



066
January '09

down in the dirt
revealing all your
dirty little secrets.

Table of contents

01/09, **Down in the Dirt**, volume 066

Kyle Harris	1
Devin Wayne Davis	2
Kelley Jean White MD.....	4
Ben Mengho Chuang	5
Adrian Ludens	6
Mark Hudson <i>art</i>	8
Nathan Hahs	9
Pat Dixon	22
R. Steeves	29
Adam Dennis	36
Neilbee Tayco.....	41
Joseph DeMarco	42

Scars Cover art of sea lions in the Galapagos Islands.

The Real Criminal

Kyle Harris

When prisoners
Raise money
For libraries
And governments
Raise money
For prisons
Ask yourself:
Who do you think
The real criminal is?

grampus

Devin Wayne Davis

the church
urges
us

—run things.
off into the wasteland,
an outclassed rival goes ...

to appreciate
the elders
—through

bloody,
unknown ...

these stories of abraham,
and adam before him ...

this sickness might
as well depart. then

to wait,
for what

survive,
ripen ...

felt every bit
like 900 years ...
until

isn't likely
that you'll find
life—but death; after all,

pater familias is dead;
and timing
has a lot to do with it.

fists do not knock
on a rock cottage door

fiendish ...
seeing anyone hold on
for so long. now,

—riveted
in the wood;

the eyes of that matriarch,
who should've followed his, will

nor come in
the womb of a cave,

also close.
as two brothers—
perhaps sisters

to which
you may have

returned
—dripping

with leprosy;
or radiating
another spell ...

so you
perfect

that walk, the stoop, well
-over the course of your years ...

the voice,
echoing in a head
& bat's ears ...

there's something about
blindly finding the old path

—unenlightened, bearing
both humility & pride ...

when self-sufficiency's
been a venerable mentor.

the dogs,
they sniff out

this strange plot;
their masters

witness magic ...
small cooking pot,

sundry plants
many animals hung ...

rituals get twisted;
drawn back, &
turned black

as fire ...
out of the pit,

and hearth, leaps
to bring it back home ...

hunters, that gang-
upon an ogre,
a golem, or medusa,

warn offspring they're not

far from legendary

monsters.

Parable of a Mother in a Difficult Time

Kelley Jean White MD

In those days I carried three children: on my back, on my hip, in my belly. I had barely strength for anything else, no more than a day's supply of milk and cookies and a few emergency toys to keep their little mouths quiet. I walked. I walked. Sometimes I borrowed a little red wagon for the children who were old enough to sit but that was difficult on hills or trails with uneven surfaces. I'd knock at their father's door and the children would call him, "Da, da, da." But he didn't answer. Perhaps he was not home. Or busy. You see I'd misplaced the key to his heart, which was also the key to shelter and warmth.

I grew too tired to walk with such weight. I set the children on his doorstep. I told them to hold each other. I set down the milk and cookies and toys and some clean diapers and books I'd managed to save beside them with a note: "Please take care of these children. They are very valuable. Thank you." I rang the bell. I crouched behind a tree that used to flower. He came out when he saw that I was gone. Their father. He took them inside. Everyday I walk by in my heavy disguise. I see what I must. I see them dancing. I hear laughter. And they sing. Songs that were our songs.

OxyContin Elegance

Ben Mengho Chuang

If sleep could be injected
into my veins in a milky silver
elixir of hyper-meditative energy,
then I would never have to
wake up from the
lucid dreaming of life again.

My blood feels old and swampy
and languorous in my veins.
The day has darkened and
the half-hearted morning has
already committed suicide.

I am at a loss for words; my
tongue is made of glass.

Somebody should be kissing my
wounds softly, or embracing all
of it with me, helping me swallow
shadows and drink gloomy whiskey.

It takes time to reassemble a
lacerated self-image; that, and lots
of alcohol. And insomnia, in quantities
deemed comical. Maybe a month of no
sleeping would do. Asceticism and self
purification at its holiest. I want nirvana,
I want inebriation, I want the kind of
sweet numbness that makes
your teeth almost buzz and tremor.

Don't tell me about recovery, because
between this second and the eventual rippling
of a brown scab lies an infinite blue
ocean of time and clarity-laden pain.

Perhaps it's time to take up swimming lessons.

Between Scenes (A Conversation)

Adrian Ludens

"Elvis or the Beatles?"

"Excuse me?"

"Just trying to break the ice. I'm Derek; your partner for this scene."

"Oh. Well, nice to meet you I guess. I'm Sindy- that's with an 's'."

"Nice. What's your real name?"

"I'm not telling you that."

"Come on! Why keep secrets?"

"Because I don't know you."

"What about breaking that ice?"

"Promise you won't laugh?"

"I promise on my mother's grave."

"Is she really even dead?"

"Yes."

"Oh. I'm sorry."

"Don't change the subject."

"Okay, okay it's Lorraine, but don't call me that in front of people."

"Nice to meet you Lorraine."

"Thank you."

"How many films have you done?"

"This is my sixteenth feature."

"In this business, you're still a rookie."

"If you say so. Jerry says they might use me for the cover photo shoot."

"You are new! Jerry says that to all the girls."

"Don't be a creep."

"Someone has to tell you. Jerry is the creep, not me. You seem nice, so I'll give you some good advice: get it in writing."

"Okay."

"You have to look out for number one, you know? Don't let them jerk you around."

"Okay, Okay! I get it."

"Will you answer my first question?"

"What question?"

"Elvis or the Beatles?"

"The Monkees."

"I can't work with you."

"Just kidding! The Beatles, but what I really love is sixties folk. I listen to the Kingston Trio, Peter Paul and Mary, The Mamas and the Papas, Crosby Stills Nash and Young, Simon and... No, wait, I think I like Paul Simon's solo work better."

"I get the picture though. That's very cool. And see? That wasn't so hard was it?"

“I think I like you better when you stay quiet.”

“I can’t help it. Not talking first just seems weird to me.”

“I guess I can agree with that. I think we’re getting close to starting the scene. Will you do me a favor?”

“Sure, what?”

“Hand me that cup of ice from the table over there.”

“Here ya go.”

“Thanks.”

“No problem. What are you going to do with... Ohhh! I didn’t know you could do that with ice!”

“Perky, huh? I know lots of tricks with ice.”

“I bet you do.”

“Want to hear more?”

“Oh my, yes.”

“Fill a glass with water. Put one ice cube in the glass. Lay a string across the top of the glass. Shake a little salt out on the ice cube and wait a few minutes. Then lift the string. The ice cube will stick to it.”

“That’s not where I thought you were going with that.”

“Good. I like to surprise people.”

“Forgive my asking, but are you single?”

“Yes.”

“Would you like to have coffee after this?”

“I never date costars.”

“Oh.”

“Don’t take it hard. I just don’t.”

“I respect that. How did you get started in this line of work?”

“I was a dancer.”

“I bet you were great.”

“I used to be. When I was younger I studied ballet.”

“Why did you quit?”

“I don’t know. I guess I didn’t think I was good enough.”

“This may sound trite, but don’t give up your dream. Be who you want to be. The only person who can stop you is you.”

“Okay Doctor Phil.”

“Hey I resent that! I don’t even have a mustache!”

“Just teasing. Look here comes Jerry.”

“Hi Jerry, are we ready to go?”

“Change of plans Derek. We’re going with Rocco for this scene with Sindy.”

“Oh, okay. Is there a problem?”

“No, we like your work, but Rocco is a bigger name. Sorry kid. Stay close to your phone; maybe we can use you in one of the scenes we’re shooting Friday.”

“I will. Thanks.”

“Okay people, let’s get this show on the road!”

"It was nice meeting you Derek."

"Same here!"

"What's with the dopey grin?"

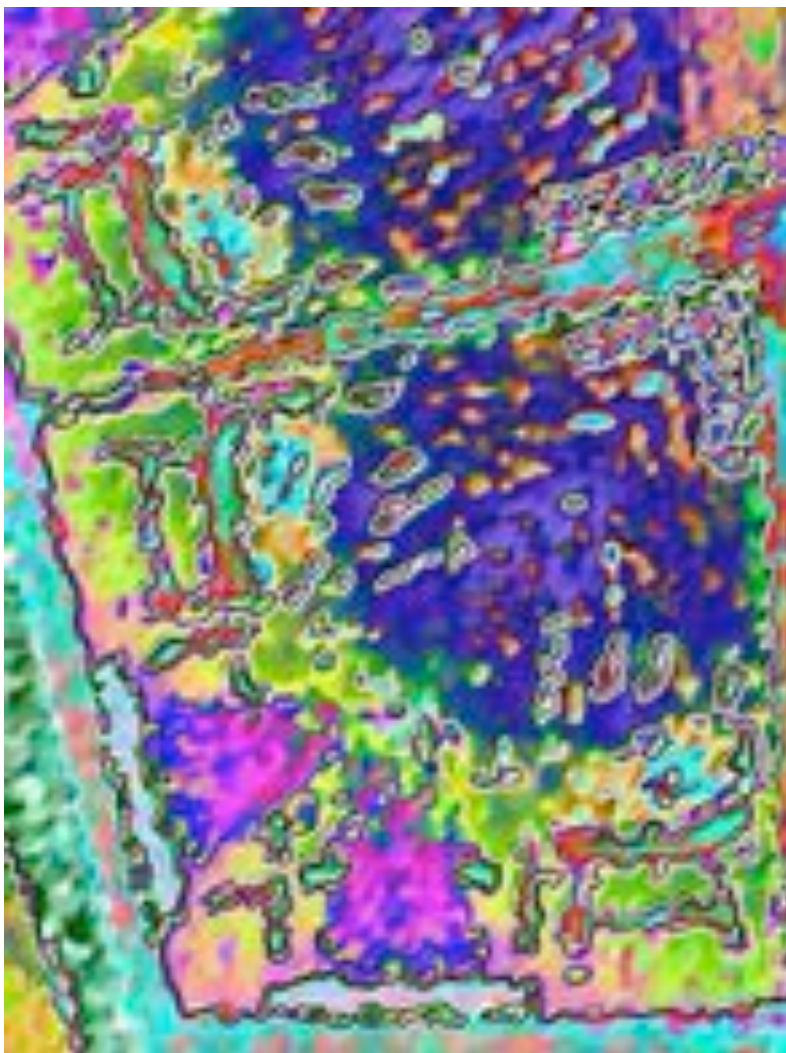
"It just came to me: I am no longer your costar."

"Are you asking me out for coffee again?"

"I would like to get to know you better. Can I give you my number?"

"All right, but don't hold your breath."

"Fair enough. I hope to hear from you, but if I don't, it was still a pleasure meeting you... Lorraine."



