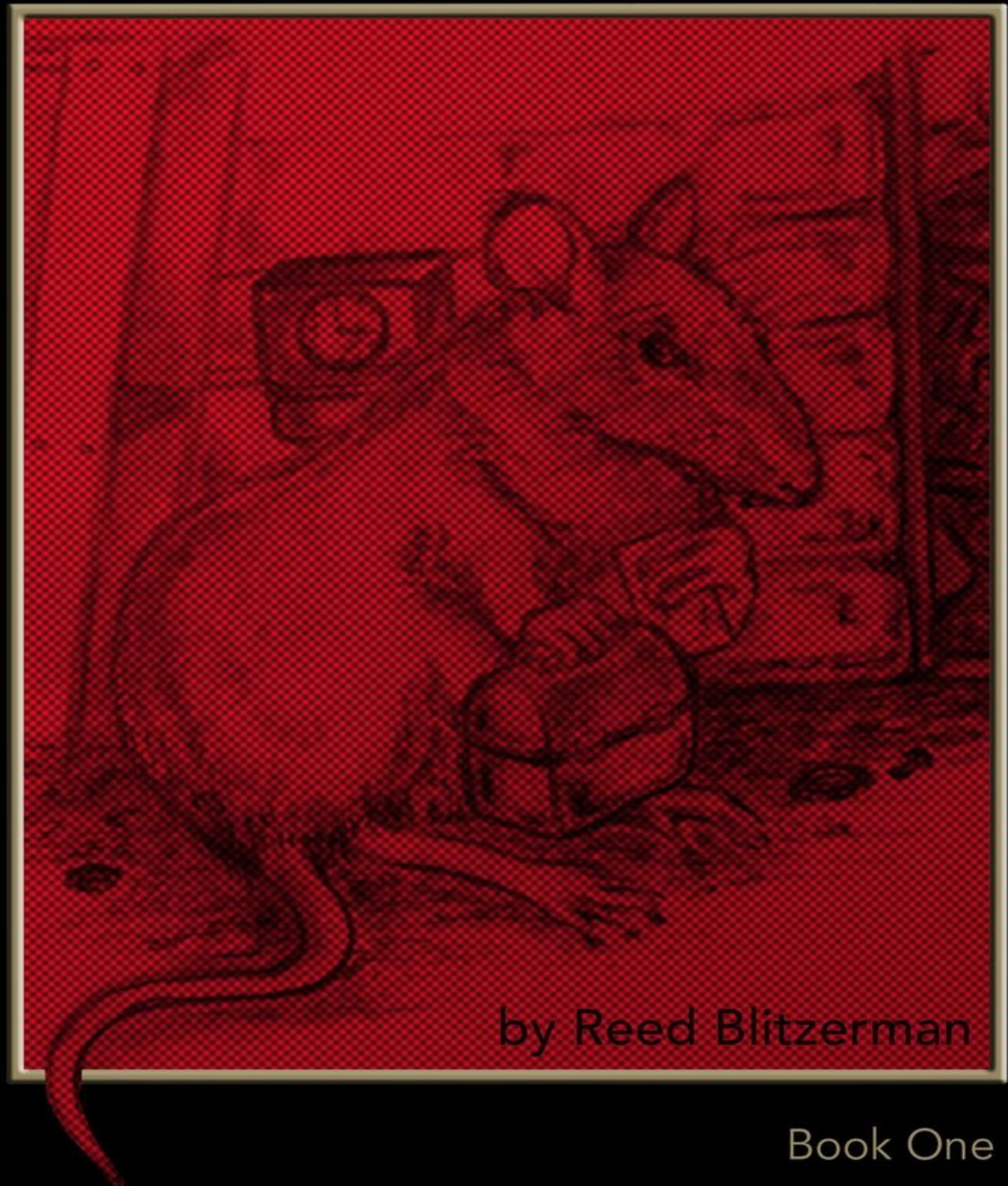


Revolt of the RATS



by Reed Blitzerman

Book One

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Reed Blitzerman

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DEDICATION



To my wife Barbara, my parents Bobby and Jan, brother Troy, three kids
Cristian, Caitlin, and Maya, and extended family.

To Nathan Harris and Dr. Sheila Ackerlind.

To my fellow veterans, and every factory rat I ever met.

“Despite all my rage, I am still just a rat in a cage”



-The Smashing Pumpkins, Bullet With Butterfly Wings

What if pleasure and displeasure were so tied together that whoever wanted to have as much as possible of one must also have as much as possible of the other ...?



-Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science*



“The past is never dead. It’s not even gone.”



-William Faulker, *Requiem for a Nun*

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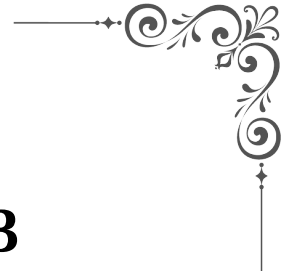
Thank you to Tim Powers for showing me the way in.

To James Altucher for his rivers of blood.



**FIND OUT WHAT
HAPPENS NEXT...**

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Washing Out, Spring 1973

THE FIRST TIME IT HAPPENED, Kahle wasn't alone. He dodged the screaming killdeer with his brother, Noyce. They flew low overhead, their white stomachs invisible, blending into the light blue sky. They banked and prepared for another pass, conspicuous with their brown speckled backs.

"Come on," Noyce said. He broke ahead, long legs easily carrying him along. Kahle followed, struggling under an oversized sweatshirt. They sheltered beneath an expansive oak, long branches providing cover from their airborne attackers.

Flying patrols circled wide, surveilling them for further movement. A barbed wire fence flecked with rust just beyond it separated their yard from the cornfields. Their border to the savage lands. No going there. They were hemmed in.

"Got here first," Noyce said. He loved games. Even games that involved running from maddened birds. Though they were fraternal twins, Noyce towered over him. Many times those same legs had carried Noyce between Kahle and the bad boys or run to the house for his forgotten inhaler.

Kahle couldn't catch his breath to reply, was bent over involuntarily whooping. The air avoided him as if the atmosphere were water. He fished in his pocket for his inhaler and it hung up on the edge of his jeans pocket. He stood in order to free it and swooned.

Too Fast. Mars. He was on Mars where the air was thinner. He was Space Ghost. No, he was Buck Rogers. Another attempt and it came free with a fistful of dander. He jammed it in his mouth, depressed the plunger to erase the ache in his ribs. Spots of light danced, flitting on a breeze that was too cool for a spring day. Before he could think, he was mumbling. "Tinkerbelle."

Noyce came closer and placed his hand on his brother's back. "What? You okay?"

"I'm okay." He didn't feel okay. In his ears, a thread was pulling with each breath as if string connected them to his lungs. He sat heavily on the ground heedless of ants or spiders. His eyes roved the yard behind. Spring winds twisted

patterns in the grass, passing through brown shoots with the consistency of a wave, turning in time to an unseen tune.

Sleepy. He felt so sleepy. Something resembling black smoke caught his eye. He closed his eyes and reopened them. The image was still there. He went up like a sleepwalker: his arms, and legs liquid or the flexible cartilage of sharks on Mutual of Omaha's Wild Kingdom. The pain persisted, but was pushed out by the new thing.

Then the killdeer descended, their moving bodies surrounding him in a halo of feathers. He ignored their pointed beaks and keening cries, his original fear forgotten. Hidden among the stalks of twisted grass was a bird's nest, the black smoke emanating from the bodies inside.

Their heads lolled to the side, their eyes closed, the lids bruised a mottled grey. The air around them coalesced from black to the washed out shade of dishwater, the tendrils of color leaching away.

"What do we do?" Noyce took several tentative steps backward.

Kahle picked the nest up with shaking hands. "They need help." With Noyce trailing him, he slid open the screen door and they stepped inside.

Before his mother turned around, Kahle had an irresistible feeling that he knew the answer. He looked into the nest again, and one of the birds was staring at him, its mouth open, its eyes glazed with defeat.

He resisted the desire to drop the nest, run for his bicycle and be away somewhere else. The light in its eyes was retreating, drawing away, headed for a destination he could not anticipate. What he saw around the birds wasn't smoke.

She turned and her eyes tracked to the nest in Kahle's hands where they changed from curiosity to concern. She accepted it gravely but nearly dropped it when he asked:

"Am I going to die like the birds?"

Edie Desireau inhaled as if a bucket of cold water had stolen her breath and said the first thing she could think of. "How do you know they're dying, honey?"

"Their color is washing out," Kahle said. "Around them. The color is washing out of their air."

She froze. In her nursing career, there were stories she'd assumed were exaggerations: interns who could read auras, nurses who saw ghosts, hospice patients who talked to the dead. Now the possibilities confronted her out of the mouth of her own child; a river of black water coursing toward her, threatening to overflow its banks. For a moment fear mastered her. She only nodded, not trusting her voice to speak, and her boys began to cry.

Kahle asked, "What about Noyce, will he die?"

This is unraveling. Noyce's eyes pleaded as if she had the power to change the outcome. She struggled for the words to reset the conversation, the sort of things adults used with curious children, and found none. "Yes."

Tears welled up in Kahle's eyes. He hugged his brother, pulled him close, and their weeping fell faster, their emotions feeding off of each other. By now she had a chance to compose herself. She seated the boys at the kitchen table, set the nest on the glass tabletop.

"Boys, understand. The birds are going to die but we are not birds. You're both going to live a long time. Okay? You're going to be fine. Everything's going to be okay."

She looked from one to the other, holding their eyes with her pauses and nods. *Liar, liar, pants on fire.* She did not believe in half-truths but these were five-year-old boys after all, and she'd seen enough dead five-year-olds in the emergency room to dread those mandatory shifts.

"Everything we see is in a process of change. The world will eventually be dust, but the human spirit lingers on. Do you understand?"

At least that's what she'd told her patients. Until now she's never questioned if she truly believed it. Last month it had been an old woman, her skin dry as chalk. Her hands were warm and she smiled until she passed away with a sweetness that seemed knowing. All the walls she had created in order to function, her child skirted as if her barriers were merely a doorway.

Exhaustion overcame her. What she needed was a few hours somewhere packed with living souls. The Duster had a full tank of gas. Glenn was working overtime at the plant, but it would be lunch break soon.

She examined the birds in the nest. They were motionless. Without checking, she knew they were gone. She got her car keys and with a gentleness she reserved for the living, placed the nest on the shelf in the garage. *We've got today. That's right.*

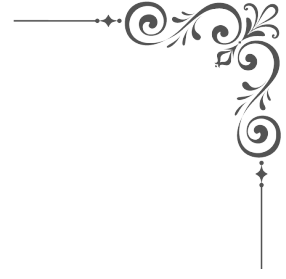
"Come on boys. Let's go see your father."

After dinner, they conducted a back yard ceremony. Glenn gave a passionate speech about how God was in all things, and the birds with nest were interred in the earth, inside a Christmas paper wrapped cigar box.

That night in bed, she stared listlessly out the window and then checked her bedside clock. She heard her son climb out of bed and sneak down the hallway: probably to make sure his brother was still alive. She heard Kahle go back to bed. Then she dropped off to sleep and into a nightmare, drowning beneath a black tide.

*Oh, a storm is threat'ning
My very life today
If I don't get some shelter
Oh yeah, I'm gonna fade away
War, children, is just a shot away*

- "Gimme Shelter", The Rolling Stones



Yellow

KAHLE WATCHED, UNNOTICED, as Mom tottered into the kitchen. Her eyes were still unfocused. She glanced at him sidelong, the way she looked at stray dogs or snakes; things that were dangerous to look at directly, things that bit. *Do you still love me, Mommy? Do you love me?*

She filled her mug at the coffee maker, face frowning a puffy full moon. She realized he was watching and came over and hugged him, making the muscles in his back and neck relax. Her robe exuded the usual sweet smell of fabric softener, but today it was mixed with the flat onion scent of stale sweat, like his footy pajamas after an evening of horror movies.

“How are you?” She asked. “Did you sleep okay?” Her hand warmed him from the center of his back, protective.

He nodded though he’d seen the birds again last night. Feathers painted grey as slate, eyes floating motionless, they crawled closer across the bed sheets until their black beaks tore wet strips of flesh from his stomach. He felt cold and disoriented. Winter’s frozen fingers had invaded his bedroom and wrapped a fist around his beating heart. He shivered involuntarily and his mother let go, perhaps mistaking it for a shrug.

He went into the living room alone. Noyce was still asleep. Probably growing again mom said. He had the cartoons on in moments. Space Ghost fought an alien that looked like a large praying mantis. It glowered convincingly and bared its mandibles. By the first commercial their conflict absorbed him and the birds were forgotten. Then the episode ended with the mantis’s crushing defeat and Kahle searched the television guide for the next show.

Mom emerged from her bedroom with her hair wet and the Stratocaster under her arm. The guitar hung from her shoulder, giving her a shot of badass coolness. “Do you have any requests?”

Kahle thought for a minute. Usually, Noyce chose “I’m Your Boogie Man” by KC and The Sunshine Band and Kahle followed with “Eight Days a Week” he’d heard on Scooby Doo during a wonderful episode that guest starred Speed Buggy. But he wasn’t in that kind of mood.

His nightmare was forgotten but the residue remained, bitter dustings amongst his thoughts. Then the song came to him he'd heard in the car with Dad, on the way home from school. "How about 'Gimme Shelter' by the Rolling Stones? You know the Stones, Mom."

"I know the Stones." But she didn't move. She just watched him the way she did when he was roaring with fever or the inhaler failed to stop the coughing and she'd had to bring him to the hospital for a breathing treatment.

"Mom?"

"Yeah, honey." She held the guitar by the neck, and searched his face with her eyes.

"Is everything okay?" Kahle asked.

"Everything's fine. It's all in order. That's right. Just how we like it." And then she started to play. Slowly at first, holding each note to vibrate the air in a gentle stutter. After a few chords she warmed to it, and her play accelerated. Her fingers crawled along the strings with an exactness, a rightness that made him feel they were a spider, spinning the strings instead of playing them.

"How do the lyrics go, Mom?"

"I'm not going to teach you the lyrics, honey."

Even without words, the song felt good. He could feel the pulse as it picked up the pace and power in the middle chords where the chorus would be. It crackled in his ears where it was absorbed into his flesh. She stopped playing.

"It's enough of that for now."

"Why did you stop, Mom?"

"Her baby...never mind, honey."

