

The meeting with Maceburger, the vice president of publishing, took place right before I was notified that my son was dying. Thinking back on it, as I tell you this, it did feel like the death of my boy was right there in the air, just hanging there like a headline suspended in space, barely out of view; as if I could almost see it from the corner of my eyes.

"As you know, Slim," Maceburger was saying to me, "book publishing is changing — has already changed." He snapped his lower lip with his rabbit front teeth and slowly turned an empty Pepsi One can under his right hand, as if trying to screw it into the desk top. "You're a damned good editor, but we need you to get a fresh angle..."

For this meeting, he sat behind his leathertopped desk — a cue which was not lost on me — and Peter Eickoff from Marketing sat to Maceburger's right, on the leather sofa of the compact office, and I sat at the apex of the triangle, in an office visitor's chair, another cue that found its way home. Cues, and omens.

There was a window that might have showed summer in San Francisco, from about six stories up, but the curtains were closed, and the room was gloomy.

Maceburger wore a three-piece suit, the jacket over the back of his chair so that in his vest and shirt sleeves he could affect the appearance of an actual publisher. I suppose, as an exec for Ledbetter Books, Maceburger was a publisher, in some sense. The slick, pernicious prick.

Eickoff nervously patted his threadbare blond comb-over, and looked at me, and looked back at his clipboard, and waited. He wore a butter yellow shirt, a brown tie, brown slacks, loafers. Prominent wedding band. He seemed like he was breathing a little too fast; like if I stood up too quickly, he might scream in startlement. I'd always

Talisman by John Shirley



pictured marketing guys and advertising execs as flippant, sleekly dressed young bachelor types, with a glibness that passed for confidence. And they mostly were like that. But Eickoff seemed more like a monochrome, witless accountant, wound just a little too tight.

He was wound way tighter than I realized. I misread the guy. Lots of people did.

Maceburger was polite but also unfailingly disdainful...

I thought about Meredith and Frankie and tried to get back on task. I dutifully chimed in, "Change can be good. Businesses need it."

"Ledbetter Books is still Ledbetter Books, though it has been purchased by Polymer International Industries," Maceburger went on.

I couldn't resist saying something to that. "Still Ledbetter Books — although... Mr. Ledbetter is no longer connected with the Ledbetter Books, in any way. Except for his name."

"Right," Maceburger said, eyeing me speculatively. "But..."

I glanced at Eickoff. He was squirming a little, like he had to go to the bathroom. I felt like telling him, *Just get up and go, dammit.*

As I watched him, his eyes snapped to the window, and back to us. There was a distant sound of a siren, somewhere south

of Market, and his hands tightened, knuckles white, on the armrests. What was up with that?

"I..." Eickoff began. "There are in fact — certain realities..."

He seemed far away in that moment. As if trying to remember what those realities were.

I sensed some kind of hideous pressure in Eickoff, and took pity on him, turning my attention to Maceburger. "Who're we going to be realistic about first?" Thinking, even as I said it, that I really ought to gentle up my tone.

They could be thinking about getting "real"

with *me*, after all. Ledbetter Books had been taken over. A takeover usually led to layoffs.

Maybe part of me was hoping they'd fire me. It might give me an excuse to go back to Austin. I'd been thinking about Texas a lot. The delicious contradictions of Texas.

But all that was fantasy: I couldn't go back, because Meredith and Frankie were in San Francisco, in the little house she'd bought. She was invested in the Sunset District, she wasn't moving, and I wasn't going to move away from the boy. I needed to see him safely to at least nineteen years old.

There had been no one to see me through, except Mom, the old man having vanished when I was nine. Mom was there as much as she had to be, and not a jot more. I remembered reading to Frankie when he was little. He was insatiable for stories. I remembered going to father-son camp with him two years before. After the separation, I hadn't been able to afford it again. But that one summer we were happy. Laughing at the chirpy clods of the summer camp staff together, paddling canoes, me and him, the two members of a two-member gang.

Eickoff cleared his throat, glanced at Maceburger, who nodded almost imperceptibly. "We're thinking," Eickoff said, looking hard at his clipboard, "that there

isn't any room for Mark Dustin in the general fiction line, or Judith Mayfield."

"Say what?" Then I remembered. *Gently, gently*. "Mark Dustin *sells*. He has a following. The New York Times reviewers love him."

