



*down* in the *dirt*  
revealing all your  
dirty little secrets

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Scars art, page 43. Cover art of a lifesize replica of the Parthenon, in Nashville, Tennessee.

# Operation *LYSISTRATA*

Pat Dixon

1

None of us women really knows how to make a bomb--at least I am pretty sure--or at least I was sure.

My best friend, Karen Hirsch--not her real name, of course--flew home with me for Thanksgiving break in 1998, and she got so pissed off at airport security and the FAA and the FBI and the United States Senate and the airlines and the president and--at least it seemed so at the time--nearly everybody who was traveling by plane that day. My twin sister met us at the airport near Atlanta--not my real home city--and in the car Karen ventilated practically non-stop for nearly ten minutes about how security is so lax and how easily some flaming militia group or terrorists or pissed-off nuns could have terminated our young lives along with every other passenger fifty times over, if they'd wanted to.

"Even real d-u-m-f-u-x . . . excuse my Belgian, Betty . . . could get almost any kind of bomb into any terminal without their stupid balls even breaking a sweat. And then, right there in the waiting area or inside the plane--ka-ploom! Reaper time for yours truly!"

Betty, my twin--not her real name either--in fact everyone's name here is made up, and I'm calling myself Babs here--Betty said, "So why don't you get off your ass, Karen, and actually do something about it? A girl of words and not of deeds is like a garden full of weeds. I hear you pissing and moaning, but is it going to help you or anyone to just tell me and Babs? No way. When I get pissed with a teacher or a clerk or anybody, I don't just framilate about it--I find a way to make 'em clean up their act or suffer some major kind of consequence. I get--don't try to interrupt me--these lips are still moving. I get the names of people that futzed up--or at least their license plate number--and then I send a zinger letter to their bosses or make a phone call--or do both. That's called 'Walk, not talk,' and it feels a lot better than being all talk and no walk--pardon me for being blunt--like what I hear you doing now."

"Oh yeah--right!" said Karen. "The whole system is broken from bottom to top, and they're going to listen to me! Those schmuckolas at the top are happy with the system just the way it is. This isn't like writing a letter saying 'You lost my luggage for a week, asshole,' and getting a hundred dollars' worth of credit on my next ticket and some extra frequent-flyer miles to calm me down. If they give me a free ticket back to school and a million frequent-flyer miles, their . . . their Fokkers will be just as likely to land prematurely in a million little pieces--with all of us in little pieces, too."

"Karen," I finally said. "Do you know what would make them listen to you?"

I was sitting in the back seat, and she was in the front--in the death seat beside my sister. She turned around to look back at me coolly.

"Like of course, stupid," she said after a long pause. "Do you take me for an airhead? I just walk into the White House and press my loaded Luger against the president's head and say, 'Now that I have your attention . . . .' But then they'd probably just gun me and him both down, and it would be business as usual the next day, so even that wouldn't work."

"It would work if you did it right--and if you had a little help from a team," I said. Like my twin, I believe in making my point where it counts. There are three bastard teachers who are unemployed right now because they thought their anatomy could touch my anatomy.

"Like what," said Karen, suddenly serious because she could see that I was totally focused on the problem and wasn't just trying to give her some shit.

I glanced up at the rearview mirror and saw that Betty was looking at me, too, in her steady, calm way.

"Like teaching them a real object lesson that gives them skivvies brown-outs all the way from the check-in gates to the White House. And like scaring a few hundred thousand passengers. And getting the word of it out to the news media. Ten or twelve of us could shake people up at least as much as that cow-turd bomber did in Oklahoma--and without really hurting a single person--or animal. We plant a dozen bogus bombs on a dozen planes all on the same day."

Karen had been complaining that nobody had asked to look inside her carry-on bags with her battery-operated laptop and calculator and travel alarm, her can of hair spray and bottle of shampoo, her electric razor and hair dryer, her portable CD player and phone, her large tin of home-made fudge, and all her costume jewelry. They all just got a quick glance--if that--from some zombie looking at an x-ray machine, and every time the buzzer went off while she was walking through the metal detector, they were satisfied when they found out she was wearing a chain-link belt and checked her no further.

"I could have had a Swiss army knife inside my blouse--or a bandolera with hundreds of bullets," she had said. "The steel tubes of my suitcase's handle or the steel rods holding on its wheels could be put together to make a gun--or a small crossbow or a blowgun--sort of a James Bond kind of thing. And if I'd had a wheelchair, a walker, a metal crutch, or a kid's stroller, I could have all kinds of weapons hidden. My chain belt could be a dangerous weapon. My hair spray could be set on fire and be a flame thrower. I could have had a pint of sulfuric acid or some explosive in my shampoo bottle, and who would know till it was too late? Or a wine bottle full of gasoline with a totally innocent looking corkscrew. Or deodorant bars or suppositories that are really plastic explosives. They say we have to take a few chances in a free society, but it's the buck that matters. If we slow up the check-in lines to really look at things, there'll be less bucks!"

"Or if they hire and train checkers who are smarter or more motivated--and use better equipment to detect lethal shit. Again: more overhead and less

bucks," I had added. "Hell—I'd be willing to pay an extra seventy or eighty dollars just to feel safer!"

Betty had driven home yesterday from a different university where her boyfriend was majoring in engineering, but she had flown with me and mom to New York last summer and could relate to what Karen was saying. Shortly after Karen had begun complaining to her, Betty had suggested that carry-on, or ninety percent of it, should be forbidden and that most passengers would be happy or at least willing to accept the new rules.

After I mentioned the possibility of us getting together a team to show up the flaws in the so-called system, Karen and my sister were silent for a minute or two. Then Karen spoke decisively.

"Let's try it. I can think of four people I would trust who might be interested--all of them women. I think men would tend to be too macho-minded and want to take extra chances just to see how close they could come to getting caught. They'd look at this as just some kind of game, like cap-gun-totin' cowboys and stuff. Call me a sexist sow, but I think women would keep their eyes on the road better and would be more careful--'cause not only would there be hell to pay if we get caught but that would also spoil our whole point!"

By the time we pulled in the driveway of mom's house, we'd agreed that we would try to pull it off at Christmas, even though that didn't give us a lot of time for either planning or recruiting. We felt that spring break just wouldn't have the same kind of impact on people that Christmas would. It would be riskier to go ahead so soon, but the payoff would be far greater, and besides we agreed that the longer we delayed the worse the security would get--and the greater the danger to the public. Besides, who wanted to leave fingerprints all over everything? At Christmas time we could wear gloves all the time without attracting notice. Very easily we began to see ourselves as PVs--Patriotic Vigilantes--pronounced 'Peeves,' and at one point Karen even jokingly gave us code names from comic book superheroines. Since she is half African-American, she called herself Storm, and she called me W-2, short for Wonder Woman.

2

Using e-mail and the phone, by the time we headed back to school we had recruited another seventeen kindred spirits, all roughly our own ages. Most of them were gals we'd gone to high school with who were now going to other colleges. One of Karen's recruits, Donna Wright, had a brilliant insight that would help us all breeze right into the gate areas of practically any airport in the country with literally armloads of every material imaginable.

The weak link that Donna pointed out to us is that people coming from one flight normally do not get reinspected when they land and transfer to another flight. They and all their carry-on crap just bounce on over to the gate of the connecting flight where they are welcomed by harried folks who can barely remember to ask whether any strangers have given them packages to tote on board. She suggested that as many of us as possible should enter the system

through various little “boondocks” airports, even if it cost more and meant driving one or two hundred miles to get to them.

We didn’t have time to rehearse the whole thing, of course, but as a kind of test, when Karen and I flew back to college, we took thirty extra pounds of metal in our carry-on bags--stuff from a local junk shop: steam irons, a horse shoe, pliers, a carpenter’s hatchet with a hammer head on the top, a heavy vise, and three glass jars full of large rusty nails. The person at the x-ray machine asked us what we had, and we told her it was just tools and stuff for a school play. She took our word for it and didn’t ask to see any of it.

During the next two weeks, we settled on a dozen of us being “couriers” of the materials, with the eight others providing ground transportation for us and our luggage for departures--and, if all went well, arrivals. Men would probably have chosen one main general to be in charge, or perhaps two or three guys who would have competed for leadership. Maybe my sister is right that there’s a difference hard-wired into most women’s genes, but in any case we all worked more like a committee with nobody getting on ego trips about who was smarter or higher ranking or anything.

Although we never were all in one place at one time and in fact, in several cases, never even met in person at all, we frankly assessed our own and each other’s strong and weak points in giving or taking job assignments. For instance, because of their special “flirtation devices,” namely pretty faces and abundant cleavages, five of the women were specifically chosen to go to security points and that were run by young men.

All of us couriers would be wearing one wig and carrying two other wigs with us in case we needed a getaway disguise in a hurry, and we all had reversible jackets and three hats or scarves. We knew that “valid picture I.D.” was essential for each disguise, so those of us who had computer skills, like Betty and me, forged three different out-of-state licenses for each courier. Since these can be placed behind the scratched, cloudy window of a wallet, we knew that even a bad forgery would easily pass--and all the ones we made with our scanners were excellent.

To allay any suspicion, we agreed on a college-girl “uniform” so that we would easily blend in: casual, comfortable clothes, even slightly sloppy and “slept-in.” Some of us added pet hair from shedding dogs or cats to our coats and jeans, and some saw to it that food stains were visible.

Inside our bags we had an array of items designed to misdirect the attention of any inspector who chose to peer at their contents. Typically, loose handfuls of tampons or sanitary pads were placed on top; metal items such as heavy brass jewelry boxes, alarm clocks, curling irons, cameras, hair dryers, vibrators, clunky costume jewelry, padlocks, and rolls of pennies and other coins were packed beneath these; frilly bras and panties and some wadded up dirty laundry with noticeable sweaty and pissy odors were next; then explicit drawings and photos razored from sex manuals might form a stratum; finally, a large fruitcake tin and a plastic bag with vitamins, face creams, skin soaps, toothbrushes, razors, combs,

toothpaste tubes, and such were packed on the bottom, surrounded by clean clothes of all kinds. In our other carry-on bag we would have eight or ten little packages all wrapped for Christmas--some were normal socks and blouses and stuff, but others were flashlights, VCR tape rewinding machines, cooking timers, coffee pots, tea kettles, and similar heavy-duty things.