Scene, art by Mark Hudson

the incomplete codex

Nathan Hahs

dedicated to the memory of
allen ginsberg & richard brautigan

part one

one

endure numb. everything wanders at the end of the sky. sweet, healthy, beautiful. finally revealed, though never concealed. we are dancing at the speed of life and i will tell you why. watching the sun set, i am dodging sorrow. this is a relic of what could have been. when this is complete, then i will be content. i am just your friendly neighborhood nah-nah. never a dull moment. stay fresh. i have attempted suicide. it is a strange thing to know, to truly know, that you have the power to kill yourself. thank god my attempt failed, but i'm sure i will try again. damn, that's not very optimistic. such is life. will i become a statistic? am i already a statistic?

connie talks to me. she empathizes with me, she encourages me, she inspires me. she lives inside my head, but does other things elsewhere. she came to me four years ago and has been with me ever since. she is sweet, healthy, beautiful. and sexy. especially her voice. i love to hear her speak. i am touched. it is nice to have pleasant things said to you in an enlightening and moving tone. the world would be a better place if more people were like her. she calls my name and i realize that i have been blessed. only with her guidance will i finish the codex. she left this morning to do whatever she does when we are apart, but she will return soon. she always does. since she came to me, we have never been apart for more than a few hours. that is the nature of the beast.

i really had no choice in whether or not to write the codex. it has been forced upon me, but i gladly accept the challenge. move within the writing and let the writing move you. art requires no justification. it requires only an artist. unknown forces are at work here. it has been said that all writing is an abbreviation of true thought. what the codex is is an attempt to give you, for once, the true thought itself. art as crime as art. i am the i am. there is acknowledgement, pursuance, but no resolution. so i'll make that the goal— to find some resolution. that's easier said than done. so many thoughts. too many to write down and too few to forget. that is the goal of the codex: to get all of the thoughts down. honestly, i am unsure about the whole thing, but connie will help me through it. disillusion is a powerful weapon. it's all fun and games until someone gets hurt. then it's just fun. if you start the day breathing and end the day breathing, consider yourself lucky. some people didn't have that great of a day.

eschew obfuscation. this is also easier said than done. i live in disillusion.

the i. chong is the enemy. the invincible chong. he is a very mysterious man: very unpredictable. he is well-traveled and has seen much this universe has to offer. this has made him very cunning. in order for me to defeat him and complete the codex, he must be outsmarted. but first, i must find this elusive character. i know where to go and how to find him, and with connie's help, we will be victorious. then, and only then, will the disillusion come to an end.

you know it is there, but cannot find it. i know it is there, but cannot find it. at least, not yet. now i am determined. now i am focused. now i have connie. we will find it. the truth. the truth to end the disillusion. i have faced my dreams. now i must face reality, what little of it is left. the codex is the answer.

i am a pyromaniac. i am a sado-masochist. i am psychotic. but i can be relied upon. i am an existentialist. and i have connie. that is the ace up my sleeve. i will realign the perception of reality. or i may realign reality itself. again, the codex is the answer. continue and it will all become clear. i guarantee it. question everything, even the codex. take nothing for granted. assume nothing. start back at square one and go from there. amen.

two

i met the i. chong ten years ago. he stole an important piece of my writing. this is highly unethical. more importantly, a heinous crime, in the artistic sense. stealing one's work is to steal a piece of their soul. to create is to bear your soul. now this is awful risk, because you may be rejected, and it is easy to take this personally. for an artist, it is done anyway. i am a perfect example of this. and then, the i.chong stole it from me. what a violation. when i find him, i will violate him and steal what was originally mine. i will have to murder him, but it is a small price to pay. art as crime as art.

connie and i head off, leaving home behind us. never to return. i know where the i. chong is hiding out. he is in alaska. he knows i am after him. he has chosen that desolate, frozen land in which to lay low. before he stole from me, he told me that if he ever ran into trouble, he would go to alaska. connie searched my memory and reminded me of this. we are prepared for this trek. we have everything we need. most importantly, my .38 special. i will end the i. chong with my .38 special.

we reach alaska in no time. now we must pick up his trail. we start in dutch harbor, on the western coast. i do not know if the i. chong has been here, but it seems as good a place as any to start. after a little looking around, we discover that he has, in fact, been here. he spent all night in a bar drinking until he was sideways. he left the next evening, but not before mentioning to the bartender that he was heading for nome. we spend the evening drinking in the same bar he did and depart the next morning for nome. we travel by boat, as i am sure the i. chong did.

the codex was written in reverse order. back to front. part four was written before part three, which was written before part two, etc. the i. chong stole part

three and now connie and i are going to reclaim it from him. when we find him, i sincerely hope he has it with him. after he took it from me, i have neither seen nor heard of it. connie assures me that it has been published. i don't know how she knows this, because she admits she has never actually seen a copy of it. and neither have i. let's hope for the best.

i take fifteen pills a day and all but one of them are to keep me stable. i think it's debatable whether or not they work. sometimes yes, sometimes no. i was put on these pills about the time that connie arrived. coincidence? in any case, the pills have not taken her away from me and i think this is good. very good. amen.

three

outside the known, that is where the codex will take you. beyond the boundaries formed by tradition of style and the restrictions of past endeavors. into unmapped territory. it is to be enjoyed. i give you the words. you add the meaning and watch it take on a life of its own. art is anything that evokes an emotional reaction.

we arrive in nome two days later. since we caught news of the i. chong in a bar last time, i thought that would be a good place to start. sure enough, it worked. a grizzly looking man told us that he had spent a couple of days with the i. chong and that he had mentioned heading towards bethel. i thanked the man for the information and bought him a drink. we stayed the night in a hotel, a cheap hotel. a very cheap hotel. we restocked our supplies the following day and hired a guide, who turned out to be practically useless, and left for bethel three days later. the guide told us it would take one week to get there. he was wrong; it took us two weeks. we got lost a number of times, due to our buffoon of a guide, but we finally arrived on a bright, sunny day in the middle of the afternoon. the scenery along the way was beautiful, but i was glad to have reached civilization again. we quickly ditched the guide, a very annoying man, and decided to take a day of rest before questioning the locals about our man. when we did start looking, we did not find answers as quickly as before. it took us four days to find a woman, a prostitute, who knew of the i. chong. they had been together two weeks ago. he visited her three times each week. on their last visit, he mentioned that he was heading east, possibly to talkeetna or trapper creek.

entropy? to acknowledge entropy, is this to allow the importance of science? the codex will answer this question. we are dancing at the speed of life. life equals reality. perception equals reality. the codex will change perception, thus changing life. since this was written back to front, there may be some sections which appear to be out of place or completely backwards. the reason for this is as follows: one day, while connie and i were walking holding hands, she told me how this ends. i was not pleased. i wrote the end and am now doing everything to fight fate. that is why i have written the beginning last, because i already know the end. writing completely backwards is difficult, for i must interpret the future in such a way as to

alter it. it's like traveling forwards in time (as connie speaks to me) and backwards in time (this is what i am writing). this narrative movement happens simultaneously, proceeding in both directions concurrently. amen.

four

connie and i arrive in trapper creek one week later. this is one big state. we start with the taverns and have no luck. we move on to the cheap hotels and still no one recalls having seen him. connie suggests we try the towns pawn shops. the i.chong is always selling his possessions or buying junk at these places. the owner of the pawn shop on the south side of town says that a man fitting the i. chong's description, fat and bald and tall, sold him a .357 magnum. the owner mentioned that he needed money for a train ticket to nenana. he said that was five days ago. it's good to know that the i. chong is now unarmed. that will make things easier. we ask the pawn shop owner for directions to the train station, return to our own cheap hotel, and then head to the train station. as luck would have it, the train to nenana would be arriving in just two hours. we bought our tickets and, when the train arrived, we boarded. it's a relatively long train ride. nothing like the journey from nome to bethel, but not short either. i don't like trains. i prefer airplanes, cars, and boats.

what if he does not have my writing with him when we find him? of course, i already know the answer to this question, but i must continue to try to change fate. that is the point here. i must complete the codex. then the codex will realign the perception of reality.

there is no such thing as true altruism. there is no such thing as a coincidence. it is all cause and effect. i may be only your friendly neighborhood nah-nah, but i will deliver a complete codex. the sorrow i am dodging is the sorrow brought about by the loss of my writing. once the codex is entirely in tact, the sorrow will vanish. if this does not happen, if i cannot make it happen, i will make another attempt at suicide. this time i will be successful. not even connie will be able to stop me.

my pyromania is under control. i do not set buildings on fire. but if i see something ablaze, i will certainly stop and watch it burn. my sado-masochism is under control. i no longer torture myself or others. my psychosis is not under control. connie is proof of that. she just seems so real. i have always been and will always be an existentialist. that is why the codex and connie are so important. connie will aid in the completion of the codex and then the codex will serve its purpose.

we arrive in nenana late in the evening. we find a hotel and spend the night. the next morning, as soon as we finish breakfast, we begin searching for the i. chong. he thinks he is invincible, but he will soon find out otherwise. i am prepared to do whatever it takes to get my writing. at the first bar we go to, we discover that he has been there. not only has he been there, but he was inquiring if anybody had seen a man matching my description: short, skinny, with a beard. the bartender said that the i. chong had only been in once, but that he was staying in the run-down hotel on the west side of town. we go to the

hotel and the man at the front desk tells us that a bald, fat, tall man checked out this morning. we check the restaurant across the street and find that the i. chong has been in for dinner the last two nights. we return to our place of lodging to wait until evening. then we will go back to the restaurant and wait for the i. chong. there is an alley right by the restaurant. a perfect place to ambush the i. chong. amen.

five

at sundown connie and i make our way to the alley. as it gets dark, she repeatedly looks around the corner into the street, awaiting the i. chong's arrival. complete darkness approaches and there is no sign of him. when it is time for the restaurant to close, we enter it. we ask around and are informed that our man was not in all day. we return to our hotel. we will resume the search tomorrow. surely he has not left town yet. i already know whether or not he has left and this gives me a sense of peace. my optimism wavers at times, but this shall not happen now. not when we are this close to the i.chong.

if i truly have the power to kill myself, then i have the power to kill somebody else. the beauty of alaska makes you want to preserve life, not destroy it. the i. chong may force me have to kill him. i do not care one way or the other. connie would prefer that i not kill him. i will do whatever it takes to get my writing. without it i cannot complete the codex.

i am only as good as my word. connie is only as good as her word. the i. chong has no word. he is too unpredictable. as long as connie continues to give me her word(s), then i will prevail and the codex will reveal the truth. i must end the disillusion.

i really like having connie in my life. i can't remember how i ever made it without her. we are growing closer everyday. she is helping me out of my own disillusion. i do not think much of religion. i do not think much of science either. so where does this leave me. it leaves me with the codex.

after we wake, we immediately begin searching for the i. chong. this time we start with the town's hotels. no one has seen him. is he living on the streets? i wonder. connie says he is. she says he is hiding out, because we are so close to him. we then ask around at all the restaurants, starting with the one we had been to before. the restaurant own looked suspicious as we entered. he denied having seen the i. chong today, but connie said she thought he was lying. after hitting all of the other cafes and eateries, we still have turned up nothing. so, we check the taverns. this is what we probably should have done first, because at the place on the south end of town, the bartender said he had just seen him. in fact, he had only left minutes before we arrived. how did we miss him? the man behind the bar said that the man fitting the i.chong's description said he was going to get something to eat. connie said we should go back to the first restaurant, but i told her that i wanted to check every one between here and there along the way. i peeked into the windows, as to not be caught by the i. chong, who undoubtedly

knew we were getting warmer and warmer with every passing second. i saw him nowhere and nobody saw me, until we reached the place at which we started. i stuck my eye in the gap between the curtains in the front window. there he was. connie was right, as she usually is. he was sitting with his back to the window with his head in his hands. there was a briefcase on the table. "he can't stay in there forever," connie whispered to me. "let's wait around the corner in the alley. i checked my .38 to make sure it was loaded and we walked into the alley. amen.

