-control program. If Tina had been turned into the Manchurian Nurse—

Then suddenly—*sensation*. A sleeve brushed my member. That meant I still had one—unless he'd rewired my nerves so that I just thought it was mine and not some master race science project. Had that wolfhound been . . . whole? *Fuck*. This was the kind of hell you couldn't pack for.

Mengele chose that moment to step around the gurney, give my bare foot a manly squeeze. His plastic gloves were splashed red. Be-

sides that, the white lab coat and mike clipped under his collar made him look like a pharmacist in a TV commercial. He plucked a silver pen out of his lapel pocket with a studied flourish. He pulled it open until it was the length of a pointer. Then he poked at my exposed scrotum. When I juked, he nodded approvingly. “See how tender. Now look at this.” He poked again. This time the silver pointer made a small thud. I felt a spongy pressure, but no pain.

“The discovery that women are by nature attracted to testicular girth is a welcome break for the species. Sperm production is a volume business. But look at our other option.”

Again, he pointered me—but this time, for the life of me, I could not tell what he was poking. I had the wholly unique sensation of owning a body part I could not identify. I fought back nervous laughter.

“The procedure is simple.” Mengele seemed almost to be singing. No doubt he was on his own chemical diet. Again, he thrust the pointer somewhere I couldn’t see and felt with nervous uncertainty. He continued as though reading a cake recipe.

“Insert a small vibrating spring at the base of the prostate. Remove the two testicles and install a single, replaceable sperm tank, and it is possible to multiply the amount of vital essence twentyfold. More than ever the white race needs a bigger DNA delivery system. This was already priority number one during the Reich! Is it any different in America now, when the white race will soon be a minority in its own country?”

Sperm tank? I pictured some kind of dispenser, like liquid soap pumps in public toilets. But where was it? How big? Would it set off airport metal detectors? I imagined skulking through life as some kind of prototype, a two-legged semen warehouse. It was more grotesque than tragic. A “News of the Weird” item. Which only made it more shameful.

“When I started my research,” Mengele hammered on, “the German birth rate had plummeted. It got so dire, the high command held

‘sperm summits.’ At the one I attended, in Munich, Himmler composed a directive requiring that whores who worked at the Kitty, the state bordello in Berlin, retrieve the used condoms from SS men and keep them on ice. Such high-grade race protein could not be wasted. At my suggestion, the condom drops were deposited into healthy Rhinemaidens, who were sent off for pampered pregnancies in *Liebensborn*—the baby factories Himmler set up to ensure that the cream of the species procreated.”

By way of indicating the clot in the species’ anti-cream, he clapped me on the ribs. “But of course, the last thing we want is more of this one. . . . The nation who understands the importance of genetic management is the nation that will prevail!”

“Fuck genetics—the money’s in cosmetics!”

In the silence that followed I held my breath. This was the unmistakable, bullying voice of Harry Zell.

“No!” Mengele finally replied. “No, no, no! It is not either-or!” he went on forcefully, slapping the pointer down on my ribs to punctuate every word. It was like being whipped with a car antenna.

“Sure it is,” said Zell, who’d apparently joined my medical practitioner at the operating table. He slapped me like a show pony under the sheet. “Look at the schlong on Rupert. Why don’t you do a transplant?” I writhed harder against the straps, the burn on my skin a welcome distraction from my bigger predicament. “You get *that* bit of surgery on film, you’ll put the whole penis extension racket out of business. Finally, every pinkie-dick in the country will know it’s possible to go from Mini Cooper to Hummer. All they need is the cash for the operation—and they come to a prison of their choice and pick out the big boys we line up for them. Nothing a convict can do if the state decides he needs to be separated from his genitalia. All we do is invent a sex crime jacket, and we got his johnson in our pocket. Nine states still have castration on the books. Who’s going to care if we take the dog and the pony?”

Mengele said nothing. I began to experience a throbbing ache that started in my perineum and radiated outward. My eyes met Tina's just as Zell asked the obvious. He stepped in front of Mengele, meeting the bottle-blond old man's perpetually entitled and indignant gaze. "You've done it before, right, Doc?"

Mengele slapped my thigh with his extendo-pen. It didn't hurt anymore.

I've tried to say this already. I know. But find the language to describe not being able to see the damage some madman has just made between your legs—to describe not knowing, for that matter, whether you were man, woman or sideshow. Tina must have seen. But she wasn't giving anything away. When I wrenched sideways I could see the shock-drunk faces of prison staff and civilians on hand. But what were they looking at? I felt like a nine-year-old Indian bride on her wedding day, eager but terrified to set eyes on the dread specter she was going to have to spend her life with.

"Come on, Doc," Zell badgered. "Spill. How many?"

"Penile transplants? No more than a hundred," Mengele replied acidly.

I could feel Zell looming. "Well *I've* never seen one, and I've seen everything. Plus," said Zell, giving my shaft a friendly pat, "we've got a doozy on our hands."

Mengele took time to work up his smarmiest sneer. "I've had a lifetime of medical experiments. Why should I share the final fruit of my research with you? Besides which, I have seen more impressive specimens."

"Where, on Woden?" Zell laughed at his own joke until he coughed. "*Huacchh!* Goddamn it, I am giving you an opportunity here. To a guy with a dinghy a speedboat's as good as a yacht."

Zell made a meal of pulling out a Cohiba and sniffing it, then slipping it back in its little cigar coffin and sliding it back in his pocket. Seeing that Mengele was on the hook, he took a big breath and blew it

out slow as he spoke. “Folks have seen everything there is to see about prison. Market’s saturated. Everybody’s lookin’ for new content. Can you imagine the money for *Lockdown*, *Auschwitz*? Well Harry Zell can. The networks would wet their drawers. Are you following? Prison docs are primo basic cable. Every network loves medical stuff. And Nazis are an evergreen. Harry Zell says why not marry ’em all?”

I craned my head up far enough to see him frame the words with his hands, as though picturing each one as he recited. “*Mengele: Death Camp Sex Monster or Medical Genius?* How hard would it be to find someone who wants a master race organ? Hell, I bet the warden here would like to trade up! You got two revenue streams—show business, for folks who want to want the procedure, and private party, for the guy who wants the goods.”

Of all people Davey piped up, though I couldn’t see where he was or if eating a prescription bottle had left any outward damage. “I’d say Major League, but not MVP. He’s no Ron Jeremy.”

“Howzabout you shut your ham trap? I’m tryin’ to talk to swastika Joe here.” Zell handled himself calmly, a man used to doing business in chaos. “What I’m saying, Doc, is we’ve got profit potential on two levels here: we make a bundle on the documentary of the procedure and make another bundle from the private party who wants to swing the Manny-bat. And by the way, Ron Jeremy is a Jew. If anybody wants to talk about Aryan supremacy in the schlong department.”

Davey’s voice quivered a little. “I was just sayin’, it’s not in the Hedgehog’s bracket.”

If the man had any concern that his son was so conversant with porn star equipment, he didn’t show it. “What it is,” Zell replied, “is the kind of cock a girl might want to take home to mother. Nothin’ ostentatious. Not everybody’s a showboat.”

I wanted to scream. Now I knew the main event was intact. But for how long? And what about that sperm tank? The one silver lining was that, so far, Davey did not seem inclined to shoot me.

Mengele's pout was more reason to hate him. Could all genociders be this whiny? "There is something more than money. Is this something your people can comprehend? This is medical technology developed in the camp. On living subjects. If the public pays for it, then they are saying that they care less about the memory of those victims than they care about their own health and beauty. They are saying that I, Mengele, was justified in what I did. Because it can make them feel better."

With a flick of the wrist, Mengele freed my elevated legs and brought the tent between them down.

I saw the warden clearly, jotting something in his moleskin pad. Then Zell and Mengele both stepped in front of me, facing each other.

The doctor's stance was smug. "Think what they will give for the weight loss formulas."

Zell leaned back a little, folding his arms, so I could see the warden. He sat perfectly still, staring fixedly at whatever was going on between my thighs—which I was afraid to close for fear of hearing a clank or hitting plastic. The warden's eyes met mine, but not in a human way. He might as well have been looking at a truck tire.

The warden folded his hands and began building another church. While the old men argued, Tina worked on my wrist buckles. The Irish wolfhound—none of whose body parts, I prayed, I would have to wear home—had either succumbed or settled down for a nap. Hands loose, I could maneuver a little. But I nearly went blind when I caught a full eyeful of Zell. I'd already taken in his purple shirt. The rest of him was a revelation. Harry was decked out like he was going to the fights in 1960: that purple Banlon shirt, black and white houndstooth sports jacket, sharkskin slacks. His head and stomach were larger than I recalled. Maybe he'd heard about Dinah and ate to stuff his feelings.

I spotted Davey, holding the camera. I was still horrified about being filmed, but it was good to see he'd come into his own. Rincin

was holding up the back wall, like always. I tried to get his attention. But Mengele went suddenly livid. Bellowing. “Don’t shoot any of this! Stop the camera.”

Davey waved his hand to calm him down. “No worries, Doc. Anything fucked now we can unfuck it later!”

“Attaboy!” Zell shot his son a thumbs-up and plopped down beside the warden. He nudged him with his elbow, chummy as a scout at a high school game. “We get a cock-swap on film, it’ll be Swiss chalets for everybody.”

I felt Tina’s fingers undoing the leather strap that cinched my head. I stayed perfectly still.

Mengele steamed. “You do not understand! Everything I am going to demonstrate—the results are nearly instantaneous. No one but Josef Mengele can make that claim. Not like those quacks on TV. I am real. So *danke*. Thank you very much; I don’t need surgery footage.”

“Why not?”

“Because you could be making a case. Do you think I am stupid? I have lived with a price on my head for sixty years by trusting greedy Jews?”

“Hot damn!” said Zell, hopping out of his chair and wagging his finger. “I like you.” He turned to the warden and shook his head. “Don’t you like him? You hear ‘Angel of Death,’ you think the guy’s gonna be rough around the edges. But, Doc, you got some kinda charm!”

Until then, I had not noticed how much Zell resembled Bill Clinton in his manner. Bill Clinton if he’d been shorter and older and jowlier and his name had been Clintstein. Zell held his hands up in mock surrender. “Okay, *uncle*! Harry gives! Tell me what you got.”

“I told you. I’ve got weight loss, I’ve got—”

“Weight loss!” Zell grabbed the silver pointer out of Mengele’s hand and broke it across his knee. “Are you mentally challenged? What’s your plan? Book some cable time at three A.M. and do infomercials? That it? *‘Sieg Heil, I’m Josef Mengele, you may know me from the*

Holocaust. Talk about chutzpah!” Zell looked back at Davey. “Can you believe this mass-murdering schmuck?”

Davey just shrugged. His father swung around and faced Mengele again, hairy nostrils flaring.

“The Auschwitz Diet? Is that what I’m hearing here? *‘Lose half your body weight in a week or we’ll send you a full refund’*? Am I getting hot? *‘Side effects may include the death of all your relatives. . . .’*”

Mengele waited patiently for him to finish. “You exaggerate. But why not? Until the National Academy of Sciences calls and offers me a prize, I have a viable commercial product. I have already applied and received patents under an alias.”

Zell’s voice lost some of its bluster. “Is it Alzheimer’s? Is that it? I bet if you’d have cured that first, you wouldn’t have ended up sounding like some demented old grifter. Well, woulda, coulda, shoulda, huh?”

“Accchh! Stop interrupting!” Mengele aimed his weirdly soft-skinned face back to the camera. If he started in on skin care, I might bite.

“Ready when you are,” said Davey.

“Good!” Zell shouted. “Get this Nazi freak for posterity. I swear, it’s like I’m lookin’ at old man Hitler here. I mean, if the Führer, rest his soul, had lived. If he hadn’t stuck cyanide up Eva’s ass and made her shit in his mouth. Don’t deny it—I’ve seen the OSS photos. What is it with you Germans? All the top Nazis—nothin’ but a nest of pervs. And believe me, you, sir, do not disappoint.”

“Are you through?” Mengele reconfigured his gap-toothed smile for the camera. “Faced with troublesome hip fat you cannot seem to lose? Too much stomach? Well, your worries are over! Apply Mengelatin Fat-Burning Balm just once and see the results within one hour—or your money back! Nurse?”

And there was Tina! In her nurse’s outfit. I rewound the movie of our Christian crack house visit. Vaguely remembered her stuffing something in her purse in the reverend’s bedroom. She stepped on her mark and faced Davey with wholesome delight.

“I had twenty problem pounds after I had my baby. But then I discovered Mengelatin!”

Mengele held up a small brown jar with a shiny gold lid and handed it to her. Tina unscrewed the top and fingered a dollop of yellow goop. “I’ve watched pounds melt away in minutes. What’s the secret?” Tina held the pretty jar up and tapped it. “It’s all in here!”

Then, with no warning, she reached for me. She grabbed a handful of side-tire and rubbed some on. “Spread it just like butter wherever you want to lose.”

Tina demonstrated. Her fingers felt wonderful—for half a second. After that the salve burned like Vicks VapoRub cut with hydrochloric acid. I let out a muffled groan.

“Just lie back,” said Mengele, “and watch your love handles melt away!”

Tina rubbed in slow, lazy circles, unaffected by the chemicals that seemed to be eating through my top layer of skin.