About eighteen inches of duct tape were wrapped around the handles of our curling irons or flashlights. The fruitcake tins were filled with bogus fudge made out of brown clay and wrapped in aluminum foil or some bogus Snickers and Mounds candy bars made of the same substance and carefully sealed in reglued wrappers. This clay, meant to simulate an explosive, would be assembled with various wires, batteries, and timing devices around the body of a flashlight or a jewelry box.

Originally Karen, Betty, and I had thought that three or four women could be on each plane, all of them with different components, and they could go up to the rest room one by one with their stuff. The first few women to go in would hide things for the last one to assemble into a B-2 or Bogus Bomb, and then the last woman would hide that either in the rest room or in an overhead compartment or whatever. However, Charlene Gardner, another of Karen's recruits, pointed out that the logistics or the choreography for such an operation would be so complex that we'd be sure to have problems--not the least of which would be getting all the women up to one rest room during a flight that might be turbulent or that had a lot of other passengers suffering from what she called "pee-er pressure." It would be better to make it less of a male Rube Goldberg thing by having each courier have all she needed--and that's what we decided to do--'cause it made more sense.

3

On B-Day, a.k.a. "C minus One," Jenine Parker drove me to a small airport in Pennsylvania where I, my long blonde wig, my jade turtleneck pullover, and my padded push-up bra breezed through security an hour before flight time. I set both bags on the conveyor belt to be x-rayed, took off my jacket, and walked under the metal detector arch. Of course, it began to sound in protest immediately, so I backed up and took keys and change out of my pockets and put them into a plastic tray. It sounded a second time, of course, and I showed the gawky looking young man my heavy silver bracelets and large silver belt buckle. Then I picked and brushed a few dozen white angora cat hairs off the front of my turtle-neck while he grinned at me. What seemed to interest him the most, though, was the large brass ring with eight antique iron keys that I'd taken from my jacket pocket and put into the tray.

"Hey, Billy," he said to the operator of the x-ray machine. "You ever seen keys like these? They must be real old!"

While Billy and he stared at them in trance-like wonderment, I mentioned that these were my lucky keys that had belonged to my great grandfather and had got him safely through World War One and had protected all my relatives ever since--which was a total lie, of course.

It was a slightly cloudy day, and I'd confirmed my three flights by phone that

morning and now again made sure that this one was still all set--as far as anyone there at the gate knew.

I showed my bogus license with me as a blonde to the man who assigned me to a seat, and then for half an hour I snacked on a bag of potato chips and watched the sky and saw two other flights land and take off. I've always hated flying in these little prop jobs that hold about eighteen passengers, but Betty told me to remember that they don't go as high or as fast as the jets do, so they could be construed as safer.

I hadn't checked any bags, but when I was boarding with my little wheeled suitcase and my small duffel bag, one of the ground crew offered to load them in the cargo hold for me.

"With a plane like this, miss, there ain't much room even to store your pocketbook in the overhead, let alone bags like these," he said.

I was nervous and must have looked startled. This isn't going according to plan, I thought. I didn't want to lose control of these bags.

"It'll be okay, miss," he said, smiling. "You can pick them up right outside the plane when you land. They ain't checked through, so they won't be going to the baggage area nor nothin'."

I smiled back at him, took a deep breath, and boarded the tiny plane.

Half an hour later we were touching down at Pittsburgh's airport, and, just as he had said, my two bags were waiting for me under the wing at the bottom of the stairs when I got off. With a knot in my stomach and a slight buzzing in my ears, I slung one over my shoulder and wheeled the other into the terminal.

My connecting flight to St. Louis was scheduled to depart in ninety minutes, and a TV monitor listing departures showed me that it was, apparently, all set to go. About halfway to my next flight's gate, I went into a ladies' room and locked myself and my bags inside one of the far end stalls. There I reversed my jacket and changed to a baggy sweatshirt and dirty jeans and put on some large, tinted glasses and a long mousy-brown wig. I flushed the toilet twice, put some dark circles under my eyes and some phony zits on my chin and nose, and went out to the concourse again.

At my gate I showed my next license and got my seat assignment. With forty minutes till boarding time, I went to another ladies' room and assembled my Bogus Bomb in a stall and put it into a beige pillow case which I tucked into my handbag. As an artistic measure, I had poked two dozen large rusty spikes into the brown clay.

At the sink, I inserted a large greenish bogus booger--made from blotter paper and some dried glue--into one nostril. I wanted to encourage people to avert their gazes from me during this flight. My mouth suddenly felt dry, so I cupped my hand under a faucet and swallowed a couple handfuls of cold water. I noticed that my pulse was running a bit faster, too.

In the concourse, I made a short check-in call.

"W-2 at Pitts. All is merry," I said.



“Roger, W-2,” said Charlene Gardner. “Nine reindeer are aloft with their goodies. Be well.”

As I boarded my flight, I wondered how the other couriers were doing. My feet felt a little numb and heavy, and I felt as if a headache were starting--I couldn't really be sure. Halfway down the aisle of the plane we all had to wait while a short young man tried over and over to force his suitcase into the overhead compartment that was just too small for it. While other passengers impatiently dithered to themselves, to each other, and finally at him, I found myself laughing at his absurdity--and at theirs.

“Talk about inconsideration and stupidity! He could at least wait till we all got past him,” said a middle-aged woman in front of me.

“He's just doing the best he can with the little God gave him,” I giggled, with little tears running down my cheeks. She glanced back at me briefly and made a sour face but said nothing further. After another minute, the young man slid his suitcase under a seat, and we were able to move forward again.

I had the seat nearest the window, just as I'd requested. I stowed my bags and took down a pillow and a blanket from one of the overheads and wrapped myself up as if to take a nap. My seat companion was an elderly man who, after a couple of brief glances at me, settled down to read a spy novel he had brought with him.

Half an hour after we were airborne, a slim young man with a black apron asked us if we wanted anything to drink. I took a ginger ale while the old guy beside me had a scotch and soda. Then he tried to be polite and talk with me.

“Are you coming home from college?”

“Me? Nah. Goin' to a rock concert!”

“Oh, you like music, do you?”

I took a piece of pre-chewed bubble gum from my jeans pocket and poked it into my mouth and shook my head.

“Nah. I just wanna find some cool guys an' smoke some pot an' get laid. How about yerself?”

He frowned and turned back to his novel.

“I'm--I'm just going to have Christmas with my older sister.”

“Cool, man,” I said and blew and popped a bubble. He turned a page loudly, and we spoke no further.

When he got up to go to the rest room, I tucked my Bogus Bomb inside the airline's pillow case, behind their pillow. All was going well so far, and I was beginning to feel pretty good. I was tense and alert, but I almost felt like laughing.

When we landed in St. Louis, I remained seated until ninety-eight percent of the other passengers had pushed and shoved their way off the plane. Then I got up and stretched and put the pillow with B-2, my Bogus Bomb, into the overhead compartment across the aisle from my seat and put the blanket on top of it.

As I trundled off the plane with my bags, I wished the slim young man with the apron a merry Christmas. He smiled mechanically and wished me the same.

Once I was in the terminal, I checked a nearby monitor for information about my flight that would take me back home. It was delayed for twenty minutes, but that was fairly normal. I went to a ladies' room at the far end of the terminal where I stowed my jacket in my duffel bag, washed my face. Then I changed into a burgundy dress, an auburn wig, and a different pair of gloves.

I stood up on the toilet seat to peer over the stall and make sure that nobody was there who'd been there when I went in. After another five minutes I left the rest room and went to a pay phone to check in.

"W-2 at St. Louis. Goody is at 19C."

"Roger, W-2. Nineteen Chuckwagon, in your sleigh. Seven other reindeer deliveries completed, four others still airborne. Best of luck on final approach."

As each of us notified Charlene of the location of our B-2, she typed it into her computer, compiling a list that would be attached to our Letter of Concerned Citizens which would be distributed to about two hundred locations as soon as the twelfth reindeer had reported in. Fifty senators, thirty-five airline executives, the president, the FBI, the FAA, twelve city police departments, seven TV networks, and over a hundred newspapers would get a summary of what we had done and what we had meant it to prove. If this didn't make somebody take notice, we didn't know what else would.

4

When I arrived at my last destination, my twin sister was there to pick me up and take me home for Christmas. Betty had checked with Charlene while I was aloft: eleven of the reindeer had delivered their goodies and had either arrived at their final destination or were on the last leg to it. The twelfth, whose connecting flight had been canceled because of equipment problems, had had to scrub her primary mission and go to Plan-B: hide her Bogus Bomb inside one of the lecterns where ticket takers stand when people board. Two hundred copies of our letter, which Charlene had altered slightly to call our mission "Operation Lysistrata," were being express-mailed from four major post offices even as we drove home.

"I feel kind o' warm and good inside, Babs," said Betty. "Maybe we can make a difference after all with our lives."

"What'll we do for an encore, Sis? Take down the tobacco giants?"

"Yeah--and about thirty senators who cater to those merchants of death."

5

Mom went out on a "date" with one of her new friends on Christmas Eve and didn't return until mid-afternoon of Christmas Day. As for Betty and me, we didn't sleep that night. At intervals, e-mail came in from Karen and the rest of the couriers and drivers, detailing their experiences, and we sent out the details of ours. In between messages, we snacked and giggled a lot together and fantasied about the headlines and the newscasts that would come in the morning. We kept Betty's TV set on all night with the volume set low.

At 4:18 a.m. there was a special bulletin about an aircraft. It had exploded en route to Hawaii, presumably killing 347 passengers and a dozen crew members.

Around noon, the FBI announced that a massive team of presumably foreign terrorists had placed several dozen simulated bombs on domestic airplanes and in terminals and, in an effort to conceal the real danger, had sent a manifesto that listed the locations of some of the dud devices.

We were stunned. Our first inclination was to call Karen or e-mail her. Then we feared that somehow the lines might be tapped. We were afraid to answer the phone when it rang.

Could it be that one of our women had been playing for keeps? Was it just a coincidence?

Months have gone by, and the only impact seems to be that security on flights to Hawaii was temporarily improved. Pieces of the plane that went down in the Pacific on Christmas morning have not yet been found. As of summer 1999, terrorist sabotage is still the only working hypothesis put out by the FBI that reaches the news.