He wanted more of it, that feeling. It was like only eating half a chocolate bar and having to save the rest for after dinner. He looked at the clock. "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood" wouldn't be on television until three o'clock. It wasn't fair. There were comic books in his bedroom, but he wasn't in the mood for them. They were cool. They were blue.

He wandered the kitchen, looking for a distraction. Sun streamed in the bay window over the sink, where it was mashed flat across the linoleum floor. It was yellow. It was warmer. It was better. He could see Mom in the living room, just a few steps away.

The cutlery drawer was just to his left. His hand moved on its own, and without turning his head he reached inside and took out a fork, encouraged by a small but confident voice.

It wasn't Mother. She was restringing her guitar as it lay on her lap, her lips moving silently, regaling a crowd of phantoms with an acapella version of "Shooting Star" by Bad Company. It wasn't Father. He was working overtime at

the factory. Kahle scanned subway tile backsplashes and wood veneer cabinets to no avail.

The electrical socket beckoned him. Its outline was so crisp, the edges of the plastic surreal, the slots inside inviting. The tines of the fork belonged in those slots. Inside was good. Inside was yellow. Maybe he could fly if he were yellow. Maybe he could find the birds and bring them back.

There was a jolt when the fork made contact and a bit of smoke, the tines discolored a cerulean blue. It was as good as he'd hoped. Something tasty and metallic rose in the back of his throat traveled up his spine and thumped into his brain. The spark was sweet and sharp. It was yellow. It was yellow and black like the sea snake on that TV special. And for a moment he was flying.

His mother heard the pop of the electrical arc, looked up in surprise. She'd realized what he'd done, bounded from her chair and knocked the fork out of his hands, breaking the circuit. She swept him up, inspecting his hands and mouth, looking in his eyes. "Are you okay?"

"Yes."

"Why did you do that, Kahle? That's not safe. I've told you that's not safe." Drops of her saliva pattered his face. Her hands wrapped around his arms, thumbs and forefingers hooked under his armpits. He thought for a moment she would start shaking him.

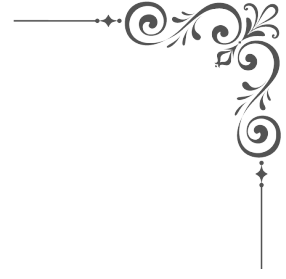
"What's wrong with you?" Her eyes searched his for some unspoken explanation.

Her concern echoed from the far end of a culvert. It took all of his will not to slump to the floor, empty at a wordless loss, as if she had taken away his Scooby Doo lunchbox.

He stored the memory deep down, a crow hiding a button or a shiny bit of wire. For years, he would bring it out periodically and examine it in the privacy between his ears. As a teenager, awash in the emotion that came with the times, he would find a name for it: longing.

When he didn't reply, she held him to her chest, overwhelming him with heat. She threw the fork in the trash, strapped him into the car, and carried his still sleeping brother outside in his pajamas. Kahle was silent for the entire ride to the hospital.

He didn't say anything as her outline used the phone in the lobby, her hands wild branches waving in the air. Noyce sat behind him, rubbing sleep from his eyes. Before the nurse pulled back the curtain, Kahle watched mom's head dip and then turn and stare intently, the way she did when she and Dad made an important decision that filled her with unease.



Black Widow



THEY WERE GOING TO try and fix him. That's why they were here. The realization left him feeling alone and isolated. It was nice though to sit in Father's lap. He used Frankincense oil instead of aftershave and when his pores exhaled, Kahle was gifted a spicy scent both welcome and singular.

He held several of Dad's fingers trapped in his fist, where the fine down of hair on dad's knuckles tickled his palms. Like the waiting room at the doctor or lines for the ring toss at the fair, it was calming.

The new man seemed familiar. He walked like Mom and Dad and talked their strange language of abbreviations. Still, Kahle wanted to go home and climb trees with Noyce.

"Thank you for being willing to see us," Mom said.

"So it's all of you then?"

"I'm being serious, David. Though it is good to see you again."

Mr. David said, "Anything for a couple of fellow 'Devil Dogs' I always say. You know this isn't necessarily my specialty, Edie."

"Well you're a psychologist now, aren't you? You said you handle the difficult cases. People who are disturbed."

"Right but he's not necessarily disturbed." Mr. David was pulling on his tie. He smoothed his hair though it was short enough to only require a brushing.

"And children are a bit different. There's no guarantee he'll open up to an adult. So he's talkative is he?"

"I wouldn't say that," Mom said.

"Well if you want a result I'll need your consent to talk to him alone. Are you okay with that, Edie? Glenn? Alright then. I have another appointment coming soon. Probably best you're not here when he arrives so maybe we can get started."

"Certainly. And there won't be any record?" She asked.

"That's right. Nothing. Totally informal." He bent at the waist and extended his hand to Kahle for a shake. "I'm Mr. David, Kahle good to meet you."

Kahle took the hand and shook. He didn't seem so bad. Mr. David looked at his watch and led Kahle down the hall to an office with a long brown leather couch and two chairs framed in black lacquered wood. Mr. David leaned against his desk instead of sitting down. He smiled at Kahle wistfully. "Would you like to just talk?"

I like him. "Yes. Okay. Do you know my Mom and Dad?"

"We were in the Army together."

"Were you in their band?"

"I was not in their band. I just listened. So Kahle, would you like to talk about the birds?" He handed Kahle a GI Joe that probably belonged to his own son and Kahle was flooded with gratitude. But he was still afraid. Because Mr. David's quick eyes and easy manner reminded him of the police officer, only without the blue uniform.

The officer's name had been Mr. Ted. He kept asking if any of the kids had seen the car accident. His eyes seemed to grow larger as you spoke, concentrating on every consonant like it was the most important thing he'd ever heard. He concentrated especially on Kahle. Perhaps Kahle's eyes had betrayed him or the rigid way he held his arms at his sides, his hands curled into fists, the tension refusing to leave.

The car had been going too fast. That was obvious to him, though the man behind the wheel had made an 'O' of surprise when the sedan had rocketed through the intersection and crumpled his car like a sheet of paper. There was black smoke then too. Everyone seemed to want to know about it.

He sighed. Unlike last time, he spoke. "You're a friend?"

"Yes, I'm a friend, Kahle."

"And you won't tell?"

"I pinky swear."

"Well, I saw the nest. It was me and Noyce. Black smoke came out of it so I took it to Mom. She helps people. I thought she could help them." Kahle felt heavy. The image pulled at him, making it difficult to speak or raise his arms. He was a snowsuit filled with winter slush, logy like the bags of concrete mix they found at construction sites. His eyelids fluttered.

Mr. David asked, "Would you like to talk about something else?"

Kahle was quiet and Mr. David was quiet with him, like Dad. He thought about asking his question. Mr. David seemed nice. If he knew, he would answer. "Does everyone die?"

Mr. David was motionless. "What did your Mom and Dad say?"

"They said yes."

Mr. David spoke in slow motion. "Well then..."

Kahle had stopped playing with the GI Joe. The question was all he could think about. "What happens after?"

Mr. David frowned for the first time. "We don't really know, Kahle. I like to think that we go to a good place."

"What about the people who are mad?"

Mr. David shifted on his desk as if he had inadvertently sat on a stapler.

A buzz echoed from the lobby.

"I'm sorry, Kahle. I have to take that. I have a patient. But we can talk again."

Kahle doubted it. Mr. David evaded him with his eyes as he said it, looking down and to the left. Mr. David pressed a button on his desk to open the outside door and Kahle walked with him back to the lobby.

"You can keep the GI Joe, Kahle. My son outgrew it."

"So why do you have it?"

"To remind me..." He broke off his sentence.

Framed in the doorway was a tall man, gaunt as a wire clothes hanger. "I've been waiting out here." His hands pawed the air.

Mr. David said, "Hi, Dennis. I'm just finishing up."

"Why are these people here?" Hangar Man asked. "Have you been talking to them about me?"

"Of course not, Dennis. Let's talk about this."

"No one is supposed to be here. That was the agreement."

It was happening again. Kahle bent over, covering his ears. Hangar Man's aura had exploded into a kaleidoscope of red and black, a widow spider that crouched on his back, its fangs buried into the sides of his neck, filling his mind with venom. Kahle whimpered. "Mom."

Mr. David pushed his glasses up his nose. "It's okay, Dennis. They're friends."

Kahle resisted the urge to squeeze his eyes shut.

"They're not my friends," Hangar Man said. "I knew it. I knew I couldn't trust you. You're like everyone else. You're a liar." His eyes shifted like a deer caught in a forest fire on television, like Bambi's mother before the flames came.

"I did not lie, Dennis. I am here to help you." Mr. David raised his hands to shoulder level with his palms out.

Hangar Man reached into his coat. "I'm going to do what I should've done six months ago."

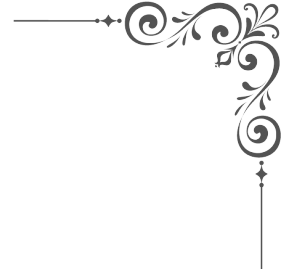
Mom and Dad must have seen Kahle's terror because they were moving before Hangar Man could finish raising his arm, the barrel of the gun looming darkly, deep as a canyon and freighted with bad tidings. Dad had the man under

the elbow, guiding the arm upward toward the ceiling. Mom was in a full crouch, Noyce pulled tight to her. Her foot shot out to hook Hanger Man's trailing ankle.

His body twisted, incisors visible in his open mouth. "I'll see you at the crossroads!"

Mr. David grabbed Kahle and threw them both to the floor. The gun went off, and Kahle swore that thunder had ignited beside them, shattering the air into fragments of plaster.

Dad was turning, his right hand rising from his hip, the knuckles getting larger as they approached the Hanger Man's face. Hanger Man's finger flexed again and the barrel loomed, dark as the leeway beneath a country bridge. *The black smoke is coming for me.*



The Call

THE POLICE LEFT. THE boys waited outside in the car, with their father. It was one of the few times that David Burge had seen Edie scared.

She asked, "Okay, so no psych report? I don't want him labeled."

"It's the least I can do, Edie. You guys saved my life. I still don't know how he..." He rubbed the back of his neck with a dusty palm.

She squeezed her hands together. "But what do we do?"

Hell if I know. "He's a good kid with a good heart, Edie. That's what matters. Much like his asthma, he may grow out of it. After childhood, the world is a different place. You guys are doing a great job, considering. He's going to be fine. Don't wait so long next time to say hello." He touched her arm just below the elbow. She nodded and said goodbye.

He kept his word. There was no report. But the moment stuck with him. He dreamed that night and every night after about the gun rising, the barrel stretching across the gap until the tip kissed his forehead, followed by the click of the round chambering and the slice as it approached up the barrel.

His eyes picked out tall, thin men in the walk from the parking garage and followed them until they disappeared. He mixed glasses of rum and coke after returning from the office and kept them coming until he fell asleep in front of the television.

It was my fault. He clearly missed whatever signs were there. He canceled cleaning service for the rest of the week and laid the case out on his office floor, perusing it anew from the first page.

Yes, the patient had a history of paranoia. Sure, he'd verbalized a desire to inflict violence but he'd never actually committed any. His job was the same. So were his relationships. And he'd said something when he pulled out the gun. It didn't make any sense. There was no obvious trigger. Unless he had a dislike for children.

What about his savior? Kahle was an intuitive boy but a gift like that was a large burden for a child. Despite what he'd told Edie, he had no idea what effect that would have on his development. *What if he didn't grow out of it?*

He would've liked to have more time with him but that wasn't going to happen. He would describe it to Kahle like a bad case of asthma: a sensitivity to his surroundings to guard and protect.

There were programs for people like that. Otherwise, Kahle could spend decades wondering what was wrong with him, and wake up someday stuck in a dead-end job at a factory, only to retire with an environmental issue or lousy pension.

He consulted a friend in Virginia (off the record, pro bono).

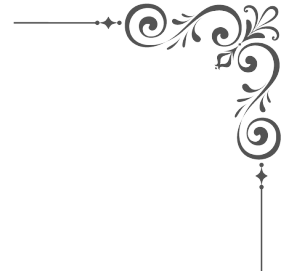
A hidden listener followed the conversation with interest.

Factory Rat: Person who gets stuck in a dead-end blue-collar job at a factory and spends decades in a position he despises; only to retire with an environmental issue or lousy pension.

Urban Dictionary

Factory Rat: an artisan who creates in the cathedral known as the manufactory. They are clever, committed, and resourceful problem solvers. They gain satisfaction from fashioning products that give joy to others. They are the salt of the Earth.

Author Unknown, "Production Methods in Small Lots for the Manager of Managers"



Pied Piper, 1998

RICK BORDA HAD CONVINCED his prospect to drive a full day through a blizzard, for a company that was rapidly going down the tubes. He considered himself a wily man ... except when it came to Wesley Brummert. The phone rang and he scooped it out of its cradle.

“My good man. How’s recruitment going? Tell me about our goals,” Wesley asked.

Speak of the devil, the devil appears. “We’re progressing, Wesley. I’ve got a new prospect coming tomorrow. On those targets...”

“The targets are the targets, Rick. You know the rules.”

Rick stood in front of his desk and leaned backward against it, his hands opened palm up (when she was still alive, his wife had called it the “we come in peace” gesture) as if Wesley were across the room instead of across the state. “Maybe we can talk about that. You know the factory is like a titan...”

“Heard the story. But I can read the numbers. I know everything I need to know about Frampton.”

Rick visualized Wesley waving him off, his eyes upon the Chicago skyline. “...But...”

“There are no buts, Rick. You’re part of the old guard. I get that. Bodge could count on you so I figured I could too. I need you to think big. People are counting on us. To accomplish Motomax 2000, I need leaders who are committed. Is that you?”

“You know I am.”

“What we need, Rick, is people. A lot of people. We’ve got a backlog of orders to push out. I need you to bring them in from everywhere. I’ve heard your spiel. I like it. It’s good. Makes Frampton sound like a paid vacation. Keep it up. You’re a regular pied piper.”

Getting them was easy. But the Frampton Plant swallowed new hires like sailors into a whale. Rick visualized himself pitching employees into inky black ocean waters where orcas shredded the weak and infirm. It was agony for him when they quit or worse yet, he had to fire them.

Wesley took a breath and changed tack. “I realize I’m different than Julian Bodge. But he’s gone, God rest his soul. And we need men on those machines, Rick. I’m not telling you to give an employee badge to anyone that can fog a mirror. I’m just saying we’re going to have to loosen those standards.”