Switching gears, Mengele gave my manhood a little pat. Tina’d spread a hand towel over it, so I still hadn’t seen what I’d be wearing home. I imagined all the little heads Mengele must have patted this way. He was famously gentle with children—when he wasn’t studying the effect of mercury injections in their livers or removing their spines while they were still breathing.

Tina beamed and tapped a few drops of brown fluid out of a bottle that looked like it once held soy sauce. Maybe it *was* soy sauce. Mengele broke out his best Jack Lemmon again. “Of course, there’s one part of the anatomy where lots of fellas might like to put on a pound or two. For you gentlemen, there’s my patented Mengelatin Mega-Men Formula. As I like to say, ‘With M3, you can make normal big, big bigger—’”

“And,” Tina cooed with a wink that hinted I might be playing in the Pee-Wee League, “turn a little man into a happy man.”

The notion of my ex-bride as Vanna White to Mengele’s Pat Sajak

was not a welcome one. Before she had a chance to offer anybody the at-home game, Zell barged back up again, waving his arms. “Enough!” he shouted.

Mengele’s face reddened. “Why not?” he hissed at Zell. “Have you ever seen that Jew fraud, Dr. Stein, selling MaxiDerm? ‘I’m Dr. Stein, and I’ve spent my life investigating penile enhancement products.’ The man *looks* like a penis. Unlike his sludge, mine actually works. I know. That’s why I don’t need the surgery. I did the experiments.”

In spite of himself, Zell recoiled. “At Auschwitz? You’re going to say, in a commercial, that you tested your product at Auschwitz?”

“No,” said Mengele, “in an infomercial. And yes, I am only mentioning Auschwitz to you. For now. Now let me rehearse.”

“You’re too good for this,” said Zell, trying another angle. “Set yourself apart. Go with the transplant!”

My tongue felt like a mitten.

Zell pointed at my towel. “Operate on him. After what this prick did to my son, he deserves it!”

Davey’s partial face went red. “I’m fine, Dad. We were just tussling.”

“Definition of FINE,” Zell mocked. ‘“Fucked-up, Insecure, Nervous and Emotional.’” I could see why his spawn had turned out to be such executive material. Zell leaned close. “Wanna know why my boy’s got a freak show on his neck, Rupert?”

“Dad, please.” Davey lowered his eyes. Even in my current predicament, I felt awful for him.

Zell jumped Davey instantly. “Oh, so now *you’re* going to give me shit? How about we tell everybody your secret?”

Now it was the warden’s turn to speak up. What was *he* getting out of all this? “Harry, I really think—”

“F you!” Zell screamed at him, facing away from me. I stared at the fluorescent lights, where a fat moth had either died or decided to

warm its feet on one of the flickering tube lights. Sweat dribbled down my—I now realized—newly shaved chest.

“See,” Zell thundered on, “his mother and I *say* he tried to commit suicide. ‘Cause that sounds better. The truth is, he wanted to go around telling people he was an Iraq War vet. Thought he would meet girls. But he wanted to make it look good. So he decided to blow his ear off. *And missed.*”

Zell pointed with both fingers and swept his hands toward the boy as though he were the pretty game-show spokesmodel. “Ladies and gentlemen, my boy Davey!” Then he raised his eyes to the ceiling, cursing. “Thank you, God. You *fuck!* Thank you for this one and the other genius.”

This was too much. I gagged out the last of the rag in my mouth and shouted, “For Christ’s sake, can I get up!”

“No!” said Mengele and Zell at once. Then the head of my penis popped out from under the towel and Zell whistled. “Reminds me of the Red Buttons gag. ‘How can you can tell a Jewish dick from a gentile’s? The Jew’s wearin’ the derby, the gentile’s in a dunce cap.’”

“That’s a good one,” the warden called from his seat.

“I know a joke,” Mengele announced. “What did the hog say to the butcher?” When there were no takers, he continued with a smile that could have poisoned wells. “You bring out the *wurst* in me!”

Crickets. In the silence that followed, I re-hated myself for not killing Mengele the moment I saw him and turned my wrath on Zell. “Why don’t you just turn him in?”

“I will, goddamnit. But he ain’t going anywhere. Why not make money off him first?”

Mengele smirked.

“Let him do some good for the Jews,” Zell snarled, meeting Mengele’s sneer with a fierce gaze of his own. “Ten years doing prison shows, a man makes contacts. I could shoot five episodes of Mengele

being Mengele for more dough than he can make in twenty years hockin' jars of Lotta Cock. And FYI, Dr. Death, half goes to me, the other half to Hadassah. Yours truly buys a lot of trees in Israel. You don't believe me, ask my accountant."

"You're forgetting something," said Mengele calmly. "Either you help me out, or I go public. About everything. All the experiments. All the money you make and what you're really doing when you're pretending to make those *Lockdown* episodes."

"You don't know what you're talking about," Zell sniffed.

Mengele picked up a tape measure and slapped it in Tina's hand, snapping at her to measure my thigh, then put on the jelly. "In five minutes, he will burn off an inch. I want this documented."

Zell and Mengele glared in each other's faces. "Gonna rat me out, is that what you're saying? For *what*?"

Mengele's mustache chewing grew fevered. He sniffed in my direction. "You think junkie boy hasn't figured it out?"

"Relapse," I insisted lamely, though no one noticed.

"I am sick," Mengele railed, so angry his scalp glowed red through the peroxide buzz cut. "Sick of you getting me jobs, sick of me doing the shit work and you making the money. Sick of doing R&D for Big Pharma money. Tired of testing for epidermal burn after some VP from the Body Factory decides he wants to give sulfuric acid in acne cream a spin. Remember when the doctor from University of Pennsylvania got indicted at Holberg State Prison, for perfume tests? He was the only one as good as me. Try to find anybody else with my talent."

"Yak yak yak." Zell, I suspected, was not a well man. His outbursts were all followed by what looked like standing collapse. He slumped. Even his words sounded beat. "Your talent is torturing the incarcerated."

"Which in your country is called the War on Terror. Except it's really research and development. Just like it was in the camps." Mengele

was just warming up. “The only difference is that we didn’t hide the death. Or what it was worth. We knew. In your camps, well—as you might say, in your crass way, somebody’s making big dough off Guantánamo. Your ‘top Nazis’ hide truth the same way they hide coffins.”

I was about to tell Davey to film this, but Tina stepped back to me, smiling, and peeled off a pair of skin-tone lab gloves. No wonder she hadn’t burned her fingers down to stumps. Facing me, she lifted the hem of her uniform, revealing nothing but leg, and dipped it in the water glass on Mengele’s instrument table. Very slowly, she wiped off my love handle. “I like that you’re not perfect,” she whispered. “Guys with great bodies really just want to fuck themselves—or each other.”

While these do-gooders debated, she discreetly freed everything that was still buckled, leaving the straps in place. I should have kept my mouth shut. There were other things to deal with—like the fact that I was wearing some kind of crinkling plastic diaper. And had no idea what had been implanted in my scrotum. I knew something happened. But even with my hands free I didn’t have the nerve to look. Zell’s rage had made me like him a little, so I decided to at least try to do my job.

“Hey, Doc,” I said, “what are you really doing here?”

The question took him aback. “Why am I where? In this prison?”

“In this country.”

“Great,” said Zell, drumming his fingers on my leg. “Houdini gets loose and wants story time.” He glared at Tina, who now fussed with the scalpel tray.

“We don’t have all day,” the warden seconded.

“Gee, Zell,” I said. “I thought you wanted to ID the butcher, not bring him meat.”

“Fuck you, Rupert. You’re expendable.”

I sat up and backhanded him. Zell rubbed his face and grinned. He seemed to appreciate it.

“See that,” he sneered to Davey, “not everybody’s afraid to hit an old man!”

His face-damaged son stared at his shoes. It made me want to smack Zell again. But Mengele didn’t like to share the spotlight.

“Enough!” he wailed. “I was a *Hauptsturmführer*. You want to know how I got here? My skin!” He stepped to the surgical table and leaned down. “Go ahead, touch it! *Go ahead!*”

I passed. He offered a cheek to Tina, who also passed. Mengele treated us to a pout at the insult.

Side by side, the two stood out as alternate visions of seniorhood: Zell, padded and frizzy haired, a slack-jowled, loud-dressing seventy-something; Mengele, whip thin, wrinkle free and working that peroxide flattop in his nineties.

To my surprise, Zell got in Mengele’s face, rehydrating it with furious sprays of spittle as he ranted. “All those experiments—the suffering, the death, the children—and you want to talk about cosmetics?”

“*Six million died*,” Tina piped up, “*but boy, is my skin soft*.” Everybody stared as if surprised that she was there. “It’s fucking disgusting,” she said. “You’re both fucking disgusting.”

Zell snorted. “Coming from you, that’s funny. But I got somethin’ funnier. I got a snitch tells me Dr. Eugenics here likes to look at himself naked in a full-length mirror. Likes to make little girls give him pony rides, too, if you know what I mean. You know what I could get if I had films of that?”

Mengele stiffened. He raised his chin, self-righteous, to show that he was above such concerns. “I will not address personal attacks. But I will defend my country. I have said it before: Germany did nothing your government did not advocate—we just advanced farther downfield. But I’m not a politician; I’m a scientist. I made breakthroughs! I have *notes*. And I’m tired of doing research so Lilly, Searle and Merck can get rich on my back! I discovered so-called Viagra in ’forty-three. Men were coming back from the front too shocked to copulate! We

called it ‘*Volks-steifer*.’”⁵ But where was I? Yes—look at my face! I have the skin of a fourteen-year-old!”

“What’d you do with the rest of the body?” I asked. Mengele’s cover-girl complexion blotted with rage.

“The mockery! You know how I came to this country! I was a pariah. But I was flown to America by a cosmetics baron. His wife saw me sunning on the beach in São Paulo. I thought I was headed for glamour. Instead, I get here, and next thing I know I’m testing perfume on convicts.”

Zell winked at Tina. “Who knew the Angel of Death was such a crybaby?” Then he shouted over me to Mengele. “You don’t get it. I could sell raffle tickets for the chance to kill you. I know a dozen Israelis who’d be on the next thing smoking out of Tel Aviv. I could make five million in ten minutes, and a hundred more than that when I sell the DVD. Imagine being the man who captured Mengele!”

I tried to whisper to Tina. “Just tell me what’s in my pants. Please! Did he put something in there? I can’t look.”

But she just hushed me up. “You don’t need to know,” she said. “But I’ll explain later.”

Meanwhile Mengele blabbered on with an old man’s addled, defensive ardor. “As I was saying, I was brought over here by a very big cosmetics man. The Jewish makeup king. One peek at the sheen on my cheekbones and he knew I had something. But the man had boundaries. ‘Doktor Genius’—this is what he called me.

“He came all the way to Brazil. Helped me stage the drowning. I told you, our Big Pharma, your Big Cosmetics—they had deals in prisons all over the world. Soon they won’t even need prisoners. The Third World is wide open. There are two thousand kidney transplants every year in Pakistan alone. And they’re not going to Pakistanis. By the way, how’s that scrotum feeling?”

5. Roughly, “folk erection.”

"I can't tell!" I blurted back in spite of myself. "What did you put in there?"

"Maybe an alarm clock. Maybe a kitten." Mengele tittered, his mirth oddly insincere, then stroked his own face. He made a show of stretching each taut, baby-smooth cheek and letting it go. "See the suppleness? The tone? You cannot fake tone."

On this note of self-satisfaction, he abruptly spun around, as if literally possessed by history. "From earliest memory," he ranted, "Bavarians have engaged in mass Jew burnings. When I was very young, every schoolbook in Bavaria had an engraving by Albrecht Dürer. *Aliquot Milia—The Several Thousand*. It showed a festival in Wurzburg, in twelve ninety-eight, where locals danced happily and set fire to Jews. There is nothing original about burning Jews. But only the rustic Germans burned them *methodically. Festively.*"

"Germany!" Zell spat. "It's not a country, it's some psychotic disease. Who puts people in ovens?"

Mengele smiled airily. "I don't remember bombing the camps."

"Enough!" The warden bulldogged between the quarreling men, using his chin as a wedge. He crooked a finger to the faithful Rincin, who still avoided my eyes. "Gentlemen," he snapped, his manner commanding. "I suggest you cease the cluster fuck. I've done good work with both of you. I say we just shoot the damn thing."

"Shoot what?" Zell locked his hands in his armpits to keep them from escaping and grabbing the warden around the neck.

"Harry, I *like* the products," said the warden. "I think there's something there." Rincin slowly broke away from the wall and drifted lazily over, like a shark with its first whiff of blood.

"Fuck that," said Zell. "We turn his ass in and make sure we got exclusive footage of the arrest, and we are *rich*. Richer than you think you're gonna get with that Christian porno you shot. And I'm not even going to bring up how you tried to cut me out and have that pimp, Reverend D, do your camera work. We'll just call that a misunderstanding."

"The reverend is a fine man," the warden said.

"For a pimp, he's a prince," Zell agreed. "So I guess the state won't mind when they find out you let him waltz in and out of your prison."

The warden reelevated his hefty chin in front of Zell, tilting his head slightly, as if calibrating the right angle to hit him with it. "Out of respect for you, Mr. Zell, I have always let your sons have . . . extra privileges."