"He's been slipping," Maceburger said, shrugging.

Eickoff wagged his head apologetically. "I do think it's a shame. I read him myself." He glanced apprehensively at Maceburger to see if this bit of self-revelation was approved.

"But uh..."

I pointed out, "We don't give him big advances. We make a profit on him!"

"I know. But it's—a kind of a narrow profit. We have a mandate from Polymer—from the stockholders, really—to at least double the profit margin."

"To double...at least?" I was genuinely amazed. I shouldn't have been. Eickoff nodded stiffly. He squirmed in his seat, like he had to go to the bathroom. "Right, uh...now when I did the Goodslice Margarine account—"

"Whoa, hold on now, you say you came here from doing marketing for margarine?"

Eickoff blinked at me. "I still do it. I do general marketing for Polymer West Coast. I do some of the Goodslice, some of the Grecian Caress Soap line, some Dinkins Candy, and all the books from Ledbetter West Coast."

"You market soap and margarine and candy...and books. All at once."

Eickoff stood up—making Maceburger's head jerk back in reaction with the suddenness of it. "Just want to...the men's room..."

Maceburger looked irritated but waved him on. Eickoff almost bolted through the door.

"Too much coffee or something," Maceburger muttered, looking after Eickoff. "He's been very tense lately. We had a bit of a...he walked off the job yesterday."

Now I was genuinely surprised. "That guy? He seems so milquetoasty."

"Seems to be having some kind of issues with his wife."

The phone on Maceburger's desk rang. It was Polymer, for Eickoff. "He was just here—just ran off to the little boy's room for a moment. He should be on his way back by now. Hold on..." Maceburger pressed his intercom. "Kenny? Is Eickoff coming back down the hall? He went to the men's—"

"Peter Eickoff?" came the tinny little voice from the box. "He didn't go to the men's, he went out on the balcony. The other way. He's out there pacing and talking to someone..."

Maceburger told the phone: "Yes uh—he'll be...okay, I'll tell him." He hung up, shaking his head. "Whatever."

"Anyway," I said, "about these marketing realities—did you say Judith Mayfield? You're eliminating Judith Mayfield..."

Eickoff came in, face mottled. He sat down, avoiding our eyes, looking just as squirmy as before. But then, he hadn't gone to the bathroom at all.

"What we're not seeing is a deep profit here, with Mayfield," Maceburger said dismissively. "Pretty much all your authors are going to have to go..."

Was Eickoff pinching his own thigh, outside of Maceburger's line of sight? It certainly looked like it. Like a man trying to control one pain by making a smaller, sharp pain somewhere else.

I looked at Maceburger. "Now's the time when you ask me if I'm a team player, right?"

"That's the drill, yes," said Maceburger, flatly, not taking the bait. "Is this the time when you play Mr. Boho Individual and let us down?"

The phone rang again. Maceburger answered. "Yes he's here but he's in a meeting...what kind of emergency. Alright, hold on. Slim...it's for you..."

I knew the woman was a nurse, the moment I heard her voice on the phone. "Mr. Purdoux? We've admitted Frank Purdoux here — we're at San Francisco General..."

"Is it...what is it?"

"He seems to've toxified himself on... Your wife would like you to come over... Will you be able to—"

"Yes! Yes I'm...coming over. Now."

The doctor was a small Asian man with a small mouth and a smaller smile. "Mr Purd-owks?"

"Jimmy?" It was my ex, Meredith, interrupting. Looking squinty eyed and pale in the doorway of the critical care hallway. She's tall and wiry, like me, but with lank dark hair that stood sharply out against her white skin.

She was intensely progressive, politically; I was intensely cynical, politically. Worse, she was a Wiccan, now. Goddess



**“—did you say Judith Mayfield?
You’re eliminating Judith
Mayfield...”**

worshipping feminist ritualizing. Which is just such unutterable horseshit. She was wearing a dark blue workshirt and jeans and sandals and an Isis moon goddess pendant around her neck.

I knew, when I saw her squinting that way. I knew he was dead, and I knew that somehow she was going to blame me.

"It was polytoxix," the doctor said in a soft little voice. "He take a number of drugs...we think maybe all in same pills..."

"How the fuck you graduate from medical school only speaking half assed English?" I asked. I barked it, really.