six

two hours later, or something close to that, the i. chong sticks his head out of the front door. he looks cautiously around and goes back in. a few moments later, he sticks his head back out before emerging completely. he stands still for what seems like a long time and then takes a couple of steps towards the alley. it is at this point that it comes to me: he is not going to walk down the street, but is going to use the alleyway to walk down behind the row of buildings. i take a step back and step on a piece of crumpled newspaper. its crackle is the only sound in the night. i draw my gun and hold it at chest height. i hold my breath. nothing happens. when i can no longer hold my breath, i let it out in a big sigh and lower the gun. it is when i have relaxed that he walks around the corner, briefcase in hand. when he sees me, he shrieks. just like a little girl. he throws the briefcase at me, knocking me over. the .38 falls out of my hand as the i. chong goes running down the alley. i stand up and connie gives me the gun and gives it to me. she could never kill anybody herself. i shoot two rounds at the bald, fat, tall coward. he is twice my size. i assume it was the gun that scared him off. connie tells me this is common sense. that is why he sold his .357 magnum. he doesn't have the courage to use it. one of the rounds hits him in the leg and he falls to the ground. we walk over to him. he is moaning and whimpering in pain. good. when i see he is shot in the thigh, i kick it. he screams. i kick him again. only a sado-masochist would do this. i kick him a third time before kneeling down at his side. "where is it?," i ask. "i don't have it," he replies. i repeat myself again and he says, "i don't have it." he begins to cry, so i spit in his face. "i don't want to die," he says. "well. you're going to, unless you tell me where my writing is," i respond. "i don't have it, i swear. it's in a safety deposit box in the central bank in juarez, mexico," he tells me. "oh, it is, is it?" i say. "it is, i swear. the key is in my briefcase. oh god, please don't kill me," he pleads. connie runs back down the alley and returns with the briefcase. she opens it and hands me the key. "now this will open the safety deposit box?," i inquire. "yes," he replies, slobbering and drooling all over himself. i pick up the briefcase and dump the remainder of its contents on the pathetic i. chong. i raise the gun to his head and he says, "i thought you said you wouldn't kill me me if i told you where it was." "i lied," i say and pull the trigger. his head explodes and i throw the .38 in a trashcan in the alley. the invincible chong. well, not anymore. amen.

seven

i am in love with connie. i think she is in love with me. sometimes we have sex. i don't know if we do this because we are in love or if it is because we just have so much in common. we do both live inside my head. how can you not have so much in common with someone with whom you share a mind? we don't, however, let each other in on all our own secrets.

the answer does not lie in religion. the answer does not lie in science. the answer lies in art. art is what evolves and endures. religion and science contribute to our lives, but it is our art that defines us. those who do not believe this are living in disillusion. spend your time wisely. spend it in artistic endeavors.

The safety deposit box key hangs safely around my neck. we left the same night as the shooting for fairbanks. we chartered a plane to san francisco . from there we boarded a major airline destined for el paso. then, all we need to do is cross the border, locate the bank, and my writing will be back in it's rightful owner's hands. amen.

part two

one

the answer does not lie in religion. a is one religion (christianity, for example) and c is another religion (buddhism, for example. b is the truth. a and c are starting points and b is the destination. since a yields b and c yields b, then a equals c. in other words, all religions are the same. also, if there is a truth, b, then there must also be an untruth, e. d is one nonreligious pursuit of untruth (for example, atheism) and f is another nonreligious pursuit of untruth (agnosticism, for example). since d and f are both starting points and since d and f yield e as their destination, then d equals f. depending on point of view, b and e are interchangeable. in other words, a equals c equals d equals f. all starting points lead to the same destination, which is truth/untruth.

to believe that the answer can be found is religion, or lack thereof, is to be living in disillusion. these pursuits do not allow for interpretation. they force dogma upon their followers. there are things that science cannot explain. to believe that this is false is to be living in disillusion.

we landed in el paso in the evening and had some trouble finding a hotel. we slept through the night and most of the following day. we went out briefly for dinner and then returned to our hotel room for sex and then more sleep. connie and i have been together for four years. she lives inside my head, but does other things elsewhere. she is sweet, healthy, beautiful. and sexy. only with her guidance will i finish the codex. the codex is very old. the codex was written in reverse order. back to front. the invincible chong stole part three and hid it. that is why we are here. tomorrow we will cross the border and retrieve my writing. i have the safety deposit box key, which the i. chong gave to me before i killed him. all i have to do to complete the codex is reclaim part three. amen.

two

when i awake, connie is gone. sometimes she just vanishes, but only for a short while. never more than a few hours. at noon i head for the border alone. once on the mexican side, i begin asking questions about how to find the central bank. i ask a dozen people and no one knows anything about a central bank. by this time, it is beginning to get dark. i am nervous about being in juarez after dark, so i head back to the hotel. connie is still not back. she has never been gone this long before. extremely frustrated, i take my fifteen pills and go to bed. endure numb.

i am a pyromaniac. i am a sado-masochist. i proved that by killing the i. chong. question everything, even the codex. i will do whatever it takes to get part three. without it i cannot complete the codex. this is pursuance. i can be relied upon. is this pursuance really a hunt for entropy? how quickly are things disintegrating? how long until we reach total and utter regression? i must complete the codex before we reach the point of no return. amen.

three

when i awake the next morning, connie is back. she offers no explanation for her disappearance. she never does. "where did you go?," i ask. i have never inquired about this in the past, but with us being this close to the missing writing and with her being gone so much longer than before, i find it necessary. "you do not need to know," she responds. i go to the bathroom, and when i return, she is gone again. she must be up to something. she returns to meet me for lunch, and again i ask her where she has been. "you don't want to know," she replies. she must know something she does not want me to know. she knows i need her. she is the ace up my sleeve. i retire to our room for a drink. or several drinks. when i have had my several drinks, she walks in. "where have you been going, damn it?," i ask. she gives me no answer. she just sits on the corner of the bed, staring at me with a long face. i repeat my question, loudly this time, for i demand an answer. this time she says, "you do not want to know, but i will take you there tomorrow."

we lie down in bed and she quickly falls asleep. my mind is spinning, partly due to the libations, but mostly due to connie's strange behavior. when we are this close, and she knows i need her, why does she forsake me? perhaps i will not have to hunt for entropy. perhaps it is finding me. we will find out tomorrow. amen.

four

the idiots have us surrounded. the i. chong was an idiot. most, if not all, of the people we have run across have been idiots. the majority of the people i have ever met have been idiots. sure, there have been exceptions, like smoe. smoe was not an idiot. i met him a long time ago, before i met the i. chong. the codex was smoe's idea. he suggested the codex as a possible alternative for those people who are not finding the answers to the questions they have. i told him that i could not do it. then, connie came along and convinced me that i could do it. smoe was an existentialist. the i. chong was not. he killed smoe for suggesting the codex. i don't know why he didn't kill me, since i was the one writing it. the

only reason i can come up with is that connie must have stopped him. but, he did steal part three, knowing the codex would not make any sense without it. then he ran. his one mistake was that before i wrote the codex, he told me that if he ever ran into trouble, he would go to alaska.

the next morning, while we were preparing for our trip to juarez, connie says to me, "i was wrong." "wrong about what?," i ask. she does not respond. she heads towards the door and says, "let's go." we soon reach the border and cross over. amen.

five

science cannot make up its mind. every so many years it gets an overhaul. first, so-and-so was right. then somebody else comes along and decides that so-and-so was wrong. then the cycle repeats itself. again and again interminably. it is pointless to spend your time working on something that someone else will eventually try to prove is wrong. spend your time in art. art cannot be proven wrong. or, spend your time with the codex. the codex will realign perception.

music is the universal language. visual art can be appreciated by all. creative writing needs only a translation to be shared with the world. greatness is measured by influence. the codex will influence.

connie takes me down a path i had not taken. we walk for what seems like hours. we finally take a turn and, shortly thereafter, the street opens up into a huge plaza. in the center is a fountain and on the far side stands a three-story building. connie points to it and says, "there it is. the central bank." "that's not a bank. that's a café and hotel," i respond. "it used to be the bank," connie tells me. "i don't believe it," i tell her. "Well, then go ask," she says. "okay, let's go," i reply. so we walk over to the bank. i approach the bellman and greet him. "where is the central bank?," i ask. "sir, you're standing in it," he replies. "this is not a bank," i tell him. "you're right, sir. last year it was seized by the government.," he tells me. "and what about the things that were in the bank?," i ask him. i am beginning to panic. "everything that was not currency or precious gems was destroyed," he says. "what about the items that were in the safety deposit box?," i inquire. my panic intensifies. "everything that was not currency or precious gems was destroyed," he repeats. "everything?," i ask in desperation. "yes, sir, everything that was not currency or precious gems." he is getting frustrated with me. "but i have the safety deposit box key," i inform him. "sir, it will do you no good. there are no longer any safety deposit boxes. the bank has been converted." he tells me. "what am i supposed to do now?," i ask. i am falling apart now. "you can do nothing," he growls. i turn and walk away. on our way back to our hotel, i say nothing and neither does connie. "you can do nothing," is repeating inside my head. but, there is something i can do. amen.

six

i leave our hotel after midnight. connie is with me. i have two cans of gasoline. we cross the border and head to the café. or hotel or former bank or whatever.

er it is. when we finally reach it, it is all but deserted. there are lights on in a couple of the upstairs rooms. there is no bellman and there is nobody at the café. i quietly pour the gasoline all over the front of the building. the building is mostly stone, but there is enough wood that i think it will burn. no one can destroy the codex. i tell connie to run. i light the fire and run myself. we head for the street that opens into the plaza. from a distance, we watch the former central bank become engulfed in flames. soon we hear cries for help. i feel no pity. my pyromania is no longer under control. i enjoy the screams of agony and the increasing heat of the fire. one man jumps from a third story window and lands with a thud. he does not get up. we can still hear the screaming. after a moment or two it stops and the only sound is the crackling of the fire. knowing that someone will soon arrive, connie and i leave the scene. i was violated by the heinous crime of destroying my writing, so i retaliated. just like i retaliated against the i. chong. amen.

seven

watching the sun set, i am dodging sorrow. this is a relic of what could have been. when this is complete, i will be content. i have tried to kill my self and failed. i have tried to kill others and succeeded. i'm sure i may try these things again. we are dancing at the speed of life. connie calls my name and i realize i have been blessed. the world would be a better place if more people were like her. only with her guidance will i finish the codex. i am the i am.

connie and i leave el paso at once to head home, whatever that is. we thoroughly cover our tracks, so no one will know it was me who started the fire. we travel by train. this was her suggestion, not mine. i don't like trains. i prefer airplanes, cars, and boats. after four days journey, we arrive in wyoming. from the station, we drive to point of rocks. this sorry excuse for a town is home. once at home, connie and i immediately lie down. we sleep for an entire day. when we get up we discuss whether or not attempting to complete the codex is a good idea. she says it is killing me. i tell her that i simply must complete it. regardless of what the price is, i must complete it. the codex is the answer. i do not care if it will kill me. i really had no choice in whether or not to write the codex. by the time we finish our conversation, i have convinced connie that it must be done. this is important, for only with her help will i be successful. amen.

part four

one

the i. chong is dead. the former central bank has been burned. connie and i have returned home to collect our thoughts. i feel defeated, but i must continue to attempt to finish the codex. only with her guidance will i finish the codex. the codex is the answer.