"Yak yak. So respect me some more. Let me have Dr. Blond and we'll both be fartin' in silk." He threw his arm over the smaller man's shoulders. "You want, I could send a check to your charity of choice. I'm talking about one with a lot of zeros after it. There some kind of acromegaly club I can give to? I'm just asking, you know, with that tugboat you got for a jaw . . ."

"If anything should happen to me," Mengele informed Zell pleasantly, "the Simon Wiesenthal Center will certainly be informed about our special relationship. Warden, *I* consider you a friend—but it may look like you were keeping me here to line your pockets with money from experiments."

"To whom?" The warden didn't react, but he was man enough for proper grammar. "To whom will it look like that?"

"He's lying," said Zell. "Like he's lying about his skin care products. Probably skinned a baby to get that pretty puss. You forget who you're dealing with, Warden?"

The warden kept his gaze on Mengele, steelier than ever. "Tell me who's going to think I was lining my pockets."

"First, my near countryman, Schwarzenegger," said Mengele, almost breezily. "What with the prison guards trying to get the governor recalled, your relationship with me may be the weapon he needs to break the union. I enjoy your Matt Drudge, your Rachel Maddow, so I would tell them. I think I would also like to tell *Newsweek*, the *New York Times* and Rupert Murdoch and maybe Steven Spielberg, the Shoah Jew. Believe me, I know how to create a Holocaust."

"I'm just a documentary filmmaker." Zell gave a self-deprecating shrug, struck suddenly modest. "Incarceration is the national pasttime. One out of a hundred Americans are in the can. That's why America loves prison shows. So ninety-nine schmucks who got bubkes can look at that one guy in a cage and feel superior."

"What about me? I feel like a piece of meat here!" I cried, surprising myself. "There are fourteen hundred other guys at Quentin. I'm not even a prisoner. Why me?"

"You signed a release," Zell said. "Remember?" To Tina, he added, "You know better than to help him, don't you, honey?"

Tina smiled sweetly. "I just work here."

Zell wanted to flirt, but I interrupted. "I thought it was a contract."

"You need to read all the shit in tiny print on the bottom."

"My judgment was cloudy. You hit me in the head with a walker."

"What I hear, that ain't what's causing the cloud." Zell rubbed a meaty hand over his face, then sniffed, as if checking for spoilage. "Here's the thing, ace: You can Q&A convicts all day. But you can't legally perform for-profit experiments on them on-screen. You, on the other hand, are not an inmate. You're an ex-cop. The same rights don't apply."

"Silence!" Mengele boasted such an authoritative yell, even Zell shut up. Mengele whirled his finger around over his head. "Camera-man, start again."

Poor Davey, the Iraq vet wannabe, sighed and hoisted his camera, a Panasonic HDX 9001. "In this vial," Mengele said, holding up a corked test tube, "I've got a custom-made stew of influenza bacillus and the common cold."

Zell deflated. "You're really going to do this?"

The doctor did not bother to answer. He bit the cork out, snatched a Q-tip from his surgery tray, stuck it in the tube and swabbed my mouth before I saw it coming.

The stuff soiled my tongue. I instantly started to sneeze. The bad kind of sneeze. The kind that explodes up from your toes and breaks stitches and shatters capillaries. The kind that ends with blood.

“Don’t worry,” Mengele said, back in Nazi pitchman mode. “One spritz of genetically enhanced immuno-spray, and I guarantee, you could French-kiss a leper and never catch a sniffle!”

The doctor tried to sound peppy. “Just watch how it stops the sneezing.”

I sneezed again and all but shoved my quivering snout at him. He averted his head and spritzed. Seconds after a mist of antidote hit my nostrils, the sneezes ceased.

“Would you look at that!” Mengele beamed. “Would everybody look at that!”

I’d had enough. Hands and feet now free, I jackknifed forward and launched sideways off the table, knocking Zell into Tina before hitting the floor. “Well, hello!” he boomed. Tina punched him in the throat. “Aucchh. What the fuck! What the *fuck!*” Zell yammered, nursing his Adam’s apple.

I jumped up, feeling ridiculous in my man diaper but more frightened about what kind of ornamental bag I had underneath. But Mengele was still pitching. “See that? Triple threat!” he declared gamely. “Lose weight! Grow bigger! Cure the common cold.” But whatever lid the warden had been able to keep on the situation was about to blow off. The steel door to the conference room slammed open and banged off the wall like a gunshot. Bernstein burst in shirtless. His physique was yard perfect, his entire epidermis a celebration of Aryan supremacy in sword and thunderbolt, flaming swastika, fiery tits and Torahs. He looked ready to spontaneously combust.

“B-B-Bernie?” stammered Daddy Zell.

The max-inked Aryan Semite ignored his old man. Instead he raised an arm to salute Mengele. “Heil, A-hole! How’s it feel to be yesterday’s Nazi?”

The warden swung into action, shouting at Bernstein, “You best think about what you’re doing, boy!”

“I’m done thinkin’,” he said. “I been thinkin’ my whole dumb life.”

Mengele chewed his mustache frantically. But Zell, reassessing the situation, was ecstatic. “That’s right, son. This is your chance to redeem yourself. Show the world Harry Zell’s boy is not really some Nazi schmuck. He’s a Jew.”

The proud dad wiped his eyes, delirious. *Imploring.*

“Shoot him, the way we talked about. Be a Maccabee! Be the Jew who killed Mengele.”

He clamped his hand over his heart, no doubt imagining future bragging rights, as hammy-sincere as Zero Mostel doing Tevye. “I can just imagine it!” he gushed. “*That’s my boy! That’s my boy! He’s the Jew who killed Mengele!*”

Quickly, he swung his rye-bread-colored head my way. “And it better be Mengele.”

“We’re back to that?”

Zell grabbed my face and squeezed. “You know how much cash I’ve laid out for this?” He smiled at the warden. “In my business you need options.”

Zell shoved me aside. Tina stepped next to me, transfixed. “Fathers and sons.”

“Bernstein!” the warden shouted. “I am not your enemy. I am your friend. And as your friend I—”

“Shut the fuck up!” Bernstein’s eyes were full of water. “You hear me? *Shut the fuck up!*”

I’d never been in a prison riot, let alone while wearing a diaper. I kept my back to the wall. Tina squeezed my arm and stared in disgusted wonder at Mengele. “If there were any justice, an army of ninety-year-old twins would pile in here with scalpels and syringes in their teeth. . . .”

Mengele eased himself away from the ALS brother. Bernstein

head-faked and Mengele stumbled backward, knocking a chair over.

“Now that’s the kind of footage Harry Zell is after. That sings,” said Zell as he exhorted his tattooed pride and joy. “You can do this, son. *You can do this!*”

I saw Rincin raise his shades to look at the warden, who waved a hand, palm down and flat, in response. *Easy, there* . . . But Bernstein wasn’t listening. Almost lazily, he eased a homemade pig-sticker—sharpened screwdriver taped to sawed-off broom handle—out of his blues. He kept his arm straight, holding the weapon by its tip, alongside his leg.

Things went electric. I thought Zell was going to stroke out from screaming. “Kill him! Kill him! Kill him!” Over and over. And then, shifting to the son manning the camera, “You’re getting this, Davey?”

Davey wasn’t listening to Dad. He had the camera aimed at Bernstein. When he raised his eye from the viewfinder, I saw something pass between them.

“Do it!” Zell yelled at his son. “You putz, you schlemiel, what are you waiting for!”

Keeping his eyes on Mengele, Bernstein uncoiled fast and threw underhand.

Mengele didn’t even duck. He knew. When the pig-sticker caught Zell in the throat the doctor let out a high-pitched giggle. It was the first time I’d heard him laugh.

Zell clutched his throat, trying to staunch the blood. It looked like he was trying to strangle himself. Maybe for raising such fine boys. From somewhere came the sound of a walkie-talkie. It was staticky. “*Ambulance.*” *Crackle-crackle.* “*Copy that.*” *Crackle-crackle-crackle.*

I had not even noticed the door behind us. With the private smile of the escape artist, Mengele backed toward it. Tina stuck out her foot and tripped him and he went down mustache-first, screaming, “*Scheiskopf!*”

While the doctor floundered, Davey, the warden, Rincin and Bernstein were out the front door. I didn’t expect I’d be seeing them again. No doubt each man was off to an alibi.

I grabbed Mengele's ankles and dragged him to cover behind the "operating table". Zell had knocked it over when the blade hit him. If we crouched behind low enough nobody coming through the door would see us. At least not right away.

Mengele was remarkably light. But his skin, supple as it was, felt disturbingly hot and dry. Like a lizard plucked out of the sun. My need to do something did battle with the potential embarrassment of doing it diapered, packing God knows what underneath. Mengele wriggled. He freed a foot and kicked me in the head and I pinned him closer to the ground. I planted my hand over his mouth, repulsed by his wet lip-fur. I spotted the bloody screwdriver a few feet away. The thing had popped out of the sawed-off broom handle. I grabbed the raw metal and eyed the door.

Zell's body was sprawled on its back near the door. He'd tried to stagger out. His face betrayed more shame than pain. Beneath that, I thought I could decipher an expression of deep regret—now he wouldn't be able to film his own murder and sell it to the Discovery Channel.

I pressed the metal to the ancient man's taut neck. Took a deep breath, expecting to savor the moment I got to avenge my people. It should have been dramatic. Instead, all I saw were the eyes of a frail, freakishly smooth nonagenarian, gazing blankly into my own.

I raised the knife like I meant to stick him. Just to show him I could. The point was half an inch from his jugular when Tina's lips found my ear. "Kill him, you kill his secrets." She snatched Bernstein's weapon out of my hand. "You need clothes," she said, the words warm on my face.

"I know. . . . But we need to get him out of here."

From opposite sides, we peeked around the table at the scene around us. Somebody gets shanked in the joint, the incident response team is there before the paramedics. But not this time.

Shouts outside grew closer. His-and-hers paramedics rattled in with their gurney. We knew what we had to do. Mengele sensed it, too. I felt something wet on my knee, which I'd pressed on his leg to

keep him pinned. I was hoping he'd be humiliated. But even pissing himself, he remained smug. No doubt it was master race pee, which made all the difference.

I grabbed the screwdriver, scooped a roll of tape from the doctor's spilled surgical tray and tossed it to Tina, who caught it one handed. We had everything we needed to tie up the paramedics and steal their uniforms. We just had to knock them out.

I dug a dozen ampoules of morphine out of the paramedics' kit. But it only took two to do the job. I wanted to knock them out, not give them an OD. The rest of the morphine I left. Let somebody else have a lucky day. I knew I'd be in throbbing pain later, when whatever he'd stuck me with to numb my nuggins wore off. Then again, if that happened, it would mean I was still alive. Life's a trade-off.

Zell's corpse farted when I rolled him over. Blood painted his hands and forearms from his doomed attempt to keep his life from gurgling out of his neck. The man didn't die pretty. But he died in battle. Kind of.

I checked his pockets, hoping for a cell phone, maybe a number on a pack of matches. Zell had to have a lot of connections. All I found was a flash-roll of hundreds and fifties. I stuffed a wad of bills in each paramedic's underwear—the one item Tina'd left on after I shot them up and she got their uniforms off. I hoped the cash would cover the cost of new ones. They looked like wholesome kids.

I dragged Zell's body off and covered him with the starched sheet I'd been staring at during my stint as Mengele's guinea pig. Done, I helped Tina pile the paramedics on top of him—girl, boy, boy—and jammed the sandwich behind the table.

Up to now we'd worked in silence, perfectly in sync, as if doping ambulance attendants and stealing their clothes was something we did recreationally.

Tina blew a bang off her forehead and looked at the stacked paramedics.

“That ought to give the staff something to talk about,” she said.

“I don’t know. It’s a little creepy. That’s twice in two days we’ve rearranged corpses into sex scenes.”

“Sometimes you don’t know you have a talent until you have to use it,” she said. “It’s nice to see you in pants.”

“Well, I’ve still got that diaper thing underneath. Would you please tell me what I’ve got going on down there?”

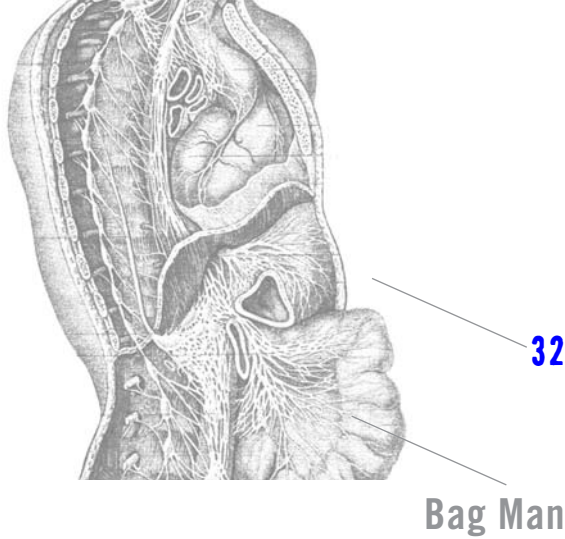
“It’s not important. You’re still you—even if you’re not, you know, symmetric.” She cupped her breasts. “I’m not either, and it hasn’t held me back. My life’s still a dream come true.”