During spring break I flew with Karen to her home to try and sort out what our next move ought to be. Should we come forward and confess and clarify who really did what? She and the majority of the Patriotic Vigilantes are against it and feel we should lie low for the rest of our lives. They're of the opinion that we'd be lynched if not crucified.

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*letter 09/16/06*

*Janet Kuypers*

I'm 36 years old, and I played gin with dad for the first time ever today. All my life I have remember mom and dad playing gin with another couple coming over, playing at our poker table (not turned over, of course), and I learned how to play, it's the same thing as rummy, but instead of 8 cards there's 10, and you can't put 3 of a kind (or a series of 3 or more) down during the game, and you can't take all of the cards on the discard pile, you can only take the top card. So if a card has been discarded, you're out of luck, there's no chance to get it back. Anyway, I think I never played gin with my parents, but I knew how to play it, and I probably played with my sister Sandy (but I can't remember specifically ever playing with her), but now all I do is teach my husband to play gin. And we play together when we want to feel like we're at a bar and want to spend time doing something other than talking or listening to music (only rarely are we dancing, so I didn't bother mentioning that). Anyway, I asked my dad after mom died if he wanted to play gin, because I hear

that he played cards with people before, when people were around and people hadn't died yet. But they played pinochle, and like how they played gin, they don't just play with two people (even though gin is a two person game), when he played gin in the past he played with partners, and they counted points, so that whatever team got to 500, then they'd win. Well, when John and I play, we don't bother counting points, we just see each game who wins and leave it at that. And probably because I knew the game and taught the rules to him, I win more often. But when we play as a pair without counting points, we call all the time, because why not? It's just a game, right?

So anyway, because dad has been trying to find things to do after mom died, I didn't know what to do for him. Some of his friends asked for suggestions, and I said, "find people to play cards with him, because it would give him something to do other than playing computer games or drinking," but no one knows pinochle other than one guy, and he couldn't think of two other people. I don't know pinochle, but apparently, like gin, you have to play in a large group. But anyway, I've asked dad a few times if maybe he'd want to play gin, and he always says no. Yesterday even, he was playing a computer game, and I offered to play a game of gin with him, and still he said no. But today, my second to last day here, he was playing a computer game and I thought, okay, I get into a rut, and they say I'm like him, so I should take some initiative. So I went and got a deck of cards and sat down next to him and just started shuffling. And he finally paused long enough from playing computer solitaire (you know, you can always pause that game, like you really are so caught up in solitaire that you need to be distracted) to see what I was doing, and I said, "I got a deck of cards. Want to play a game of gin?" and he said, "let me finish what I was doing, and okay." So I kept shuffling until he was finished playing, and dealt.

I actually ginned the first game, when I got the winning card from his discard I said, "I'm sorry, but gin," and then we played again, he called and beat me because I had absolutely nothing in my hand. And then we played a few more hands and then he said he was wanted to watch the game, so we stopped playing after about 4 or 5 games.

And I talked to John on the phone long distance this evening, and I said that this was probably the first time in my life I had ever played gin with my father.

Interesting, I learned this game from my father, without him trying to teach me, and this was the first time I had ever played gin with him.

Interesting.

# *AMERICAN HERO*

*Mel Waldman*

During 9/11, human barriers melted in the poignant metamorphosis of American tragedy.

We were close. Yes, for a brief period of time, that stretched across weeks and perhaps months after the Twin Towers toppled,

we embraced each other with kind thoughts and deeds.

In our souls, we saw the Phoenix rise again. And we were one-Americans united by an attack on American soil.

Yet soon, much too soon, we drifted apart. Perhaps, we wanted to forget.

During and immediately after 9/11, American heroes

spontaneously emerged throughout the country, especially in New York, where a canopy of metallic dust and human debris covered Lower Manhattan.

Police officers, fire fighters, and others, including a beatific wave of anonymous altruists, acted heroically,

without dreams of glory.

During this horrific period, our noblest selves leaped across our lonely human walls of isolation and separation.

Yet eventually, we lost our connections. We seemed to lose our heroism too, here, at home in America, until an unknown man showed extraordinary courage at a Manhattan subway station.

Wesley Autrey, a 50-year-old construction worker, leaped from

a subway platform as a train rushed into the station. He dived into the abyss below to save a 20-year-old man sprawled on the tracks.

The younger man had suffered a seizure.

His convulsions catapulted him off the platform, and into a deathtrap. And when the Good Samaritan sailed in front of the speeding train, plunging into the darkness, risking his life as his two young daughters

watched from a distance in the arms of a stranger, he found the lost man, pushed him into a trough and covered him with his body.

In the trough between the rails, he held the man tight and told him not to move.

And the train passed over them.

The hero's daughters, 4 and 6, waited on the platform, covered in a blanket of terror.

But soon, after the train stopped, the father cried out from under the train that he and the young man were okay.

Later, after the electricity was cut off, Wesley Autrey emerged from the trackbed-a true American hero.

Like the heroes of 9/11 and our soldiers overseas, he is willing to risk being killed to save one human life.

At the end of the day, what can we say? In the privacy of our souls, what truths will we confess?

# RASPUTIN'S MISSION

Mel Waldman

## I

Rasputin dreamed he was climbing Jacob's ladder. But last night's vodka, which he had devoured after leaving the old man, fully interfered with his spiritual quest. And of course, protecting a mysterious old man from unknown assassins was not exactly his Brooklyn cup of tea.

So in the middle of the night, Rasputin leaped from Jacob's ladder and fell into the abyss. "The Black Hole of Hell!" he cried as he jumped out of REM sleep and vomited his guts onto the dirty sheet covering a torn mattress in the rat hole bedroom of the basement apartment which enclosed him.

In the midst of his late night "let it all hang out-episode," the phone rang. "It's the Messiah!" he cried out. "Not the old man, please."

He continued vomiting as the phone rang until the answering machine was activated.

"This is Rasputin, you V.I.P. private eye of Brooklyn. Brighton Beach's favorite. The Chosen One. The P.I. you have chosen. I'm not available to come to the phone right now. But at the sound of the beep please leave a friendly message and tell me your name, the time of your call, and your telephone number. Rasputin will get back to you. Thank you."

Although he was in the throes of Hell, Rasputin listened to his message with much pride and joy. He admired himself from a distance in perhaps, an out-of-body experience or the likes thereof. Until the stranger spoke.

"Good evening, Mr. R, honorable private eye of Brighton Beach. Sorry you are not available right now. Indisposed. Whatever. But not to beat around the bush. The NNKKK wishes to hire you for a very special mission. An envelope has been left underneath your front door. Inside you will find payment number 1 and instructions about the nature of your mission. Welcome aboard. Good night."

And the rotund Rasputin stumbled across the underground railroad apartment until he found the letter under the door. Inside the envelope was a single one dollar bill and a note: "Enclosed please find \$1.00. This is the first of several payments for services rendered. Total payment equals \$100,000.00. Mr. R, your first mission is to contact the police in the morning. Tell them a bomb has been planted in Sheepshead Bay. It will go off at



noon tomorrow unless the members of the NNKKK are permitted to march through the area. Thank you, honorable P.I.”

Grinning sardonically, Rasputin made the finger, pointing it upward to no one in particular. “A joke. A middle of the night prank. Now, let me go back to sleep.”

He waddled across his underground tomb, his barbershop moustache twitching and moving more rapidly than his tired feet.

He stroked his pulsating moustache and goatee and patted his bald head. “Time for beddie bye.”

And he fell into a deep sleep, snoring relentlessly through the swaddling night.

## II

“Hell on earth!” Rasputin screamed as he heard the bomb go off in his dream. He woke up in a sweat.

He looked at the broken alarm clock on the night table. 12:05. He missed his morning appointment with the old man. No matter. He had told him to stay put until Rasputin arrived.

Rasputin poured himself a shot of vodka and turned on the TV just when a news flash came on. *At noon, there was an explosion in the Sheepshead Bay area of Brooklyn. Several people were killed. Dozens were injured. Cause of the explosion-unknown at this time. More news in a minute.*

“Jeeeesuus Christ! The bomb was real!” His hands shaking, he tried to pour himself a second shot of vodka. He couldn’t. Most of the liquor spilled on the floor. And then the phone rang.

Rasputin let it ring, for he wanted to screen the call. He listened to the hypnotic sound of his own voice until the person at the other end spoke: “Rasputin, are you there? If you’re there, pick up. This is the old man. I hired you to protect me. Where are you, Chosen One?”

He lifted the receiver with his right hand and with his left pressed a button to turn the machine off. “Yeah. Yeah. Rasputin speakin’.”

“Been waitin’ for you, Mr. Private Eye, since early this morning. Are you workin’ for my enemies?”

“Never!”

“Well, if you want to work for me today, get here fast.”

“Are you where...?”

“Yes. That place.”

“I’m on my way. Stay...”

The old man hung up and Rasputin was left with his mouth wide open. As he scurried to the door, the phone rang again. “Christ!” he shout-

ed. "God in Heaven!" he added. Then he turned around, waddled to the phone, and picked up the receiver. "Old man, you are..."

"Good afternoon, Mr. R, hired killer for the NNKKK."

"What?"

"You failed us, so people died. Do not fail us again!"

"Who are you?"

"Your friend and benefactor. Now, look under your door for the second payment and further instructions. Bye."

There was an envelope, a ten dollar bill, and a note: "Enclosed please find \$10.00. This is the second of several payments for services rendered. Total payment equals \$100,000.00. Mr. R, your second mission is to go to the 61<sup>st</sup> precinct within the hour. Tell the police a bomb has been planted in Brighton Beach. It will go off at 3 unless Joseph K is set free. Goodbye, Mr. R."

"Why me?"

Rasputin paced back and forth. He stopped abruptly and gave the invisible NNKKK his glorious finger, tossed a coin, called it, made a hopeless decision, and stormed out into the dog day afternoon.

### III

Inside the 61<sup>st</sup> precinct, Rasputin told his story to Detective Blank. "So you're telling me that the NNKKK is responsible for the explosion in Sheepshead Bay and another one which hasn't happened yet in Brighton Beach if we don't release Joseph K? Is that right?"

"Yeah."