i find that i cannot work at home. it reminds me too much of smoe. this was, after all, his idea. we journey towards montana, until we reach ranchester. this is where it all began. or rather where it all ends. smoe suggested it, i wrote

it, and the i.chong stole part of it. this is where the codex came to life. here i will be able to stay on task. this town has no hotels, just hunting cabins on the outskirts of town, down muddy roads. these cabins can be rented on a weekly basis. we pay for two weeks and then unpack. the cabin has no electricity, no running water, and no food, so we head back into town for candles, dry and canned goods, and water. now we are set. amen.

two

the codex was written in ranchester. is being written in ranchester. i thought i would never come back here, but here i am. trying to finish the end, which is actually the beginning.

the trees are beautiful here, but i have a headache. i am also fatigued. i have been sitting at the typewriter for twelve hours straight. i can see the trees through the window to my left. connie was gone all afternoon, but is back now. she is cooking pork chops for dinner. i feel her presence when she is near me. i am getting close the the end now, which is actually the beginning. the sun is setting and an orange red glow is filling the room. we will have to light the candles soon. we have no clock, so we rely on the bright astrological object to tell us what time it is. my unrazor-sharp text is moving along nicely. connie tells me i have a sinister obsession with the codex. i am using every available resource to write. connie tells me that this may be an unattainable desire. i cannot give up. i will die trying. or i will commit suicide. amen

three

you know it is there, but cannot find it. i know it is there, but cannot find it. the codex is the answer. there is no such thing as true altruism. there is no such thing as a coincidence. i fear connie and i are growing apart. she is gone again and has been gone all morning and all afternoon. i hope she is back by dinner.

connie returns several hours, or what feels like that. we have sex (for what will be the last time) before turning in for the night. the next morning she fixes us breakfast. when i head to the typewriter, she leaves again. i wonder where she is going these days. i fear she will not be here when i need her most. she used to hold up the sky for me, but now it seems she is gone as often as she is with me. amen.

four

i feel we are reaching the point of no return. this was supposed to be our last day here. connie and i decided to stay for two more weeks. i should be able to finish the codex in that amount of time. we drive into town to pay for the use of the cabin and to replenish our supplies. the next morning i am back at the typewriter and connie vanishes again. she is leaving me every day now. i feel the end is near.

it has been years since this began. is the fate which connie foretold inevitable? if so, then i am heading right for it, unable to change it. i have no regrets. without connie i am broken and pitiful. i have disregarded science and

religion. tortured and beaten emotionally, i hesitate to continue without her. but she is gone so much. my head is full of weird ideas. will the codex be acceptable or will it be a monstrosity? i cannot imagine life without connie. the codex is the answer. my hands are trembling and yet i continue to write. even if connie is not at my side. she cannot be punished for what i have done. question everything, even the codex. question the existence of an existentialist. this ancient writing has been fragmented, but i must complete the codex. amen.

five

connie has been home for two days straight. she has been at my side the whole time, except to cook meals. i haven't spent much time writing. i have just been enjoying her company. she says that some of the time she was away she was due to her running into town for supplies. i hadn't even noticed that we were even low on anything. apparently, she did. at other times, she says she was gone for different reasons, none of which she would explain to me. we'll see how much longer she stays this time before abandoning me again.

everything wanders at the edge of the sky. when this is complete, then i will be content. never a dull moment. and just like that, she is gone. two days together and then she leaves me. start back at square one and go from there. i take my fifteen pills and go to sleep.

when i awake, i am still alone. i continue undaunted. i have developed a new habit. when connie is gone, i become shaky and nervous. nervous about completing the codex. only with her guidance will i complete the codex. where is connie, now when i need her most? amen

six

it has been a week and i have not seen connie. i no longer care where she is or what she is doing. i think it has been a week. with no clock and no connie, everything has begun to blur together.

i feel an emptiness with connie gone. i think i have been abandoned. my awareness and confusion are expanding, like traveling forwards in time and backwards in time. this narrative movement happens simultaneously, proceeding in both directions concurrently. there is no argument. there is only the codex.

i am exhausted. i am exhausted. i am exhausted. i am exhausted. i am exhausted.

i am exhausted. i am exhausted.

i am unraveling. i am unraveling. i am unraveling. i am unraveling. i am unraveling.

i am unraveling. i am unraveling.

the vibrations in my hands seem to coincide with the vibrations in my mind. i feel that with connie gone i have entered into some sort of unsweet, unhealthy,

unbeautiful self-hypnosis. sunshine creeps in through the window, but it does not warm me. my teeth are chattering. it is dawn. there is no need to pray to the truth/untruth. we have no soul.

there will be no apocalypse, because there is no god(s). amen.

seven
where
is
connie?
where
is
connie,
now
when
i
need
her
most?
i
have
slit
my
wrists
and
the
blood
trickles
onto
the
floor.
i
sit
at
the
typewriter
trying
to
finish
the
incomplete
codex.
amen.

Shadowboxing

Pat Dixon

3

Aaron Czarsky, Professor of History at Witherspoon Academy, selected seven small cans of acrylic spray paint from the wire cage, stepped back, and nodded to the young clerk, who reattached three padlocks to secure these materials against the predations of teenagers.

“Thank you, ma’am. Now, kindly just point me in the direction of your rolls of masking tape, please,” he said, glancing towards the ceiling of the store and smiling to himself.

For the first time since junior high school, at age 49, Aaron Czarsky was going to attempt to “make art” or “do art,” and this time he was looking forward to it. While he was hovering near sleep around 2:45 a.m. that morning, he had pictured distinctly what sort of art he wanted to try.

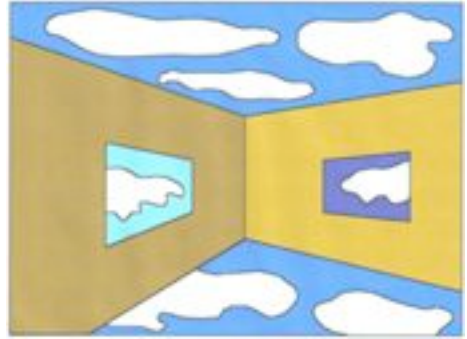
2

The previous evening was a warm one, and, as he marched rapidly through a strange residential neighborhood, his shoulders back and arms swinging, Aaron Czarsky decided after the first mile and a quarter that he would feel more comfortable and better able to concentrate on his problem if he unbuttoned the top four buttons of his flannel shirt. *One, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, ten*, he had counted over and over in his mind, in time to his rapid steps.

It had been 8:37 p.m. when he had taped a note to his coffee cup on the kitchen counter at home—“I need to go for a walk. Aaron”—and he wondered if it was a cowardly act to leave the house without explaining to his wife, Sarah, even vaguely, about where he was going. *One, two, three, four, five, six . . .*

He kept his eyes unfocused, above the uneven sidewalks, letting his off-center night vision detect where the tripping spots were and, half-instinctively, letting his feet avoid these. *Six years as a marine taught me something useful*, he had thought without losing count. *Nine, ten, one, two, three, four, it, was, a, mistake, it, was, a, mistake.*

Six times in the next mile he paused in the darkness to allow cars to enter cross streets or private driveways, vaguely resentful about the aggressiveness of the drivers who had no intention of yielding to a pedestrian—or of pausing at a stop sign—and yet he felt vaguely pleased that he seemed to be passing through this unfamiliar dark place unnoticed, as if he were invisible—like a ninja, perhaps, or like Lamont Cranston. Nearly two miles farther, about forty yards ahead he saw three teenage boys cross to his side of the street and open the doors of a new Mercedes convertible. They were talking loudly to each other and paid no attention to him as he passed by them. Three blocks beyond these, he noticed a pair of teenage girls cross to the opposite side of the street and go up the walk of a large split-level house



with its porch lights on. In the back of his mind, he was aware that this neighborhood was several degrees “ritzier” than his own. His footsteps on the hard sidewalk were nearly silent, and he felt the rhythm of his march with the soles of his feet. *It, was, a, big, mis, take, it, was, a, big, mis, take, we, do, not, get, a, long, it, IS, a, big, mis, take, we, don't, get, a, long, it, IS, a, BIG . . .*

After four miles, Aaron Czarsky crossed a main highway and entered another strange neighborhood. Passing a Mexican-theme bar, he glanced in and considered vaguely whether he would like a beer or two—or perhaps a rum-and-Coke. It was over six months since he had had even a glass of wine, and he continued on his way untempted. *We, don't, get, a, long, at, all, no, we, don't, get . . .* Feeling too warm, he unbuttoned his shirt completely and pulled it outside his trousers all around.

Half a mile farther, he passed a small Irish-theme bar and smiled mirthlessly at its punning name—Two Shay.

Again he thought briefly about going inside and “wetting his whistle”—or using their men’s room. He saw a public park ahead, dozens of its lights on. Three concrete basketball courts were in use, and he knew there would be an unlocked restroom there if he needed to use one.

When he had first left his house, before his cadence counting had calmed him and finally led him to what he now saw as his correct logical course, Aaron Czarsky had, in his own words, “fumed, dithered, and stewed” about three recent events—events which seemed to go far, far beyond earlier instances of bizarre behavior. Because this was a Tuesday, Aaron had had no classes to teach, and he and Sarah had begun it by carrying five pieces of furniture and twenty-seven boxes of castoffs to the end of their driveway for a Salvation Army pickup at 9:30 a.m. And then, when the truck’s driver, a slender young black man, had declined to take their small marble-top table because a small drawer was missing, Sarah had screamed that this was a charitable donation and had then thrown the sheet of marble into their street, shattering it and turning the table into trash.

“Aaron—you deal with this—this—man!” she had shouted and stamped up their walk and slammed their front door behind her.

An hour later, in tears, Sarah had phoned the Salvation Army and begged them to tell the driver how sorry she was, and then she had spent four hours alone in their bedroom, apparently trying to nap.

After supper, Aaron and she had driven to the market together, where Sarah had decided to break her diet and buy a small lemon meringue pie. Aaron had jokingly offered to “help her eat it,” and she had jokingly offered to break his jaw for him. At the check-out counter, a young Latina cashier had been flirting with a nearby male coworker while she scanned their items and had propelled the pie too swiftly towards Sarah, who was bagging their purchases. Meringue had smeared onto half of the clear plastic lid covering her pie, and Sarah had screamed at the young woman, “Are you some kind of ****ing idiot—or do you destroy people’s things deliberately?! We’re paying you to serve us, you stupid ****ing moron, not to flaunt

your little tits and fat ass at the fellas that work here!”

Aaron, shocked, had said, “Sarah—stop it,” and Sarah had stormed out of the market, letting him complete the purchase and carry their groceries. In the parking lot, Sarah had glared at him while he unlocked and loaded their car. They drove home in silence, and when they reached their driveway, he had softly asked her what had happened back at the store.

Sarah had opened her mouth and then closed it, as if censoring her thoughts. At that moment, behind the hedge next to their driveway, a young couple who lived next door, two unmarried students who were renting upstairs rooms from a neighbor, loudly burst into laughter at some private joke, and Sarah had screamed through her open car window, “Will you just shut the **** up!”

Aaron had pressed the control to raise her window and had again said, “Sarah—stop it.” Sarah had glared at him, and he had added, “Maybe they’ll think you were only shouting at me.” Then she had stormed out of the car, into their house, and up to their bedroom. Frequently shaking his head from side to side and biting his lower lip, he had carried in the groceries and put them away, placing her pie in the freezer as she would have done herself had she been helping.