He didn't even blink; he nodded to say he understood how angry I was and put a hand on my arm. "We think someone sold Ext-shaw-see to him. They are many times now only little bit ex-shaw-see, lots of amphetamine, cough medicine too, mix in the pills. Maybe sometimes they take cocaine too also. PMA, another drug. Polytoxix."

"You're saying...you're saying he's dead."

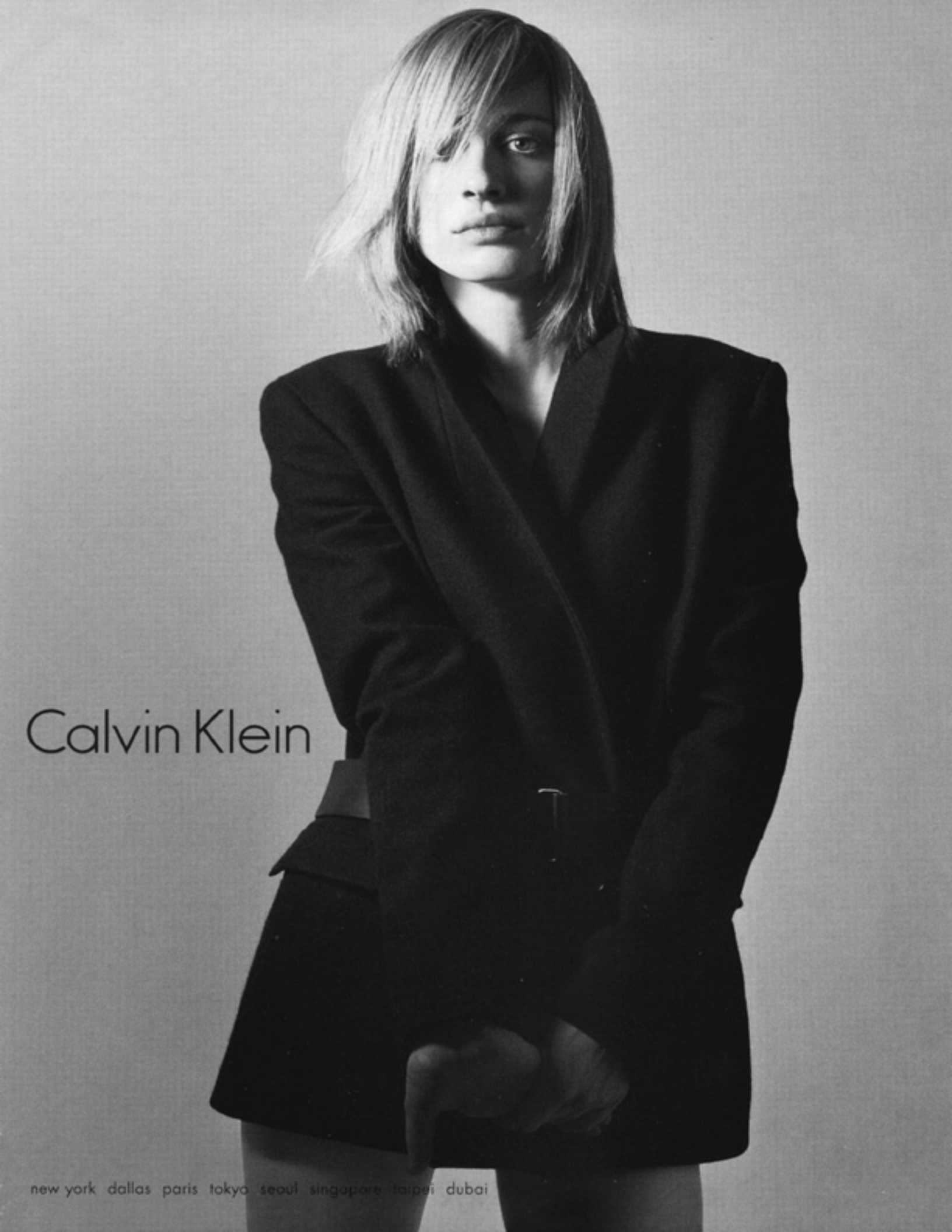
"We try for half an hour to revive him...everything, everything."

I turned to look at my ex. She was gazing mutely at the floor tiles. "Where did he take this shit, Meredith?"

(The room was a box with some white walls and white lights overhead. There were three people in the box. Me and this little Asian guy in the white suit, and my ex-wife. We were in this box and always had been; we'd always been here, talking about my dead son.)