“God, I fucking love you,” I said, scrambling to arrange my outfit. I pulled the male medic’s knit cap low and put on his tinted shades. We wheeled Mengele out under a sheet, so nobody would ask about the tape over his mouth.

Such was the magic of chaos. You could hide in the middle of it. Walk through like you belonged and keep on going. Just as Mengele had done, when the Americans arrested him in Czechoslovakian no-man’s-land, in June 1945.

Even then his vanity saved him. SS men had their blood groups tattooed under their biceps, and all the Allies had time to do was check the prisoner’s armpits for ink. But Mengele, the mama’s boy, liked his own skin too much to scar it, so he’d never gotten the SS ID. Maybe he knew, even then, that eventually he would need to escape.

He gave the Americans in the internment camp his real name. And walked out a free monster, his lab notes under his arm. There is, I now understood, no better feeling than undeserved escape.



We rolled our quarry to the ambulance without being stopped. We both knew this was the easy part. When we made it to the gate, they'd no doubt want to check the cargo. If we made it that far.

Everybody we passed stared at the vehicle as if they'd never seen one before. "You think we should hit the siren?" I asked her.

"Not on the compound." Tina stared straight ahead. "Nobody'd get any sleep. Too much shit goes down at night."

"What, like guys stabbing each other in their cells?"

"No. Like heart attacks. Most guys have them between midnight and three. They hit the cherry top, but not the siren."

"How do you know that?"

"San Quentin Emergency'—it was one of Zell's episodes."

"Of course."

"What can I say? I'm a sucker for jailhouse television. His plan was to start the APN."

"Don't tell me. The All Prison Network?"

"He was close to getting investors. The problem was he'd shot everything inside there was to shoot. He needed something nobody'd

seen to get investors hot. You met the man. His big dream was ‘San Quentin Nazi Sex Change.’ To him, this was like dying and going to cable heaven.”

“Well,” I said, reaching back to make sure Mengele had a pulse, “one out of two isn’t bad.”

“Nice,” said Tina. “All I’m saying is, along came Mengele. Dr. Peroxide opened up whole new possibilities.”

“Except Zell got greedy, right?”

Tina shrugged. “It happens. Once he found out about the money the warden and Mengele were making from pharmacy companies, he wanted in. Zell was one of those guys who wants a finger in every pie—and if he can’t get it he’ll try to take your finger so you can’t have any, either. When he saw the reverend waving a camera around, he figured the warden was gonna cut him out, start filming his own action. You think it’s any accident Rev D got called to heaven early?”

“I don’t know. Maybe it’s no accident that Zell bought it either. And I’m still scratching my head about his wife.”

I thought something flickered in Tina’s eyes when I mentioned Dinah. Or not. “What’s the mystery? Either he didn’t care,” she said, “or he’d already taken care of the situation. Zell had prison business. He wasn’t about to leave Quentin and risk somebody stealing his turf. And from what I saw of the late, great Harry, he’d leave his mother’s body on a slab if he thought he could make a buck selling her shoes.”

“It is a loving family. You saw how he treated Davey. And I’m guessing half the reason his boy Bernstein went swasti-Hebe was to drive Daddy nuts.”

“Unless Daddy wanted to open up the Aryan market and the kid was his in-house ambassador. A dime in Q and a batch of SS tats might be worth a little something on the other side.”

Tina popped open the ambulance glove compartment, reached in and found a bottle of Advil. She opened it and gulped four dry and snapped the lid back on, disappointed. “Don’t you hate when there’s

Advil in the Advil?" She tossed the plastic bottle in the back. "Fuck! I just hope they don't find Zell's body before we get out of here."

"No!" I sat up suddenly—maybe forty yards from the gate—and it all clicked in. "We better hope they found him."

"What?"

"You think the warden's gonna risk taking us down if there's a chance Dr. Death here might testify? Word gets out about the money he made letting Mengele experiment on prisoners, he's going to be living in a cell instead of assigning them. Along with a few golf carts full of drug and cosmetic execs. Don't forget, thanks to the warden, the state of California's been supplying Mengele with the same thing the Nazis did."

"What's that?"

"A ready supply of expendable human beings. Only now he's not doing research for the good of the race. He's doing product testing for American business."

Up ahead of us, a lanky guard on an overhead bridge lowered a key in a blue bucket to a uniform below.

"That's your theory? The warden figures 'cause you're Jewish, you're going to take Mengele out and avenge your people?"

"Mengele's the one who wants revenge, sugar. He's had sixty years to stew about not getting the glory he deserves. If he gets a trial he's going to go Nuremberg on everybody from Coca-Cola to Gerber baby foods. He's waited all this time to name the biggest Nazi collaborator of all."

"Who's that?"

"The American government."

"Who the warden thinks sent you to kill Mengele."

"He wasn't that far off."

Tina stared as if I'd told her I was Napoleon. "Now you're scaring me. You're saying the government sent you to—"

"Not *me*. This fake Rastafarian named Jimmy. But he never got

the chance.” I hadn’t put it together before, but now it seemed obvious. “He said he was FBI. But I think Rasta man was on a mission of his own.”

“So why not give Mengele his day in court? Bring him to justice.”

“Why give him the satisfaction? He’s waited his whole life to spout his side of reality.”

“So what are you saying—we punch his ticket?”

“Fuck no! He probably thinks we were sent to kill him. I’d rather let him live. I just need to figure a way to make him wish he was dead. What do you give the man who kills everything?”

“I have a few ideas,” said Tina.

“Me too. But it has to be something special.”

“Like what?”

“I’m not sure yet. But it’s going to work out.”

Despite my upbeat prognostication, I stared out at the grounds less like a tourist than a man contemplating his future home. Between buildings, I caught a glimpse of the yard. The sight triggered the same feeling it always did. I didn’t see rapists, embezzlers or violent offenders. I saw the strolling cons and thought, *One bad move and there’s me.*

I wanted to believe what I’d told Tina. That everything would work out. But I had my doubts. Historical travesties aside, we were still imposters in a stolen ambulance, kidnapping a prisoner taped to a gurney. We passed the old convict weeding his flowerbed, and I waved. Now the roses looked dead.

Finally, we rolled up within three vehicles of the gate. The driver of a DOC truck in front of us waved us by, and then it was two. Tina slipped her hand over mine on the seat. The imminence of possible arrest got her talking.

“Listen,” she blurted, knuckles white on the wheel, “I saw how you left a bunch of morphine back there. If we make it out of this, maybe we can both, you know, start clean . . .”

“I always *start* clean, it’s where I end up that things get messy. As

you know. And I'm still wondering what that maniac stuck inside me. Whatever it was, it feels a little inflamed."

Tina held her mud.

"It was the Irish wolfhound, wasn't it? Just say it: 'Manny, you've got a dog ball.' I can handle the truth."

"Can we stop talking about you?" she said. "I'm serious here. If we make it out—"

"Don't," I said, touching her mouth. Those lips I wanted to eat. "Plans are bad luck." Mengele picked that moment to start wriggling under the sheet. I turned and smacked his head. "Stop that, goddamn it!"

Tina pulled up to the guard booth. A beefy black guard checked us out through the window. Then picked up the phone.

"I'm gonna gun it," Tina said.

"No! You do that, there's gonna be a traffic jam. And all the cars'll have cherries on top."

Tina kept her face frozen forward, staring into middle distance straight ahead. But I saw the smile she was keeping under ice. "I love when you talk like you're in a bad movie."

"Nerves," I said. "Some guys sweat, I go direct-to-video."

The longer the guard stayed on the phone, the more I squirmed. Finally I couldn't take it anymore. I told her to jump. "As soon as you're out, *I* fucking gun it," I said, keeping my voice low. "You disappear."

Tina gasped and put her hand on her chest. "You'd do that?"

Before I could answer, the beefy guard put down one phone and picked up another one. Then he ran out of the booth, waving his arm like a third base coach telling a runner to slide. "*Go go go!*" I shouted.

"What?"

"Just do it!" I yelled, jamming my foot down over Tina's on the gas. We plowed past the man so fast he had to jump out of the way. "Hit the siren."

Seconds later, we both remembered to breathe.

“Jesus Christ!” Tina cried. “Jesus fucking junkie Christ!”

She started laughing. Then I did. Nothing was funny. It was primal relief. Tina took the small-town curves at sixty, shouting, “I can’t believe this!”

“Me neither!” I shouted back. “I feel like the hangman had his noose around my neck, then crapped his pants and fell off the scaffold.”

“That’s so poetic.”

Without slowing down, she lurched across the seat to grab my hand. The ambulance bounced over a curb and clipped a mailbox, nearly pancaking a schnauzer and its blue-haired owner, who’d bent to scoop its droppings in a plastic bag. She saw us howling and dropped the leash.

Tina shrieked, “What just happened?”

“I think we got a message from the warden,” I said, “and you almost killed a senior citizen’s reason for living.”

I stuck my head out the window, craning backward, to make sure puppy and Grandma were okay. Tina snaked her hand between my legs.

“‘The loins,’” she sighed breathily, “‘the place of the Last Judgment.’”

“Nick Cave?”

“William Blake.”

“Either way.”

A garbage truck pulled out of nowhere. Tina swerved, going full stunt driver. We squealed into a cul de sac of clapboard houses and scared a posse of skater kids, barely missing the nose of a speedboat poking out of a driveway. The tires screamed like they’d just seen their parents die. The ambulance spun a full 180, burning tread until the asphalt smoked. We ended up facing the wrong way down the one-way street we’d just careened off of.

The siren was still blaring. Families poured out of their houses to see who had the emergency. One workadaddy, waxing his pickup in a garage opposite, threw down the rag and ran over, Glock in hand.

“Gun!” I shouted.

Tina slammed back into drive and floored it. A woman in curlers flew out her front door with a shotgun. As she peeled out Tina pounded the wheel and shouted. “Shooting at an ambulance? What’s wrong with these people?”

“Paranoid,” I shouted back. “It’s that ‘San Quentin’ on the side in big letters,” I said. “They think we escaped. Neighborhood Watch probably has Stinger missiles.”

She cut left through a church parking lot. “I don’t want to find out. Is the old freak all right?”

I pulled back the sheet. Mengele eyed me wildly, nostrils flared over mustache and gaffer’s tape.

“He’s fine,” I said. “Right, Herr Doktor?”

I gave his mustache a tweak. He flinched. But seeing him so helpless, I was beginning to understand. You really *could* do anything to a man if he wasn’t human. I pulled the sheet back up over his head, checked on his straps, and fought back the desire to hit him with a tire iron before I clambered back up front.

“You know where you’re going?”

Tina chewed her thumb. “I need cigarettes.”

“Now?” I glanced back at Mengele.

“Yes. Now. There’s a Seven-Eleven two blocks up. Is there a problem?”

I threw up my hands. “Problem? God no! Just because we’re driving a hot ambulance with the Butcher of Auschwitz in it, that doesn’t mean there’s a fucking *problem*.”

Tina glared and plowed through traffic.

Amazing the respect you get in an ambulance. The way cars skittered to the side, like they were afraid we were going to hit them,

made me want to. “Adrenaline *is* a great drug,” I shouted in Mengele’s direction.

We spotted the 7-Eleven and Tina swung the ambulance past a gaggle of teens cadging beer money in the parking lot.

“Wait here,” I said, scattering the boys as I jumped out and ran inside. The turbaned manager backed away from the counter when he saw me. “You call 911?” I barked at him.

“No, sir! I never—”

“Goddamn it! You think we don’t have real emergencies? That’s a hundred-dollar fine!”

“But, sir, I—”

“Never mind. Give me a pack of Newports. No, make it a carton.”

I still had the paramedic’s tinted shades on but made sure to keep my hat low and my face angled away from the surveillance camera.

I saw that the 7-Eleven gang had gathered round the ambulance. One of them, a tall boy in a sideways Raiders cap, was leaning in Tina’s window. *Perfect*.

The turbaned clerk rushed back with the carton and asked if I wanted a bag.

“Just matches.”

He placed the cigarettes on the counter and hesitated. “Sir, that fine . . . If you could—”

“If I could what? Take a carton of cigarettes so you won’t have to pay the money? *Baksheesh*? Is that what we’re talking about here?

“No! Sir, I was only asking if—”

I cut him off. “That’s not how we do things in America, sahib. But just this once.”

The manager looked horrified. I might as well have spit in his face and accused his mother of killing cows and fucking Gunga Din. I felt horrible. “Hey, just messin’ with you,” I said lamely, peeling a pair of C-notes from the wad I’d taken off Zell. Most I’d slipped to the

paramedics, but a man has needs. I slapped the bills on the counter and grabbed a Slim Jim and a pack of Dentyne. “These too. Keep the change. Use it to buy a handgun and get rid of those hoodlums out front. Look at them! It’s not fair to respectable people.”

He took a second, but the manager smiled cautiously and I smiled back. Then we both laughed, shook hands. That was a good moment.

“Sorry for being an asshole,” I said.

“Is America,” he said. I knew what he meant.

“What was that about?” I asked, back in the ambulance.

“What was what about?”

“Your little confab with the local ne’er-do-wells.”

“We were just chatting. Driving an ambulance looks like a pretty cool gig to a sixteen-year-old. They wanted to know how you get to be a paramedic.”

“Really? So what’d you tell them?”

“Study hard and stay in school.”

“Are you serious?”