Now on the far side of the public park, Aaron Czarsky had walked the “wrong” way down a dark one-way street that had no sidewalks. In the dim cross-light coming from the park and from a house fifty feet distant, he noticed a large storm sewer—larger than any others he had seen elsewhere in this central Connecticut town. For a few moments he paused and stooped slightly to try to see whether it had a grate of any sort. It appeared to have none, but he could not be certain. He smiled mirthlessly to himself and thought, *If I were to slip—and fall down into that sewer and drown, probably nobody would ever find my body—I would just become—one of—history’s mysteries. And who would really care? It would be as if my students had a holiday from my nonsense about the politics of Greece and Rome—a holiday from me. And Sarah—too—one brief holiday—for all—then all their lives would go on.*

He straightened up and walked to the corner leading into this odd side street, no longer counting cadence to himself, no longer marching.

His mind drifted to the frequent parallels he had drawn between the political chicaneries and corrupt activities of ancient Athens and Rome and those discussed in contemporary newspapers. “Indeed, there is nothing new under the sun,” he had often said; “Our own politicians haven’t found any new ways to rob us that weren’t anticipated by the wise ancients at least a dozen times, two millennia ago. Not that they are necessarily plagiarizing, mind you: as in nature, things have ways of recurring by a kind of independent invention. But history can show us just how unoriginal ‘our leaders’ really are—and show us something of our own perpetual gullibility.” And he frowned, remembering that, during the last ten years, fewer and fewer of his students cared to hear this from him—and that fewer and fewer even seemed the least bit aware of what yesterday’s newspaper contained—*other than sports pages*, he thought, *and comic strips—and ads for jeans*.

During his return walk of three miles, he amused himself by considering the

parallel corruptions of the Tudor administrations, those of the first four American presidents, and those of the four most recent American presidents. In half a dozen letters to the *Hartford Courant* during the past three years, he had made similar points, but in a less pedantic and florid manner than the lecture he now constructed inside his own mind. Twice he chuckled to himself at his ironic humor, and twice he shrugged when recalling that none of his letters had been accepted for publication.

1

Aaron Czarsky entered his house quietly, stood very still, and listened for half a minute. Then he walked into the kitchen and tore his note off his coffee cup on the countertop, crumpled it, and tossed it into a grocery bag containing waste paper to be recycled. He stood staring towards the waste paper for another forty seconds before shrugging and stretching his shoulders.

“I was very worried,” said a soft voice behind him. Slowly he turned to face Sarah, and gazed at her with calm interest, just as he might look at a stranger in an airport or a department store who strongly resembled somebody he had known long ago.

“I went out looking for you for half an hour or forty minutes, driving all over our neighborhood. I even talked with the Afro-American guard down at the entrance to that gated community about half a mile away. He was very nice and helped me do a U-turn to get back out of there. Then I came back here and worried some more.”

After a short pause, she added, “Can you tell me where you went?”

After a longer pause, Aaron said, “Yes. I walked about six or seven miles—around the perimeter of our neighborhood, then around the edges of Soundhaven, where the richer folks hang out with their spoiled kids, and then around parts of Green Manor, where the richer blue-collar workers live and the bikers and Latinos rent rooms from Soundhaven slumlords.”

“If you will listen to me, please, I’d like to apologize—and explain some things—at least from my viewpoint. Not that I expect anything from you. I know that you may have already hardened your own views, and I can understand and appreciate that. I just would like to say a few things—if I may. I know I behaved badly tonight—to you and to others—and also on other occasions before tonight. Will you sit down and let me talk for a little while?”

Aaron stood motionless for almost twenty seconds, his arms and legs numb and heavy. He drew in a slow, deep breath. “Yes,” he said quietly.

“You are not the cause of how I am, nor are you responsible for me,” she said, as they sat side by side in their darkened living room. “You did not make me the way I am, and you are not responsible for fixing whatever is broken or cracked or bent or warped in me. If you want to leave or want me to leave, I can understand that. You’ve been one of the most patient people I’ve ever known, but probably even you have your limits. I want you to know that I don’t think you owe me a thing—I don’t expect you to give me a thing or even another moment of your life. And I will not

blame you if you want—out. At least I hope I will not blame you—we never can promise how we will feel or think later. Do you hear me so far?”

“Yes,” said Aaron in a faint whisper.

“I’m sorry. I couldn’t hear you, Aaron.”

“I said ‘yes,’” he said, raising the volume slightly.

“Good. You are not responsible for how I am now—or how I got to be this way. I know I just said that. You are not my parents, who gave me their DNA, such as it was, and who taught me by example how to treat or mistreat others—probably a bit of both, especially judging by how they treated each other—and how they treated me. Nor are you any of the doctors who hooked me on a variety of medications before I was two years old—and a variety of others as I got older. Nor are you one of the stoner friends I had as a high schooler or college—schooler—who introduced me to a variety of things, from wine and vodka to cigarettes and weed—and some other stuff you already know about—during the ‘70s and early ‘80s. You didn’t even know me then. We met in 1987, if you will recall. I already had my own psychological history and my pharmacological history—and genetic and behavioral history—or histories—well before we met, just as you had your own. And just as is the case with everyone else—everywhere. Do you hear me?”

“Yes. I understand.”

“I don’t know a lot about a lot of things, Aaron, but one—*one* of the things I learned *after* my parents were dead—and by the way, I’d like to thank you again for all your support during the five years they were dying by inches—one of the”

“You’re welcome—Sarah,” he said.

“Thank you. One of the things I was *lucky* enough to learn—finally—was that I was not responsible for fixing whatever was broken in them—and wasn’t to blame for them being broken, even though they acted as if I was and often encouraged me to try to fix them in a hundred devious little ways—or at least let me make the effort to fix them if I misunderstood what they were expecting from me—like me trying to make peace between them from early childhood on and like running a thousand errands for nit-picky things I *thought* they wanted fetched—and so on and on and on—and on. It was something I’d heard a hundred times before from fifty different people, but I just had never incorporated it into my ‘belief system’ on a gut level. It took their deaths—and my own near death, probably, when I began taking my mom’s medications instead of throwing them down the toilet—to get me ready to internalize the concept at long last. Are you still listening? Aaron?”

“I’m still here—listening—Sarah.”

“Good. Al-Anon counselors—and Pot-Anon and Beer-Anon and Narc-Anon and Shroom-Anon counselors and—and Wine-Anon and Hash-Anon and LSD-Anon—and two shrinks that my folks hired in their two most lucid moments—and three school counselors—and two teachers—and my best friend’s mother—and Hop-Anon and Skip-Anon and Jump-Anon—and a couple dozen others I can’t remember any more at this moment—they *all* told me it wasn’t my fault my parents

were broken. They all said it wasn't my job to fix them—but I tried to do so every which way and any which way I could. *You* saw that yourself. Even *you*, in a huge number of lucid moments, told me repeatedly it wasn't my fault or my job, even if you didn't use those words—do you remember?"

"Sort of."

"Sort of. Well I remember, but even when you told me, repeatedly, I wasn't yet ready to hear it and absorb it and make it a part of me. All right? Do you see?"

"I see."

"Good. I hope you do. I really hope you do. I wasn't ready then. And now maybe you've forgotten some of your own wisdom—your so-called 'wisdom of the ancients.' You—Aaron—are—not—to—blame—for—me—being—broken. You—are—not—at—all—responsible—for—fixing—me. Okay? Do you hear?"

"Yes—I do."

She took Aaron's hand and gave it a gentle squeeze.

"I don't know whether you love me any more, Aaron. I do love you—despite how I seem sometimes—despite how I behave. Besides you not being responsible for my DNA and my upbringing and my addictive behavior—which I have conquered in twenty or thirty years, you know, though it's a constant struggle—besides that, you are *not* responsible for me being a woman—though especially in the early years I think you liked that fact pretty well. A woman has, as you learned before you married your first wife, a monthly cycle that causes—periodically speaking—emotional ups and downs—and sometimes they get pretty intense. They have been getting more intense with me these past few months—and here is part two—the second shoe being dropped, so to speak, which should not be a surprise to anyone who knew both your mother and my mother—it's been getting more and more intense because I'm approaching a second little joy of womanhood: menopause. I'm not there yet, but it's coming—which does *not* mean I couldn't run a corporation or even be president. I'm on an intercept course with it, closing in every day, and I am not a candidate for any estrogen replacement therapy—not with my personal history with breast lumps and my mother's and grandmother's history of breast cancer. I just won't do it—not even to get myself to 'lighten up' a bit, nor will I mess around with any more diazepam tablets to lower my affect and be more like a charmingly mellow zombie. It has taken me too long to kick Valium to go back on it—even at the cost of losing you. I love you, but for me, for my own sake, I will not do that again. Do you hear me?"

"I love you, Sarah."

"Do you *hear* me, Aaron?"

"I—hear—you—Sarah. I—love—you—Sarah."

"I love you, Aaron. I'd love you even if you didn't love me. I do want what's best for you—even if what you want is—for us to split up. I love you, Aaron. But I won't become a zombie for us to stay together. I can tell you that none of what I did was personally directed at you, even if it seemed that way. I was being overwhelmed by a bad hormone cocktail that—that an evil dybbuk had put into my

body—a bit like a bad date who slips all kinds of—bad shit—into a girl’s drink without telling her. It’s not an excuse I’m giving. It’s an explanation. There’s a difference. Sort of like men not being able to control—when a happy-chested redhead walks by in a tight sweater—the sudden increase in the sizes of their—their pupils of their eyes. It’s just hard-wired into the evolution of the sexes—accept it or not. At least that’s what I think.”

“That’s what I think, too—in my lucid moments.”

“You used to have a quip about Buddha that I liked, even though you made a joke out of it about your students.”

“Yes. Supposedly a bunch of people went up to the Buddha and said, ‘Oh Great Enlightened One’ (which is a long, redundant way of saying ‘Buddha’), ‘kindly tell us something reassuring that applies to all things in this world of constant change.’ And the Buddha thought for a couple seconds and replied, ‘This, too, will pass.’ I used to joke that his words applied to all the students who were underqualified for admission to college—but who were now being granted the highest honors at graduation *and* often were later being granted Ph.D. degrees—with honors. Bitter humor about grade inflation—when what it means is ‘No matter how bad things are, they will change—and eventually may change for the better—if we last that long.’”

“I’d—I would like to try to stick it out—with you—if you’ll let me,” said Sarah. “I can’t promise anything will be better tomorrow or next year even—but it is not personal—and not your fault—and I love you, Aaron.”

Aaron squeezed her hand and rubbed his shoulder against hers. Then, slowly and casually he brushed a half-dried track of moisture from his cheekbone with the cuff of his shirt and then planted a long kiss on the side of Sarah’s forehead. A moment later, Sarah was nestled under his arm, and he was stroking her cheek gently with his free hand.

Two hours later, his calf muscles stiff and his soles aching, Aaron quietly tiptoed from their bedroom to the bathroom.

While he was up, he took two more buffered aspirins and went into the living room where he jotted down a sketch that, to him, symbolized their condition. He had lain awake, considering his wife’s newly revealed wisdom and reconsidering his earlier views of her and himself. He wished to keep this insight. Too often in his life he had been told or had realized things he considered important—only to forget them. A few times he had luckily stumbled across them a second or third time, but often they were lost forever—or so it had seemed.

Just tonight even, while lying awake, he had thought up a short phrase—just two words—for her insight and own his comprehension of it. It had been a phrase with a clever double or triple or quadruple or quintuple meaning. And now he had already forgotten it.