Rick threw up a little bit in his mouth. “Yes, sir.” He felt disembodied. He’d been the architect of all this. Old Man Bodge had given him latitude. But Bodge was dead. Sure Bodge had been a little flamboyant for taste, but Wesley was different. Their conversations left him feeling impotent, the power drained away.

“Motomax is bigger than one factory, Rick. It’s bigger than just one man. Look here, do you ever watch the fights?”

“No, sir.”

“Oh, well. Never mind. Send me an update at the end of the week. Together we’re going to make this company great. Make it happen, man.” And then he hung up.

Fifteen years of his life had gone into the bone and marrow of Motomax. His grandchildren stared down from picture frames on top of his credenza. He wondered what they were doing now. His daughter, Megan, probably had a pitcher of lemonade waiting for them while they played on the swing set he’d assembled last summer. The condensation would leave a ring on the table that used to sit in his kitchen.

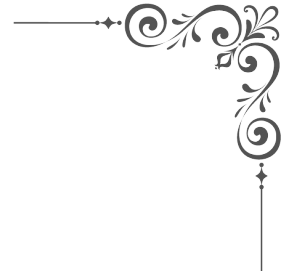
Motomax had paid for all of that. He picked up the yellow legal pad with his list of prospects and started dialing the phone.

*Ere does a man not live
Ere does a man not lie
Ere does a man not die
In the path of a flexible bullet*

*Ere may a man yet eat
Ere may a man yet drink
Ere may a man yet love
In the path of a flexible bullet*

*Thus may it all be so
Thus it be not a lie
Thus may a man not die
If he gat him a flexible bullet*

Major S. King, Royal Marines,
The Ballad of the Flexible Bullet



The Interview

KAHLE BELIEVED IN SECOND chances. Not that he had a choice. More specifically, he believed his chance was a woman. Beezor Wasikowska was here. He would find her. If he failed, he would walk back out the doors and into the snow. And not worry about what would come after that.

The lobby reminded him of a train station: brass and tile, sandstone arches and parquet floors. He waited beyond wood double doors, the walls closing in, his blue suit clinging to him box-like, a fabric coffin after years in fatigues.

The secretary said, "You sure had quite a drive."

With shaking hands, he accepted her glass of cold water and the layer of small talk she doled out along with it.

She swiveled in her chair. "I had family in Wisconsin too *and* a cousin in the military... Frampton is nice, with the lake and all. Summer you'll see, it's all just so fine...Working at Motomax isn't so bad."

He clung to her patter like a swimmer on a rope. It was a welcome distraction, mild anesthetic after hours in the car. So when her aura peeked out he was caught unawares. Frills of hunter green tickled the air around her, surrounded her head like so many dead saints, before spreading down to corset her waist. They reached for him across the space: naked fingers without the flesh. The intimacy shamed and mesmerized him, too strong for him to look away.

Instead, he waited for her mind to react. As reflex he'd seen in the past: disgust, rage, or most common of all, a sort of curiosity; a child finding a toy they thought long lost. The remedy was usually abrupt. She would excuse herself. Send him away. Distract him with some minor detail. An inner eye followed with soulless detachment as she prattled on, oblivious.

In the army, such attacks had crippled him. It occurred in Bosnia and again in the states, stuck behind an ambulance in the center of traffic. He'd given up pretending it was normal. What he needed was someone to burn it away. What he need was a healing, and salvation lay behind that gate.

It was a sort of relief when Mr. Borda opened the doors. He waved with his left hand and said, "Please, do come in." He extended his palm for a three pump

handshake then Kahle did what he was told and came in and sat down.

Just like on the phone, Mr. Borda's voice soothed as smooth as cough syrup. They bantered about the blizzard outside. His demeanor was relaxed and confidential as if to say, "Your secrets are safe with me."

Mr. Borda started in. "So, tell me about yourself."

Kahle wanted to confess everything: He knew Bee worked here (her real name was Beezor) and anywhere she was, is where he wanted to be. Instead, he gave his practiced response. "I'm a Swale graduate with a degree in engineering, originally from Wisconsin. Spent six years in the Army. I'm looking for a new career where I can apply what I've learned."

Mr. Borda nodded through the elevator speech with his head cocked to the side. He asked, "What do you already know about Motomax?" His eyes were open and unblinking, twin pupils floating in a vastness of white. *Tell me. You can tell me anything.*

Kahle kept his hands in his lap. "Well, you're in the automotive and aviation industries."

"Very good," Mr. Borda said. "We service the automotive, aviation, and oilfield industries. Julian Bodge and Dallas Haight started the company, beginning with the plant you're seated in now. Starting small, they built a powerhouse applying the latest tools of financial management. We apply these tools even now, creating the success you see around you."

Kahle nodded, attempting to appear friendly and intelligent. Mr. Borda seemed the sort of man who lived next door and took pride in the orderliness of his lawn. It was just a feeling, but it calmed him.

"What interests you the most about Motomax?"

Kahle wanted to blurt out, "The woman of my dreams works here," or "I'm chasing a flexible bullet." Instead, he said, "The spirit of innovation and that Frampton is the center."

Mr. Borda rose from his chair and made a sweeping gesture with his arms, as if all of this would one day be Kahle's. "Of the twelve factories that make up Motomax, fifty percent of the volume is generated here."

Mr. Borda scooped the paperweight from his desk and held it between them. "Like the Titan Atlas, the Frampton plant balances Motomax across its back. It is said that 'As goes Frampton, Ohio, so goes Motomax.' Eight hundred souls fill a billet here. Machine operators, quality inspectors, craftsmen, and engineers form the muscle, do the heavy lifting."

He rubbed his hands together. "Machine shops, assembly lines, heat treat furnaces, and stamping presses serve as the backbone." Mr. Borda pointed down. "The presses produce the vibration you feel in your feet right now. Most

importantly, computer systems pass customer orders around the factory. They're the blood that keeps us alive."

Mr. Borda returned to his chair and retrieved Kahle's file from the blotter. "Well, your questionnaire came back tip top, Kahle. I have no further questions. The pay is forty-five thousand dollars per year with benefits and paid overtime."

He leaned back and perched his glasses down on his nose, "There's no layoffs, since we *are* automotive, lifetime employment, generous pension. We are a bit of a resort town here, too." He waved a hand toward the ceiling. "Nothing like Daytona Beach, but lots of people come in the summer to enjoy the lake. You would report to Gary Queeg, Quality Supervisor for the Selva truck line, working as a quality engineer."

Kahle understood from practice sessions with his parents that this was a buy sign. "I won't disappoint you, Mr. Borda. You'll be glad you hired me." This seemed easier than he'd expected, but he tucked away any doubts.

Mr. Borda pushed a form across his desk. "Yup. Just sign here next to the X and give me a thumbprint to the right. Good. Welcome to the team. In a few days, you should receive two books I recommend you read right away. There's the history of Motomax and a second on management statistics. I've arranged a meeting with your superior for coffee. Watch for traffic on the aisles."

Kahle purchased two cups of coffee for sixty cents each in the machine on the walkway. It passed in front of the supervisor's office and then met with the main run, where it traveled the distance of three football fields. It was thirty-five cents for the same coffee at the machine across that main drag. And it was three months in traction, *easy* if you didn't look both ways crossing and got hit by a fork truck.

He found Queeg's office right away and handed him a steaming cup. Kahle asked, "Has anyone ever gotten hit by a fork truck walking to the cheaper coffee machine?"

"Well, in last week's safety bulletin some guy got a leg crushed by a semi when it backed into him at the loading dock. Three people lost at least a finger on a lathe, but it's been at least two years since we've had a fatality here. So promotions are a little slower."

Kahle didn't know what to make of his supervisor. The secretary had related that Queeg was a former tennis pro gone to seed. He had parleyed his sales skills and a fearsome command of the dark arts into a fifty thousand dollar per year job, including weekends without pay and an office the size of an elevator shaft. According to her, he was somewhat bitter.

Queeg was thin, except where his stomach protruded, below a full beard going grey and a pair of wire rimmed glasses. Through uneven, nicotine-stained

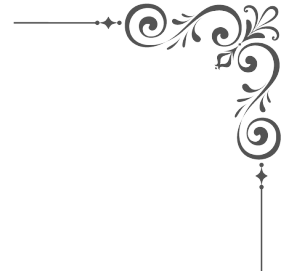
teeth he asked, "Do you play any tennis?"

"Uh, for a quarter in high school."

"Well, it's a lot like manufacturing. I played for a couple of years, you know. Yeah, I could've gone all the way my coach used to tell me, but the knee went out in college." Queeg slapped the side of his left knee for emphasis and nodded. Kahle nodded too, it seemed like the right thing to do.

The secretary had been quite a talker. The truth was, in college, Gary had usually been stoned. Mary Turley had sneaked him his first joint behind the student union between chemistry and basic calculus. His status as a child of Aquarius had risen rapidly and his tennis game had deteriorated in a directly inverse fashion. She sure knew a lot about him.

They sat staring at each other until Queeg asked, "You got an apartment yet?" When Kahle shook his head "no", Queeg said, "Well, you better get started. You've got three days and the weekend before you start work Monday morning." He remained seated, giving Kahle a handshake that felt more like a wave goodbye. When Kahle disappeared through the turnstiles and out the gate, he could still see him watching as he checked over his shoulder. A seed of disquiet pressed upward inside him.



Katsumoto

HE TRAILED HIS POTENTIAL landlord up a wide staircase. It was the second floor of a brown brick building, almost high enough to see down to the bay.

“All of this used to be one house,” she said, stitched into a goose down coat. Her red ears poked out from a white cotton headband, growing redder as they trundled room to room. Kitchen. Gas stove. Bedroom. Steam heat. Spare bedroom. Closets. He’d ridden on adrenaline across miles of snow. Now it was fading. Puffy clouds of boredom traced the skies in his head.

She pointed past smokestacks to the water beyond. “The original owner became wealthy by importing across the lake from Canada. I think he was a veteran, like you.”

In his imagination, a thin man appeared in the hall, turned out in black suit below a stiff white collar, bowler hat just so in the cup of his hand. He paused in the kitchen and gave Kahle a slight nod.

“It’s that obvious?” Kahle was incredulous, as if witnessing a card trick without detecting the feint.

“Set of the shoulders.” She held her hands up like she had caught a large northern pike. “Width of the shoulders. Yes, no, and please. It’s obvious.” She lowered her hands. “When the depression hit he turned to smuggling before eventually they caught him and sent him to prison. But he never gave up his partners. Honor among thieves and all that.”

Kahle handed her the deposit which she shoved in her purse.

“Died behind bars only six months later.” She grew silent, measuring him now, some idea arrived on a cold gust of wind. “Maybe he should have stayed in the army.”

The phantom flickered before descending the stairs.

“Rent’s due on the first and late on the fifth,” she said, then handed him the key and left.

Silence surrounded him as her footfalls faded. His heart beat thrashed deep down in his ears. No fellow officers were going to call. No classmates to stop by to share a brief dinner. Noyce was back home and so were his parents. He went

to the bathroom and regarded the mirror; hunting the twin who had birthed this idea.

He needed to get out. Distraction. On automatic, he put on his coat and descended the stairs, climbed in his car and drove away from the lake. The dodgy looking movie theater he'd passed coming into town appeared to his right and he pulled into the parking lot.

Up close, it had a battered charm. The façade was clean, hand-painted in shades of red and gold. Old and new movies declaimed from the handbills, stapled just so in a glass-covered case.

He stepped to the ticket booth and asked what was showing.

The man behind the glass tore a stub from a reel of tickets. "Only showing one. That'll be seven dollars."

He picked a middle seat before the lights went down for "The Last Samurai". Tom Cruise strutted across the screen.

As Captain Nathan Aubrey, looking the part in blue coat with gold buttons. He even got the stance right. He'd lost his honor by following orders and compensated by remaining perpetually drunk. The performance was too real. To watch shame disembowel a soldier, a Medal of Honor winner, felt awkward.

Aubrey's mission was to help General Hasegawa defeat the samurai army and their leader, Katsumoto. They had served together and now Hasegawa refused to oppose him. Kahle and his fellow officers had been loyal, like these men. And now they were gone. Well, he was gone and just as well.

The talk of honor left a lump in his throat, made his face feel hot. Honor was wearing the uniform. He recalled the pride he felt when putting it on, and the sensation taking it off that there was no one underneath; that the man in the uniform was somebody else, and the man without it was nothing at all.

Active duty had jaded him. His eyes tracked the retired Sergeant Major or Army Colonel, shrunken in their non-military jobs, scattered around bases that served as their refuge. Uniforms that still fit hung pressed and unworn, standing watch in bedroom closets. *Let the process run its course and you'll end up like them*, he told himself, adrift without morning cadence calls and the bugle of evening taps.

But still. The Army exerted a gravitational pull akin to a dwarf star. He scanned crowds for the olive drab pattern of a battle dress uniform. His eyes lingered on passing recruitment office signs. Salvation lay within.

He could go back. The letter was in his glove box. He'd recognized the seal on the envelope before he even read the words, traveling the three pages with shaking hands. If he came back in, the Army would promote him to Major.

Kahle was disgusted at his own weakness. He could make coffee for a Colonel this time.

His missing peers ached in his mind like a phantom limb. For all he knew, they were dying in some third world shithole, covering for Kahle who was on the dole, paying his share along with theirs. His throat constricted. A pressure on his chest made it hard to breathe. Regret flared behind his eyes like the tongues of infection.

On the screen, Katsumoto led hundreds of samurai armed with swords, bows, and arrows in preparations to attack thousands of soldiers bristling with rifles. He led the rebellion out of loyalty to the emperor, to help him choose his own way, by forcing him to lead.

Kahle memorized their expressions; invigorated before a death most certain. As the profession demanded, they accepted their destiny without fear and made peace with it. They would live or die together.

He'd left his brethren over selfish need; for personal happiness, to become his own man. He'd left his brethren alone and unprotected. He'd done what he'd been trained to do. He'd run, betraying them all for a flexible bullet.

He had rebelled. And rebellion was always punished. No matter how miserable army life had been, he yearned for it now with a breathless ardor. He had no honor left. He was fallen. He was masterless. He was Ronin. He was lost.

He dreamt that night of crossing the bridge into Frampton. The air smelled faintly of gasoline. A low wail filled his ears from the holes in the floorboards. The headlights sliced through growing darkness, illuminating fat snowflakes that sizzled against the windshield. The wheels crunched forward making a whump-whump-whump on the wooden crossbeams. He eased up on the gas at the sign for Frampton, expecting the rest of the trip to be light. The steering wheel spun at the touch of his hand.