Roaring through traffic had started to feel normal. Traffic parted like the proverbial Red Sea. Tina kept turning to scream at me and I kept yelling at her to keep her eyes on the wheel. She was the only woman I knew who liked car fights.

“Get off my back, Manny. You don’t know what I’ve been through.”

“What *you’ve* been through? I’m lucky I’m not gelded and missing my kidneys. And you still won’t tell me what’s in my scrotum.”

“It’s smaller than a bread box.”

“Great. Thanks. Wait till you wake up with a joke ovary.”

“Fuck you! Do you think I *liked* being there, playing nurse to that bastard? He didn’t exactly have a steady hand when he was holding

the scalpel. If I hadn't taken over you'd be worrying about a lot more than your left ball."

"Wait! You took over the scalpel?"

"You can thank me later," said Tina.

The ambulance swerved and a man in a wife beater dove for the curb. Tina cheered up. "The thing about you, Manny, all you ever think about is yourself."

"Not true. Since I saw your naked ass frolicking outside with your Aryan love buddy, I've spent a lot of time thinking about you. More time than I want, to tell you the truth. I mean, Bernstein, for Christ's sake!"

"You're not going to let that go, are you?"

"Oh, fuck it."

I wanted to roll down the window, let the breeze slap me across the face. But I was so pissed I grabbed the handle and ripped the window panel out of the door. Tina burst out laughing again.

"It was loose already," I said.

By now she was smacking her leg and pleading. "Stop. . . . Oh, God! I'm going to pee myself!"

I was furious. Mostly because *she* wasn't furious. But the sight of Tina laughing so hard made me start to laugh. At least it sounded like laughing.

Minutes later, siren killed, we bumped the wrong way over a speed bump marked NO ENTRY into the gravel off-street parking lot behind the Homeaway Motel. Tina nosed the ambulance into a spot in the corner under a balcony.

"I'm in two ten."

"Where's your car?"

"Right beside us."

Sure enough, there it was.

"I forgot you drive that fucking Prius! My plan was to stick Beppo in the trunk till we figured out what to do with him."

“Don’t worry, it’s bigger than it looks.”

“Fine.”

She killed the engine and I scoped out the motel. It was Motel 6 without the elegance. An Escalade took up two spots in the corner. The rest of the cars looked like their owners might have lived in them.

“Even if we can squeeze him in,” I said, “I’m worried about somebody seeing an ambulance in a motel parking lot and calling the cops.”

Tina grabbed her Newports. “Trust me, baby. Nobody here calls the cops.”

I checked the place out again. Amazing what they can do with cinder block and rust. “Well,” I said, “they’re not leaving the curtains open, that’s for sure. What is it, a shooting gallery?”

“Among other things. Though the fiends I’ve seen look pretty cranked out. Mostly, the clientele’s all baby mamas and families visiting the prison, or illegals staying twenty to a room, working the pickup landscaping crews. The last thing any of ’em’s gonna do is call the *policía*.”

I eyed the corners. “No surveillance camera?”

“Funnily enough, when I checked in, the lady in the office told me some twaker stole it the night before. Wonder how much crystal that buys you?”

“Maybe they just wanted the video. I’d sure want the tape of *us*. Kidnapping, driving a stolen ambulance, impersonating a paramedic . . . How many felonies can you commit in a parking lot without actually killing somebody?”

“Impersonating a paramedic’s a felony?”

“I don’t know. Maybe that one gets you community service. Give me a hand.”

I pulled the sheet off and met Mengele’s eyes, pink rimmed and hateful. Sometimes he looked old, sometimes he looked like he’d had his skin pressed. “Help me put him in the front seat.”

“Why?”

“So he can get out the passenger door. Just in case. If anybody’s watching, it looks a little less weird than taking his body off the gurney and throwing it in the trunk. Anything in your room have sentimental value?”

“Not really. And I registered with a fake name.”

“So you won’t mind if we just split?”

“Well, I would have liked the little soaps and shampoos.”

Tina looked so beautiful I wanted to take a picture of her face and candy it. She raised her eyes from me to the balcony, letting one long finger slide across her parted lips. “We could hang out for a couple minutes. . . . There’s something so nasty about cheap motels.”

“Yeah, there is. . . .”

I let my mind drift for a second, then shook my head like a man trying to get bees out of his ears. “*No!* Why are you doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“Come on, Tina. I know how you’re wired. If it’s dangerous, irrational and potentially life threatening, it turns you on.”

“You make me sound like Evel Knievel.”

“Really? Did he enjoy pretend anonymous sex with his ex in hot-sheet motels?”

“‘Evil,’” she intoned, “‘is screwing strangers after cocktail parties.’ Lawrence Ferlinghetti.”

“I never get invited to cocktail parties. Why do you like to pretend I’m a stranger? You did that last time we were in a motel.”

“Don’t ask. It’ll ruin the mystery. Details, details. Let’s go.”

Once Mengele was in the front seat, Tina opened the passenger door. I eased him out gently, carrying him the way you would a fragile relative. Tina snapped the filter off a Newport, started to toss it, then put

it in her pocket. The cop in me appreciated a perp who knew how to hide her tracks.

“What happens,” she asked, “when they find the ambulance?”

“It doesn’t matter. I guarantee the warden’s got friends in local law enforcement. If he wanted to get us, we’d be got. We’re more dangerous caught and talking than we are on the lam.”

Curtains parted in the room across from us. A blinking ghost appeared and quickly closed them again.

“On second thought,” I said, “even people who don’t call the police might call the police if they see us stuffing a body in a trunk. Give ‘em something to bargain with next time they get popped.”

I tapped Mengele on his head, because I could. “For all we know the fucking Mossad was closing in. Or the Nakam. We’re probably doing the old bastard a favor.”

“What’s the Nakam?”

“It means ‘revenge’ in Hebrew. They were vengeance squads. After the war, a bunch of death camp survivors got together to avenge the six million. They caught up with a couple thousand unpunished Nazi bigwigs. Killed them straight out. They even planned to put arsenic in the Munich water supply.”

Tina stopped the flame halfway to her cigarette. “Did they do it?”

“The arsenic? No. But they did other stuff. There was an internment camp outside Nuremberg, full of SS men, and the Nakam managed to sneak in and poison the bread. A thousand Nazi POWs died.”

Tina was impressed. “I had no idea Jews did that.”

“Neither did the POWs. We’re full of surprises,” I said. The curtain parted again, then closed just as fast. “Now come on, we gotta move. The tweaker probably thinks we’re coming for them next. Grab the blanket so I can wrap him up.”

My ex-wife’s eyes glazed over, the way they did when lust hit. She leaned over and bit my neck. “Nothing hotter than a take-charge guy.”

“Just grab the fucking blanket.”

“Wait—does the Nakam still exist?”

“Nobody knows.”

“Wow!” Tina stood there holding the ambulance blanket. “That is *unbelievable*. . . .”

“Seems pretty believable to me.”

I grabbed the blanket out of her hands and threw it over Mengele’s shoulders, wrapping it high enough to hide the tape on his mouth.

I positioned Mengele more or less upright in the backseat of the Prius. Tina buckled him in, then got in back too and pulled out a nail file to press into his ear while I drove.

“Do you think the freak heard you talking about the Nakam?”

“I hope so,” I said, idling at a red. By then I wasn’t thinking about survivor vengeance. I was thinking about my own. But the drive to wreak frontier justice did battle with another mutant urge: to go back to San Quentin.

I checked the dashboard clock at a red light and swallowed hard. “It’s twenty to one.”

“So what?”

“I could still make it to class.”

The red light went to green but we didn’t move.

A car behind us honked. I inched forward.

“I don’t understand,” said Tina. “We barely made it out of there. Why the fuck would you go back?”

“I don’t know,” I said. “Maybe it’s genetic. Some cross-generational misfiring synapse.”

In the rearview, I saw the knowing crinkle form around Mengele’s light-sucking obsidian eyes. I drove carefully, just under the speed limit. Tina listened the way you would to a singing dog.

“You want to explain?”

“After my great-grandfather made it out, in nineteen thirty-seven, he saved enough to bring his two sisters from Berlin to Morgantown,

West Virginia. Bessie and Essie. They were very cosmopolitan. When they saw the neighbors frying squirrel, they took the first boat back.”

We made it another block before Tina spoke. “It’s not so bad fried and battered. So what are you saying here?”

“I’m saying maybe I take after my great-aunts. Maybe I’ve got the gene that makes you go back—after you get out.”

“It doesn’t sound like a gene issue. It sounds like a squirrel issue.”

Mengele’s head had fallen to his chest. But his shoulders seemed to be riding up and down. I had the distinct feeling he was laughing at me. “That’s the thing,” I said, trying not to obsess about how much I was amusing the butcher next to me. “Once they went back to Berlin, the sisters wrote a letter to my great-grandfather, thanking him for everything and explaining the real reason why they went back.”

“It wasn’t the squirrel legs?”

“It was partly fried squirrel,” I said, “partly not wanting friends and family left behind to think they didn’t care.”

“So what happened to them?”

“Auschwitz.”

I glanced back at Mengele—considered slitting his throat—then willed my eyes back to the road and tried explaining my theory to Tina: I didn’t really know if irrational, guilt-driven impulses could be passed from generation to generation. But how else to account for the soul-deep tug I felt to go back to Quentin, in spite of barely making it out, to check on my drug class guys? To show them I was *there* for them?

“You mean show them you’re a fucking idiot,” said Tina. “If any of those convicts found out you showed back up, after what you pulled off, they’d lose whatever faith they had in you.” She reached forward and grazed a menthol-scented finger along my cheekbone. “You know this isn’t about them, Mr. Guilty. It’s about all the people you didn’t show up for.”

The finger drifted slowly down to my mouth. I could taste the

sour tobacco under the minty-fresh menthol. Tina whispered in my ear. "You want to do something good for mankind? Your opportunity is riding back here."

I caught a red light, and we both swung around to steal a peek at our passenger. Mengele snored softly, a little spit-bubble wobbling on his lips.

"Look at him," said Tina. "Sleeping like a baby on Valium."

"When he's asleep he looks his age."

"Manny!" Tina snapped, loud enough to pop the old man's bubble. "Why does *he* get to sleep?"

"You're right," I said. "You are so fucking right."

The light changed. I spotted a Wal-Mart, cut across two lanes and aimed the Prius at it. It was the first time in my life I was happy to see a Wal-Mart. Tina gazed at me with real concern.

"Manny, where the hell are you going?"

"If I don't get out of this car, I might do something I regret."

"But you hate Wal-Mart."

"I need a new shirt and different shoes." I tore onto the lot and pulled into the first spot I found, beside a Winnebago. Just the sight of an RV brought back the stench of my Quentin digs. Mengele was still snoring, still spit-bubbling. My gorge started heading north. I smacked the doctor's knee. He jerked upright.

I killed the engine. A trio of largish women in leotards passed in front of us, and I saw Mengele's eyes go wide. Tina grabbed my shoulder and turned me toward her. "Now what? What's going on inside your head?"

"Don't ask me. I just work here." The truth was, I could pass on the morphine. The drug I was addicted to was Tina. And I did not want to get strung out again if the supply was going to disappear.

I had to wonder, not for the first time, if my whole marriage had been the setup for a crime: suicide by wife.

"When's the last time you ate, baby?"

"I'm not hypoglycemic," I said. "It's just, not strangling him is fucking with me."

"I feel the same," she said. For a moment we both studied our freight. "Have you seen the way he looks at fat women?"

"His mother was obese."

"Figures." She turned to Mengele and yelled in his ear. "Free mustache rides for fatties, huh, Master Racist?" She slapped him across the face. Mengele didn't flinch—but I did.

Here it fucking comes, I thought. She tipped a Newport out of the pack, cracked off the menthol filter and delivered it to her mouth.

"Go do what you have to do," she said, lighting up. "But if I'm going to be sitting here while you step into Wal-Mart, I want this *thing* in the trunk. Otherwise he'll have holes in him when you come back. Then if we change our minds, we won't be able to return him." She turned and blew smoke in Mengele's face. Despite the tape over his hands and mouth, he took this as calmly as he'd taken the slap.

Tina took another hit of menthol, working herself up. "The more I think about what he did—the babies, the twins, the dwarves, the injections, the sex torture . . ." She took one more puff and exhaled. "The surgeries, the probes, the poisoning, the sick, sadistic insanity disguised as *experiments* . . . the less I can remember why we haven't killed him already."

"The dead don't suffer," I said, popping the trunk.

"The living do," she said, lunging for him with her lit cigarette.

I grabbed her hand before she could burn him. "You don't want to do that, baby. Just wrap the blanket over his face and give me a hand."

We waited until there were no Wal-Marters in the immediate vicinity, then hauled Mengele out of the backseat and squeezed him over

the spare tire in the trunk. "He really stinks," said Tina, averting her nose.

"He wet himself at Quentin."