It was ambiguous, Aaron thought, like the phrase “secret sharer” in Conrad’s book title: is “secret” a noun—like “bus” in “bus driver”—or an adjective or, deliberately, both? Is the man a sharer OF a secret? Or is he a sharer of a cabin who IS a secret from the rest of the crew—or is he both at once? Who can say what Conrad meant by

it? Certainly not those twelve English professors I've asked in the past fifteen years. But what was that other phrase I thought about tonight—just an hour ago? It had two words, the letter P started each word, I think, and their parts of speech were BOTH ambiguous—deliberately—maybe “painting” was one—as a noun AND as a participle—and as a noun, it can refer both to an object—and—to an activity.

Aaron felt mild annoyance at his failure to recall his own defining phrase—*If I'd just gotten up to pee sooner, I might have written it down—but he chose to focus his attention on trying to preserve their main insight in a concrete form, if he could do so.*

Lying again beside his wife, Aaron slowly felt calmer. The painting he now pictured in his mind's eye—the one he had hastily sketched—would be surrealistic and symbolic—*like some work by—oh—Dali or Magritte*, he thought with a faint smile—and it would symbolize, in his own private way, his wife's and his very different viewpoints by means of two windows on adjacent walls of a floorless, ceiling-less structure which might be floating above an unseen planet, and the clouded sky, seen through each of those two windows, would be two very different shades of blue—and both views would be very different from the clouded sky seen above and below the two walls—walls that would also be of different colors—though related colors—and, he thought, *perhaps one window will have a half-drawn shade, while the other has a partially opened venetian blind—or is that too—fancy?*

Drifting closer towards sleep, Aaron Czarsky also made vague plans to construct a 3-D shadowbox of the same scene, *with the two window openings cut out of a folded sheet of cardboard—or perhaps two pieces of plywood—and the sky showing above, below, and through each window, but looking different each place—just as in my painting.*

The Real Thing

R. Steeves

Russell Simons drummed at the wheel of his Honda Civic in a close approximation of the beat of the song on the radio. He had no idea what that song actually was—his radio had been merely a transistor the last time he listened to anything beyond NPR or sports talk radio— but he felt like he needed a throbbing beat to help him celebrate.

For the second time, he flipped open the glove compartment and checked. The envelope was still there, its contents secure for the time being. Russell's guts were churning and roiling, a combination of elation, anxiety and terror spreading through his bowels and into his groin. The presentation, the handshakes and signatures, the smiles and the panic, all swirled in a massive ball of energy, looking for release. He slowed the car, as the gaudy neon sign came into view.

Russell pulled his Civic into the crowded parking lot, squeezing between burnished silver Jaguar and a rusty pickup. Best not to be the nicest or the dingiest car in the lot, he thought to himself. He checked his pockets for his phone

and wallet, locked the car door with his keychain, and strode boldly out of the lot. He nodded to the gruff, bearded parking lot attendant as he passed, mentally reminding himself to tip the man when he returned.

Pole Position II, name of the destination that Russell now approached, was somewhere in the middle of the spectrum between “gentleman’s club” and strip bar. The exterior was mostly innocuous: a sleek black façade- with no windows, of course- a single entrance, and one small neon sign, with the name of the establishment and a promise of “Girls, Girls, Girls.” Russell vaguely wondered why these places never seemed to promise women. The night was chilly, and he wore no jacket, so Russell quickened his pace, on a beeline for the door, lest he linger exposed in the open for too long.

A cacophony of stimuli hammered into his senses as Russell breached the portal of the club. A thick cloud of cigarette smoke assaulted his nose, wafted on thick, humid air. His eyes were momentarily stunned by the sudden transition from dusk to darkness, and his ears were pummeled by an even louder, unfamiliar pounding beat. A hulking cliché of a biker, leather vest and all, sat perched on a stool, ready to check Russell’s identification if the patron seemed the least bit callow. But the man merely waved his timid customer in. There was no cover at this time of day.

As his eyes and ears adjusted to the startling change in sensory input, Russell stumbled over to the bar. This, at least, was familiar, if not comforting. He had never spent a great deal of time in bars, not even in college, when his Saturday nights consisted more often of intense games of *Magic: The Gathering* than bar crawls. After a few moments of standing there, impotently, as the buxom bartender ignored him, and the sweaty businessmen around him were served beer after beer, the frantic waving of his twenty dollar bill finally garnered some attention.

“What’ll you have, sport?” the bartender asked, her chest straining at the fabric of her halter top.

“Um, I’ll have a beer, please.” The bartender frowned at this reply, as if he were providing insufficient information. “Um, Bud Light?” She grabbed a can from the cooler at her knees, popped the top, and slapped it on the bar, amber froth spitting from the mouth. She snatched the bill from his hand, returning shortly with a swath of one dollar bills, which she placed next to the beer. She moved on swiftly to the next customer.

Russell gently picked up all but one of the bills with his right hand, and palmed the beer can with his left. He stuffed the cash into the breast pocket of his denim shirt, and turned his attention to the stage. And capture his attention, it did. In front of him was the secret revelation of his darkest teenage desires, made flesh. Copious amounts, in fact, of bare, glistening flesh.

The stage was simple. A black platform, mirrored in back, with three poles distributed evenly across it, and a row of chairs pushed up to the edge. What he saw on the stage, though, was anything but simple. Three very different specimens of womanhood arrayed in three very different styles of dress- or undress. A buxom Brazilian, with a g-string in the color of her country’s flag; a leggy waif of a woman in enormous platform shoes and neon fingernails; a platinum blonde with a boy’s

chest in a green plaid skirt. They hung on the pole, hunched over for the men, or gyrated to the beat of the rhythm. Russell didn't know what to say or do first. Finally, he made his way over to the nearest seat, making sure there was an empty buffer seat on either side, sat down, and bellied up to the stage.

Safe in his new vantage point, Russell began to relax. He set his drink down on the edge of the stage, and gazed into the wall-sized mirror in front of him. It allowed him to observe the world around him, something he'd been good at since his nerd-borne survival instincts kicked in during high school. He noticed the LCD screen behind him, playing a college football game; the patrons sitting around him, eyes deadened to the world, or hooting and hollering with liquid bravado. Businessmen, college students, burned out shells of men, looking for... what? Release? Distraction? The slimmest of connections with another human being?

As a proud observer of human nature, and an early-adaptor of bizarre cultural mores, Russell quickly decoded the rhyme and reason of the establishment. He watched as other men took the tattered and worn bills and placed them on the edge of the cracked and peeling stage, a beacon of promise beckoning out into the wild. The lure could not help but catch its intended target. Without fail, the women would approach, stepping casually along the edge of the stage, or slithering up on all fours, ready to show their wares to the paying customer. The transaction continued, as the lady took the bill, leaned forward, and whispered to the patron sweet promises of dances and desire.

This circle of lust continued, unaltered, for several cycles. Songs would play, the women would flaunt themselves, then, inevitably, the menu would change, and another group would take the stage. The women varied in age, dress and body type, but one thing remained consistent- eyes that only looked at you, lips that licked themselves just for you, hands and bodies whose sole existence was for your benefit...

It seemed the moving flesh had hypnotized Russell as he sat in his chair, nursing his drink. He had barely registered the last string of ladies as his mind began to wander, crashing and dashing its way around his skull. He was, then, brought back from this absence by the most unfamiliar of sensations: a tongue sliding up his neck and into his ear.

"What's your name?" the tongue seemed to ask. Russell, pulled from his stupor, could not quite make out the face or features of the woman, contorted as she was, although he could intimately describe the scent of the perfume that anointed her breasts. Before he could respond, she whipped her head back, her black hair cascading down onto the stage, her back arching and her body...

After the parade of silicone and stretch marks, there seemed something different about this one, something indefinable. She had youth, to be sure, cheeks-all four- that still held a bit of baby fat, but there were other dancers who tried to present an appearance of youth. Despite her appearance, she did not radiate the expected naïveté, nor did she have the hard, cynical edge that seemed to permeate the more seasoned women. Perhaps it was this mix, this tension between innocence and skepticism that drew him toward her. For whatever reason, his

body acted on its own, leaning forward, crossing the threshold of the stage's edge, entering her world.

"Ron," he replied, not even sure why he bothered to lie about it.

"I'm Zoë," she responded, pressing her breasts together, and forming her lips into a practiced pout. "This set is about over. I know you want a private dance, don't you?" The question itself was perfunctory. She knew the answer as well as he did.

This, however, was new territory for Russell. He had subliminally witnessed other patrons, eyes glossy, hands held, being led away to a curtained area in the back of the club. They would return a few songs later, their faces a mixture of pleasure and shame, their pockets, presumably, lighter. Although this transaction had occurred numerous times around him in the past half hour, Russell had not paid quite enough attention to absorb the etiquette of the situation. What did one say? What did one do, or touch or think? And what, precisely, occurred behind those curtains?

All of this went through his mind in an instant, as his head nodded, and his lips whispered an affirmative. His body had committed as his mind deliberated. "Good," she whispered huskily. "don't go anywhere..." Her body uncoiled and her derriere shook as she walked away from Russell, leaving him aroused and confused- for the first time that night, but not the last.

As he sat there, watching the woman in question display her assets to another customer, Russell could not help but wonder if he had made an oral contract, an implication of a future transaction that he simply could not renege upon. His mind and body were at war: an intellectual curiosity and animal instincts clashed with ingrained social paranoia and uncertainty. It did not last long, however, as the song quickly ended, and he felt a warmth and softness touching his neck. "Ready?"

His body, acting on autopilot, stood up, as Zoë's hand slid off his neck and into its place next to her shapely thighs. She walked with gusto toward the curtained area, glancing back once, with a look that was equal parts "come hither" and "get moving". Russell followed...

...Down, it seemed, a rabbit hole of sorts. Through the curtain, past a bouncer who appeared to be the larger, meaner, steroid loving brother of the biker at the door. But he was merely the gatekeeper to the Wonderland at hand. Naked statues; gaudy purple carpeting; wide, soft chairs- some of which were occupied by two entwined bodies- one barely clothed and writhing, the other taut and alert. Zoë grabbed Russell by his hand dragging him to a chair in the farthest corner, shoving him onto the cushions, and ripping his glasses off his astonished face.

The next two and a half minutes were a maelstrom of rubbing and grinding, of naked flesh and naked desire, confusing, cacophonous and chaotic. At one point she leaned in close and whispered "Do you want another?"

Russell simply did not know what to say. Did she mean later that day? The next time he came in? For surely, he wanted this feeling again, he craved it, didn't want it to end. She had stopped, for some reason, and he wanted her to go on. His confusion must have shown.

"If you want me to dance for another song, you've gotta pay me another \$20."

While his mind considered this, his throat must have grunted an affirmative, as she resumed her erotic gyrations, faster, deeper, more intense. His body was doing things he didn't intend it to do, and his mind was wiped, lost among the sensations that threatened to overwhelm him. Eventually, she leaned into him again, and he knew this time, his answer would be "yes"

"Would you ever pay for the real thing?"

It was not the question he had anticipated, but his answer came nonetheless. "Yes."

She abruptly stopped, and dismounted his lap. She quickly dressed, and held out her palm. "Give me the forty for those dances, and let's go talk."

After a moment of struggle as he attempted to locate his glasses, Russell pulled two twenties from the large wad in his wallet, and followed the woman out of the back room and toward a secluded table near the bathrooms.

"How much?" she asked as they sat down. She clarified, in response to his apparently quizzical look. "How much would you pay for it?"

Russell was not a man who was used to being unable to answer questions—especially those that pertained to money. He found, though, that he had absolutely no idea what the monetary value of this transaction could be. A figure blurted from his mouth: "100 dollars."