Careless, he'd missed black ice that had coated the bridge. In the skip of two heartbeats the rear tires caught the ice. The back end of the car fishtailed. *Don't panic.* He pumped the brakes. No response. He wrenched the wheel, turning into the skid like he'd been taught-but the car resisted. It slid across the ice into the oncoming lane until he was staring off the bridge out over the river. Momentum carried the car forward. It punched through the railing, and the roadbed was replaced by a series of choppy greycaps. He held tight to the steering wheel though his body grew weightless. He howled a wordless scream as he fell without ever meeting the water.



A Traveling Salesman, Spring, 1932



“WHAT IS FAITH, EVERETT?” Father was bent at the waist, looking Everett in the eye.

Everett shrugged his shoulders and then repeated what he’d heard Father say, so many times before, “Faith is the substance of things hoped for and the evidence of things unseen.”

Father’s eyes rolled side to side, watchful of his expression. “So what does that mean to you?”

Everett pushed his hands into his pockets. “I don't really know.”

Father put on his straw hat and stood up straight. “When you know, son, when you know it in your heart, the world will be a different place.”

That had been their first conversation this morning, and then Father had left him to do his chores.

Everett Steiner was born of the earth. Or it seemed he was always covered by dirt. Father said Everett was a Golem, that he’d breathed life into clay by placing the hidden name of God on his tongue. Everett stuck his tongue out in the mirror but saw nothing. He looked it up the next trip to the library.

He was small, short, and thick across the shoulders for a ten-year-old, with a shock of dirty black hair. He’d been able to talk ten months after he was born, and run at two years. Now he did both at once, at full speed.

His mother had laid him out coveralls and a long-sleeved shirt this morning, to hold off the sunburn. Everett had insisted on dressing himself and got red in the face when she helped comb his hair.

He loved the stalks of corn and the sweet smells that came with them. He walked the rows now, enjoying the shade and cool touch of the cobs. He understood the patience necessary to put a seed in the ground and water it for a whole season, hoping for a result. He learned the faith to believe that those seeds would one day sprout and become a harvest.

Once again, he was alone. Father was gone today, helping some stranger, and his mother working on chores. He felt a jealousy for the sick stranger and the needy cows, as they took his parents away. Normally when his father had a call like this, he would take Everett with him. If they got done early enough, they would go by the store for a soda pop. Not today. Today his father had insisted that he go alone.

Father liked helping people even more than he'd liked farming. He and Everett sitting side by side in the dark, listening to some poor farmer with the grippe, a persistent cough, a stiffness in the neck, or occasionally something more.

Dad never had formal medical training, yet he was often asked to nurse the sick. Their spouse would be there as well, the strain evident in their voice. Father would capture their words, soundlessly, his head nodding a rhythm as they reeled out the symptoms. He was a slight man, slow to anger with the clearest brown eyes. Maybe that was why they trusted him.

He would ask a question in a low voice about how long had the fever been going on, had anything changed in their schedule, was there any exposure to wild animals? He would recommend a medicine, or sleep, or a specialist in that same voice. Then he would place his hand on his patient's forehead if he was confident they would be alright.

They remained in his lap if news was bad. *Patient might not survive.* Or he was unsure. His prognoses were remarkably accurate. As the news traveled of the farmer healer, many a farm spouse watched his hands to detect the unspoken diagnosis.

If it was a close thing, he might fetch the medicine himself, Everett riding in the car with him, blowing out gusts of words, and then return to his charge remaining with them for hours or days until they recovered or passed on.

His kindness was well known. What he kept to himself and his family were his dreams. Sometimes he woke and dressed, his mouth would be hanging open, his eyes searching blindly for a sunrise that wouldn't come for several hours. He would put his hand on mom's side and say, "I just had the most amazing dream." Everett knew. He could hear them.

In the beginning, she had ignored it, thought it the habit of a romantic, or the side effect of drink, until they started to come true.

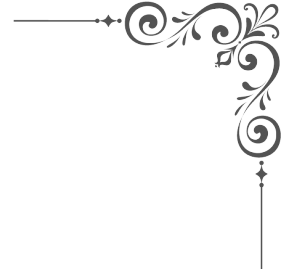
It all began with a traveling salesman. Eli had received a message this morning to help a stranger; and as always, he had gone. The man had come to town hoping for a tidy sale but found the farmers here were no different than farmers everywhere else. They had no money.

He'd made a few sales calls the first couple of days and then holed up in his room at the bed and breakfast on Main Street, ordering plates brought up until his money had run out. The owner had gone upstairs to demand he settle his bill and found him listless and sweating, where he lay now, beside a flyblown plate of eggs and toast.

Since the town was too small for a doctor, Anise ("Like the spice," her husband liked to say, "slightly bitter"), sent her boy to retrieve him and ask him to take a look.

Eli arrived at the failing light and followed Anise up the stairs. "Winston" was in the last room, end of the hall on the left. The shades were drawn, but the windows were wide open, trying to create a breeze to cool the man in the bed, wrapped in a loose cotton nightshirt.

He rolled over at the sound of the opening door. His face revealed a set of eyes near black, the light a gloss on steely pupils. His lips were red like blood lipstick, the skin so dry it cracked. Dehydrated, he'd sweated through the nightshirt and all the sheets.



A Rational Universe



ANISE OVERCAME THE urge to leave the room. “Said his name is Winston. Came into town selling machine parts.” Her words came out high, and harsh.

Steiner’s back was to her. “How long has he been like this?”

He’d been up here at least a week. *A week too long, she thought. He’s certainly going to die.* “Oh, not sure,” she lied. “He come from out of town.”

“Water,” her patient rattled, and then, “Burn. I burn.”

Steiner finally turned to look at her after remaining motionless this long and nodded once, “yes”.

Unconsciously she touched her smooth high cheekbones with both hands and shuddered.

Steiner read her then, read her true. She would not help this man without some prodding. He looked back at the salesman, barely seeing him there as the blinds were mercifully closed, and paused, seemed to be unsure of something. He placed his hand on the man’s forehead, absorbing a gratitude that floated through the air like silk and was gone. “It’s just a fever, it’ll pass.”

Anise got the water, placed in on the bedside table and smoothed her dress. “Well, alright then. I’ll send my boy if we need any more help. Thank you for coming.” She nodded and turned slightly toward the door. Eli took the hint, made a final glance at his charge and departed with a nod.

For once Eli Steiner was wrong. Anise stayed on, staring at the guest in her ten-room bed and breakfast like he was a serpent. When Winston turned fitfully in the bed, she noticed what she should have seen before, had missed because of the darkness in the room, the blotchy puck-shaped red swellings that were a sure sign of the pox.

Smallpox.

Certain death.

Anise blanched, still bolted to the floor. *The stranger was done for, water or not.* Her fear of contagion consumed her, ran its way up her spine to tingle behind her eyes. She thought, “If I hand him the water he’ll get pox on the glass. If I touch the glass I could end up like him.”

She fidgeted, her hands turning summersaults at her waist. She started to run them through her hair, remembered the pomade that held it carefully in place and stopped. If word got out she had a sick renter she'd never be able to keep the place full. She was already a month late on the note. The hogs she raised wouldn't be enough to close the gap, even if she sold them all. The bank would call her mortgage and she'd be out on her fanny.

She would do what was right; hide the body and burn the sheets. Ten days later, after sunset, she took the body out to the edge of the forest in a wheelbarrow and buried him deep beneath the pine needles. She hid his car in the barn, under some sailcloth. Later she sold it two towns over.

By then, Eli Steiner was home in bed, delirious, watched over by his wife, Judith. She was more handsome than beautiful. Eli hadn't said it like that when they were dating, though she knew that it was true. What he'd noticed first wasn't her face, (which was broad-cheeked and round), nor her stature, (broad shouldered and thick), it was her aura. She radiated faith.

She had read the Bible and embraced its tenets, but her true cathedral was the ceiling of branches in the woods behind her house. She witnessed faith in action in the birthing of a calf. She saw faith rewarded in the new spring of water they found in their pasture.

Her home reflected her sense of order. It was spare but clean. A clapboard two-story with the front painted crisp white and doors in careful red. She had a small art studio in the sunroom on the back where she occasionally closeted herself or taught her young son.

There was a kitchen table, a couch, a two-hole sink in the kitchen and a second simpler sink in the mudroom. The couch, the table, and cabinets were a simple Jesuit style, clean and functional. She decked the walls in bead board, protecting the plaster from the activity of her two menfolk.

Judith had grown up on a farm. She knew what it took to plant and bring in a crop. She understood that you leveraged everything for tools and seed in the spring, hoping the migrant workers came north to help with the planting, knowing that the fall would bring forth a harvest to make it all worth it. She saw farming and life as being the same: a series of seasons that rose and fell with a rhythm, with structure, with order.

All things and all people had a place in the universe. Things happened, but they happened for a reason, to achieve something better. But the crop last year had not been good. It hadn't been good the year before that.

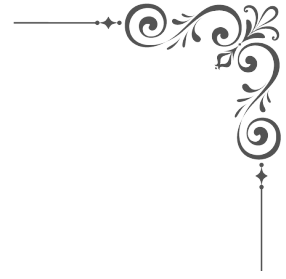
So, faith or not, she could not understand how a generous God in a rational universe would bring her home a sick husband at the beginning of planting

season. Eli Steiner, who had never been sick in his life, never complained, now had taken to bed with a headache and a fever.

Everett was strong for his age, had the work ethic too, but he was no match for his father, a full grown sunrise to sunset working man. She would be the only able-bodied working adult in the household. Judith could keep pace with her husband, but to plant one hundred and sixty acres alone? She could hire help, but every farmer and migrant worker in her town knew you paid out weekly or not at all. And she would have to leave her sick husband alone. All her family was either dead or estranged. Eli and Everett were the only family she had left.

Eli slept soundly. Everett was at the creek. Judith stepped out onto the porch, smoothed her dress and sat in the porch swing. Away on the skyline, the sun was setting. The clouds were shaped like white hooks shot through with yellow and blazing red. She imagined herself there, in the sky, impaled on those hooks, impaled by fate.

Judith rang the bell on the porch to call Everett home and began to get ready for bed. She would stay up as long as she could and nurse her husband. Tomorrow she would have to go to the bank for their seed loan, without him.



Catching Frogs



EVERETT AVOIDED THE inevitable. He was down at the creek, the legs of his coveralls rolled up to the knees, stepping from round stone to round stone, looking for frogs. He heard the bell on the porch, cocked his head and continued his hunt. He knew at some level that danger was near, that his father was sick, but he was only a child and his child's mind was blind to the weight of what was at stake.

Yet his intuition gave impressions that left him wary and moody. What he did know was that Dad could not come out and play. Dad would not be going into town. He spent nearly every waking moment with his father, at his side in the car, riding with him on the tractor, reading in the evening until the sunlight was lost.

His father was his best friend. Farm life was lonely. He looked forward to the occasional festival or visiting relative with an anticipation he admitted to no one. Standing at their wooden fence, looking down the windblown dirt road, he felt an overwhelming ache to see someone, anyone pass down the roadway toward him. His father was kind but taciturn, his mother likewise, so the silence in his home left him perpetually restless.

"What's wrong Everett?" Mom would ask. "You look like a groom that's been left at the altar."

Her light brown eyes and round forehead would gently bob. She would place a coarse hand on the side of his face, sometimes on both, and look him in the eye, unblinking. Her skin smelled of soap and lavender perfume.

"My little dervish. You will find your place in this world, child. The Steiners are a force of nature, boy. Always have been, and you are no different." Her words would placate him for weeks, sometimes even months, to be replaced with a longing that approached sickness.

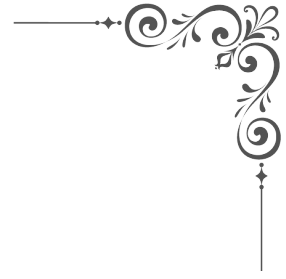
His only respite had been reading. Everett Steiner could and did read everything he could get his hands on. He read the Farmer's Almanac. He read the newspapers, comic books, the bible, and everything available at the small library in town.

Riding with Father, Everett would make him slow down the car so he could read the billboards. It's as if he'd been born burning, like he'd come from his mother's womb hungry for knowledge. He had questions about the stars, the livestock, steam engines, and weather. Everett would ask his mother who quickly become impatient, "There's work to do, boy. I'll answer any question you like once all them cows are milked."

Father had patience to spare. Regardless of what they were doing, he explained the answer in a warm, steady voice. He would even ask at the end if Everett understood the answer. Father likewise had read the Farmer's Almanac, the newspapers, the comic books and the bible, all the books in the library, and a whole lot more.

Sitting beside him, sometimes with a warm hand on his shoulder, his father spoke of places and countries Everett had never seen. Stories so vivid he felt that he was there. With his father nearby he was not just on a farm. He was in a vineyard in Italy or walking fertile fields in Germany.

So the possibility of losing his father was unbearable. He refused to contemplate that besides his mother, he would be alone. The window into the giant world that existed when his father spoke would be gone forever. Everett sighed, picked up his shoes, and began the walk back to the house as fireflies descended with the darkness.



Poker Face

JUDITH ENJOYED A FRIENDLY game of poker with the ladies, by and by. More interesting than knitting, her father had done likewise in the church basement for trifling stakes: an ear of corn, a day of setting fence posts, the recipe to a much desired dish. Always with Judith at his side; tallying the favors, recording commitments.

Her sister nicknamed her “Daddy’s Little Foot Soldier”, and maybe she was. *More than that, I was Daddy’s Little Adding Machine.* She could retrieve it all: Sunday morning collection, the price of corn last week, time till harvest, the balance on the mortgage. It was a skill that tested her, tied her to the worldly things around her. A little bit of poker, what was one more thing? He’d called it a necessary evil, but instructive in the nature of others. And so it was.

Faith hadn’t made her blind. She learned to look for the tell. She played the ladies for buttons, pennies, laudanum, information; her favorite mark was Ruby Creel, banker’s wife. Judith knew as much about her and her husband, Carter, as his wife, wagging tongue and all. Maybe more.

Carter Creel was *the* senior loan officer at State Street Bank on Crestview Row. Thin and high strung, he was a balding man in a brown suit with a bristle-brush moustache. He hadn’t slept well any nights recently.