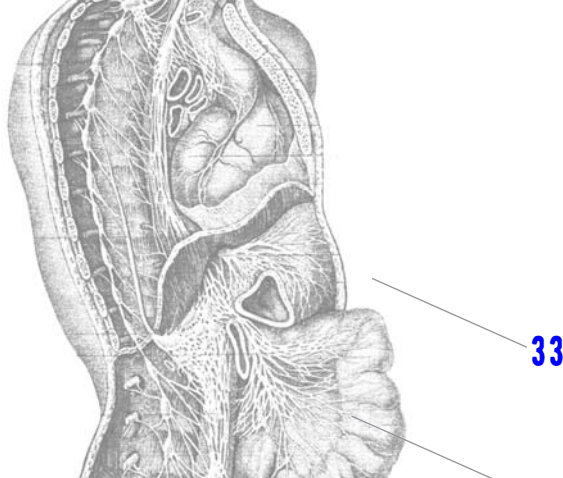
"Who doesn't?"

Tina threw her cigarette on the asphalt and stomped it. We took a last look at this man who'd shown the world what men are capable of. Then Tina slammed the trunk.

"Thanks for stopping me just now." She kissed me on the mouth and shuddered. "I have to admit, there is *something* about treating people like they're subhuman. . . ."

"That's why people have personal assistants. Wish me luck in the menswear aisle."

Joining the other Americans on their way into Sam Walton's retail heaven, I willed myself not to look back.



Just Say *Nein!*

My new flannel shirt made me feel like the Brawny paper towel man. Plus it itched. And my Husky Dog work boots squeaked. I'd thought about grabbing new jeans, but fear of dealing with whatever was throbbing inside my diaper prevented me. *Something* had happened. I just didn't want to know what. Not *yet*. I'd managed to pee without looking, so I put off the big surprise until later. My swollen scrotum was still tender but, mysteriously, not in pain. Not too much, anyway, provided I juked my leg to the right when I walked, as though semibowlegged. If there was such a thing.

I was so busy itching and juking, I didn't see the smiling fellow in Bermudas standing in front of me when I stepped out of the Wal-Mart dressing room.

"Hey there, bunky."

I passed right by the face but recognized the voice. "Officer Rincin?"

"The very one," he said.

Without his brown corrections officer uniform, Rincin might have been any brush-mustached barbecue dad out for a bag of briquettes

and extra buns. Above the screaming pink and green Bermudas, he wore one of those I'M WITH STUPID T-shirts popular twenty years ago. Below, he sported black Banlon socks with black tie shoes. I noticed the freshly waxed sheen of his calves and decided not to comment.

"Didn't recognize you without your uniform," I said instead. "So where's Stupid?"

"Left her at home," he said, "but I brought this for you."

He slid his hand under the T-shirt and I grabbed his wrist.

"Whatever you're pulling out, pull it out real slow."

"Fine instincts." Rincin nodded approvingly and let me ease his hand out by the wrist. "But technically, corrections officers cannot carry arms off duty, if that's what you're worried about."

"What I'm worried about," I said, "is why you'd follow me to Wal-Mart and stand by my dressing room."

"I guess you wouldn't believe it if I said I missed you."

"Rincin," I said, "you're a funny guy. But right now my shirt itches, I got some kind of ball situation, and you're standing between me and the outside of Wal-Mart. Just tell me what the fuck you're doing. That fucking grin of yours is starting to freak me out."

"Bell's palsy," he said. "Nobody believes me, but it's true."

What did it cost to tell a lie and make somebody happy? "I believe you," I said.

"Great. Let go and I'll show you what I got."

I did, and he did, plucking a folded-over manila envelope from the waist of his shorts. I quickly plunged the thing under my flannel shirt.

"This isn't going to explode, is it?"

"It's photos," said Rincin, the smile half-disappearing from his face for the first time. "You have to know, there are things that go on in there. . . ."

"You don't have to tell *me*," I reminded him.

“No, I do,” he said, “’cause once you showed up, there were more of them.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“Well, Bernstein hung himself. Heard it took two belts, too. That’s one AB had a neck like an elephant leg. And of course you were there when his daddy died.”

Another dead Zell. Were they all my fault? My mouth was so dry, talking was like rubbing my tongue over rough concrete. “They let Davey go down to the funeral? Jews put the body in the ground the next day.”

“Davey’s not going anywhere,” Rincin said. “He nuttet up. They got him up in the dink ward, pumped full of Haldol. I don’t think Davey’s ever comin’ back.”

By now his grin had fully returned. A mother and back-to-school teen needed to get by us into a changing booth. We moved closer to the wall. Rincin scratched his shiny calf and I looked away.

“Funny thing,” Rincin picked at a dried moth that somehow ended up on the shoulder of his Stupid T-shirt. “Zell brings you up there—then him and most of his whole family go dead.”

“You saying I have something to do with it?”

“You? No. But the doctor. He’s *dangerous*. People die. But he always lives. . . .”

I didn’t need to hear the rest. I had the length of the Wal-Mart to chew on my heart for the mistake I’d made—leaving Tina alone with a bitter mass murderer who had nothing to lose. “Gotta run,” I called over my shoulder. “Stay in touch!”

Passing the unopened envelope from hand to hand, I stepped gingerly from car to car. I felt a strange need to sneak up on Tina. One parking spot away, I peeked around the back of a burgundy Hummer. Then I popped out, took two steps left, and raised my eyes to the black Prius. I pressed my eye to the tinted glass. Empty.

“What did you expect?” I said, to no one in particular.

Maybe this was progress. For once in my life I'd let myself hope that nothing bad had happened. Something *bad* always happens.

Frozen between Hummer and hybrid, I mumbled to the air in front of me.

"What's behind door number three?"

"I don't know," came the reply, "but I think it's where they stick people who talk to themselves at Wal-Mart—generally the same ones who shit in the Home Depot display commodes."

I spun around and Tina held up a McDonald's bag in each hand. "I hate this crap, but I was starving. I got a couple apple pies."

I grabbed her. "You're all right? I was afraid—"

"I'm fine." She continued, "I got a Happy Meal for our little guy."

As she took my arm, I was struck by one of those thoughts you never really expect to have in life before you have them: *This would be almost like a picnic if we didn't have the Angel of Death in the trunk.*

Tina reached for the car door and I pulled out the envelope. "Wait," I said. "I ran into Rincin. He gave me this."

She just shrugged. "What is it?"

"Photographs," I said. "No doubt all the ungodly shit you did with Bernstein . . ."

She snatched the envelope and opened it before I could finish. "Fucking drama queen." She pulled out a photo, stared at it. "You're right, pretty disgusting." Then she threw it at me.

The photo showed me naked, laid out on the table as Mengele poked me with a pointer. "Oh, man," I mumbled, then checked out the second one. This time, I was lying on my side on a gurney, facing the wolfhound. The dog had its own gurney, just like I remembered. But in the photo he had a black leather muzzle over his mouth and a look of plaintive, accusatory despair in his eyes. The other photos showed my torso, grease-painted into sections like a side of beef.

"You never told me you were a medical anomaly," Tina said. "How do you get three liver transplants?"

“Pittsburgh is the liver capital, and the police had great insurance.”

“Three?”

“I kept shorting them out, but I never had any problem with rejecting them.”

“I think all the cock-and-balls stuff was a diversion.”

I squirmed and she amended her sentiment. “Well, not all. But Mengele really loved you for your liver. He probably has people at insurance companies. Combing for freaks. The reverend’s got a cousin at Folsom, said an old German dude was there a year ago, doing weird shit with a pair of dim-bulb twins from Petaluma.”

“So did Zell hire me to see if Mengele was who he was—or did Mengele hire Zell to go find him a triple liver and man?”

“Probably both,” said Tina. “Break it down, they’re still crabs in a basket, a couple of big-league lowlifes trying to get over on each other.”

By now there was no way around the looming question. I tried to sound only mildly curious, as opposed to gripped by mad-dog, pit-bull-on-hot-tar paranoia. “And why exactly were you there?”

“Manny . . . The reverend told me Mengele was looking to do a johnson relocation. He said the doctor wanted to take penis enlargement to a whole new level. I guess he heard you had a healthy specimen, ’cause he was going to make you a penis donor.”

“And where would he have heard that?”

“I told you, I might have mentioned it to the reverend. When he was coming on to me. Just to let him know he wasn’t all that compared to my main squeeze.”

“Who wasn’t technically your main squeeze.”

“Manny, come on, we’re getting along so well.”

“Okay, okay. So he wanted to penis transplant. Why should I be bothered that none of this would have happened if maybe, you know, you’d been just a little, you know . . . discreet.”

"I just told you—I got involved because of what I'd heard."

"What were you going to do about it?"

"Whatever it took to keep it from happening."

"That's a meaningful gesture, from an ex-wife."

"Just 'cause a girl gives up skiing doesn't mean she has to dynamite the Alps."

"I'm flattered. What about Bernstein?"

"Nothing happened. And even if something did—which it didn't—we wouldn't be here if we didn't go there, right?"

There was nothing to do but kiss her on the mouth or jump out of the car and bang my head on a utility pole. So I kissed her.

"Thank God!" Tina said. "I wasn't sure you'd be okay after the surgery."

"Why not? Tina—" I started, but she cut me off.

"Now listen, I found a tape recorder in the glove compartment, so I pulled the tape off his mouth, clipped on a little mike. I asked him to talk, you know, for posterity. . . ."

"How's that working out?"

As soon as I opened my door I heard him. His disembodied voice ranted indignantly from behind the seat, as if he'd waited his whole life for the opportunity.

Minutes later, I held my Big Mac in front of my mouth. Untouched. Tina sat with her legs curled under her, absently twirling the straw in the strawberry shake she wasn't drinking. We could not leave the Wal-Mart lot. We were listening to Mengele. . . .

". . . was my *mutti* fat! The word does not do justice! In Gunzberg, she was some kind of . . . no, I can't say it. She was an object of scorn. Leave it at that. 'No need to pay a pfennig for a sideshow,' my friends would tease, 'we can go peek at Mengele's mother in the bathtub!'"

Tina bit her thumb, then stopped. "You know what's worse than the evil? The self-pity."

"I'm with you," I said. "Is he blaming his *mother*?"

"It's more disgusting than that." Tina kept her voice soft, which didn't diminish her contempt. "He's trying to sound human."

"... Every day, at precisely noon, Walburga would waddle into my father's factory with his lunch. The name Mengele, I am proud to say, still graces the flank of German agriculture. Drive through farm country, and you will see that noble name showing proudly on the sides of tractors and threshers. But there was nothing noble about trailing my mother, who plowed through the ranks of sweaty men and oily machinery, her beady eyes fixed on the table ahead, where my father sat, among the men, and endured his daily visit from his three-hundred-and-fifty-pound stoat of a wife."

Tina nudged me. "Do you know what we can do with this?"

"We could erase it front of him," I said, opening the door. I re-wrapped my Big Mac and left it on the asphalt for a hungry shopper. I covered my ears, then removed my hands and let the words wash over me again. Mengele's voice was whiny, defensive, arrogant. . . .

"Have I some obsession with overlarge women? When I came to America, I could have wept at the sight of so many obese lovelies, their monster thighs and buttocks squeezed into stretch pants, children and husbands trailing them through malls like sullen, obedient dogs. Mother never knew that somewhere on this earth there waddled a race of her own kind. Not a 'master' race, perhaps. A 'massive' race. But a race that she could claim as her own.

"I am not a religious man. But I believe that heaven, for my mother, would be the Reseda Vons: food of every variety, aisles swimming with full-carted women, legs encased in suitcase-sized tumors of lard . . ."

He was still going strong a half-hour later, after we had decided to drive back to Los Angeles.

"... Only in America would you have a 'hate crime.' America was founded on a hate crime. Is it better to kill someone you don't hate?"

Listening to him had gotten awful before we made it over the bridge. But, as if by silent commitment, neither of us suggested turn-

ing the thing off. Much as I wanted to, I didn't retape his mouth.

If so many had lived through what he had done, then we could endure what he said.

"Isn't this the fantasy of every Jew," came the voice of the erstwhile SS *Hauptsturmführer*, "to have ten minutes alone with Mengele? How much did Zell say he could get for the chance to kill me?"

We finally pulled over outside Santa Cruz. Took a random exit for gas, missed the on-ramp getting back on and ended up, as dusk blurred to dark, at the end of a two-lane blacktop that dribbled off into a dirt road through the woods and stopped by the beach.

Outside the car, there was no noise but crickets and surf. We stared up through the trees. Took a little walk to stretch our legs.

"Full moon," I said inanely.

Tina stared up in contemplation, then closed her eyes. "It looks tired."

Tina started back for the car and I followed.

"We have to feed him," I said, in no mood for lunar poetry. "Picnic with Mengele."

"Hey," she said, "I'll glue him down and leave him for the ants. Say the word."

Mengele was bent double in the trunk. I unfolded him and set him down on the ground. He was sweating, rambling into the tape with his eyes closed. But he did not sound weak. Even now his skin looked fresh—if his odor wasn't.

"You're doing the right thing," he said, "turning me in."

"Does this look like we're turning you in?"

Tina came back and kneeled beside him, chewing an egg-salad sandwich. "What do you think is going to happen? Open up."

His hands were still taped. Tina opened his mouth. She squeezed her sandwich until yellow mush oozed out the side. Then fingered a dollop and dropped it down his gullet.

He swallowed fast so he could keep talking.

“I am a part of history!”

“A lost part. You think we’d hand you over so you can tell your side of the story in a courtroom?”

“Yes, yes! That’s what I want. Finally! A trial. With what I know about your prisons, your government testing, your medical and pharmaceutical corruption . . . The truth needs to be told. We did not do anything America didn’t want us to do.”