"He went to..." Meredith was making long raspy asthmatic gasping sounds in between phrases. "A party without...without my permission...collapsed at the party, dancing...four or five pills..."

I was in a state of raging detachment, though I stood statue-still, and my voice, in my own ears, was flat as the surface of a



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**“You going to shoot me too?”
I asked**

subterranean lake. “I thought you had a counselor working with him...some flake from Marin, Meredith, right?”

She looked at me with a murderous emptiness. “I...you...you were his hero, the party animal...”

“I have been clean and fucking sober for eleven years.” I clamped a hand on the doctor’s bony little shoulder. “I want to see him, Doctor,” I said. “Now.”

The hall contained little Filipino nurses and a middle-aged white doctor who darted by as if he was afraid I was going to ask him for pain meds for my dying mother, and then there was a room, a cool room, with three gurneys in it, with sheets pulled up over three faces, making me think of three-card monte, pick the right shell and under it...is your dead son.

The doctor pulled back the sheet on the nearest body.

I was surprised by how much expression there was on Frankie’s face. Puzzled, a little angry, betrayed. Cheated. There was a certain dulling, too, like wax when it’s just a little bit warm; that was death, softening the edges of that final expression. Death undefines us.

The doctor’s gentle touch on my arm steered me away from the body, and I went down the hall. Away from the room where I’d seen Meredith. I found an exit—emergency only, and it rang when I pushed through it, and I didn’t care even slightly that it rang. I liked it ringing. It should ring. The hospital should be filled with that clangor, for all day and all night. It should be required.

I decided I needed to be moving. I had to keep a step, two steps ahead of the feeling that was coming. So I decided to go back to work, to quit the job, which I only kept for my boy, all along; and while I was there I could just coincidentally get the Jack Daniels I had in my desk, a retirement gift

wrapped up to send to Mr. Ledbetter. I wasn’t going to send it to Mr. Ledbetter any more.

The office. For starts. That was someplace to go.

I walked a few blocks and waved down a taxi and took that. The driver tried to talk to me and then he looked at my face in the rear view and shut up.

I went upstairs, in the elevator, scribbled a resignation note to Maceburger, handed it to Clueless Kenny, the vapid young gay guy who was Maceburger’s assistant, who blinked back at me in graceless confusion, then I went to my office, got the wrapped package, tore it open, poured a coffee-cup full, and drank off about three shots worth...when the gunshots started.

It sounded to me at first like someone was really whacking something resistant with a hammer. Rap! Rap! Rap RAP!

“Huh?” I said.

What was the last thing I said to Frankie, I wondered. Was it something like, “You gotta go to the damn summer classes if you want to graduate to the next grade. You screwed off most of the school year.”

Something like that. You screwed off most of the school year. Last thing his dad said to him before he died.

I felt something catching up to me, and had to keep moving and curiosity was a way to keep moving, a couple of steps ahead of it, so I let curiosity pull me to the banging sounds, and saw Eickoff, with a big automatic pistol in his shaking hands, standing over the body of Clueless Kenny. Blood skirling around his loafers. Blood still pooling, flowing.

Eickoff was panting, staring down at Kenny.

“You going to shoot me too?” I asked, more interested than scared. I took another drink of the J.D. “What the hell, it’s your gun, I’m just asking. You want some of this here?”

Yew want some of this here? I was also interested to note that my accent returned a little when I got drunk. The first drinking I’d done for years.

“I believe...” Eickoff licked his lips. Staring at the bottle. “I would like a drink. Yes.”

I handed him the cup. I could smell Kenny’s blood.

I was a little afraid...of how little I was afraid.

He was drinking, looking at me with wide eyes over the cup. His face was

tearstained.

I felt I had to say something. Also it kept me busy, kept me moving, in some way, to talk. “My son’s dead, there, Eickoff. He died last night. He was, you know, all I stayed here for, all I stayed straight for. Pretty much all I loved. So what do you think of them apples, Eickoff?” I swigged from the neck of the bottle. “He’s gone, Eickoff. Wiped off the face of the Earth. Frankie.”

He nodded. Cocked his head at the sounds of sirens. “I killed Mr. Maceburger too,” he said conversationally.

“Yes,” I said. “I can’t say I’ll miss him but I can’t say I approve. I take it something was bothering you.”