"Well, as I see it, there are two problems here. Never heard of the NNKKK. Never. And there ain't no Joseph K in prison. Not in Brooklyn. Not upstate. Nowhere."

"Nowhere?"

"Yeah. So keep in touch."

"Sure."

And Rasputin sauntered off in a daze until he remembered he had another appointment with a desperate client.

### IV

Rasputin drove his 1980 Chevrolet Impala recklessly through the streets. Soon, he drove up to Dunkin' Donuts on Kings Highway near 15<sup>th</sup> Street, by the Kings Highway Station for the D train. He parked the car in front of Dunkin' Donuts and rushed into the crowded, seething

store.

Last night he left the old man inside Citibank near the cash machines. Before leaving, he had ordered the old man, disguised as a homeless person with torn clothes and a shopping bag, to sleep inside the Citibank vestibule. In the morning, he was to hang out inside Dunkin' Donuts.

"Old man, you here?" Rasputin yelled indiscreetly.

An old man emerged from the rear of the store. "Rasputin?" he cried out.

Suddenly, a fat stranger with sunglasses and a .38 in his right hand covered with a black silk glove stepped behind Rasputin, shot the old man, and shoved the hot gun into Rasputin's right hand. Then he disappeared.

Momentarily, Rasputin stood paralyzed in the center of Dunkin' Donuts, the hot steel dangling from his numb fingers. He looked quizzically at the corpse nearby. Some of the other customers looked blankly at Rasputin.

Then an old lady screamed: "He's dead! And there's the murderer!"

A throng of mental patients, junkies, alxies, and other misfits shouted: "Murderer! Murderer! Murderer!"

Rasputin dropped the gun. Then he turned and ran into the street. His hands shaking wildly, he took out his car keys and tried to unlock the left front car door until he realized that it was already unlocked. Confused and desperate, he jumped in, started the car, and drove off.

Rasputin sped up Kings Highway and made a right on Ocean Avenue.

"Are you nuts, Mr. Private Eye" a familiar voice asked.

Rasputin looked into the rearview mirror and saw the old man. "You? But I saw..."

"You thought you saw, Mr. R. A simple matter of impression management. I am very much alive. But that poor fellow I hired to stand up and call your name is most certainly dead."

"You knew he'd be killed, didn't you?"

"Of course. Just as I knew that you'd be dumb enough to lead my enemies to me. You were quite predictable. But what kept you?"

Mindlessly, Rasputin told the old man what had happened.

"The NNKKK didn't waste any time," the old man commented. "They want me dead! And they want to own you. Such evil men."

"You're just like them, old man. A murderer!"

"We're all killers, my friend. Given the right circumstances, the right time, the right motive, and... Killing is a natural instinct."

Suddenly, Rasputin stopped the car and turned ot face the old man. "who are you?"

"A hunted man."

“Why?”

“I’m a writer. I wrote a book which my enemies condemn. So they have sentenced me to death.”

“A writer? You?”

“Yes. A writer-me!”

“Christ! In my wildest dreams I never imagined that a man of intellect could commit such violence!”

Smiling wickedly, the old man said: “Now you know-who we are-and what we do!”

For a few seconds, the two men looked maliciously at one another, across a bridge of silence.

“Sorry, old man,” Rasputin said ironically. But due to these unusual circumstances, I’m afraid I can no longer help you.”

“Of course, you can.”

“Perhaps, you do not understand. As of this moment, I quit!”

“Impossible!”

“On the contrary, inevitable! Yet since I’m a decent fellow, I’ll drop you off somewhere and...”

“We must stay together.”

“Never!”

“Foolish, foolish man. It is you who do not understand. Since that little incident in Dunkin’ Donuts, you’re a fugitive too.”

“I didn’t kill that poor soul.”

“It doesn’t matter. You’ve been set up by the NNKKK. Your fingerprints are on the gun. Before I easily broke into your car within a matter of seconds, I witnessed everything. The crowd saw you holding the killer’s gun.”

“But what about the real killer?”

“There was confusion and chaos. Perhaps a few customers saw the man. Eyewitness reports are notoriously unreliable. But fingerprints are not.”

“I’m innocent!”

“Of course, you are. But you appear to be guilty. That is the Relaity of the situation!”

“I’ll go to the police and explain. But first, I must go home and find two letters which the NNKKK left for me. It’s my proof!”

“Stupid man! These letters have probably been destroyed by now. It’s too late, you see.”

“No!”

“Yes, my friend. This is the way it is. Remember, the NNKKK does not officially exist. But you do. And by your own confession, you are implicated in at least one mysterious explosion. Perhaps two. So Mr. R,

I am your only hope of survival. The hunted animal knows its hunter!”

“I’ll take my chances alone, old man. Now, where do you want me to drop you off?”

“Nowhere!” the old man shouted as he took out a .45 from his shopping bag. “No exit, Rasputin!”

Impulsively, Rasputin grabbed the old man’s right hand which held the .45. Rasputin and the old man struggled for a few seconds. The old man shrieked and howled. And then the gun went off, blasting a hole through the hunted animal’s forehead. And the silenced quarry slumped over, murdered by its protector.

Sweating profusely, Rasputin gazed incredulously at the corpse. Shocked by the unreal events which had occurred, he was momentarily immobilized. But the oppressive heat forced him to act.

Unexpectedly, he found himself touching the corpse, confirming that the old man was really dead. And then he searched the body. He found a driver’s license issued to Joseph Kant. So the old man was Joseph K!

Frantically, he continued his search, finding sundry items: a key (perhaps, to a safe deposit box), an address and telephone book with mysterious symbols scattered throughout the pages, and a list of names and different cryptic notations. Apparently, the old man was fond of codes.

Later, he’d examine Joseph K’s possessions more carefully. But now, he had to go home and find the two letters. In the postern of his mind, he knew he should hide the corpse before returning home. He couldn’t. Something stopped him.

## V

Ignoring the corpse in the back seat, he drove toward Brighton Beach. On his way home, he heard the explosion in the distance. “It must be 3 o’clock,” he muttered to himself as he continued to head home. But when he approached his block, he stopped the car abruptly.

The house where he lived was a magnificent inferno. Inconspicuously, he watched the beautiful fire swallow up his underground apartment. No one noticed Rasputin or the corpse in the back seat. Spectators were consumed by the fire, unaware of other forms of destruction.

Eventually, Rasputin drove off, heading nowhere, a desperate fugitive with only a silent companion to kill his loneliness. His mission was to make it through the night. Nothing more. At sunrise, he’d figure things out, say goodbye to Joseph K, drink some vodka, and talk to the crepuscular insects.

# Purpose

Ken Dean

Sarah was keeping an eye on Tom McFarley, following him near Wall St. and Nassau before he entered his office building nearby. He entered the lobby and headed towards the first empty elevator with Sarah following behind. The doors cycled closed and he punched the 50<sup>th</sup> floor button. Feeling a little nervous, he glanced around, but there was no one in the car with him. Exiting the elevator, he headed towards his office, unlocked the door and entered with Sarah closely behind him. Glancing around the office, he locked the door to ensure his privacy. Good, he was alone. Tom also closed the hallway blinds on his office window; what he was going to do had to be private.

Tom McFarley was all about greed. No matter how much he made at his brokerage firm, he had to have more. Life was just so damn expensive with kids in Ivy League colleges and a wife who wanted and had become accustomed to a certain higher standard of living. What the hell; he loved money too and the power and prestige it brought.

It was about the right time. Sarah reached into her stomach and pulled out a small DV camcorder. Tom turned on his PC and was met by a hard drive and bios password. He had to be cautious. Sarah had already started recording so that she could capture everything. Plus she was behind him so the camera couldn't be seen.

Tom logged into another server across town via a secure VPN connection. There he set up a private chat session with 'Niles', his insider informant at a Fortune 500 company.

'niles'

'yes'

'what are the tips for this week?'

'usual split, right? fifty/fifty?'

'of course'

A list of stocks and securities along with their anticipated changes in value came up on the chat text screen. 'Oh man, these looked great!' Tom thought.

'thanks niles – these look like real winners. we'll do the usual place for the split once I do my part'

'cool. niles out'

This had been a good assignment. Sarah had caught everything they needed. The boss would be pleased and this brought her a feeling of fulfillment. She closed down the camcorder and inserted it back into her stomach so that it was invisible again. Jumping up effortlessly, she flew through the wall of the building into the morning sun and headed back to the office.

Gunter Mann made his way through the revolving doors into the building

where his office was located in lower Manhattan between Pine and Wall St. He pushed the 34<sup>th</sup> floor button after entering the empty elevator. It was good to get out of the heat and humidity of the New York summer. Thank goodness for air conditioning; all he could figure was that people were more cranky and irritable back in the days before AC.

Gunter was a handsome man, what with his German background and stylishly cut blond hair. Women sought after him while men were jealous of his rugged, Ayrian good looks. Ah well... you get what you were given. On the business side, he was a professional. In private life he was quite gregarious. The two sides mixed well to his advantage.

His family had moved to the U.S. when he was ten years old after his father's business had opened up new ventures in New York. His father had made it a priority for them to all learn English and gain their American citizenship.

'Having a dual citizenship is always an advantage, or vorteil, in any country,' he had said. They wound up staying in America, and their father had made sure that their German citizenship stayed current.

"You're late as usual, Boss," a voice spoke close to his left ear.

"Shut up, Tony... you know the rules."

"Sorry boss, see you in a minute."

He turned right after exiting the elevator and headed towards his corner office. Business as a private investigator had been lucrative enough to allow him to afford that luxury. Not many private investigators had his advantages. Several items from his past helped his present business. He had been with the New York City police department several years, and promoted within to detective where he excelled. Then came the break where he applied to and was accepted by the FBI. From there he was promoted up to the Missing Persons Bureau. He had a knack for the job, but in his zeal to get a collar, he had tampered with evidence to incriminate a felon that he knew was guilty. But someone else in the department had found out about the tampering and he was let go from the FBI. Gunter felt justified in his actions, but what he did was way out of line by FBI standards, hence the firing.