Before the Great Depression, he’d somehow convinced a headstrong, vivacious dancer that he was flamboyant and fun. She’d since married him and found out the truth. As a form of revenge, she had proceeded to burn through every penny he’d saved and almost everything he’d made; her love a gentle riptide, slowly pulling him under.

The distraction of those first three years of bliss had produced in him a blindness that horrified in hindsight. He’d underwritten many farm loans that his previously sharp eye would have never approved on those terms, some that he would never have approved at all.

As a result, State Street Bank had underwritten, in the name of Carter Creel, quite a few loans that were now in default. He’d always considered himself compassionate, and a friend to the farmer, but he was running out of room to breathe.

Judith shuffled the cards in her mind as she entered his office, before he looked up from his desk. He regarded her warily, making her feel skittish and out of sorts.

He'd written their seed loans for the last three years and they'd always paid come harvest time. The soil they had was decent, and the both of them were diligent in their affairs. Of course, they'd always come together, with their son. And yet today she was here alone. He greeted her, made small talk, and asked the question that she could see was on his mind. "I assume you're here for your seed loan."

"That's right." Her blue dress made her feel confident. *Hold your cards close.*

"Well now, where's your husband? You know he would have to sign the papers as well."

Judith had anticipated his question and practiced her response. "He's been under the weather, a temporary thing."

"Well, we can't really make any exceptions. It is the policy. Is there a chance your husband could still come?"

She visualized her husband walking through the front doors. He'd woken this morning covered with small red sores. No, they certainly wouldn't write a loan to a man in a fight to the death with smallpox. She'd dressed and come anyways, hoping to save their farm. She said, "No. he's got a bit of a fever, not quite up to traveling."

Judith watched his eyes, and knew she'd miscalculated. Like a good poker player, she knew his tell. He blinked several times as the fear blossomed at his shoulders and billowed upward to fill his mind. Carter had known Eli a decade. He'd never seen him with as much as a runny nose. This was the start of planting season. If he wasn't able to travel, he probably couldn't sit a tractor either.

He said, "Well, I'm sorry to hear that, I am. But I don't think we can help you. When Eli is better, maybe he can come in and we'll take care of everything."

She leaned forward in her seat. "We don't know when that will be!" She could feel her resolve beginning to crack, desperate to play her last card. "We've only got a few months and planting season is over!"

Carter closed a ledger on his desk. "Well now, if Eli was here that would be different, but a woman..."

"We're good for the money, we always have been!"

She could tell, the burst of honesty had overwhelmed Carter, reminded him too much of how closely their money trouble mirrored his own. He stood up

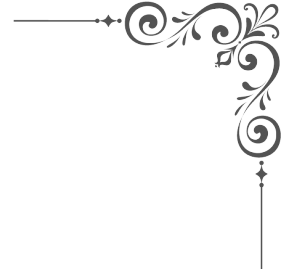
quickly. "I'm sorry, Mrs. Steiner, I am. If the situation changes please let us know."

She staggered, felt something shift in her heart. She could hear it now, beating in her ears, and then her mouth set in a hard flat line. *I'm as good as any man.*

She made a decision. All her life she'd followed the rules and her compliance had brought her here, on the edge of ruin, pleading to a small man in a brown suit. She was going to break some rules, every single one if she needed to. First, she'd save her husband then she'd save her farm. *Bankers be damned.*

She slung her purse over her shoulder and stood up. "I know the way out."

Judith walked to the car, only just avoided breaking into a run. She kept the motorcar to a crawl until the telegraph office where she sent a message to her sister, and a separate one to Doc Vickers, two towns over. Then she wheeled toward the Steiner farm and opened the throttle.



Those Eyes So Cool



NOT FOR THE FIRST TIME, Everett wished he was an adult. He woke before everyone else, except his father, twisting in his second-floor bed. Dad had been delirious and in pain as soon as he woke. He'd said in a croak that it felt like his skin was on fire, the itching was so bad. Mom came in, covered him in calamine lotion and gave him three aspirin. When Dad returned to a fitful sleep, she ordered Everett to watch over his father, and then she left them for the bank.

Everett hugged himself as he paced back and forth. He kept telling himself that this was not happening even though he knew it was.

Father seemed to feel his distress. He opened his eyes, staring in the half light, returning briefly to clarity. "Read for me, son."

Everett stopped pacing. His mouth formed a slight smile. Then he crossed to the bed stand and picked up his father's book. Father sat up slightly in anticipation, looking happy for any distraction for them both. Everett laid the bookmark across his knee, started at the top of the leftmost page, and spoke out loud in a small but powerful voice.

"There was music from my neighbor's house through the summer nights. In his blue gardens men and girls came and went like moths among the whisperings and the champagne and the stars..."

Eli and Everett were reading when Judith got home. She came through the back door, placed her keys on the countertop, and made a pot of coffee.

Doc Vickers had said he would be by today. She'd confided her husband's condition and he said what she already knew, "there's no cure. It's got to run its course."

Judith had been inoculated as a girl. Despite being a farmer and a pastor, her father had also loved science. So she and her sister Dill had been the first in town to get the needle. She'd never thought to do the same for Eli and Everett. They were on a farm in the middle of nowhere. She'd never anticipated the disease's reach would be so far, and yet here she was.

Smallpox could be a death sentence, and her little boy had already been exposed for several days. She sat in their small kitchen and silently wept.

The wait for Doc Vickers seemed to stretch into eternity. The only positive light was her son's small sing-song voice echoing down from the upstairs bedroom. The rhythm was unbroken, except for Eli's occasional grunted encouragement. She listened, unnoticed, with the sensitive ear of a professional mother.

He was such a raw creature. Even as a child he had a wildness about him. A ragged aggressiveness lay just below the skin and around the eyes. He was sweet in his own way, but it was nothing like having a daughter. He reminded Judith of her sister, she thought with apprehension. It'll be hell on wheels if she shows up. Judith felt like a cold glass of gin just thinking about it.

The steadying force with Dill had always been Eli. Somehow he'd seen past that sullen exterior. On their first date, her girl child sister had insisted on tagging along. She'd become attached long before Judith did.

Unlike every other suitor that had come before, he somehow seemed to have all the time in the world: for Judith, for Dill, even for her father. When Dill mentioned she always wanted to see an airplane engine, he'd nodded. On their next date, he'd taken both of them to see a local barnstormer.

Dill had squealed like a stuck pig. She'd stroked the engine of the Curtiss JN-4 "Jenny" with reverence. Judith had had to wipe the grease off Dill before taking her back home; not an easy thing as it went from her hands all the way up her elbows.

Since Dill was usually fighting with Daddy, Eli was a godsend. When he lightly teased, called her "Dilly Pickle" he did so with such a warm smile and a gentleness Judith had no doubts about what kind of father he'd be. Only now he was sick. And a different kind of godsend, as Eli on his deathbed was probably the only thing that could've gotten Dill to come.

Judith needed the help. She needed the help desperately, hellion or not, baggage and all. Her sister was only slightly smaller than Judith and had a capacity for work that was breathtaking, when she felt like working. The two of them with Everett...they would still need seeds. Until Eli could make it to the bank, she didn't know how she could make this work.

The nape of her neck tingled, bringing her back to the moment. Her son had stopped reading, walked down the stairs, and was staring at her. Those eyes so cool, so calculating, and clearly very afraid. *Damn his intuition.*

How long has he been watching? She wondered how much he understood, what was at stake, what could be lost. She opened her arms and her wild curious child came to her, and wrapped his arms around her neck. She was glad for once he didn't ask any questions. She had no answers to give.

Just before dusk, Doc Vickers arrived in a dirt-caked black Model T Ford. *Last stop of the day.* He stepped off the running board slowly in a threadbare black suit and white shirt he'd washed and re-washed many times. He carried his medical case in his right hand past Judith and into the entryway, filling it with the scent of witch hazel.

He nodded by way of greeting and waited as she pointed upstairs, leading him to the master bedroom where her husband now lay. He had brought a small lantern and he lit it now. He held it over his head, illuminating his patient in a dirty yellow glow and asked a single question. "Where'd you get this?"

There was a pause so long he thought Eli wouldn't answer. Eli's eyes opened to slits. "Anise. Salesman."

Doc brought the lantern closer. "Anise at the bed and breakfast?"
"Yes."

Doc muttered under his breath, "I'll pay her a visit." And later he did. He got up from the chair beside the bed and led Judith downstairs where they settled in the kitchen. "How long's he been like that?"

"Couple of days," Judith said.

"Well, it's at the tail end of the cycle. You'll know everything in a couple days more. If he does recover..."

"When," she corrected.

Doc Vickers eyebrows went up and he continued on in a low but firm voice, "If he does recover, there may be side effects. You'll know soon enough. But given your husband's constitution, his chances are excellent."

"You've heard of my husband?"

"Well, it's worth your while to know your competition, isn't it?" He hoped the look in his eyes was kindly and a touch wistful. "Actually, there's no shortage of work, and most people can't pay anyhow. I hope he does get better, he's a good man. Now where's that boy of yours you mentioned? We'll do an exam and I'll come back to give him an inoculation."

When Doc returned, the three of them sat in the kitchen and administered the needle. When he'd finished, he shook Everett's hand and gave him a small salute. "That should do it. Good luck to you, young sir. And ma'am you keep an eye on him for a few days. He might have a slight fever and a few aches but it'll be gone pretty quickly."

Judith finally stopped hugging herself, seeming to relax slightly. "Thank you, Doc Vickers. How much do we owe you?"

They settled the bill and he returned to his car, placed the case on the seat next to him, and headed off home, kicking up plumes of dust as he went. He did like Eli. That had been the truth. *I pray that workhorse gets back on his feet*

before planting season ends and they have a new problem to go along with the first.

*'Cause there's this tune I found that makes me think of you somehow
When I play it on repeat
Until I fall asleep
Spilling drinks on my settee
Do I wanna know if this feeling flows both ways?*

Arctic Monkeys – “Do I Wanna Know?”



Do I Wanna Know? - 1998



MAYBE LIFE WOULD NEVER be this good again. Kahle tried to memorize the moment.

“Are you sure, Captain?” The sergeant asked. Tree patterned fatigues made him seem more somber, the starched edges contrasting with the soft words he was speaking.

“Yes, please.”

The sergeant nodded once and handed over the packet. When they shook hands at the door he held on a moment longer. “If you change your mind, sir, we’ll still be here.”

“Thank you, sergeant, but I’m not a sir anymore.” Kahle descended to the parking lot and fired up his car. Time stood still the sixty feet to the stop sign before he turned onto the main drag and made for the gate.

The air conditioning exhaled the stench of armadillo mouldering at the side of the road. Kahle found it’s corpse without effort: it’s tongue and eyes black, boiling with the bodies of feasting ants. Its crushed shell resembled a tiny ruby-red whale, beached on an emerald shore. Blades of grass flourished around it in shades of virile green, fed by seeping entrails. Young plants poked out beside it’s carapace, their buds the color of bile.

The gates receded, framed in the rearview mirror as the car floated onto the turnpike, winding north from Fort Benning through angry red hills of Georgia clay. He was glad to be leaving the base behind, the clumps of slashed earth reminding him of so much dried blood.

He pulled into a Citgo parking lot before Murfreesboro, Tennessee, settling on a patch of mud amidst standing water. Beside him, two children ate bookended by parents. Small legs wagged from the rear of their pickup truck: bone white except where rust grew in the crevices of past sins, proof of blunt force trauma on an unearthed skull.

The boys attacked cobs of corn puffing cheeks rouged brown with dirt. Their matching overalls glowed a brilliant blue. A strawberry blonde the color of milk made a half-hearted attempt to tame their dancing wisps of hair. The father

watched from under a large straw hat, covered in brown freckles where he'd burned and burned again beneath a relentless sun. Kahle filled the tank and ate a sandwich as he pulled back onto the highway.

The roadway dipped gently and Nashville filled the horizon, shining like colored glass. Streetlights and neon signs painted the streets and river inviting shades of red and gold. He resisted stopping. He had a long way to go.

The adrenaline drip of all things military began to weaken at Kentucky's Bluegrass Parkway, taking the colors with it. Passing barns and houses leached to ashen monoliths, his windshield covered with a thin grey film. He pulled into a rest area and set his alarm.

The feeling persisted through Iowa cornfields. Deer melted into nearby tree trunks. Cornstalks impersonated the fence posts that surrounded them. Pale ghouls haunted truck stops piloting aimless tractors filled with useless goods. The spell was temporarily broken at his parent's driveway, the Cape Cod behind it exuding an old friend's good will.

He settled into the lull before grad school, unnerved by the open space that was freedom, in all its possibilities. He sat in the kitchen after they left for work, accompanied by stillness and the second hand ticking on the kitchen clock. Invisible bars held him immobile until their returning cars whined up the driveway.

The University of Wisconsin was supposed to help him find himself. Instead, he found someone else. She wasn't his supervisor. She wasn't officially his peer, either. Five foot two inches tall and two pay grades above him, the photo he'd snuck of Beezor Wasikowska didn't do her justice.

He'd arrived late to her lecture and sat the sixth row back. The flyer on his seat said she was one of the first women at her school to major in mechanical engineering. Finished in the top of her class. She was the engineering manager at Motomax Manufacturing.

She was saying, "...as scientists we're presented with a paradox. We model the present to predict the future, in an environment where the future is constantly changing."

He noticed what everyone else noticed. Her lack of fingernails. The slacks and button down shirt. The steel rims of her glasses. The sweep of black hair. The way she lisped 'scientists.' The smell of her perfume.

Chanel Number 5 trailed her, bearing hints of machine oil, tinged with the ozone tang of weld flash. It recalled dinner with Captain Parr, her uniform redolent with rifle range cordite, her hands misted with unspent gunpowder.

He also saw more. A silver glow formed lively coils around her. It intensified as she spoke, pouring tendrils like dry ice across the lecture hall floor.

Kahle looked from side to side, wondering if anyone else saw. But the other students drifted in detached bliss, taking notes or staring with clinical curiosity. Swale Academy had dismissed his ability as a parlor trick. It didn't feel that way now.

"Like a flexible bullet, the future bends its trajectory, altering its path through time and space. So then the purpose of statistics is something else."

Her aura wrapped his legs, exposing a memory half submerged in sediment: the moment with the fork and the light socket. The back of his throat tanged tasty and metallic with recollection, puckering his skin with a thousand pinpricks. He tuned out the room and she came into luscious focus. Tint exuded from below her skin, flowing in her blood, seated in her bowels.