He spoke in a whisper. “My Alice left me and wouldn’t talk to me. I’ve had some problems, and they started to come back lately, but it’s so hard to concentrate when I take the medication, I can’t work, so I cut back on it, and then she wouldn’t see me...so I called her today, and she told me she had a restraining order...so I said if she didn’t come here to talk to me I was going to start killing hostages...”

I remembered his behavior, earlier that day. “So—did the good folks at Polymer know you were on medication?”

“No, no, I would never have gotten hired. I have a relative at Polymer, and I did some copy writing for an agency, those two things got me the job, but no one knew about the episodes...or the meds...no, no, no.”

“You certainly seem more relaxed than in the meeting,” I said. “Hold out your cup, you want another drink.”

The blood continued to pool around his feet; as quickly as it pooled it was soaked into the carpet, but then some more kept coming. Poor dumb Kenny had a lot of blood in him.

Eickoff held out the cup and I poured. I had some instinct not to die just yet and some instinct to keep him from shooting anyone else.

At the same time I felt I was in a kind of existential groove with Eickoff. He and I were both stricken, and he and I knew a certain truth we probably couldn’t have articulated for one another.

I was carefully not looking at Kenny’s body because I was afraid I’d see Frankie’s face instead of Kenny’s.

Eickoff took another drink.

“I’ve got a fresh clip in this gun,” Eickoff said. “You want it?”

He held the gun out to me. I felt like a magic token was being passed over to me. A badge of office, a talisman of some kind.

I took the gun, thinking if I had it he couldn't shoot me or anybody else with it. I didn't think I wanted to live, but I didn't want to be sitting in an office building, gut shot and dying, either.

"It has a fresh clip in it," he said helpfully.

It was a blocky .44 semiautomatic; heavy in my hand. But I was pretty comfortable with guns. I'd gotten some guns, back in Austin, soon as I was legal to have them, and spent a lot of time shooting at paper targets. Meredith had made me get rid of the guns, of course...

More sirens outside.

I squinted at the gun, trying to make out the safety. "Where's the safety?" I was drunk. And not so drunk. But drunk enough I was having trouble figuring the safety out.

"It's there — see it? But why would you want the safety? Can I have another drink?"

I gave him the bottle, it was starting to give me a headache anyway.

Then I heard the amplified police voices, from downstairs, and shouts.

Eickoff was swaying, beginning to shake. "Alice..."

"Say uh, Peter—who else did you shoot? I have some friends in this building."

"Just that security guard downstairs."

"Don't really know that guy. Too bad though."

"One favor...Mr....wait, I might have to throw up...no...no it's passed...Mr. Prodox—"

"It's pronounced Per-doo."

"Sorry."

"No big thang there, Petey. So uh...what favor?"

"Could you please shoot me?"

"Oh."

He looked pitiful, and like he needed putting out of his misery. How would a guy like him do in prison? Hang himself first opportunity anyway.

I raised the gun and pointed it. But it didn't feel like I had it in me to shoot him. To shoot somebody, it has to be in you; has to come out of you. It didn't seem to be in there.

I thought I could shoot lots of other people though, if they fucked with me. I could shoot just about anybody who fucked with me, now.

They had all made a joke of my life, and

they had all taken Frankie from me. Frankie had made everything meaningful.

It almost caught me then, the feeling, but it didn't quite — because that's when the cops started shouting through megaphones or something at the hall door.

"Stay out there or I'll shoot this hostage!" Eickoff shouted at them, though I was the one with the gun.

"Eickoff..." I began. But I wasn't sure how to advise him. "Hey — they'll do it for you — take the gun back..."

"Kill me before they get here, please!" Eickoff said, licking his lips. "Please oh please...I'm scared of them. I might fall down and beg them not to kill me. I'm not scared of you. I could let you do it."

I didn't understand that logic at all. But Eickoff hadn't been taking his meds; he had his own logic.

The booze made me dizzy when I shook my head. "No, man — it ain't in me to kill you in cold blood. If you have another gun and threaten me with it...Then I could."

"Come to the door and talk to us, in there! Do not hurt that hostage! Are there wounded people inside?"

"How about..." He stumbled to the desk, stepping in the blood, and found a dagger-like letter opener. "I could stab at your eyes with this..."

He was just full of helpful suggestions.