He fell back on the one thing he was good at; crime and missing person investigation. Being a private investigator let him continue practicing along with obtaining a good income. His other advantages helped. Gunter opened his office door which led to the receptionist area. Tami, his secretary, was already here. That was usually the case. He was a late riser, setting his own hours, whereas she was here around nine AM to get started on her work in the office. She was a beautiful blonde with striking blue eyes whom he had hired partly for PR purposes and other personal reasons. He just happened to like blondes. That was his preference and he paid the bills. 'So shoot me,' he thought. She messed with her nails, hair and makeup too much, but did a fantastic job on the office scheduling and receptionist end. She also knew how to treat the clients; made them feel special. No hanky-panky of course; she just put a tad bit of flirtation in her dealings

with them. Plus Tami was a born organizer, which was what he needed, since Gunter happened to be unorganized to a fault. Tami kept his business dealings and schedule in line, for which he paid her well.

“Morning Tami.”

“Hiya handsome,” she pretended to kid, but down deep the thought was real.

“Back at ya, gorgeous. With that blonde hair, you could easily be German. But you’re an all-American blonde, right?”

“My secret... course, you’re probably a closet Nazi.”

“Hah!” Gunter exclaimed, “I keep my secrets too, Blondie.”

Their office banter would seem offensive to some, but they had a great working relationship. Worth every penny.

“I have to tell you Gunter, business is really booming. I’m not sure how you do what you do, but you always solve a case. And your rep has spread so much that we’ve had to turn away some business. How do you do it?”

“Got some outside sources that really help.”

“Snitches, informants, what?”

“Just some sources who always get the right kind of leads, info, etc.”

“But I never see them on the payroll. You must pay them off somehow.”

“Oh, they get paid. Just can’t say how.”

“Well... just keep paying them however. They really seem to help the business.”

“No problem; they’re invaluable.”

Gunter entered into his office and shut the door behind him. The room was comfortable with a large couch and several comfortable chairs for clients along with a large desk which sported a new PC. He liked to have plenty of working space. The couch was on the door side of the office facing him. Even though he had a great view out the wrap-around corner windows behind him of Battery Park and beyond, he was always reluctant to have his back to the door. That included anywhere. He had developed the habit after a friend of his was shot in the back of the head as he was facing away from an entrance. Some protection also came from the shoulder holstered, Sig Sauer forty-five automatic under his coat jacket for which he had a carry permit. Of course it came in handy for the job also.

His three employees were sitting on the couch obediently, waiting for the days assignments.

“Tony, quit being the trickster and morph visible. There’s a time and a place for that.”

“Sure boss,” Tony quickly assumed his visible form.

Tony was his most recent employee and still plenty feisty. ‘He’ll learn eventually what his situation was and hopefully settle down,’ Gunter thought. It was amazing that he had to include some training for the new ones.

Sarah and Thomas, sitting on the couch with Tony, had been around longer and new the ropes. They’ll help Tony stay in line and keep reinforcing the rules to him. Business was booming and he had to pick up a third employee; hence Tony. And he couldn’t just pick up any employee; they had to have certain attributes.



Thomas spoke up, "So Gun, what's on the docket for today?"

"Let me check," he keyed the intercom. "Tami, can you bring in today's case files please?"

"Sure thing", the intercom responded.

They heard some rustling in the outside office, and then Tami walked through the office door, files in hand. From her perspective, there was only she and Gunter in the office.

"Here you go," laying them on his desk.

Tony, having been a young man, couldn't help himself. He flew up into the air and started swirling around Tami.

"Boss! This girl is it! She's gorgeous! Tell me you haven't been tapping this fine thing."

Gunter had to bite his tongue and keep from laughing while Tami was in the room, ignoring Tony, lest she think him crazy. He did crack a smile though.

"Something funny, Boss?"

"No, just was admiring your hair. Have you done something different?"

"Just some highlights, why?"

"Just admiring it. Looks great,"

Tami blushed slightly.

"Thanks for noticing. Aren't you the sweetie?"

"Right back at ya."

"Teaser. Now about these cases; don't tell me you're going to take all of them on by yourself. You should delegate some of the case load out to your mysterious employees."

"Thanks. I might just do that for your piece of mind, okay?"

"You'd better. Don't want to lose a good job because the boss overworked himself," she chided, walking out the office door.

Gunter, who suddenly developed a pissed look, jumped up from his desk chair and walked over to Tony.

"Listen Casper, you need to learn your place and quit the hijinks! We both know only I can see and hear you, but it's damn distracting while I'm trying to talk to her. Do you want to keep your job?"

This rattled Tony, who sat down on the couch with a 'my dog just died' look on his face.

"No boss, definitely not."

The two other ghosts on the couch looked nervous as well.

"Don't let the kid go, Gun," Thomas said, "he'll learn his place soon enough. Besides, he needs the job, it's all he has."

"He'd better, or I'll let him go in a heartbeat. There are always others."

People like Gunter were highly prized among the ghost community, since they were among the relative few who could see and hear them, unless the ghost chose to become invisible.

Ghosts were stuck in a void with no purpose or motive, feeling empty and void.

At least that's how it was explained to him. Employment by a mortal was invaluable. It gave them something to do with purpose. That was their payment; purpose. Once finding a 'job' they did whatever was asked of them so as not to lose it.

Thomas and Sarah had been around for a while, where Tony had been dead only a few months. Gunter had hired Tony on their recommendations. Thomas had been dead five years, but had been a New York detective killed in the line of duty. His knowledge was invaluable. Sarah, who was formerly a homemaker and successful romance writer, had died seven years ago in a home accident. She was just handy to have around for her female perspective. Tony was still up in the air. Gunter had hired him on the impression that he was street smart, hailing from Brooklyn and only being gone a few months.

Gunter's hiring criteria had to be selective. If they had skills he could use, then they were 'hired'. Not all ghosts were easy to work with. Some wanted only vengeance on a life or person that had supposedly done them wrong. That left few that were level-headed and useful. But they were invaluable; invisible and being able to follow anyone anywhere was an advantage any PI would kill for.

"Sarah, did you get the info on McFarley this morning after shadowing him?"

"Yes, it's all right here."

She reached into her abdomen and pulled out the camcorder and handed it to Gunter.

He winced a little; still hard to get used to that. Turning it on, he went over the evidence.

"Sarah, this is perfect! This is exactly what the client wanted to see. Great job."

Sarah smiled like a kid who had just thrown your car keys into the toilet.

"After I show the client this evidence, I think it will be over for Mr. McFarley. Okay; for today's assignments. Sarah, I want you to shadow a Mrs. Anna Hunter on request of Mr. Hunter. He wants to see what she is up to."

He handed her the file so she had all the info, pic, address, etc.

"Thomas, I have a special one for you. A New York patrolman wants his partner shadowed on his off hours. He wants it handled outside Internal Affairs for now, but he thinks he's dirty."

He handed Thomas his file also.

"And take Tony with you; he needs the training."

"Got it, Boss."

Tony was silent.

"Sarah, here's another camcorder for you. And here's one for you, Tom. I need to burn a DVD of the McFarley evidence off the first camcorder. Okay, you folks get to work. I'm going to take the evidence over to my brokerage client and fill him in. What are you waiting for, shoo!"

At that, they all took off and flew through the office wall to the outside. They all stopped and were hovering a good distance from the office.

"You know, I really hate being treated that way." Tom said.

"Same here," added Tony, "Damn, this view is amazing."

They were hovering about fifty stories up above downtown Manhattan.

"You'll get used to it in a while," Sarah interjected, "Guys, come on. Don't you feel good having something to do with some meaning and purpose? Otherwise we'll just be floating around aimlessly. Do you want that?"

"No, not really. Just feel like a slave sometimes."

"Come on then," Sarah said, "let's just get to work; purpose is everything."

"I guess your right," Tom answered, "come on Tony, let's fly. See you, Sarah."

They quickly flew off in different directions.

Gunter was glad they were gone. He had become accustomed to seeing and conversing with them; that wasn't the problem. It was just that he could always tell when they were in the room; slight chill to the air. He also needed to get to his meeting with the brokerage client. He had a feeling that McFarley would be fired and prosecuted. One of his favorite sayings was 'you do bad, you get bad.' He put the DVD in his briefcase, donned his suit jacket and left his office.

"Tami, I'll be out for about an hour, meeting with a client."

"Sure boss. See you in a bit."

The walk was short to his clients building, being right up Wall Street. He was located in the penthouse office.

'Must be loaded', Gunter thought.

Gunter asked the receptionist if Sam Capino was in.

"Yes. Whom should I say is here?"

"Gunter Mann."

The receptionist looked him up and down.

"Gunman, I like that," she said teasingly, "go ahead in if you want."

He knocked and entered just as Sam was sitting down at his desk.

"Sam, how are you doing?"

Sam Capino ran the Prosperity Brokerage Firm, and being a rarity in this day and age, he was an honest businessman. That's why he hired Gunter. His reputation was stellar on solved cases and Sam wanted any dishonest inside trader busted good and hard.

"Is your investigation complete?"

"Yes," Gunter replied as he plopped down in a chair close to the desk, "and I think the evidence I've gathered will be totally sufficient."

He opened the briefcase and handed Sam the DVD he had burned off the camcorder. Sam took it and inserted into his office player.

"Damn Gun! How did you get footage this close?"

"Trade secret, sorry."

"Well, you and your team are amazing. Sure you can't tell me?"

"Sam, you wouldn't believe me if I did. Let's just say they are very resourceful."

"I'll say. This will all do nicely. I've suspected Tom for awhile. You can always tell by a change in a person's lifestyle."

"You got it. That's the place I start in a case like this."

"Understandable. Let me get you your fee."

Sam took out a check ledger and wrote out one for ten large.

“Worth every penny,” handing the check to Gunter, “I’m going to grab Tom and have an immediate meeting with his sorry ass.”

“Just keep my name out of it, if you don’t mind, unless the feds need my testimony or something. I don’t think they will though. I’ll be on my way too if you don’t mind, before your meeting.”

They both stood up and shook hands.

“Stay in touch.”

“You do the same. And let me know how it turns out.”

Gunter left the penthouse office and passed Tom McFarley in the hallway. Funny; Tom gave him a look as if he knew who he was, and he had that ‘deer in the headlight’ look. Could be coincidence. Whatever and what the hell. He made his way back to his own office down the street.

“Hey Tami. Anything new while I was gone?”

“Just a few calls on more prospects. I laid the messages on your desk.”