"Our use of statistics is fundamentally flawed." Her skin glowed tawny, her lips red with blood; a lone colorized starlet amongst a sea of black and white. "As human beings, we don't predict the future, we create it. Statistics merely show us the place to twist. I say you that this world is malleable, and like that flexible bullet we can bend it to our will."

He closed his eyes, but her aura pierced the lids, etching the tissues inside.

She folded her notes and spoke from memory. "We were made in God's image, not as left over scraps, but just below the angels. If you embrace science instead, then we are the highest form of consciousness in the world, the result of millennia of progress. Either path will suffice. And all of it leads to this; giants walk the Earth. You know them. It's you. Statistics are a tool, nothing more. If there's a magic formula, you'll be the one to provide it. Thank you."

Blood rushed to his face. He wanted to get up. He wanted to ask. But before he could, she turned and left the stage. The colors left with her, returning the world around him to grey.

Kahle called his parents that night from his dorm, flying with what passed in his head for a plan.

"Well, Kahle how are you? How was your week?"

He ducked a look outside the phone bank at his classmates: math books open in their laps, writing letters, or propped on the concrete stairs nodding with their mouths open. "Good, mom. What's been going on?"

"We saw Fleetwood Mac in concert, which was nice. Carly Simon wore this sequined dress that must have cost a mint. Your father finally finished rebuilding his Cadillac. I can't say I care for the finish, but he insisted. And you know how your father is when he digs his heels in. Noyce is helping coach a local baseball team. Keeps him busy." She continued to talk.

He enjoyed the pitch of it, only half hearing the words themselves: precise as a stylus writing on paper. They were clean and reassuring. Everything's in order.

Everything will be fine.

He closed his eyes and tried to convince himself he was a boy again. They were at home in the kitchen where she tuned her Stratocaster, plucking the strings and tightening the wires. They were discussing a trip to the Wisconsin Dells where they would ride the amphibious cars.

“How are classes going?”

He returned to the moment. “About that. I met this girl...”

There was a long pause. Kahle could hear his father in the background, shuffling dishes and Dan Rather talking on the television until someone turned down the volume. “Um, don't tell me you quit grad school to chase a girl.”

“Well...”

“I can't believe it. I knew you were irresponsible but this tops your previous record. This is just like in third grade...”

“Mom...”

“When we had to tell you to stop hugging everyone.”

He knew this was the part that made her sad. He felt it too.

The stacks of photo albums said she missed them, but it that their dreams filled her with dread, knowing that year after year life would carry them away from her.

“Mom...” What he wanted to say he could not.

“The teacher even had us come to the school, said it was assault.”

“Mom...” That the auras had never left.

“Or 6th grade when you kept writing love notes to Mrs. Jaworski.”

“The feelings were mutual.”

“She said you had nice handwriting and a good posture. I don't think she was cultivating a future husband. Besides you wouldn't want her blood on your hands.”

Kahle was silent, his face hot with shame.

“Honey, you have a good heart. But you can't just fall in love with any woman who's nice to you. Not everyone you love will love you back.”

He heard his father in the background. “Tell me about it.”

“Shut up, Glenn.” She turned back to the receiver. “You can't always be so soft-hearted, Kahle. Life will crush you like a beer can. Did you even speak to her?”

He thought again of the retreating colors. “Well...”

“Glenn, did you hear this? I can't deal with this. He is so your son. You need to do something!”

He had to tell. “Mom, her aura was silver. Brilliant silver.”

He could hear her sit, the cord probably draped across her knees. Her legs shaking. He imagined what she would be thinking: *it was back. That aura thing was back.* She could've been holding that bird's nest now, the dead baby chicks breathing their last.

A matter of time. It was just a matter of time. And then there was Swale. She would have blocked the thought out of her mind. She'd said before, if her son was soldier material then Mic Fleetwood was a monk. He waited to see if she would hang up the phone.

She said, "You could've lead with that. Tell me about it. Take your time, don't leave anything out."

She listened to his voice, soothing as his sleeping breath, perhaps enjoying the pitch of it, only half hearing the words themselves. She would try to convince herself he's a boy again. He's not dropping out of school to chase some girl. In this moment life has not yet carried him away.

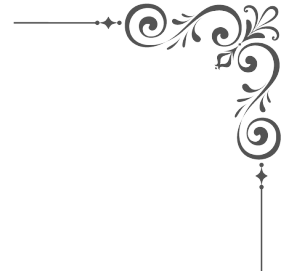
"I was thinking," he said, "I could come home and put in an application where she works."

He could hear her waiting, his words expended. He tried to summon an optimism he didn't feel. He had to own the decision. Against all their wishes he'd become an adult.

This aura thing was like a caul, a bloody veil that hung about his shoulders. He'd tried ignoring it. He'd tried hoping for the best. But it had a mind of its' own. He didn't hold it against her. No parenting books army manuals or nursing courses ever covered the subject. She was left with mother's intuition.

She exhaled. "Good luck, honey. Call us when you leave."

Dan Rather signed off for the night just before she hung up the phone.



Red Queen

THINGS DIDN'T GO LIKE he'd expected. Kahle bumped into Beezor his third day on the job. She'd handed him a stamping and spoke to him in that beautiful voice that hinted at too much whiskey. She said, "Stop sitting around on your ass and put this in the scrap hopper."

He was so intimidated he lost the nerve to talk.

Instead, he kept it on his desk, told everyone it was a quality sample. He replayed their meeting and one thing had not changed: she was a splash of color in a sea of grey, winding her way up to the engineering offices, a green light shining beneath the door.

He'd come this far and lost his nerve. But he waited. Seasons were changing at Frampton. He would follow her, he would follow the light, he would solve the Ballad of the Flexible Bullet. Just not yet.

Gold leaves became green after the first week of spring. Vacationers came into town, towing boats still glistening with their factory finish. Drafts of hot air trickled in around the apartment door and across his bare feet, returning his mind to the mission.

Like a good scout, he'd visited most of the plant, getting to know the lay of the land. The only place left was the heat treat area. He'd saved it for last, anticipating a world of swirling smoke and an imminent asthma attack. Tomorrow was the day.

In the morning, his bicycle brought him there of its own accord. Workmen lumbered in heavy aprons checking gages, shuffling forgings in and out, rotating the metals with long, forked staves. Illumination came from open overhead doors or the orange glow of metal heating in the furnaces. Every time one opened, a wall of hot air erupted, took away his breath and bathed him in the Victorian stench of burning coal.

He sauntered around the blast furnaces, imagining the forgings were the cockles of his heart, burning brighter. Beezor on his mind, confusing him. He had nothing to offer. If he cracked his heart open would anything come out? What would a soldier know about love? Maybe friendship was safer.

Kahle thought it over. There was a junkyard down the road where they could scrounge for parts or shoot rats. He knew a guy at a diesel engine repair facility a half hour away, maybe they could get a weekend tour.

Not a good idea. He would keep his engine parts and whatnot to himself. She might think he was a stalker or worse, a fuckup and decide to tell Gary Queeg. He would be hounded endlessly and it would undoubtedly find its way onto his evaluation report.

This is what he got for venturing into heat treat. The smell of baking forgings affected him: the lack of light, the steel glowing orange, the whole cockles thing. *Something's wrong with me that I don't know how to fix.*

He was returning to his office and there Bee was; gorgeous in an Oxblood red pantsuit. She'd let her hair down and it shone, cut in a classic pageboy. Her glasses were gone beneath her safety goggles. He could see her eyes. And her aura burned like a sunburst. His Red Queen.

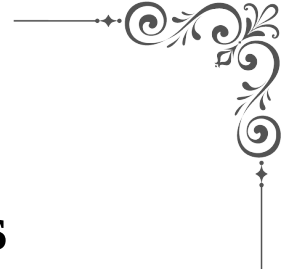
Standing just behind her was Saffron Meyer, the company Chief Financial Officer. And standing next to Bee, handsome as a movie star, his hand resting oh so lightly on her elbow, feeding her his megawatt smile, was Wesley Brummert the Chief Executive Officer of Motomax.

Kahle remained motionless, frozen. He was a street pole at a parade. They passed by as if he didn't exist. Perhaps Bee had found someone who was exceptional like herself, making Kahle quite unnecessary. He limped back to his desk and filled out spreadsheets, until the end of shift bell released him to go home.

That evening he dreamed. *Bee held Wesley's hand and a glass of white wine; vibrant in a yellow shoulder-strapped sundress. Wesley removed a blue box from his pocket and opened the lid, where a pearl necklace winked from inside. Bee, eyes glittering like stars, plucked it from the velvet and clasped the bauble to her neck. The pearls shone with dusky intensity, promising future commitments.*

She gave Wesley the smile that should have gone to Kahle, and to him alone. His hands on the small of her back, she spoke Wesley's name over and over, kissing him deeply with a ferocity that said only "yes". His Chicago friends crowded them laughing and smiling; then raised their fluted wine glasses "to the beautiful couple".

He was woken by a bang. The transformer outside blown apart, throwing sparks across the parking lot. He called his landlord who called the electric company. There'd be no power tonight. All thoughts of sleep were abandoned.



Everything's Big in Texas

KAHLE AVOIDED ANYTHING sharp. He discarded an attempt at his morning shave and drove the fifteen minutes to the plant in dejection. He was deluded. He'd done all this for nothing.

After clocking in, he did timekeeping for his employees, and climbed onto his bike. He rolled past his assembly line in a daze, waving absently. He kept going until he reached the next department, the welding area.

Steel tubs of parts were stacked everywhere, waiting to be processed. Operators with welding hoods and heavy aprons trapped the parts in fixtures, manually welded them and placed the finished parts in totes. Dust and soot coated the apron-wearing operators like cursed Oompa Loompas in a chocolate factory hell. Kahle paused, still on his bicycle, to observe the spectacle.

A balding man no taller than Kahle walked amongst them. Everywhere he went he stopped and talked, placing a hand on a shoulder here, asking about an order there. He was in constant motion and filthy from the neck down.

He came over at a walk and extended his hand. "Boomer Lorenz."

"Kahle."

"I'm production supervisor over here." Boomer waved his hand in the general area around them. "You lost?"

"Uh, yeah."

Boomer adjusted his safety glasses. "Figured you were new, as your clothes are clean."

"You wash yours, don't you?" Kahle was amazed Boomer's wife let him out with those on.

"Sure, but the grease gets everywhere. The stuff never completely comes out. It's crazy, but sometimes when I blow my nose, everything that comes out is grey." Boomer shrugged, ran a hand across his scalp, then used the bandana around his neck to move the sweat from one place to the other—exposing a massive gold ring.

"Mighty big rock you got there."

"College ring from Texas A&M. Everything's big there. People call me Aggie."

Kahle felt his spirits rising. “Did you serve?”

“Five years active.” Boomer continued. “Motomax was my second job out of the Navy. I’m second generation. But my family’s needs came before the Navy, thank you.”

“Do you miss it?” Kahle asked.

“We had a small picnic on the day I was discharged. It felt like a funeral. So whatcha looking for?”

Kahle stared at his shoes. “Place to hide, I suppose.”

“What’s got you spooked?”

“Saw Brummett here, yesterday.” Kahle left off the part where he had his hand on Bee’s arm.

“He was doing one of his surprise inspections,” Boomer said. “He thinks we’re idiots so he shows up unplanned with his spy, Saffron. He’s got this initiative, Motomax Future that he’s pushing.”

“Is it working?” Kahle pushed his hands into his pockets, searching for a stick of gum.

“I don’t think so, but I can’t really tell for sure. Well, we can’t just stand around like we’re on rest and recreation. Come on and I’ll give you the tour.”

They strode easily side by side up the aisle, threading between the machines as Boomer pointed out the different welders, benders, and punches “Understand this, in my department, I’ve got three big variables, the skill of the welder, the welding fixtures, and the equipment maintenance.

He tapped each bench as they passed. “Right now I’ve really only got one of the three working for me: the skill of the welders, but if that changes this sucker could go down fast.”

Their conversation went on for an hour and they agreed to meet for lunch.

*Will you still love me
When I'm no longer young and beautiful?
Will you still love me
When I got nothing but my aching soul?
I know you will, I know you will
I know that you will
Will you still love me when I'm no longer beautiful?*

Lana Del Rey, Young and Beautiful



Back is Gone, 1997, New York City



WESLEY NEVER THOUGHT the most important conversation of his life would take place in the bathroom; a place he believed ranked statistically high for accidents and suicides. He stood behind his wife in his drawers and a dress shirt.

“Wesley, will you still love me when I’m baggy and grey?” Maisie asked over the shoulder casual like, bent over the sink in their bathroom. Her hands fluttered at her ears, inserting gold posts fronted by dusty pearls.

The mirror reflected his puffy face. Last night would do that to you. They’d signed the Nelson account at the Marriott. The signing was followed by steaks. Steaks were followed by dirty martinis someplace he couldn’t remember.

He meant to say something earnest. Instead, what came out was, “Hmmmmmm.” If he’d been sober, it might have gone differently. But he’d broken his own rule and brought a knife to a gun fight. The punishment of course, was death.

“That’s a hell of an answer. I ask you something important and all you can do is mumble.” Her head was raised to expose her neck. Her hands traced the folds there, then the small crow’s feet in the corners of her eyes, maybe measuring the bloom still left on the rose. “Are you gonna say something, Wesley?”

He was looking at her ass. Nothing baggy about it. He loved her face too. He loved all of her. He’d dreamed of nothing but since he was sixteen. He even loved her father, dry as gin.

Her eyes were bright now, clear as crystal, the watchful eyes of a barn owl. She saw where he was looking. The corners of her mouth turned down, a familiar expression of disappointment. He expected about now, she’d demand he dress in the guest room.

Instead she said, “I want a divorce.”

His response squeezed out soft and airless, like a balloon deflating. “Shouldn’t we talk about this?” He had the strange sensation of spiraling

backward, passing through the floor, and landing on his back in the entryway. The straight lines in his life whisked away with a phrase.

"I've been talking. You don't hear anything I say. It's our life, Wesley. The limousines, the boats, the parties, they just hypnotize you. If I hear another word about what important people you're meeting I'm going to scream."

He could've been fully clothed and those eyes would have penetrated to his pumping heart, dissatisfied with the output she noted in his veins.

"Here's someone important, Wesley. The nanny that watches our daughter. You were supposed to meet her yesterday--"

"Yesterday was bad."

"--and not even a phone call. I tried you at your office...."

"We were at the Marriott. It was important."