Zoë seemed to consider this for a moment. "Make it \$140. I have a cell phone bill I need to pay. And you pay for the room." She continued, taking his silence for consent. "We can't be seen leaving here together—people would get suspicious, and I wouldn't be coming back. Do you know where the *High Horse* is?" That was, of course, the other strip club in town, the one near the DMV. Russell nodded. "Good. I'll be done here in an hour. I'll meet you there in 90 minutes."

"That'll give me time to eat something and get, um, you know..." he could feel his face flush. "...condoms."

"Good." She paused. "You'll need to pay me in advance."

Russell immediately reached for his wallet, counting out 7 twenty dollar bills. He handed them over to her without hesitation. "I guess I don't get a receipt, huh?"

She looked at him, considering this. "Here, let me give you something, so you know I'll show up." She pulled a small red ring off the pinky finger of her right hand. "This belongs to my four-year-old daughter, Clara. I wear it every moment of the day to remind me of her. I won't leave it behind. Don't lose it." She placed it in Russell's outstretched hand, then got up quickly. "You better go, before anyone gets suspicious. I'll see you in an hour and a half." She turned and departed. Russell took a deep breath, looked around for one last time, and exited the club quickly.

100 minutes later, Russell was sitting in front of the stage at the *High Horse*, nursing a beer, the small ring sitting as a dwarf star in his front right pocket. He had a Big Mac, large fries and a coke sitting like lead in his stomach, and a three pack

of condoms, bought with shame and humiliation at a nearby drugstore, in the glove compartment of his car, next to his envelope. The bar he now occupied seemed to be a clone of the previous one- dark, loud, smoky and full- of lust, hope and desperation. He had entered the establishment almost an hour ago. Since then, he had sat through one full rotation of the dancers on stage. His pocket was nearly drained of singles, his glass nearly drained of beer, and his soul drained of anticipation and longing. It had been replaced by anxiety and uncertainty.

Once again he declined the current dancer's offer of a private dance, and once again, he felt for the ring in his pocket. He glanced toward the door once again, but saw nothing. He looked at his watch, considering the late hour and his options, but doubt squeezed its grip of inertia around him. The dancers changed shift again, and the waitress pressed hard, trying to replenish his well-nursed drink. Russell got up, looked around, and started toward the door-

Where he ran smack into a tiny figure in an enormous ski jacket. He was about to excuse himself and move out into the cold, when the figure addressed him.

"Sorry I am late. Are you ready to go?"

Startled, he looked down at the figure, wearing no make-up, hair pulled in a tight pony tail, ski jacket puffing out to obscure her body. Underneath all this, he assumed, Zoë lurked. He nodded and they headed outside together.

What followed was a terse exchange about logistics- where would they go, whose car would they take. It was decided that, since Russell had no idea where to find a hotel in the area, he would follow Zoë's SUV to a nearby Holiday Inn. In the meantime, he would be nice enough to charge the woman's phone in his car. He agreed to this stipulation immediately, without asking why, and dutifully handed over the ring and got into his vehicle.

As Russell entered the car, he plugged in the cell phone to charge, opened the glove compartment, snatching the condoms and pointedly ignoring the envelope (which he was relieved to see nonetheless). All of this only took a few seconds, which was enough to allow the SUV he was supposed to be following to streak off into the night. He ignited the car and took off after her.

After a dizzying array of twists and turns down unfamiliar and dark streets, the two cars arrived outside of the Holiday Inn more or less intact. It occurred to Russell that, perhaps, she was trying her best to ditch him, but he pressed on. In for a penny, in for a pound, as the saying went. He shut off his car and approached her.

"Is the phone still charging?" she asked, by way of greeting.

Russell looked at the charger. The red light was not active. "Not while the car is off."

"Then leave it on. That phone has to be charged."

"But I can't just leave my car running in the middle of the street."

"Why not?"

Why, indeed not? He shrugged, turned the car on, making sure the lights and radio were off. Perhaps this would not take long, he mused.

She quickly shuffled into the lobby, and he followed. What came next was a

quick and embarrassed exchange with the front desk attendant, who noted their lack of luggage and Russell's discomfort. He paid with a credit card, laying down far more than he had anticipated, and they rode up to the room in stony silence.

As they entered the hotel room, Zoë made a bee-line for the bed. She stripped off her ski jacket, and kicked off her shoes. Russell placed the condoms and his glasses on the night stand and began to slowly undress. When he was bare naked, he looked over at the bed, seeing Zoë seated there, wearing a fuzzy green sweater and white socks- and nothing else.

"Let's do this." Her voice had no twinge of desire, or even welcoming. The words were laced with something that Russell could not quite identify- disdain or self loathing, he could not be sure. What he did sense was that there would be no foreplay- no kissing, no fondling, nothing but the act itself.

"Are you sure you want to?"

"Don't you?"

The question, like all questions that came his way these days, was a loaded one. There were two answers, of course, neither of which seemed right to him. Like always, he gave the answer he felt she wanted to hear. "Let's forget it, okay?"

And just like that, they were both dressed. It was decided that she would come down and collect her phone, and then she would spend the night in the room- it was paid for already, after all. She even went so far as to promise not to order a movie. For this he was grateful.

She came down with him to collect her phone from the car that was, thankfully, still there. She snatched it up, and, grabbing a pen and an old Lotto ticket from her jacket pocket, scrawled a phone number. "Call me, and we'll find another time."

"For whom do I ask when I call?"

"Zoë, silly!" She smiled, pecked him on the cheek and turned back toward the lobby. He considered the odds that she used her real name on stage, then compared them to the odds that she had given him a real phone number. He was good with odds, numbers bent to his will. These numbers, however, seemed more of a long shot than the lottery numbers over which they were written. He dropped the paper into the gutter, then drove off into the night.

As he sped toward home, Russell reached into the glove box and found the envelope. He quickly tore it open and tipped its contents into his palm, reassured to find his wedding ring still there. He slid the car into his parking space and got out. His head swam as he approached the steps. The lights were on outside, but he could tell that the interior of his home was dark and silent.

He keyed himself in quietly, leaving his shoes by the door. He stepped over the Brio train set that littered the floor, entered the bathroom and quickly stripped off his clothes. A bit of mouthwash and some orange scented soap later, he silently entered the bedroom. Blood pounded in his forehead and his stomach clenched violently as he crawled into bed, careful not to disturb his wife. She sighed and rolled over, while Russell buried his head in a pillow to stifle his sobs...

In Their Shoes: Five Lessons

Adam Dennis

Lesson 1:

There's a middle-aged Iraqi man, just past fifty, opening his general store for the day. Although everyone has called him Akmad for so long that they cannot recall his given name, his brothers can. He hasn't seen them in months though.

Akmad pours ice into a Styrofoam container and checks the condition of the coolers. Often he finds them raided in the morning or puddles of water on the floor and spoiled drinks due to another dead generator. He makes sure to keep his store alcohol free except for a private cache kept in a locked cooler in the back room, hidden inside the trunk of a burnt car. He used to operate a gas station and auto shop, but the government kept raising the price of petrol, and though he'd met their demands, even that wasn't enough to ensure sufficient and consistent delivery for his often impatient customers.

It is 5:00 A.M., so he unlocks the front door and turns on the fan resting above the Styrofoam container. In an hour the temperature inside the store will drop to 106° as it rises outside, stopping at 133° a little after 2:00 P.M.

Outside the store one sees nothing but desert until it meets the horizon thirty miles east. Three roads intersect by his store, and he stands in the doorway admiring the rising sun as it pulls away the dark cloak over the sand and quickly reveals brilliant flashes of deep red and violet, colors so foreign they make Akmad tremble though he sees them every morning, and then they are gone, and the sun begins its day of dry punishment and a plume of dust billows up from the north; his body tenses and unconsciously his hands clench and he slips into the back room to retrieve the hidden cooler. Only government men come from the north, he knows, only Saddam's men.

As he nervously punches numbers into the old cash register to force the drawer open he hears the echoes of rumbling tires over the broken dirt road and guesses there will be two cars, for he sees two great dusty clouds approaching and he manages to fill the register with a few hundred dinars, crisp new bills with the president's familiar moustache staring up from the drawer, just as the men like it. He reaches for a magazine, lighting a harsh, hand rolled cigarette with bits of tobacco spilling out, and sits on his stool behind the counter, waiting.

The cars arrive minutes later. Two men in dark sunglasses enter while two stand guard outside and two more walk around to the former auto shop and rummage for any hidden treasure. Akmad flips his magazine and smokes his cigarette while the two men laugh and take a few items from the shelves.

"Akmad, you're getting lazy," one calls from the back in Arabic.

"Yeah, and your store's gone to shit," says the other. "Perhaps the President should be made aware of the state of things outside his capital, wouldn't you say?"

The man looks at his partner so that they do not see Akmad's sigh. He has left

the register drawer slightly open. When the two men reach the counter they find a pint of Turkish whiskey and six beers dripping sweat, and a smiling Akmad.

“Please, forgive the current state of my deplorable store,” he says genially and bows slightly, hands pressed together against his lips, as if in prayer. “You all must be thirsty after doing the good work all day, praise Allah.”

He takes a small box, moves a step to his left, and puts the drinks and stolen items inside, leaving his magazine flat and cigarette burning and a clear view of the register drawer.

“You know,” one man says to the other, “this place really does look shittier every time we come. It could do with a good torching, start over with someone new, someone who won’t let it turn to shit.”

Akmad bows again, repeatedly, pleading in gibberish to please not speak of such a thing, to spare his family, especially his wife and starving infant son, and he inches closer to the register, then stops. He looks at the register, then the men, then the register and he moves quickly, throwing the drawer back hard and it catches with a sharp thud that makes Akmad jump slightly, his first unplanned movement of the ordeal, and the men laugh, thinking they’ve scared the old man into submission, so that when he hands over the drawer contents and resumes his bowed pleadings, they tell him not to worry, that they’ll see to it his store stands for at least another month, and one grabs the box and the other gives Akmad one final glance, smiles, and walks out. Car doors slam and he sees nothing but the dust clouds for miles.

The whole “inspection” takes ten minutes and when they have gone Akmad returns the cooler to its hiding place and says a silent prayer of thanks that it worked out well this time despite his nervous tremor, and a prayer of hope that he’ll be able to restock the cooler and the register before they come again.

Lesson 2:

It is past sundown and Akmad is closing the store. He locks the gate and stares at the shattered window to his right. Some kids came by the other day, chanting that he was a traitor like his brothers, throwing rocks until the sounds of shattered glass pacified them. He’d stayed on his stool with his magazine and cigarette while one hand rested on the gun taped to the belly of the counter.

Once a man walked in wearing tattered and dirty robes and a scruffy, haggard beard, and pointed an old Russian .9mm gun barrel to his face and demanded he empty the register. Akmad stared hard into the man’s eyes and did not move. He gritted his teeth and flexed his feet until his weight rested in the toes so he’d be ready to spring, but he waited too long, and the impatient thief hit Akmad with the handle of the gun, breaking his nose, but he didn’t go down, and the gunman became frightened. He lunged for Akmad and in one motion lifted him from the stool and threw him through the window. Akmad lay dazed and bleeding while the gunman tried and failed to open the register drawer, and not even a hard shove to the floor would crack it. Finally the man gave up. He spit on Akmad and ran into the desert.