“Thanks.”

“How did the meeting go?”

“Great. Made ten G.”

“Wow Gunny! Take a girl to dinner later to celebrate?”

“Name the place and time and you got it.”

“Cool. Mind if I go to lunch in about fifteen minutes?”

“Naw... I might take a quick nap.”

“Okay. I’ll leave quietly.”

Gunter took off his suit coat and sat down in his chair. The ghouls must still be at work. Good, he wanted a little privacy. It didn’t take him long to nod off leaning his head back on the comfortable leather.

Funny – he felt something cold on his neck. He jerked awake.

“Don’t make a move, dirt bag.”

It was McFarley, holding a silenced forty-five automatic to his neck.

“How the hell did you get in here?”

“Your secretary was kind enough to let me in as she was leaving. Luckily she didn’t recognize my face. I told her I needed to talk to you about a case. Pretty much the truth.”

Shit! Tom had the drop on him. He grabbed for his Sig .45, all he got was empty holster.

“Sorry. I took the liberty of removing your piece.”

He showed it to him just out of arms reach in his left hand.

“I’m not as stupid of a mark as you think I am. Although I don’t know how you got the footage of me doing my trading. Hidden camera maybe?”

He pressed the silencer harder against his neck.

“Where’s Sam?”

“I left him dead in the meeting room with his Human Resources witness. He said I was through and that he would be calling the Feds shortly. I couldn’t let

him do that. I had to get away where no one could find me, but I wanted to take care of you first, you snoop-ass bastard! You and Sam ruined my life. Now I'll have to fake an identity and probably take off out west somewhere. I'll start with taking your car and be gone before your secretary gets back. That should throw them off my track long enough to get some fake ID."

"How did you know I did the investigation?" Gunter asked nervously.

"I told you I wasn't stupid. You're close to the firm and have the best rep for a case like this. Plus you just confirmed the fact."

'Absolute stupidity on my part!', Gunter thought. He might have been able to talk him out of this if he hadn't opened his mouth. Stupid!

Tom reached into Gunter's pockets and took car keys and wallet.

"What kind of car do you drive?"

"Red Lexus, and I'm not telling you the license number, suckass." he said, spitting in his face for emphasis.

Tom wiped the spittle from his face.

"Well, got some spirit, my PI friend. But this is the absolute end of the line for you."

The front office door opened unexpectedly.

"Don't make a sound." Tom whispered.

"You in there, Gunny? Got down to my car and realized I left my wallet and license up here. Is your visitor still here? Gunny, you awake?"

Tami opened the inner office door slowly and entered.

"Tami, get out!"

It was too late. Tom quickly shifted the gun and drilled five whispering rounds into Tami's chest and head. The thud of the rounds hitting flesh and bone was the loudest part. She collapsed to the floor, smashing the glass in the inner office door as she fell. Blood started to pool around her.

Gunter took the opportunity to lunge at Tom, trying to get an advantage. But Tom was too quick. Swiveling fast, he fired five rounds almost point blank into Gunter's chest.

Gunter felt himself falling backwards, head hitting the floor, although he didn't feel it. Everything was fading into blackness. 'So this is what it feels like to die', he thought, and he was gone.

He felt like he was out for a short while. He came to and stood up slowly. 'Maybe I'm okay after all.' He turned around and saw his body on the floor in a large pool of blood.

Tami's body was still over by the office door and Tom was long gone.

"Aww for the love of shit!" was all he could come up with.

Fine mess. He looked around and everything had a washed-out, monotone color. He could walk around okay. He discovered he was able to put his hands through objects or pick them up. He could even walk through the office wall and back in again.

Thomas, Sarah and Tony flew in through the building wall.

“Boss, what the hell happened here,” Thomas said taking in both bodies dead on the floor.

“Very bad meeting with a pissed mark, and now Tami and I are both dead. I’m not sure what happened to her. I haven’t seen her since I came to, so to speak.”

“She probably panicked and ran or flew off somewhere. She’ll come to her senses in a while; they all do.”

“What now, though? What am I supposed to do?”

“It’s starting to set in already.” Sarah said, glancing at the others.

“What is?”

“The feeling of absolute uselessness, having no purpose, nothing to fill the void.”

“Yes, I can feel that. But I should go after Tom. He needs to pay for what he did.”

Thomas spoke up quickly, “Gunny! Snap out of that. He will pay some day. There’s nothing you can really do, and it will just drive you insane. Then you won’t be good for anything.”

“Okay, I’ll fight the urge. But it’s strong.”

“Don’t worry, it will pass, trust me.”

“Don’t worry, Boss. We’ll show you the ropes.” Tony piped in.

“You can stop calling me that now.”

“Sure thing, Gunny. But we’ll help you through this transition; it takes some getting used to.”

“I do appreciate it.”

“Most importantly,” Thomas spoke up, “is that we three and now you need to find employment. The three of us know most of the mortals who can see and hear ghosts. So we need to start pounding the pavement, so to speak, and find a job. Having something to do, a purpose, is all that helps stave off the emptiness. And purpose is the only commodity that someone can give to us in payment. So, are you ready Gunny?”

“Yeah, let’s fly.”

The four of them flew out the building wall into the afternoon sunlight, high above the Manhattan landscape.

He figured he would have to polish up his resume.

## *Aftermath*

*Cathy Porter*

A light rain patrols the city,  
keeping watch over tempers  
that have been tempered  
far too long.

Moonlight serenades  
are a thing of the past;  
survival is the only song  
left to sing.

Some still keep vigils on half-porches,  
staring into the night sky, waiting;  
others light endless cigarettes  
and blow smoke rings in the dark

that become larger  
as they stretch to the heavens,  
before disappearing  
altogether.

# *Black History*

Tanisha Alexander  
AKA  
Phenomenally

Tulsa Public Schools Ain't never taught me shhhh  
About it  
Yea I know about Malcolm X  
And Martin Luther  
What about Sojourner the Truth  
And Fredrick Douglas  
See those two names were hard for me to pull  
Because your history classes were too full

And the teacher was to busy  
To busy teaching European and Western civilization  
To teach my little chocolate ass  
About Kenya  
Nigeria  
Tanzania  
Or hell where my name came from  
Tunisia

Public school system  
you're robbing me  
Of my history  
My ancestry

I don't know how I came to be  
Where I came from  
Because it's sure not Tulsa, Oklahoma  
Or Wichita, Kansas

It's sad to know that I don't know who my  
Great Great Grandmother  
Or Grandfather Be

It's really horrible that I speak Ebonically  
Unconsciously

See I don't know who comes before Hugh Maxwell  
and Nelly  
Because the census of 1920  
Didn't care to much for me

Check W for white  
N for Negro  
No names and birth dates  
Just how many are in you're household  
They didn't care if they misspelled our names  
On the United States roll call  
Because after all  
Who the hell cares  
Where we came from

See truly it's about the powers that be  
Because they truly have a lot of power over you  
And me  
If your skin any shade of brown, black or blue

Taking my history away  
Leaving me to believe that my only history  
Is that we were once slaves  
But fuck that because  
My ancestry started way before that  
But how can I ever trace it  
You made sure I could never find out  
About my true roots



I refuse to believe that my ancestry started from a slave  
They are a part of my history  
Yes indeedy  
But baby I want to know  
Who gave birth to them  
And them  
And them  
And them  
And  
What did they do all day?  
Because Believe me  
Kunta is not the sum of my history

But media  
Society  
And public schooling  
Want me to believe in that American dream  
And forget that we were the ancestors  
Of kings  
And queens.  
It's the greatest tool of deceiving  
And  
It's a powerful way to demean the Black Community.

---

## *FIRING SOLUTION*

*G.A. Scheinoha*

It isn't often that he thinks about the life he could've had. Usually regret delves deep as a U-boat along the continental shelf at the base of his skull. Just another plank, another vertebra rung buried in the solid ladder of his spine.

Sometimes though, these thoughts blow ballast, surface to periscope depth, streak across the front of a guy's imagination like twin fish among the waves. And you know they'll explode somewhere just ahead with a thunderous WHUMP! of what if.

# *What is Romance and Intimacy in 2007?*

Tanisha Alexander (AKA Phenomenally)

A man asked me this  
I was stumped  
And upset because I couldn't answer him?

I thought to myself  
It's saying you will come over  
And you do

So I'm happy  
Even though it's 11 at night

Nooo  
It's saying I'mma call you after work  
But I don't hear from you until after 9

Nooo  
Its Lets go to a movie  
But oh  
Change of plans  
Lets watch this DVD  
At my place  
On my couch  
So I can feel on you

Nooo  
It's actually having a conversation  
Before doing the do

Noo  
What the hell is it  
Obviously it hasn't shown its presence around me

I don't know Intimacy  
And who the hell is romance?

Is that the new couple I met at the gym?  
Or maybe the zoo  
Or are they related to Kim

Anyway, I don't know them  
Or I'm having a damn hard time remembering  
Who they are  
Where did they came from  
Or why they came in the first place

I don't know who's to blame  
For their disappearance  
People are immune to it  
Like the little girls  
Receiving the vaccine  
for the Human Papilloma Virus

I know who killed it  
It was rough sex  
The porn industry  
TV  
Sexual demeaning rap music  
Booty calls  
And  
Lowered standards

But fuck all of that  
Cuz I still don't know  
What  
Romance  
Or Intimacy  
Means

So can you please share their definition with me?

## *And Your Mission Is...*

*Raud Kennedy*

James Bond is always on the go.  
I can't picture him going to the toilet  
or trimming his toenails, doing what the rest of us do.  
He doesn't sit in cafes, bored and irritable,  
like other imaginary characters that fill our evening hours,  
naval gazing about his sex life.  
His life is pared down to his mission.  
Just his mission, and our lives depend on it.  
I wish I had a mission that cut  
all the drudgery and dullness from my life.  
And a cool theme song, of course.

# *Dangerous Curves* Kathleen Malloy

The moon hid its face from the earth behind a veil of dark clouds as if it were in mourning. The only light seen from the snaking highway was the red glow emitted from the city to the west. Meager headlights barely lit the road for the tiny yellow truck speeding valiantly towards its destination in the vast ocean of darkness. Inside, twin souls became intoxicated with the romantically dim light in the endless stretch of blackness. There's something horribly entrancing about the night, and the two in the truck had not eluded seduction's fingertips.