He came back toward me — stepping on Kenny's bloating stomach, his weight forcing air out of the corpse, which said, "Eeeewwww," faintly, something Kenny might've well said in life too. "We're going to come in there — drop your—"

Then Eickoff came at me with the letter opener. I stumbled instinctively back and the gun went off in my hand and Eickoff shouted in triumph and fell on his face at my feet, shot, and then there was a pale, gaping, very young cop-face at the door. The SWAT guys hadn't got here yet and this young guy was staring at me with his pretty blue eyes.

"Shit!" the cop swore. Mad that he'd failed, so he thought, to save the hostage.

"No, I'm the—" I began.

But a vase on the desk behind me burst apart: the young cop was already shooting at me. Thinking I was the disgruntled ex-employee here and Eickoff just another of my victims.

I felt a ripple of rage come up in me, almost as much a feeling of relief as an ejaculation, and I squeezed the trigger, making the gun buck in my hand, pieces of



"Kill me before they get here, please!" Eickoff said, licking his lips.

the door frame fly.

I missed the young cop, who ducked back around the doorframe, shouting to his cop buddies.

"Fuck you fuck you fuck you and all your fucking dim bulb cop friends!" I shouted. "You guys become cops so you can find some fucking excuse to shoot people goddammit!"

I was moving through a side door into the strip of cubicle-filled rooms, down the aisle, as I shouted this, and then I saw the door onto the lunch balcony, the deck put there by a show-off architect, and I was out the door and climbing off the balcony onto a motorized window-washing scaffold, where I found the switch and made the scaffold go down to the alley, and I jumped onto a closed dumpster from there, and —running ahead of the black wave that was trying to catch me—jumped on top of a cop car, ran past two clueless and startled cops, around a corner, hiding the gun in my waistband under my untucked shirt, and then I was slipping into the crowd, laughing, laughing, and grateful to Eickoff, knowing I was going to have plenty of people shooting at me, a little later, thanks to Eickoff, plenty of people to shoot back at, until somebody eventually put me out of my misery.

Frankie. Frankie.

Stay ahead of it. Run! Run and get some ammo and reload that gun...that talisman...

"Thank you, Eickoff," I said aloud.

And I meant it. ~

This story, "Talisman," is (in another form) part of John Shirley's Spider Moon which will be published by Cemetery Dance. Information on the author is available at the Authorized John Shirley Web Site: (www.darkecho.com/johnshirley).

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September 2001

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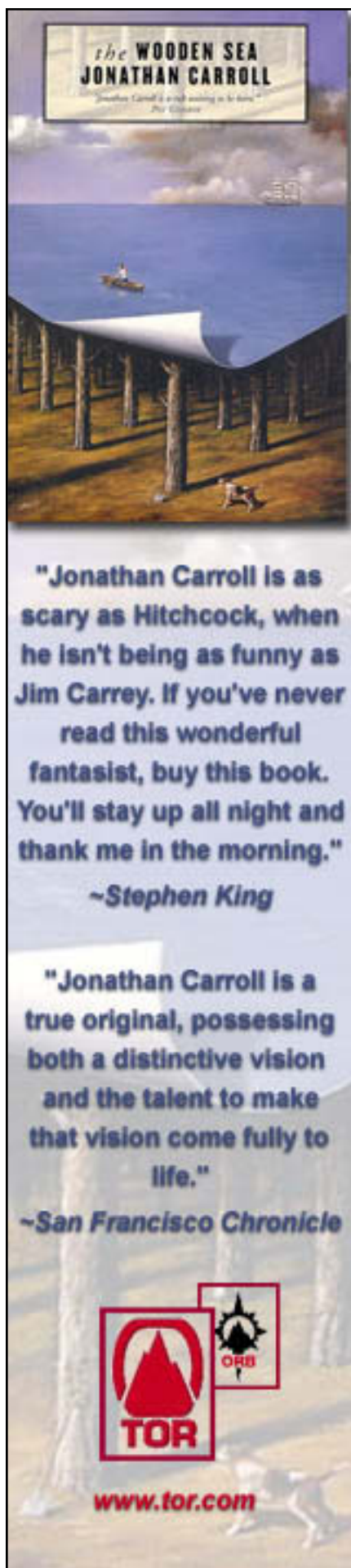
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The Spook online magazine is published by FILMCITY productions.
P.O. Box 281, Warrensburg, New York 12885
(518) 623-3220

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