With the store closed he finally begins his walk home. His wife and children wait in their three-room home. Some of their neighbors have fenced yards and flowers, walls lined with paintings and shelves filled with expensive stereo equipment, but Akmad's home has no fence and only barren dirt greets him on the path to the front door. The walls inside are bare and the shelves contain a few books and photographs, all of his children. He buried the photos of his brothers behind the store.

Lesson 3:

The next morning Akmad gets to the store and feels so good he starts humming absentmindedly, humming a song he couldn't name if asked, some melody picked up at the market in Baghdad perhaps. The previous night he entertained his children with wild stories and he and his wife made love after they'd put the kids to sleep. He'd slept wonderfully, waking early to bathe his hands and face and to watch his children sleep for a little while.

After checking the generator he grabs a broom and goes to the auto shop to chase out any stray varmints taking refuge. What he sees makes him gasp and drop the broom. He is too shocked to scream so he simply stares. His hands shake. It is the first time he is unprepared and truly frightened since the day his brothers did not return from their trip to Turkey. The words barely escape his lips, and though he has not uttered them in months, they come to him effortlessly, for he has thought about this moment every day.

"Al-Nimr," he whispers, his older brother's nickname (for Amir).

Then he dashes to the unresponsive man, who lies against the door of the burnt car, drifting between some dream-unconscious state and consciousness. Quickly, Akmad scans him for wounds, bullet holes, knife cuts, and when he touches his brother's leg, the man shoves him off violently though he remains virtually unconscious. His lips are cracked and scabbed, and Akmad drips water onto them. His brother's beard is matted and clumped and missing chunks.

For the next few days Akmad hides his brother in the front seat of the burnt car and nurses him back to health while appearing to run his store with normalcy and typical routines. He watches his brother in his delirium, occasionally moaning, often swatting at something invisible around his groin. Finally, on the fourth day, after closing the store and locking the front gate, under desert darkness, Akmad sneaks to the auto shop and hears his brother's tale.

Lesson 4:

Akmad greets the Americans as they start their morning patrol of his now working gas station and store. The auto shop has become an oasis to the Americans, the burnt car replaced by an old broken couch, the fan and Styrofoam container moved to a shelf just above the couch, where it blows less hot air on the men's necks. The line of cars stretches endlessly to the horizon on

the east road (the Americans use the north and south roads), all waiting for petrol; some will wait in line for five days.

Two Americans guard the front door and allow only one person at a time to enter the store. They stand with their backs against the wall, guns at their sides, feeling the sweat soak their dirty fatigues as the temperature holds steady at 124°. The customer inside raises his voice and begins shouting at Akmad. The two soldiers give a cursory glance inside, determine the man is not an immediate threat to them, and turn back to face the brutal sun and endless sand. One of them reaches in his pocket for a cigarette. A moment later one of the soldiers feels the barrel of a gun pressing into his neck, the hot, ripe breath of a hajji crawling up his nostrils, and before he or his partner can reach for their weapons, Akmad pounces on the man with a scream, knocking him to the ground with a two-fisted blow. The gun falls from the man's hands at the soldier's feet. Akmad curses at the customer and chases him down the road, kicking dirt and gravel towards the running man, and walking back to a shaken and embarrassed soldier, who picks up the gun and flicks the trigger, sending a small orange flame out the barrel. He uses it to light a cigarette.

"Mistah, you help me, I help you," Akmad says and offers each soldier a cold drink. "Even tricks like this can be bad for you, yes? I protect you, you protect me. And he no come in my store no more."

Akmad tells the Americans stationed at his store in broken English that he hasn't been robbed since they showed up in Iraq and sent Saddam into hiding; not the *President* no more, *Saddam*, Akmad tells them.

One group of Americans stays at Akmad's store for two months and a few of them become cordial to the store owner, naming him Chuck Norris after his now infamous charge, and going so far as to invite his children to organize a soccer game behind the auto shop and rewarding them with whatever trinkets they had picked up. Business is booming for Akmad and he and Amir often discuss opening another station down the northern road, though they wade carefully through the Halliburton-dispersed petrol and oil, spending some of their profits to ensure sufficient and consistent delivery.

A soldier everyone calls Lew spends more time than the others talking with Akmad and Amir. Amir is distrustful of the Americans and says very little beyond grunts, but Akmad believes if he gets the Americans to like him, they will continue to protect his business, and one of them might even think of marrying his oldest daughter and taking her to America. Akmad excitedly tells Lew he knows of some troublemakers in his village and he will identify the homes of these men if Lew agrees to accompany him, and eat dinner with his family.

Lew tells his bunkmate, Cedric, that he's doing some recon work to bring back something special for the boys, and not to say a word to anyone. Cedric agrees with the promise of first dibs, and Lew and Akmad head off to the village. With the store fading behind them, they walk away from the angry taunts of the line of customers and Lew asks a question.

“Chuck, what’s with your brother, man? Dude doesn’t say shit, just grunts all the damn time.”

“That is my brother’s way since he return from Turkey border. They hold him prisoner, him and younger brother. Get shocked with cables here,” he says and motions to the groin, “get no food, no water, get beat and dragged. Younger brother dies. Amir runs away one day and come back here.”

“Jesus. Why would they beat him like that for?” Lew asks.

“Who knows. Saddam is crazy, his men worse,” Akmad says. “Here is the vilage. We go to my house and eat and I show you where *silah* [weapons] are hidden.”

Lesson 5:

Lew and Cedric’s company moved on shortly after raiding a series of homes in Akmad’s vilage, and another company took over patrols of the store and gas station. This company came from southern Iraq where resistance remained violent and strong, despite the President’s assurances to the contrary. They had lost more than a dozen men, five in a roadside bomb two days earlier, and had been assigned to Akmad’s store to give them a break.

Akmad and Amir had recently purchased an abandoned gas station forty miles north, and Akmad spent most of his days there preparing for a grand opening. His oldest daughter had started school at a new girl’s school near the station, and he kept an eye on her while overseeing the repairs. Amir stayed behind and tried to assume his brother’s role with the new company of Americans, but his smiles came out wrong, looking crooked and painful. He rarely spoke to the soldiers and they eyed him suspiciously.

One scorching afternoon, two men stand guard outside the door. They both lean against the wall and feel their agitation grow as the sweat drips into their fatigues, as they remain stationary while other soldiers even the score.

“What a fucking dump,” one soldier says and spits black tobacco juice into the sand.

“Fucking *hajji*, same shit everywhere. Today they line up to get the shit, tomorrow they use it to blow us up,” says the other.

The first man nods in agreement. “And we sit here and protect this shit and make *sure* they fucking get it.”

Both men were on duty when the roadside bomb had exploded two weeks earlier. The explosion had temporarily deafened them though they’d still seen two legs and an arm get blown off, and a man’s insides spill out into the street. The blood pooled in the street and with the dirt formed a thick dark mud that no one would touch.

“Enough of this shit,” says one of the men and sticks his head in the doorway. “Hey, *hajji*,” he yells, and then turns to his partner. “What’s his fucking name again?”

“Amir,” comes the reply and suddenly there is a tall, bearded, older man in a long white robe standing before the soldier.

“Step out here for a minute. We’d like a word with you.”

Amir crosses his arms but remains firmly in the doorway. The two soldiers look at each other and shake their heads, then reach for their weapons simultaneously. "What do you wish to know?" Amir asks in slow, careful English. He squints hard at the men and his thin eyes and furrowed brow make the men uncomfortable and itchy.

"We want you to step out here from that piece-of-shit store," says one of the men, "and that's all you need to know."

"This is my store," Amir replies, "and I will not leave it. I am no terrorist. But what belongs here, belongs to Akmad and me."

One soldier steps inches from Amir's face and tries to pull him forward, but Amir pushes the American hard and he falls to the ground. In a moment they are on him. He is thrown into a corner while the two American soldiers destroy the two shelves and smash all the glass coolers. Amir dashes behind the counter and rips the gun from its hiding spot, but before he aims it the Americans open fire, sending dozens of rounds into the Iraqi man and obliterating what is left in the store.

The gas station closes temporarily. A report is filed. The long lines begin to disappear, venturing forty miles north through the series of checkpoints. The company leaves with nothing to protect. The store never reopens.

Mt. Pinatubo

June 15, 1991

Neilbee Tayco

Three o'clock in the afternoon:
the sun should have been
scorching the asphalts
and the shingles on roofs, but

spruts of red electric spark
ran across the sky. Blackness
smothered any hint of light.
Molten earth spewed out
from the gates of hell. The ground
rumbled and shook.
Ash engulfed the rice fields.
Those who were caught
and trapped in its path
were mummified like those at Pompeii. Rocks,
mud rained from heaven,
thudded against concrete walls.

Palm and coconut
trees were unearthed from their roots
as if a gardener was yanking out weeds.

Villagers ran blindly to a nearby church
while their skins roasted and peeled
from their muscles and bones. The ones,
who were able to reach
the Cross, suffocated—their lungs
seared from sulfuric acid.
An avalanche of dirt buried them
six feet deep.

I was on the opposite
side of the island. The wind
howled as it blew East.

Secrets of the Subconscious

Joseph DeMarco

Secrets of the Soma

We don't wear our mind on our sleeve
We wear our mind
Our body is an extension
of mental characteristics and environmental dynamics
like a suit custom made from our past
each scar a sovereign of pain and knowledge
each flaw a feeling not forgotten
"fat thighs packed with childhood anger
baldness from trying to control everything
breast problems from refusing to nourish yourself
indigestion from gut-level fear, dread, and anxiety
halitosis from a rotten attitude"
As we speak our cells are regenerating
We are rewiring ourselves
according to what we THINK
The replicated cells are all confused
They think MONEY is the same thing as WORRY
The circuits have been crossed
They think TIME is the same thing as FEAR
You must synergize your synapses
They have reconnected all crippled
They think LOVE is the same thing as DISSAPOINTMENT
They got all these ideas from patterns in your behavior
And now like a run-away disc drive these patterns can't be stopped
OR
rather they are difficult to stop
because you can't just change what you do
you have to change the way you think
you have to change the way you live
or suffer your untimely demise.

Secrets of a Small Synapse

It starts when you're young
The bountiful brainwash
careful coloring books
Rules, regulations, rituals, routines
"STAY BETWEEN THE LINES,"
Wristwatches and Bedtimes
Watching time
"At 6:30 AM We wake up,"
"At 9:00 PM We go to bed."
It doesn't matter if you're tired
Just Follow
Don't question
Why?
"At 8:00 AM We go to school,"
"At 12:00 PM We eat lunch,"
I don't need a clock to tell me
I'm hungry or tired
I don't need the television
to tell me
What time it is
The writing seems pretty clear
The possessive propaganda
Eat three meals a day
Five food groups
Fully functioning Fear
Develops
Those that operate outside the box
Are shunned and sequestered
denigrated and denied
nourishment
Gifts suffer and
Dreams deflate
Dying in the stomach
Where they grow into something Else

Secrets of the Psyche

“All learning is remembering
what we have forgotten.”
at the blessed birth
at the dharmatic death
the elusive Ego
not dipping deeply enough
to uncover ultimate understanding
the original origins
the destiny of the final destination
is blocked by biological needs
the message muted
sounding like stale static
as harmony brushes by beneath us
we vaguely feel the familiarity
like a long lost home
we never knew we had
truth teases time
testing us
knowing the soul is forever
telling us
the body will soon expire
subliminally
We know ALL
yet We
 only believe what we want to believe
and our frail bodies will die
because of the fear that it is an inevitability

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