A thin hand made its way through the darkness across the bench seat. "I'm really glad we finally got to do this."

Randy flashed that dazzling smile and placed a hand on supple, jean-covered thigh. "Me too, Meg. Me too." A quick kiss landed upon his cheek.

A semi-truck rushed pass the small Toyota, first sucking the tiny truck towards its boxy cargo and then tossing it to the side of the road towards the black sea of desert, as though the mighty beast did not enjoy the taste of the Toyota. Randy quickly corrected the truck back to its course. "I hate that," he mumbled.

"I know." Meg stared into the review mirror, watching as the red ants of taillights disappeared rapidly behind them. "But at least we're almost there. The back road to the lake should be coming up soon, but I can't remember if we take the first turn off, or the second one."

Randy frowned. "You don't know which road to take?"

"Nope," Meg replied airily. She turned her eyes back onto the shoddy highway. "We'll find it. Besides, its not like we're on a schedule or anything."

The truck stirred up a small cloud of dust behind it as it flew across the potholed highway. Palo Verde trees whirred as it passed by, the claws of their branches reaching into the darkness for the light of the truck.

Light cast by the truck's headlights revealed a bend in the road up ahead. To both sides were jagged cliffs. Dynamite had been used years ago to blow a hole through the hill to make way for highway construction so that drivers could travel across the desert on a relatively flat surface instead of going thirty feet up and down the hill. Rock steps six inches wide and six inches high traveled up the cliff walls. Wire mesh covered the sides to keep stones from tumbling down. Signs were posted stating **Watch for Rocks** .

"Did you get the pretzels?"

"Yeah." Meg reached into the backseat to pull the bag of chocolate cov-

ered pretzels out. “Here you go,” she said smiling as she handed it to him.

“I didn’t want them.”

“Then why did you ask?”

The yellow Toyota reached the summit of the hill, soared for a moment on top of the world, and made its way back down.

Randy shrugged. “I don’t know. I just wanted to know if we had them.”

“Why do you do that?” Meg crossed her arms over her chest. Had Randy not been watching the road he would have cowered under her furious glare. “Do you think that I’m completely incompetent and have no responsibility or common-sense?”

“Meg, that’s not what I meant.”

Meg’s dainty nose shot up in the air. “I think that is what you meant. You know, just because you-”

Randy waited for his verbal trashing, but it didn’t come. He looked over to the passenger seat. Meg’s hands were clutched to her knees so tightly her knuckles had turned white. Her green eyes were wide and frightened. “Meg? What’s wrong?”

For a moment there was no response. Then, one bony finger pointed to the dark road ahead. “What is that?”

Randy squinted into the distance. “What?”

“That. Those lights up there.”

Two glowing embers were rapidly stalking them low on the horizon.

He looked again. “Yeah,” he nodded. “I see them.”

“What is it?”

Several moments passed as the lights drew nearer. Less than a football field ahead, Randy could now see the wicked halos approaching. They were the headlights of a car, but they were orange, an unnatural orange like the couple had never seen before. “It’s a car.”

“No it’s not.”

“Yes, it is. Look, its just weird headlights, probably some groupies or something just smoking pot and trying to be cool. There’s noth-” Randy’s blood froze in his veins and goosebumps shrunk his skin at his new observation; the headlights did not illuminate the ground in front of it.

Randy was stiff and his breath came out in tiny spurts that did not even swish the blonde locks round his face. Meg clutched his leg, her nails clawing into his thigh. “Rand?”

He sucked in a gulp of warm air and rubbed his cheek where a five o’clock shadow was already emerging. “Its nothing.”

“Then why are you scared?”

“I’m not scared.”

“What is it?”

“A car.”

“Cars have outlines around them.

He shot her an irritated glance. “It’s a car.”

“No it isn’t.”

“Then what is it Meg?”

“I don’t know.”

In less than ten seconds the light would be upon them. Meg’s heart pounded, Randy’s brow glistened with sweat. Neither one could take their eyes off the lights. Randy became totally and utterly entranced by those glowing red-orange lights as they came closer, and closer, and closer to the little yellow truck. The now almost flaming embers kept pulling them towards their hypnotic illumination.

Pull...

“Randy.” Meg wasn’t sure if she’d even made a sound.

Randy was a fish, the other car an anglerfish taunting him with its succulent glow against his will. He was paralyzed by it, and secretly pleased. The orange headlights were prime bait, and he wanted a taste too.

“Randy.” Her vocal chords were frozen.

Pull...closer...closer.

He couldn’t take his eyes off the lights. They were frightening, yet beautiful. He wanted to be near them, to become one with their glow.

“Randy,” she mouthed. Her mind screamed at her to make some kind of sound, anything to make Randy avoid the orange eyes of the car barreling straight for them.

Pull...closer...closer...pull.

The truck began to drift into the other lane. Randy’s hands did not move the steering wheel, yet the tires seemed to carry them across the road. They were going to hit the car head-on.

“Randy!”

Randy jumped with Meg’s high-pitched squeal. He jerked the wheel to the right, just barely avoiding the oncoming car. The truck made a loud thunkthunkthunkthunkthunkthunkthunk! as the tires ran over the dents in the road designed to wake dozing drivers. Rocks were thrown as the tires kicked up a trail of dust. The other set of headlights passed them quickly. Randy yanked the wheel to the left, and after some panicked swerving, re-aligned the truck to its straight course.

The two of them sat panting, bemused and shocked at what had just happened. Meg twisted in her seat to look out the back window at the car that had nearly cost them their lives. “Oh my God Randy, that-” she stopped short when she looked back at his face.

“What?” he whispered. His face was a sickly pale green, forehead dripping sweat, knuckles white from grasping the wheel too tightly.

“That, uh, that was scary,” she mumbled. She couldn’t tell him what she’d seen because she’d seen nothing. Nothing but darkness was behind them. The car that they’d almost hit dead-on had no outline, no tail-lights, not even a dim glow from the headlights. It seemed as though any trace of the car with the eerie lights had just vanished.

They sat in silence as the little truck continued to speed on into the night. And tonight, for the first time in the three years since she’d known him, Meg wished Randy were a square about the speed limit instead of topping the truck out at one-ten.

“Rand, sweetie,” she cooed with a shaky voice, “would you mind slowing down just a tad bit?”

“Megan I refuse to let one minor incident leave me unnerved and force me to change my driving habits!” he boomed in his no-nonsense I-don’t-give-a-fuck-what-you-think voice. “We will maintain speed to our determined destination on our present course.” Cut-and-dry, that’s it, no questions, ifs ands or buts, she heard her mind mock.

Instead, she took a deep breath, let it release slowly and loudly, and chose to take the woman’s way of winning. She pointed up ahead. “Well, we have to turn right up there, Captain, and at our present speed we’ll die making the sharp right if you don’t presently proceed slowing down.” Randy turned to glare at her while applying the brakes, sliding over the pebbles and bits of loose asphalt. The worn brake pads squeaked at the resistance.

At the sharp right turn on the back road to the lake, Randy did more than slow the truck down; he brought it to a stop. Something caught his eye in the distance. It was just a faint flicker, but it made its presence known. He cocked his head towards the flicker on the highway they’d just been going. Eyes squinted, mouth slightly agape, Randy’s blood froze. He stared at the orange flames far in the distance that were heading their way.

“Rand?” No answer. “Randy?”

He shook his head. “Yeah?”

Meg pushed the hair out of his face and let her hand rest on his cheek. “Are you okay?”

Soft, warm lips pressed against her palm. “Yeah. Onward?” A quick

flash of a smile and they were on their way.

The road to the lake was ten miles altogether; two miles on pavement and the remaining eight on a bumpy dirt road. The little truck sped soundlessly up the windy mountain road. Randy sat in rigid silence, trying to convince himself he was just tired. After all it was late. He'd just zoned out and began to drift back there. That's all it was, a simple mistake. *But what about when you saw it again?* his brain questioned. Just shaken up, that's all, he told himself. *Really?* Yes. *You know what you saw.* A figment of my imagination. It wasn't the same car. How could it be? It was impossible, wasn't it? He wasn't sure anymore.

Meg pulled her legs up and clutched them to her chest, curling herself into a ball on the front seat. She stared out the window without really looking at anything. Her mind was on the lights. It wasn't exactly the color of the lights that had gotten to her, though they were eerie. After all, she was from Phoenix, the weirdo capitol of the world. It wasn't even the disturbing fact that when the car had passed them she couldn't see it. After all, it was dark and the car could have been black. What bothered her was Randy's reaction and hers for that matter. The truck jolted as it made the transition from pavement to gravel, interrupting both from their thoughts.

"Ow!" she yelped.

"What?"

Meg put her feet back on the floor and rubbed her jaw. "I bi my tun."

"You what?" He looked over and saw Meg pointing to her tongue as she stuck it out at him. "You bit your tongue?" Fervent nodding followed. He couldn't help but smile. "Silly." Meg, wonderful Meg to put him at ease.

He turned his gaze off her childlike face and back to the road, still keeping his speed at almost seventy.

The truck jumped and yelped over every rock and rut on the dirt road. More than once the tires lost traction over the countless pebbles, but Randy barreled on down the scarred trail. Meg tightened her seatbelt as the road became more treacherous. It climbed through hills, ran down steep inclines, and wrapped sharply around mountainsides. On a high ridge Meg was able to see the lake. The dim slivers of silver moonlight that escaped the suffocating clouds reflected poetically off the still black water. However, another glow caught her attention. Tiny specks of orange danced on the water around a small island close to the shore. She leaned forward and squinted her eyes to see. She knew they were back. Though impossible, the same car from earlier was heading towards them. They were back. The reflection on the water from them was becoming much brighter and broader than physi-



cally possible. The glow began to change. Its color escalated in brilliance. Slowly it began to dance upon the lake with life of its own. The water looked like a burning lake of fire from their light. "Rand?" she whispered.

"I see it." Up ahead, the glowing twin embers reappeared, burning their way towards the defenseless little truck. The lights were turned away from the lake, but flames still danced from the water. "What the hell?" he murmured.

Their truck whipped around a curve by the water, then snaked to the left. The orange headlights lay far in the distance. When the road turned right towards the lake, they'd be facing each other once again.