"Colby's important. We're important. Those are fucking strangers. I think you're fighting for the wrong thing, just watching the line go up, hoping Jones Wentworth makes you a partner. That's an empty life, Wesley. You were a better man when we had nothing and you were folding towels at the Boston Club."

Had to remind him of where he came from, did she? Bring him back down to Earth. In spite of himself he was sneering. "Poverty doesn't make you noble."

She took a shallow breath and he could see it coming. Something she had saved for him, rushing out like a freight train. "Oh yeah? Well, money doesn't give you class."

He'd gone too far. Already at the precipice, he could feel the ground give way. "We could go back."

"I've had enough, Wesley. I've tried. I've really tried. Back is gone. Just like me." She pushed past him then, shielded by her hair brush. "And don't worry about picking up Colby. I've got someone important taking care of it."

The custody hearing had been brutal.

"He's neglectful. He couldn't tell money from love." She'd stared at him as she said it, making sure the words found their mark. "I'm not a possession. I fell in love with Wesley when we had nothing. I thought he understood. But I was wrong."

"No...." He'd said it softly. He doubted it had even carried across the room. It had been a mistake to have a corporate attorney there. He knew that now. He'd wanted to tell the truth then. To pour his heart out. Status be damned. He'd mouthed it. But the words were known to him alone. *All I have I've given. If you leave there'll be nothing left.*

He could see the corporate attorney from his seat without turning his head. He was frowning. His head tipped almost imperceptibly to the side, a negation

interrupted. He knew how skittish the board was about his divorce. He bit back his honeyed words.

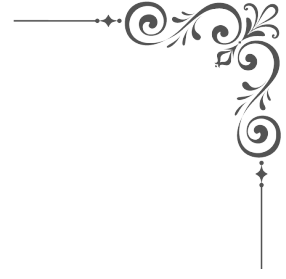
The gavel struck.

“I award full custody to Maisie Stratford.”

Full custody? That was unheard of. And she’d already gone back to her maiden name. It was betrayal, plain and simple. *Maybe he'd never been family.*

The years returned in a moment: her father’s hand on his shoulder, her mother’s encouraging smile, their first date. Drifting in the boat in the evenings, talking until the moon was full, blighted by swooping bats. The birth of their child. The first fever. The first step. The first argument.

Her father had been there at court, wrapped in a charcoal grey suit. Not a word had escaped his lips. He’d stared at Wesley for two heartbeats and then looked away. *Erased. So many mistakes.*



Find Dallas Haight

“HOW WE LOOKING DOWN there, George?” Wesley’s voice expanded from the speakerphone, filling the room.

“Almost done, boss. Give us another thirty minutes.”

The line was still open. Wesley paused, distracted by the view. From the 30th floor, Chicago (there were no penthouses in Frampton) was perfect. The distance made the grit invisible. Traffic crawled along the edge of the lake in orderly strings. Brick apartment buildings teeming with roaches were picturesque from here, their arched facades thrusting out of the snow. Skyscrapers saluted, dressed in straight lines.

Wesley fidgeted with his tie. “You know Frampton’s got to make schedule. They’re fifty percent of our volume.”

“Yeah, boss.”

He’d fought his way from a tenement dweller parsing Warren Buffett’s annual letters, to Motomax CEO at forty-three. His tattered originals were long gone, replaced by handsome bound copies and a master’s degree in accounting from Westlake, a school out east. He talked in numbers, relied on numbers, and trusted numbers. That’s how things were done.

“It’s been three years since I took Motomax public. The time for missed commitments is over. Frampton needs to turn the page.”

“We’re with you, Wesley.” George was one floor below, where accountants and analysts checked and double checked the numbers from desks in their glass-walled cage.

“I’ve got a reputation to uphold after all,” Wesley said. “I need to know there’ll be no more mistakes.” Like keeping Bodge. All the angels in heaven but that had been a doozy.

Months ago he’d toured Frampton with Bodge and the engineering manager, a human mole named Oroszco. They waded on safari through clouds of oil, pointing out various processes, the stroke of stamping presses forming a drumbeat in the roots of his teeth. Black liquid condensed on his arms and neck, like an army of leeches slithering across his skin.

Wesley had asked one question. “Are you going to make your numbers this month?”

“That depends, sir. The devil’s in the details.” Oroszco said it plain as giving the weather forecast in Tibet. *Insubordinate.*

He’d already looked at the details back in civilization, at his desk. *When were these guys going to wake up? Lazy. These two were lazy.* His ears were hot. He couldn’t fire Bodge, but he could send a message.

He stuck his index finger in the human mole’s face. “That’s not true. The devil’s in the numbers and I had those in Chicago. Give me your badge, Oroszco. Bodge, walk him to Rick in human resources. He’ll know what to do from there.” Oroszco had gone the color of lard and then shuffled off, threatening to teeter into stacks of stamped parts. That had been difficult.

Motomax needed more leaders like George Bristol. He’d boxed in college and remained punchy, a little distasteful really. But the analysts below him followed the rules. And he was loyal. There’d be no more betrayals. With George on the job, Motomax had started to hit their numbers.

Ahead of schedule, the lift doors pinged open. “Morning, boss. Just finished this.” George handed over two inches of printer paper bound with thick steel staples.

“George, my good man.” Wesley riffled the first three pages and frowned. He looked up.

“I know, boss. It’s bad. As goes Frampton, so goes Motomax. And Frampton’s in the shitter again.”

Wesley squeezed his eyes shut. He looked at the report again. Its numbers were not perfect, not even close. Much like last quarter. He broke out in an oily sweat. He’d have to swap out his shirt. Something had changed these last three months, but he was damned if he could put his finger on it. George needed to understand where they were at.

Wesley took a deep breath. “Wall Street analysts are like vultures. If profitability falls, they’ll swoop off a power line and tear our credit rating apart. Then they’ll start in on our stock price.”

He paused and thought about what he was going to say next. He trusted George. No one else had detected yet what he was going to say. “Somebody’s buying up the stock. As the stock price drops, the purchases are accelerating.”

George whistled between his teeth. “So who is it, boss?”

“We won’t know their identity until after they own five percent of the stock. At that point, they could request a seat on the board.” Control would be lost. *Everything I’ve worked for would be gone in the blink of an eye.* Wesley tucked

the report under his arm and exhaled with effort. "Rumor has it the buyer is Dallas Haight."

"You're kidding."

"I'm not." Wesley tapped the report with an index finger.

"No one's seen him in years."

"That's right. He disappeared after Bodge pushed him out."

George set his shoulders. "What do you need me to do, boss?"

Wesley knew he'd picked the right man for the job. He'd be damned if some old man would take away what was rightfully his, founder or not. "I need you to find Dallas Haight."

George re-entered the lift. Wesley started an email to Niles Bodge. He had to get those numbers back on the rise, and pronto. It was time for some stronger medicine.

"You still want to go to the fights this Friday, boss? I can get us a couple of tickets."

Wesley looked up from the computer screen and leaned back in his chair. "Wouldn't miss it. I'd like to see some blood."

You let your feet run wild

Time has come as we all go down

Yeah but for the fall oh, my

Do you dare to look him right in the eyes?

Cause they will run you down, down till the dark

*Yes, and they will run you down, down till you fall And Yeah so you can't crawl
no more*

And way down we go

Kaleo, "Way Down We Go"



Half Death Trap, Half Money Pit

HIS BRUSH HIT THE CANVAS and for an hour his office was a studio. Niles concentrated on the couple in the foreground, loading the brush thick with paint. It danced hurriedly across the images, looser than his usual musings. He had to capture the moment before it disappeared.

The couple sat side by side, following passersby through a picture window, perched on spindly-legged restaurant chairs. Their evening finery glowed below the blaze of globed streetlights, painting the cobblestones outside yellow with reflected radiance. Trees framing the window were evergreen, frozen mid-wave. Across the street, shops of limestone brick served silent sentinels. Their arches framed a bakery crowned by a veranda of cerulean wildflowers.

For once, Niles felt satisfied. Today was like that magical first day of 3rd-grade summer school. It had finished with art class. He'd sat entranced with the other eight-year-olds, as the balding old man created a snowman for them to mock. There was a carrot for the nose, branches for the arms, and a striped hat hung to the side at a jaunty angle. When he got home, Niles presented his treasure to his mother in a small, dirty fist.

Her hand passed through shoulder length brunette hair, the cigarette ticking up and down between her fingers in time to her speech. "That's good, baby. I like the colors." She smiled then, the Queen to her Prince.

Her brown slacks whispered as she walked into the kitchen and put the first one on the refrigerator. Perhaps sensing his enthusiasm, the instructor had let him bring the paints home. Mom asked, "You gonna make me another one?" He did another, and she taped the second to the wall.

She regarded the pictures the way she sometimes did the electric bill or letters from the attorney. A divot formed between her eyebrows. "That's got a good feeling to it." She bent sideways at the hips, looking from the picture to Niles as if she were seeing him for the first time and asked, "Would you like your own set?"

They spent the summer in the living room. His little easel laid claim before the sleeping television. Mother decamped to the recliner, where study guides for the paralegal exam lay stacked on a TV tray. She passed it the following summer

and got a new job. It was a nice raise over her take as a secretary. She used her first paycheck as down payment on a car.

They left the used car lot on a balmy June afternoon. His mother skipped first gear for second, sliding the station wagon off the cracked concrete pad and out into traffic. He was so proud of her. She looked as beautiful as the musicians on television in her brown-tinted sunglasses. It was the same color as the car's fake wood paneling.

Mom spoke without looking away from the road. "We're rolling now, Niles. We've traded up our bus passes. This baby will take us where ever we want to go."

He could feel the excitement rising in his chest. There were all the ice cream stands that the bus drove past that weren't on the regular stops. There was the art supply store on Burkhardt Street. The possibilities made his head feel light. He'd stepped out of the real world and into the bedtime stories Mother read to him at night. "It's a magical chariot! We're going to tour the five kingdoms."

"You know it, Tiger."

Niles thought about it. He'd heard his mother on the phone last week with the attorney. He couldn't reach Niles's father, Julian, who was out of the country in France. "Could it take us to Paris?"

Her smile wavered then. Her head tipped forward, creating small shadows on her cheekbones. Her eyes were hidden behind the sunglasses. "Maybe we'll go sometime, Niles. You and me. Until then, perhaps we'll find some things here to paint."

She kept her word. Beginning that weekend, they visited the bridges and farms around Frampton, hauling a wicker basket with his art supplies and their lunch. As summer turned into fall, his mother framed his best work and mounted it in the living room. She fussed with the alignment and then stepped back to survey it with her right arm wrapped around his shoulders. "We're going to chase our dreams. Keep going. You're good, Niles."

It took ten years to receive a letter. It came by regular post, heavy black font on cream paper. He opened it in the kitchen and read it with his mother over his shoulder.

"A full ride scholarship. In Kansas. I'm so proud of you, baby."

Her smile started large and faded. "You're going to be an art professor after all." She was still smiling when the tears came. "Kansas is a long way away."

The Prince left. The Queen sickened. And their kingdom fell fallow. She rallied once to extract a promise on his behalf and then all was thrust into darkness.

The brush in his hand shook when his computer pinged, signaling an email had arrived. He ignored it, not ready for the moment to end. He tucked his paintbrush in a jar of water and sighed.

This past weekend he'd packed a zippered case of paintings in his car, and gone to see Mother at the rest home. It was the nicest place he could afford. It didn't have the faint urine smell of some of the others he'd toured and the nurses wore pressed uniforms. His mother knew them all by name. She'd memorized the route to the cafeteria, the pool for swim class, and the recreation room for backgammon. If he took her out, she'd have to start all over again.

Cheryl at the front desk gave him her usual. "Good evening, Mr. Bodge."

"Hi, Cheryl. How is she tonight?"

"She was pretty lucid the last time I saw her. And that wasn't long ago." Then she smiled and leaned closer over the desk. "Since you called ahead we helped her do her hair. What have you got there?"

"Just a few pieces."

"That sounds just great. Looking forward to seeing them. Come on back."

Niles passed the front desk and crossed the round entryway. The resident apartments started through the door on the other side. He depressed the lever, went to her door and knocked.

When it opened the old smile was there. Her hair was still full and long, but grey, the color of flaky wood ashes. It was brushed to lay straight, falling over her shoulders to disappear behind. She'd given up smoking, thank god, and her teeth were a brilliant white. He gave her a hug. "Mom."

"Son. Good to see you, Niles. What have you got there?"

He threaded his arm through hers and they made for the cafeteria. "It's a surprise, Mom. You'll have to wait and see."

They followed the signs for the cafeteria. Residents waved from walkers or saluted with canes as they passed, and Niles slipped back for a moment into childhood fantasy.

The Prince was grown, touring the gardens at the side of the Queen. Their subjects smiled, and gave heartening cheers. The evening city opened before them. They sat in a restaurant on spindly legged chairs, their eveningwear resplendent in reflected light.

Hesitantly, Niles came back to reality. They sat near the cafeteria windows with their trays, enjoying the last of the day. Then the darkness returned.

She started and then drifted. "You know I was thinking..."

He could see the confusion in her eyes. It arrived without warning, rolling in like storm clouds on an ocean coast, marked only by the familiar divot between her eyebrows.

She asked, "Where am I?"

He felt cold as if the doors to a freezer had been opened behind him pouring frigid air across his back. "We're in the cafeteria."

"Who are you?"

"I'm your son, Niles." The floor dropped away. He was falling. Must have stepped over the ramparts. Too close to the edge.

"You couldn't be. He's only eight. You'd really like him. He's so creative. Someday he's going to do something. I saw his work and just knew. I took him to the Ben Franklin that same day, bought him his own set of paints."

Like the flip of a switch her eyes seemed to clear and she gave him a large smile. She was her old self again, confident and true. She turned her head to the side, exposing her neck and took his hand in hers. "Oh, Julian," she said. "I knew you'd come. I never should have doubted you."

Niles fought to maintain himself. Even like this, his tears seemed to imbalance her. His signal brought the nurse on duty and she helped get Mother back to her room. Then he sat in his car until he could stop crying and drove home. Weekend over.

He put on his reading glasses, sat down at the computer, and scanned the email. It was from Wesley Brummert. He started at the top and began scrolling. His throat tightened when he realized he would have to speak in public.

Niles assembled the entire management staff in the cafeteria that afternoon. Saffron, Bee, himself, and Ian Tatupu occupied a row of brown plastic chairs at the front of the room. Ian probably could have used two—he hung over the sides of his chair like a freckled man-mountain.