I wanted to throw up. “Here we go . . .”

“No, listen. I liken it to your William Pierce and—”

“William who?”

Mengele ignored the interruption.

“William Pierce, of the American Nazi Party. He wrote *The Turner Diaries*. He described how to blow up a government building. Timothy McVeigh was so inspired, he blew up a government building in Oklahoma. Very impressive, for a complete methedrine addict. After the bombing, when Pierce was interviewed, he said, ‘I did not make him do it. I just wrote the book.’ Well, America’s laws were on the books—and Hitler read them. And yet you take no responsibility. You inspired us!”

“Triumph of the Willies.” Tina laughed in his face. “Do you have any idea how pathetic you are?” She pulled a Red Bull out of the glove compartment, cracked the top, and handed it to me. I took a gulp. “Can’t you do better than ‘It was America’s idea’?”

Mengele, who’d managed, somehow, to extricate himself from our tape job when we weren’t looking, picked a mustache hair out of his teeth and examined it. If he could actually see it, his eyes were better than mine. “This narrative displeases you? Why, because your textbooks tell you Germany was your enemy? America and Germany shared the same spiritual DNA.”

The thought that we ought to have tied a bow on him and mailed him to Jerusalem was like a persistent itch. “I think you’re taking the twin thing a little far,” I said.

“Am I? We wanted to keep the fatherland pure. Suppress the ‘foreign elements’ in the body of state. And what do your Minutemen want? I have seen your Lou Dobbs foam at the mouth on the subject of immigrants.

“Your president wanted to build a wall. I wanted to build a genetic wall. A barrier to keep inferior chromosomes from crossing the border and polluting our national essence. Are you going to tell me Herr Dobbs does not consider Mexicans *germs*?”

Mengele could barely wait to swallow another bite of pie before rambling on.

“Hitler understood that no border could prevent penetration by unhygienic strains of human. In stadium speeches, Himmler, the ex-chicken farmer, was fond of sharing his solution for infestation by poultry nit. It’s a parasite. It survives by sucking hen ovaries. ‘The war to save the race is waged on two fronts. There is the path of blood—eliminate the living vermin—and there is the bloodless method: sterilize them, ensuring that this will be the last generation of nits.’”

“All right,” said Tina, “you had me till hen ovaries. Time to cover the old schnitzel hole. Come on.”

“No! Please.” Mengele’s tone was at once commanding and abject. “Just eleven more items. Please.”

“He’s counted,” I said.

Mengele held up a hand for silence, then began his litany. “Nazi scientists were the first to warn against asbestos, alcohol, artificial food dyes—and these are just the A’s. We were the first to promote vegetarianism. First to recognize the value of fiber and condemn white bread. First to establish the link between tobacco and lung cancer. You might condemn our methods of research, but would you prefer that the nurse did not put lead over your reproductive organs during X-rays? That mercury leak out of your fillings? Did children have to die so that we could discover the value of vitamins? Would that knowledge keep you from taking vitamins?”

"The Chinese think they invented pizza," said Tina. "Is this the bedtime story you recite so you can sleep at night?"

"Jet propulsion, guided missiles, synthetic fuel, nuclear fission, computers, calculators, electron microscopes, data processing, hormone therapy . . . The first television broadcast strong enough to leave the earth, what was it? Hitler's speech at the nineteen thirty-nine Olympics."

"No wonder UFOs make themselves scarce. They probably think we're a planet of Hitlers."

"It's not exactly a stretch."

Mengele tongued chunks of egg goo off his mustache. It was so thorough, it was like he had a little animal living in his mouth. All we could do was stare at him.

"Did your sarcasm," he wanted to know, "prevent you from drinking methadone when you wanted to withdraw from opiates?"

I deflected the question. "I hear Göring had a taste for the hard stuff."

"Göring was a degenerate. But that is another subject. The softness at the heart of Western civilization prevented it from making the discoveries I just told you about. Why did medical science flourish under Hitler? Because we had no fear of pain."

"You mean no fear of other people's pain."

"Why do you treat me like an enemy? All I did was connect the dots America's best thinkers laid out at Cold Harbor, the womb from which American eugenics was sprung. Davenport at Harvard—"

"Who cares?" Tina barged in. "You're *here*. There are lots of evil assholes in the world, but I can only fit one in my trunk."

I edged her away before she lost it. Or got any closer to Mengele. I still had the image of Laurence Olivier in *Marathon Man* with his up-the-sleeve switchblade. But catch him in repose, mouth sagging, spit bubble swelling and shrinking on his lips while he snored like a one-year-old—you could forget his crimes. We'd logged enough road time that he'd morphed into a crabby bachelor uncle who needed to be

driven to doctor points. Which was probably dangerous. Mengele was as cagey as they come. Maybe cagey enough to lull us into thinking he was a harmless old coot before flicking a six-inch blade out of his shirtsleeve and slitting our throats. I gave Tina a little *stay cool*/squeeze on the shoulder. “Easy, baby,” I said.

Mengele stewed. Whatever hardships he’d endured after a half century on the run, not getting his way appeared not to be one of them. We had passed down a sleepy lane of large California Craftsman houses and deep shady yards overhung by avocado trees and gently swaying palms. I saw the doctor watching the passing estates with something like hunger. Though, truth be told, I didn’t know if he wanted to occupy one of those white-picket-fence homes or kill everybody in them. “Must be galling,” I said, “just because you don’t qualify as a Good Nazi, you don’t get invited over here with all those other scientists.”

“My enemy did not approve of me. There was a time when that was a badge of honor.”

It occurred to me that his arrogance must have been an effort. He seemed to be getting smaller by the second. I could see it dawn on him: we might not be picking up the phone and dialing Interpol any time soon.

“Come on, Doc.” I opened the trunk and patted the tire-well bump. “In you go.”

Mengele stared into it as if it were full of faces staring back.

“Fuck this,” said Tina. She ripped his mike off and pushed him into the trunk. “We have enough on microcassette. Let’s tape his mouth again.”

“I can’t find the tape. I looked for it before we got out of the car.”

“That fucking car. It’s the size of an ashtray and I still lose everything in it.”

“Well . . .”

“Don’t say it. I don’t want to hear about the army surplus store on wheels you drive around.”

“Well, we need something. If he starts screaming at a stop sign, somebody’s going to think we have a kidnapped Nazi in the trunk.”

Mengele had been scrutinizing Tina this whole time. Finally he popped the question. “How many?”

“How many what?” She stopped pillaging the glove compartment for gaffer’s tape and regarded him.

“How many have you killed?”

Things went quiet for a second. If the doctor wanted to touch a nerve Tina wasn’t going to show of. “One—that I know of. But what time is it now?”

“Who was he?”

“No, who the fuck are you, to think I would even want to start swapping murder talk with you? What is that, like, porn for you? You and the other mass murderers sippin’ umbrella drinks in Buenos Aires, remembering the good days when you just killed whoever the hell you wanted. No questions asked.”

“You are Catholic?”

“What is this? My eHarmony application? Yes, I’m Catholic. Though I prefer to think I was held captive from birth.”

Mengele stared off. “When I crossed the Brenner Pass, from Innsbruck to Genoa, Catholic priests took me in. Italian monasteries were full of escaped Nazis.”

“One more reason to love the church,” said Tina, digging something out of her glove compartment. “Maybe we can superglue your lips.”

She waggled a tube of superglue in his face. Mengele twitched.

“For broken heels. My mother was big into pumps. It’s the one bit of practical advice she ever gave me: keep glue for your shoes. That and don’t give out your real phone number.” She threw back her head and planted the back of her hand dramatically on her forehead, defeated. “I gave my number to your father, and look what happened. . . .”

Tina screwed the top off the glue. “You know about embarrassing mothers, don’t you, Joe?” She bent toward Mengele. He watched her with his black, assessing eyes. “Can I call you Joe? So what’s best, Joe—coating your top lip with superglue and pressing down, or coating the bottom and pushing up?”

“Wait! There’s the tape,” I said, spotting a roll under the jack.

“Party-poop!”

“Tape’s fun, too,” I said, ripping a strip and handing it to her. Then I steadied him and Tina, her eyes glinting, slapped the silver gaffer’s tape over his mouth and patted his head.

“Aren’t you the best little boy in the world,” Tina said.

I slammed the trunk.

Life was too short to comprehend the Holocaust. Not just the deed itself—the not-quite-finite horrors, all the recorded awfulness—but the web extending from it, forward and backward: the subsurface connections, the local and international enablers and profiteers and believers before, during and after. You could go so far down trying to figure it out you’d never come back up. . . .

The word “genocide” was antiseptic. Pain wasn’t sterile. But if you weren’t there, even if you had relatives there, it was theoretical. Relatives who died in the Holocaust were theoretical. Until I met Mengele.

“The only thing worse than what he did,” Tina said, “is enjoying doing it.”

“Tell me you wouldn’t have enjoyed supergluing his mouth.”

“You can’t arrest a girl for dreaming.”

After that we didn’t say much. Tina laid out the sleeping bags she’d bought from Wal-Mart to surprise me. Neither of us could get a fire going. A cold breeze came off the water and we crawled into a

single Scotchgard-smelling bag with our clothes on. Then the moon went behind a cloud, leaving the world beneath it black.

I felt her hand on mine. I heard her voice from very far away, somewhere beyond fatigue. "What do you want to do with him?"

"Let's decide in the morning."

In the morning, we decided.

We let him sit in the backseat, miked and muttering into the recorder. After an hour and a half, he stopped seeming human. The thing talking in the backseat had two eyes, two legs, two arms, and bone-white hair growing out below the peroxide and out of his eerily clean ears.

All I had from my trip to Quentin was the leather jacket I'd had on when I arrived. The morning air was chilly enough to need it. When I put it on, for some reason, I stuck my hand in my lapel pocket and felt a lump. Really smushed in there. Tina watched as I tried to work my fingers down to the bottom. Then I pulled it out. A white lump of satin. Opened up, unwrinkled, it was about the same size as a Shazam pie, stitched with a baby-blue star of David. At the center of the star, right on top of the yarmulke, a button puffed up like a satin nipple.

We had the same idea at once. Tina took the top off the glue while I held Mengele's head steady. Curiously, he submitted. Too readily, he almost bowed his head. Tina narrated as she squeezed out six tiny dollops on the back of his head "Six drops," she recited. "One for each point of the Star of David." For the first time, Mengele's face betrayed fear. Tina glued the yarmulke on his head at an angle, so it looked like its owner was going for some kind of jaunty urban reggae feel. A nonagenarian Matisyahu.

"Today you are a man," I said.

“Apparently a very old Jewish man,” Tina added. “The dyed hair and the satin are so working for me.”

“I didn’t know better, I’d say you were a real *alta kocker*.”

Mengele groaned behind the tape over his lips, working his head from side to side. I ripped the tape off and waited. “What’s so important?”

He eyed me with contempt. How could I not know? “I will tell them everything.”

“That’s it? That’s the idea,” I said. “Tell them who you think you are. Give a lot of details. Shrinks love details.”

Tina put her hand on my arm. “That reminds me of something Bernstein told me.”

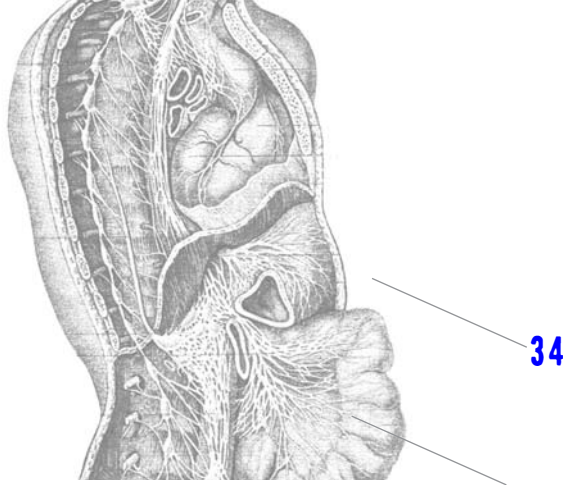
“Bernstein? Now?”

“No, listen,” she said. “The old warden wanted to hire COs with degrees who were also licensed therapists. But they were more shrink than cop. So it turned into a joke. ‘How can you tell which guard has a degree in psychology? He’s the one with the shiv in his neck.’”

“You both have problems,” Mengele said. “You’re both sick. You should not have children.”

“Too late,” I said. “My first wife was an Aryan gal. I’m a pol-luter.”

“Me, I’m not popping one out until I know you’re dead. I’m not taking any chances.” Tina took a moment to step back and really take in the new yarmulke-topped Doctor Death. She nodded approvingly. “Say what you will, the man wears that yarmulke.”



Love in the Time of Relapse

It's our neighbor," Tina whispered to the receptionist. "He just screams all night. And the things he says . . ."

She looked away, folded her lips into her mouth, and took a long, brave breath. The scarf was a nice touch. She'd found it in an IHOP bathroom on the way over. We might have had 2.5 kids waiting in the car. The woman could act.

"I am Josef Mengele!" Mengele shouted. "These people are kidnapping one of the most wanted men in the world."

The receptionist, a ponytailed teen volunteer with PRU on her name tag, was all open smile and helpful concern. "Who's Josef Mengele?"