The truck sped down the hill, making a sharp right around a bend. A driver couldn't see the next three foot stretch of road in front of him on the turn much less the warning beacons from an oncoming car.

Then the lights came roaring towards them, engine silent as the night. Meg let out a high pitched shriek as the car swiped the side of the pickup, making a loud thunk! as it knocked off the review mirror. "Fuck!" Randy cursed. "What the hell!"

"Stop saying hell!"

"Why?" His voice aggressive with fear.

"Because we're gonna die and go there tonight if you keep saying that!"

"We're not gonna die!" Randy popped the truck into gear and the motor screamed as he put the gas pedal to the floor. It was a straight fifty-yard shot up the hill before the road took another left turn.

"Randy slow down." Tears were threatening to overflow from Meg's eyes. She looked to the side of the road. They must have been at least fifty feet above the valley below, the vertigo making her sick. "Randy please slow down."

"No."

The speedometer never stopped sliding to the right; they were doing eighty and still gaining. The bend at the top of the road was seconds away, and guardrails didn't exist this far back into the road. "Randy slow down!" Now her face was drenched in sweat.

"No!" She jumped back when their eyes met. His once sky blue eyes were now pulsating fiery orange.

"Randy!" The flames met them head-on. Randy jerked the truck to the left. An enormous dust cloud erupted all around them as the back tire spewed rocks and bits of hard earth. The left side of the truck scraped the craggy side of the cactus covered mountain.

Meg panicked when she saw his face. Eyes wide, pale as death, a maniacal smile, and all the while ever increasing speed. Meg screamed when she saw the sharp turn ahead. The scream clicked in his head, the

intoxication of the anglerfish fled and suddenly cold terror gripped him as he saw the turn for the first time.

He slammed on the brakes two seconds too late. The left turn of the bend was too sharp, they were going too fast, and the accuracy of the flames was too precise. Seconds later the truck launched over the cliff.

It was a cloudless afternoon and the blazing Arizona sun vaporized any form of shadow or coolness it saw. Officer Pete Shays was writing a report for the deaths of Randall Travis Johnson and Megan Diane Stevens, blamed on negligent driving with the possibility of DUI. The swerving of the tires strewn haphazardly all over the road had been all the analysis they'd needed. He stood on top of the turn where Randy had lost control of the vehicle and plunged 150 feet off the side of the mountain.

But what he couldn't figure out were the skid marks just before the turn. The tracks in the dust from the truck didn't look like the couple had been speeding and simply skidded off the edge of the cliff. They were too parallel to the edge, almost as though something large, like another car, had pushed them over. Judging from them, the black paint and denting patterns on the side of the truck it seemed as though another vehicle had been involved. But there was no trace of another car in sight.

## *Knowing Kevorkian*

Janet Kuypers

Oh, I knew Kevorkian, he used to be a pathologist  
he used to do autopsies for my precinct

what I remember about Kevorkian  
was that he'd go out with us, for drinks, you know

and he'd get a gin martini but he would always have  
just one, and he'd never join the conversation

I never thought he had anything to say,  
never thought he'd have a cause  
well, I guess he did

## *the state of the nation*

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

My phone rang earlier today and I picked it up and said "hello" and a man on the other end said,

Is this Janet Kuypers?

and I said, "Yes, it is, may I ask who is calling?" and he said,

Yeah, hi, this is George Washington, and I'm sitting here with Jefferson and we wanted to tell you a few things.

And I said "Why me?" And he said

Excuse me, I believe I said I was the one that wanted to do the talking. God, that's the problem with Americans nowadays. They're so damn rude.

And I said, "You know, you really didn't have to use language like that," and he said,

Oh, I'm sorry, it's just I've been dead so long, I lose all control of my manners. Well, anyway, we just wanted to tell you some stuff. Now, you know that we really didn't have much of an idea of what we were doing when we were starting up this country here, we didn't have much experience in creating bodies of power, so I could understand how our Constitution could be misconstrued

and then he put in a dramatic pause and said,

but when we said people had a right to bear arms we meant to protect themselves from a government gone wrong and not so you could kill an innocent person for twenty dollars cash

and when we said freedom of religion we included the separation of church and state because freedom of religion could also mean freedom from religion

and when we said freedom of speech we had no idea you'd be burning a flag or painting pictures of Christ doused in urine or photographing people with whips up their respective anatomies but hell, I guess we've got to grin and bear it because if we ban that the next thing they'll ban is books and we can't have that

and I said, "But there are schools that have books banned, George."

And he said

Oh.

# *everything was alive and dying*

Janet Kuypers, from the chapbook "Dual"

I had a dream the other night. I walked out of the city to a forest, and there were neatly paved bicycle paths and trash cans every fifty feet and trash every ten.

and then a raccoon came right up to me. she had a few little baby raccoons following her, it was so cute, I wish I had my camera.

and she spoke to me, she said, "thank you thank you for not buying furs, I know you humans are pretty smart, you have to be able to figure out a way to keep yourselves warm without killing me."

and I said, "you know they don't do it for warmth, they do it for fashion, they do it for power." And she said "I know. But thank you anyway."

Then I walked a little further and there was a stray cat. she still had her little neon collar on with a little bell. and she walked a few feet, stretched her front paws, oh, she looked so darling. and then she walked right up to me and she said "thank you." and I said "for what?" And she just looked at me for a moment, her little ears were standing straight up, and then she said, "you know, in some countries I'm considered a delicacy." And I said, "how do you know of these things?" And she said. "when somebody eats one of you word gets around." and then she looked up at me again and said, "and in some countries the cow is sacred. Wouldn't they love to see how you humans prepare them for slaughter, how you hang them upside-down and slit their throats so their still beating hearts will drain out all the blood for you?" and she said, "isn't it funny how arbitrary your decision to eat meat is?" and I said, "don't put me in that category, I don't eat meat." and she said "I know."

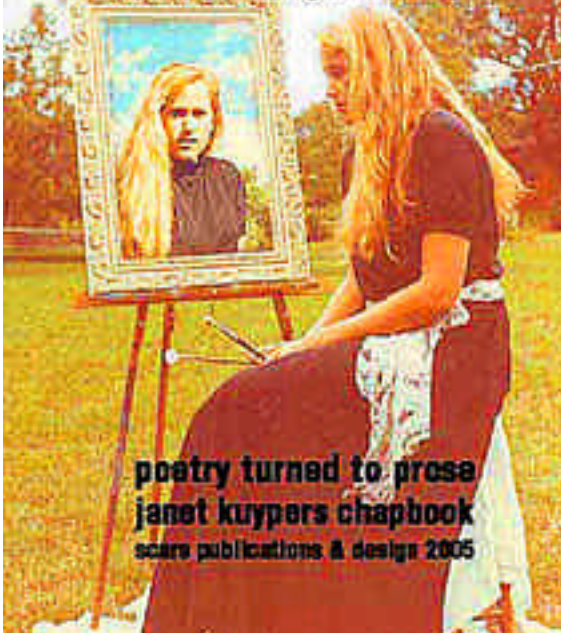
And I walked deeper in to the forest; managed to get away from the picnic tables and the outhouses that lined the forest edges. the roaring cars gave way to the rustling of tree branches crackling of fallen leaves under my step.

when the wind tunneled through, the wind whistled and sang as it flew past the bark and leaves.

I walked listened to the crack of dead branches under my feet, and I felt a branch against my shoulder. I looked up and I could hear the trees speak

# dual

seeing writing in two ways



poetry turned to prose  
janet kuypers chapbook  
scars publications & design 2005

to me, and they said “thank you for letting the endangered animals live here amongst us. we do think they’re so pretty, and it would be a shame to see them go. and thank you for recycling paper, because you’re saving us for just a little while longer.”

“we’ve been on this planet for so long, embedded in the earth. we do have souls, you know. you can hear it in our songs. we cling with our roots; we don’t want to let go.”

and I said, “but I don’t do much, I don’t do enough.” and they said “we know. but we’ll take what we can get.”

and I woke up in a sweat.

so tell me Bob Dole, so tell me Newt Gingrich, so tell me Pat Buchanan, so tell me Jesse Helms, if you woke up from that dream would you be in a sweat, too?

Do you even know why we should save the rain forest? Oh preserve the delicate balance, just tear the whole forest down, what difference does it make? Put in some orange groves so our concentrate orange juice can be a little cheaper.

did you know that medical researchers have a very, very hard time trying to come up with synthetic cures for diseases on their own? It helps them out a little if they can first find the substance in nature. A tree that appears in the rain forest may be the only one of its species. Or one like it may be two miles away, instead of right next to it. I wonder how many cures we’ve destroyed to plant more orange groves. Serves us right.

You know my motives aren't selfless. I know that these things are worthwhile in my life.

I'd like to find a cure to these diseases before I die of them, and I'm not just a vegetarian because I think it's wrong to kill an animal unless I have to. I also know the excess protein pulls the calcium away from my bones and gives me osteoporosis, and the excess fat gives me heart attacks, and I also know that we could be feeding ten times more people with the same resources used for meat production.

You know, I know you're looking at me and calling me an extremist, but I'm sitting here, looking around me looking at the destruction caused by family values and thinking the right, moral, non-violent decisions are also those extreme ones.

everything is linked here. we destroy our animals so we can be wasteful and violent. we destroy our plants, we destroy our earth, we're even destroying our air. we wreak havoc on the soil, on the atmosphere. we dump our wastes into our lakes. we pump aerosol cans and exhaust pipes. and you tell me I'm extreme.

and these animals and forests keep calling out to me, the oceans, the wind.

and I'm beginning to think that we just keep doing it because we don't know how to stop, and deep inside we feel the pain of all that we've killed, and we try to control it by popping a chemical-filled pain-killer.

we live through the guilt by taking caffeine, nicotine, or morphine, and we keep ourselves thin with saccharin, and we keep ourselves sane with our alcohol poisoning. and when that's not enough maybe a line of coke.

maybe shoot ourselves in the head in front of the mirror in the master bedroom. or maybe just take some pills, or walk into the garage, turn on the car and just fall asleep.

In the wild you have no power over anyone else. now that we're civilized we create our own wild.

maybe when we have all this power, the only choice we have is to destroy ourselves.

and so we do.

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