Mengele slammed the counter. "*Who is Josef Mengele?*"

Pru stopped smiling. She took a step back from the ranting walk-in patient before her—a wiry, ready-to-foam old delusional with mustache in his teeth and dyed blond hair.

"I'm sorry," she said evenly, "were you on television?"

Mengele froze. Pru slid the clipboard forward, a battered black ballpoint dragging on a chain behind it.

"Would you sign your name, Mr. . . . Whoa! Did you direct *The English Patient*? We saw that in class."

"That's Minghella," Tina said, taking the pen. We'd realized the weak spot in our plan. We couldn't walk in with an old man in handcuffs. But if his hands were free, there was nothing to keep him from trying to strangle Pru. He wanted to be arrested. So we glued his hands in his pockets—actually one finger of each hand, so we could rip it out if we had to. "I'm afraid he has a condition. He won't take his hands out of his pockets." She lowered her eyes as if she didn't want to embarrass herself or the perky receptionist. She spoke in a stage whisper loud enough for half the waiting room to hear. "And he's not very . . . *clean*."

"We don't really know him," I said, doing my best to convey the baffled helplessness of a do-gooder who doesn't know what to do.

Mengele scanned the room frantically until he found an old man whose demeanor matched his own. A slight, goateed professorial gentleman. "Surely you know Josef Mengele."

"Mengele is dead. He died on February seven, nineteen seventy-nine, in Bertioga, Brazil. He had a stroke while he was swimming and drowned. He's buried in Embu das Artes cemetery, under the name Wolfgang Gerhardt."

I could see Mengele's ego arm wrestling his paranoia. "You seem to know quite a lot about . . . him."

"Sir, please, if you would sign?"

While Mengele was distracted by the attention he so craved, I grabbed his hand. Grinned *What are you gonna do?* to the lovely Pru. Mengele stammered out, "N-no!" I squeezed his fingers around the pen. He pulled back his hand and held it in front of him like something that needed to be bagged and burned.

"Um, Pru? All right if I just put his name down?"

"Really, sweetie, he's a nice man." Tina took the young volunteer's hand, going girl-to-girl. "Just a little, you know, n-u-t-t-y, *lonely* since the wife . . ."

"We're just the folks down the street," I said.

“Good Samaritans.” Tina squeezed Pru’s hand and whispered. “Last week he said he was Einstein.”

“What scares me,” I said to her, checking to make sure no one else was listening, “are the children.”

“What?” Pru put her hand to her throat.

Tina took my arm. “Now, honey . . . We don’t know for sure.”

“Why would she make it up?” I looked to Pru for validation. “The girl’s eight years old.”

A sprinkling of harried middle-aged caretaker children and their Alzheimer-age parents looked up from their *Newsweeks*.

Pru nodded stiffly. Tina took her wrist. “We probably shouldn’t even have said anything. That’s how rumors get started.”

We’d chosen Stanford because the psych ward had a geriatric wing. Mengele puffed himself up to full Selektor mode. He pointed at the dazed faces around the waiting room, squinting at each individually, startling them as he thrust a bony forefinger in their direction. “You! You! You—NO! You! You! You—NO! You—NO! You! You! *Schnell!*”

Pru backed away, picked up the phone. Banged a key.

The doctor arrived a few seconds later. Tall, slender, in long white coat, stethoscope around his neck. Shiny black hair and deep orange-brown skin. All topped by a lovely orange silk turban.

“I am Dr. Patel, how can I help you today, sir?”

Mengele stopped pointing and stared. He’d gone pale, a sheen of sweat on his placenta-softened skin. He studied the doctor’s skull as if estimating its dimensions. I should have let him have some calipers. Mengele walked beside the doctor and studied his jawline and occiput. “Where were you born?”

“I am from Pakistan. Please, come with me.”

“I want another doctor.”

It got ugly fast. Tina held my arm. *Concerned*. After a brief, intense exchange, Dr. Patel left and another physician stepped forward,

this one short, thick, black, bald and in no mood to have her time wasted. Her tag said DR. BROWN. “No, no, no! Another doctor!” Mengele snarled before she could open her mouth. “I want another doctor! This is the problem with America, they let your mother breed.”

The doctor laughed. “Oh, we could have some fun with you. Umm-*hmmmh*.”

A pair of married (or brother-and-sister) oldsters on seats facing us took each others’ hands. They stared openly, the man canny and attentive and his wife in child-eyed panic.

Tina watched like it was Brecht. I waved to Pru, to get her attention. She excused herself from a sporty eightysomething with madras shorts over unabashedly varicose legs adjusting his oxygen at the sign-in desk.

“Is there, um, security we could call?”

“It’s his lunch.”

Dr. Patel and his successor stood with their arms crossed, conferring as Mengele lapped nervously at his mustache, searching for a word. Now the whole waiting room was on alert; even the senile were jittery.

“Another doctor?” I said to Pru. “A supervisor?”

“Is there no white man?” Mengele roared behind me. “Are there nothing but vermin? Has the world turned to *shit*?”

The third gerontologist, maintaining his equanimity, scooped the sign-in sheet off the counter and glanced at it. He was fiftyish, slightly slumped, with sad eyes and frizzy hair into which he’d clipped a knit yarmulke with a Star of David in powder blue on a white background.

“Sydney Goldstein?”

Mengele jerked as if wearing one of his own shock collars.

“Mr. Goldstein, I’m Dr. Stern. I hear you’ve been making a lot of noise. Why don’t you come with me?”

“Goldstein? I am no Goldstein. I am Josef Mengele, Doktor Stern.”

Dr. Stern froze. Mengele looked gratified. Finally, respect.

"I want a trial! I have valuable information."

"I see," said the doctor.

Dr. Stern took Mengele's left arm by the elbow. The old man shook his hand off viciously.

"Get your Jew hands off me. I am Mengele! I want a trial. I know things about your government! I have cures. I can help!"

Napkin still tucked in his collar, the security guard returned from lunch in time to take Mengele's other arm. He was as old as the doctor but Latino, with a limp and a gut. Mengele stared at the second man's club foot with professional disgust.

"They let you live," Mengele said, "with this?"

The Semitic doctor and the physically challenged Mexican-American froze. Mengele was growing more agitated. The doctor stroked his beard, sympathetic, the soul of rabbinic wisdom. "You really believe this, Mr. Goldstein?"

That was it. Mengele literally sputtered. "*I am not Goldstein!* They know," he cried, pointing directly at Tina and me. Dr. Stern gave us an inquiring glance. Every head in the waiting room turned.

I held my hands up, funny guy. "Hey, we're just the folks down the street. Have to go!"

"Good Samaritans," Tina added, sighing with befuddled affection as we backed toward the door. "Last week he said he was Einstein. . . . The week before that, who was he, hon?"

"Henry Kissinger."

Dr. Stern relaxed and stroked his beard.

"Josef Mengele," I heard him say before we were out the door. "Wait'll I tell my wife."

Dr. Stern led him, with the help of the burly security, through a pair of double doors. That's when we heard Mengele scream. "I am not Goldstein! I . . . No . . . I am not a—"

Silence.

As discreetly as possible, Tina and I turned and ambled back toward the exit. “They frown on disturbances in geriatrics,” I said.

Tina threw her arm over my shoulder. “Wonder what they use to knock out a ninety-seven-year-old? It’s kind of a small end for such a massive evil.”

“That’s why it’s perfect,” I said. “He wanted opera and we gave him a sitcom.”

Driving back to L.A., neither of us talked for the first hour. Then Tina mentioned the tapes. “Do we keep them?”

“I would have liked to burn them in his face, but now . . . I don’t know.”

We drove in silence another few miles. Then she spoke up again.

“The other thing, I found these notebooks, under the spare tire. I can’t read German, but there are equations, sketches of organs . . . stuff that looked like locations and dates. Even some photos.”

We’d gotten lost and ended up going east instead of south. When we cut back to L.A. on the 10, we passed the roadside dinosaurs at the Truckee Farm. The giant fake tyrannosaurus looked embarrassed to be standing there, along with the sullen, ratty triceratops.

“It’s funny,” I said, “Zell and the warden going to all that trouble to make bank off Mengele. . . . Meanwhile, now we’ve enough paraphernalia from hell to get rich for life.”

“Wait, baby, you’re not thinking . . . ?” Tina bit her thumb, genuinely offended. “There is not enough money in the world . . .”

“Or enough drugs to kill the guilt.”

“Forget drugs. *Please.*” She stared out the window like there was something else she wanted to say. I knew her well enough to let it go.

“Well, I guess we have to decide whether we send the Mengele stuff to the AMA or the FBI. To tell you the truth, I don’t trust either of them.”

“I say nobody gets it except the Holocaust Museum. And they get it anonymously.”

“Much better idea.”

We drove in silence for a while. But there was too much I wanted to say.

“Tina . . . ,” I began, then realized I didn’t have the words. I didn’t know whether to slap her, slap myself, buy us dinners, take a bite out of my own hand or ask her to remarry me on the spot.

She cast a glance in my direction, going from zero to a hundred radiant. “What?”

There was always something irrational about Tina’s affection—the occasions of its arrivals and departures. I felt the same sharp desire and protective urges that overwhelmed me the first time I saw her, sitting at the kitchen table where she’d lately served her husband his fatal bowl of Lucky Charms.

Tina snuck another sideways look. “Of course, we could put some stuff in a safe. In case we wanted to get rich later.”

Just when I thought I could trust her . . .

“I’m kidding, you asshole! If we made Holocaust money, what would we tell our children?”

“I don’t know, what do people who own shares in Halliburton tell *their* children? It’s a religious matter. Anyway, this is all abstract. Let me meet my future children, then I’ll worry about what the fuck to tell them.”

“You will,” she said.

“Will what?”

“Meet your future children.”

“What? . . . When?”

“Soon.”

“Not exactly. But I’m ready.”

“You’re ready?”

“Listen. You know me, man, I didn’t used to think I could have a normal life. Now, after all this insanity, the shit of history . . . I think I need to do this. *We* need to do this. When we fucked around in the trailer, I had a vision. Twins. Matching little Mannies.”

“Twins,” I repeated in spite of myself. “Mengele would be thrilled. But I still don’t . . .”

“What?”

I stared straight down the highway, behind a truck full of cattle, their faces at once dumb and weirdly serene on the way to slaughter. I reached across the seat, put my hand on one of her epic cheekbones.

“If those little fuckers are born with bull necks and swastikas on their backs, you’re going to have a lot of explaining.”

She smacked my hand away, but not unhappily. “Trust me, they’ll be yours. That’s the scary part.”

She was right about scary. I checked the rearview—a habit I imagined I could shake in two or three decades, when the kids I didn’t know if I’d ever really have were grown up and gone. I spun the wheel and veered to a squealing stop on the shoulder.

“If we do this, it’s for real,” I said. “No more bullshit, no more secrets.”

Tina ran her finger down my face and smiled. Our eyes found each other and had their own conversation. And yet . . . There was something tainting this romantic idyll: part of me still wondered if the woman I was ready to share my life with—again—had murdered Dinah Zell. There was still no explanation for what happened. Tina was, like myself, no stranger to insane jealousy. She might have gotten wind we were together on the plane. Might have come to the conclusion that something transpired between Harry Zell’s wife and me. After that it was a simple matter of execution: find the house, drug the housekeeper, surprise Dinah in her bedroom and—all the rest.

I didn't believe it. I wanted to scour the inside of my brain with bleach and kill all these negative bacteria. But denial was a kind of relapse too. And an odd calm came with that thought. It was, I realized, the *not knowing* that would set me bolting upright at four in the morning for years to come. My true north was always the worst-case scenario within reason—or without it. But there was, here and now, one verifiable truth: I knew Tina had murdered. Once. And once upon a time I had made the conscious decision to let myself love her with that fact intact. So now I would simply live with not knowing who killed Dinah Zell. She had already mentioned, as it happened, that her first thought when she found the body was that *I* did it. Which was not all that implausible either. Even if I hadn't ground-glassed-and-Drano'd a loved one out of existence, I was hardly model-citizen material myself. We were probably made for each other in hell. And here we were.

We were probably made for each other in hell. And here we were.

But still . . . What was the point of unconditional love if it wasn't unconditional? For all we know, after creating the universe, God went into a fentanyl-and-gin blackout, saw the Holocaust when He came to and wanted to claw His eyes out. Like Oedipus. He couldn't deal with the guilt. And we are made nervous, in his image. The consequences never seem to end.

This was the history of the world. Recovery and collapse, despair and relief. The dialectic of clean and dirty. Every time is worse than the time before. The bad thing comes, days and nights and days and nights get so unbelievably fucked up, unbelievably fast, but in the end—if there is an end—everybody's best self just slogs forward, one stagger, one fall, one day, one *What the fuck just happened?* moment of oblivion and soul-broken joy at a time. All we have to do is not die.

Tina leaned across the seat and kissed me on the mouth. "Never again."

"Right," I said. "Until it happens again."

About the Author

JERRY STAHL is author of the narcotic memoir classic *Permanent Midnight; I, Fatty* (film rights optioned by Johnny Depp); *Perv—A Love Story*; and *Plainclothes Naked*. He has written extensively for film and television, and his much-anthologized fiction and journalism have appeared in *Esquire*, *Details*, *Playboy*, *Black Book*, *LA Weekly*, and *Tin House*. He lives in Los Angeles.

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