Niles stepped forward and leaned on the podium, spilling hair into his glasses. He cleared his throat and nearly lost his nerve. Fifty sets of eyes flickered, with emotions ranging from boredom to dread.

"We as the leadership of the Frampton plant set the pace for Motomax. We continue a history of success and faith that started with my father following World War II."

Saffron's gaze disquieted him. He could tell her mind was somewhere else. Once she'd seen something in him. Had believed he would make a difference. Now clearly what she felt for him was hatred.

Saffron saw Niles staring. She smiled and nodded, encouraging him to go on. Then she sat like a Sphinx, her mask frozen in place. It was hard to hear Niles and not think of his father. She'd accidentally called him Julian once and taken satisfaction in the nauseous rage that surfaced. It was the most passionate she'd seen him.

Bodge continued. “You may be aware that we’ve had some recent setbacks. Profitability has fallen and lead times are increasing. As a result, we are forced to undertake some measures to bring us back to the plan.”

She couldn’t believe she’d left a top-shelf accounting firm to come here. Upkeep had never been done or was done half-hearted. There was misspending of funds that bordered on fraud. It reminded her of the first house she’d bought with her now ex-husband: half death trap, half money pit.

They’d considered suing Julian Bodge and then he died. Torturing him was impossible now. She settled for Niles as the next best thing. Julian had described his middle-aged son as creative and introspective. He’d provide continuity; keeping the Bodge name and the brand that came with it. They’d signed an airtight employment contract, understanding only after the ink was dry that old man Bodge was universally despised.

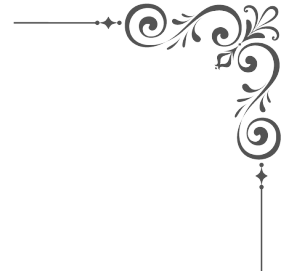
Niles was less than a cad, he was some sort of artistic dreamer. His watercolors were actually quite good. One hung in her entryway from before things went bad between them. But they needed someone who could run a factory, and that was *not* Niles Bodge.

Clients had noticed. Their largest customer, French car maker Escargot, was in secret contract negotiations with their competition. If news hit the papers, Motomax would bleed out on the front page of the Wall Street Journal and she would die with it. No one would hire a Chief Financial Officer that ran a company into bankruptcy.

“Effective right now there will be no new hiring. We will be closing off climate control to the production area. Operators are allowed to bring one box fan to protect against the heat. To reduce expenses, we will be idling three additional furnaces. As part of this process we are decreasing corporate contribution to your insurance.”

“In order to improve efficiency, we will expect all machine utilization to be maintained above ninety percent. These policies will remain in place indefinitely. It is only through the direction of this team that Frampton will once again lead the field. Thank you.”

She watched Niles place his folded speech in his pocket, then wait impassively for the supervisors to leave. They filed out avoiding eye contact and returned to the plant floor to inform their employees. Every bar in Frampton would be full tonight.



Revolt of the Rats



THE PROPER NAME WAS Pressroom Irish Pub. To the regulars, it was just The Pressroom. Long and narrow as a key slot, it was wedged between an apartment building and an empty commercial office. Inside it was dark as a cave. Four decades of ferment emanated from the floorboards. Stamped tin panels covered the ceiling above.

Kahle closed his eyes and it was like honky-tonks around the world where he'd blown through his paychecks. Only the particulars differentiated them; dirt crusted bottles of Tecate below a corrugated aluminum roof, liter glasses of frothy orange wheat beer spilling onto aged cobblestones, vodka bottles with tear off tops pungent with the scent of potatoes somewhere that looked like Des Moines, Iowa but was closer to Moscow. He'd take any one of those places over this one, right now.

A few familiar faces crowded the bar with its draft beer taps and bottles of luminous liquors. They stared numbly, commiserating over pitchers of pilsner. He heard snippets of their conversation as he threaded the tables, wending his way to the rear. "Without air conditioning, it'll be unbearable...", "I can't make the mortgage without the overtime....", "Private school goodbye." and lastly, "...I bet she'll ask for a divorce."

A booth in the back was empty, and he sat in the corner facing the door. Bookcases lined the walls. The nearest was larded with paperbacks and cheap bound copies; survivors from the wallboard factory shredder. His fingers pored through random books while the lager erased his memory, forming a wall against his recent horror.

His mind was still in the cafeteria. He heard the hammering of the stamping presses outside, smelled the drifts of oxidized steel from welding, as Bodge's speech unspooled in uneven tones. He stared at the floor, his head filled with white noise.

When he looked up someone was standing beside him. He had to crane his neck to see her face. She was smiling. Her name escaped him.

Two knuckleheads at the next table whispered, “Large Marge” and he blushed, embarrassed for her. The name came to him then - Margaret Fischback. Her smile hesitated and she asked, “Do you mind if I join you?”

“No problem. Yeah, sure.” Occasionally she sat with Kahle and Aggie over lunch. She worked with Aggie as a planner, scheduling parts for assembly.

The booths were 1970’s orange, overstuffed, patched with duct tape and wide as a pickup truck bench seat. She filled half her side of the booth, her shoulders casting deep shadows in front and behind her.

“Hey. Saw you at the briefing.” She asked, “What’d you think?”

What he thought was that he hated Bodge and the falling sensation his speech had created. The word ‘austerity’ had burned. He got the underlying message: no one was safe. It left him jangled, wanting to leave Frampton in his rearview mirror.

“I guess if we have to do it, we have to, but....” he trailed off. He set the bottle down to hide his shaking hands.

“I’d just like to know how they came up with this,” she said. “Run the machines above ninety percent efficiency and we’ll be making stuff we don’t even need.”

She took out a pen and drew a chart on the coaster between them. Her bangs swished down in front of her eyes and she pinned them behind one ear with the wave of a hand. “Here’s what we’re spending now, and we’re already waiting sixty days to pay our suppliers.”

“How’d you know that?” Kahle asked.

“I’ve got people. Anyways, in another ninety days, if not sooner, our vendors are going to cut us off for non-payment. We’ll have to pay cash for everything. We’d be dead.”

“How do you know all this finance stuff?”

“I’m an actuary. I was a manager at the Frampton Savings & Loan but we had so many defaults they closed the place and let everybody go. Some of those foreclosures are still sitting empty.”

She caught Kahle’s eyes lingering on her hands. They enveloped the beer glass with only the edge peeking out. “I threw hammer in college. Track and field paid my way through the University of Michigan,” she said, trying to sound casual.

Kahle realized he’d been caught and tried to keep talking. “With an education like that, you could’ve gone anywhere.”

“Sure but my grandmother is here. She’d never move, and since I take care of her, I guess I’m not moving either.” Her head dipped briefly. Shadows under her eyes deepened.

She asked, "So I heard you went to Swale. That's a military academy, isn't it?" Her hand went to her neck where it played with her locket.

Kahle nodded.

"So you were in the Army, right? My dad was in. He said he got out in order to start a family. Why did you get out?"

"You know, I'm not really sure."

"Well, my grandmother's got that cottage on Edison. You know, the one with sunbursts carved in the doors."

"Yeah, I've passed by there a few times." It was an arts and crafts style home, painted with yellows and pinks. He drove past it every day he could: looking for the flower boxes of roses, admiring the bright colors meticulously painted on the dormers and trim. It would be nice to belong someplace like that.

"That's the place. She fills the window boxes with red roses all summer long. She and my grandfather built that house as newlyweds. That's why she said she'll never move, even if Frampton dies around her. I made her sound morbid, but she's not, just pragmatic." She hasn't been well.

"I'd suppose so. To have a house like that would take an optimist," Kahle said.

"So what do you think of Frampton?"

Frampton felt like an indigent husband half out the door. It was full of houses like her grandmother's. It was full of people like the Fischbacks. *Where would they go if the plant shut down?*

"It reminds me of my neighbors back home in Wisconsin. Midwest neat and tidy, you know?"

"So what are we going to do about Bodge?" she asked.

"Order another beer, I suppose."

He could feel something shift. She didn't like his answer. Her voice was husky now. It was strident. The vibration was a pressure in his ears.

She said, "There's no other jobs here. I've looked. We can't follow this plan. We'll lose our houses and so will everyone else at the factory."

"What does that leave?" Kahle's head was swimming in disbelief. The trajectory of the conversation had led to this. It was a path through the jungle opening onto a clearing. In the center was a Bengal tiger, his stripes distinct in the light of full noon. *The savage lands lay beyond.* He anticipated her words with dread.

Margaret leaned forward, blocking the overhead light, leaving them in shadow. "Revolt."

"There's just you and I." Kahle scanned the room without turning his head.

"There's you, I and Boomer."

He was tempted to get up and leave. "I don't want to lose my job." The tiger licked it's lips and prepared to pounce. This was the part in school where they'd been trained to run away.

"You'll lose it anyways. But if we succeed, maybe you'll impress Weezy."

He tried and probably failed to keep emotion off of his face. "Her proper name is Beezor Wasikowska and why would I want to impress her?"

"I see the way you watch her. When she's in the room you go off into your little world. It's so intense like you're..."

"What?"

"Obsessed."

Kahle felt small, as if she were judging him. He wanted her to go away. "And why would you need my help?"

"I think you're an outlier. That daydream thing you do has to be good for something. You know my dad told me once that...."

"Your dad told you what?" He thought about Swale and felt real fear. What he knew, he'd never tell. Lots of people asked, and it usually started just like this.

As if she'd read his mind, she changed the subject, looking for something safe. "Never mind. Like you said, I think it's time for another beer. This round's on me." She raised her hand for a waitress. Maybe Margaret was alright.

The alarm clock came to him from a distance, a siren on the rocks calling out as his bed drifted by. His head was filled with cotton batting. Trying to keep up with someone twice your size was always a bad idea. His face burned hot as he vaguely remembered her carrying him baby-like up the stairs to his apartment. He pushed the thought away, wishing again for a memory erasure device.

Kahle filled his thermos and scooted off to the plant. He was tapping through the morning headcount when a mailroom clerk entered with a box. He asked for a signature then reversed out the door.

The carton lid rasped dryly as it opened. On top was a form letter from Wesley Brummert. The memory of Wesley's hand on Bee's arm rose unbidden and Kahle summarily tossed the letter in the trash. Two books were inside. The first was "Motomax, a History of Financial Engineering." He imagined Bodge holding the book while Wesley soaked it in ether and then watched God-like from Chicago as Kahle faded into a dreamless stupor. He put it back in the box and slid the box under his desk.

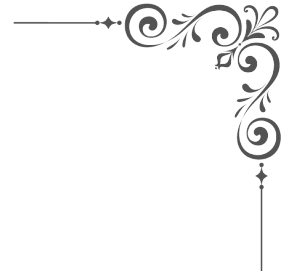
The second manual was not "The Motomax Playbook". Instead, it was a thick pamphlet. The hand drawn pictures seemed to move as he flipped through the browning pages. It seemed alien. How had he ended up with this? He looked up from the book in the grip of paranoia.

The corner office where Gary Queeg was normally bent over his computer monitor or silently staring at him was empty. Queeg didn't need to know about this. He placed it in his desk's left-hand drawer. When he got home tonight he would read it. Right now he was hungry.

Kahle rode into heat treat and looked both ways; nobody on duty. A small portable parts furnace was at the rear of heat treat. He opened the tinfoil wrapped around two bratwursts from his lunchbox and carefully placed them on the rotisserie table. He'd seen two old timers do this last week. He waited a few minutes and his sausages popped out the other side a golden brown. Perfect. Kahle wrapped them in bread and sat at the tables outside. Time for a picnic.

The day stretched out, elastic. He entered inspection sheets into a table on his computer until finally the bell rung to end the shift.

Breathless smokestacks witnessed his climb up the apartment stairs, their clinker bricks painted gold by the setting sun. He sat on the deck with the book, a glass of wine, and a pizza. He was twenty pages in when he sat upright, dropping it to the wood slat deck. If what this said was accurate, he needed to see Boomer first thing.



Going All In, April 1932

EVERETT COULD HEAR down the hall, eavesdropping from his open bedroom door.

“My hands hurt,” Father said. “The joints burn when I make a fist.”

He knew the word for that. He was well through the “A”s, and “arthritis” was at the beginning of the encyclopedia. His father had been in and out of consciousness the last several days.

“Doc Vickers said something like this might happen,” his mother said. She left off any mention of smallpox or side effects. They didn’t need any reminders.

Father’s voice hung thin and light. “If it’s what I think it is, I don’t know how I’ll be able to farm.”

“It’s too soon to know for sure,” Mom said.

“If it’s arthritis it’s not going away. It’s not getting better, ever.”

Everett covered his ears and waited for them to fall asleep.

Judith didn’t answer. She lay beside her husband on their sagging bed, her hands clasped on her stomach, adding numbers and praying for a miracle. Waiting out the arthritis was like getting Eli back from the pox and then losing him again; or worse yet, getting someone else.

Would he just sit here in the bedroom all day and stare out the window, thinking about the man he used to be? She’d have to do it all, then. And it was a two person job. The thought of spending the rest of her life as a nurse and a plow horse filled her with dread. Guiltily, she pushed the thought away.

Constantly thinking and adding when she didn’t know the outcome was wearing her down. Eli finally fell asleep. She decided to let it all go. She went downstairs, lay on the couch, and was out cold minutes later.

Everett heard his parents snoring and crept down to the porch. He stared across the fields, enjoying the evening breeze. He thought best when outdoors.

Father might still be sick. Carter Creel had told mom that without his father they would get no loan. Without a loan, they had no seeds to plant. No seeds to plant guaranteed no plants to harvest. If they had no plants to harvest it was too awful to even contemplate. His logic stopped there. He gritted his teeth trying to force the answer to come.

Everett tried visualizing what he would do if he were an adult. He conjured a version of himself he called Big Everett. Big Everett (Big Ev) was cooler, a kernel of the man he would someday be.

Big Ev wasn't afraid. He sat on the porch beside Everett, a green shoot of hay lolling from the corner of his mouth. He threw one of his beefy arms across the backrest. "It all starts with Carter Creel, doesn't it?" Big Ev said. He saw Carter now in his mind's eye, a small man in a brown suit with a large smile. That's how he'd been when Everett first met him on a Saturday two summers ago.

He'd been with his new wife. Her long arms were twined around his and they'd stopped on the sidewalk to speak to the Steiners. She'd worn a string of pearls with her sundress that Everett swore were real.

Carter had bent over and shaken Everett's hand in a warm but serious manner, squatting so close Everett could smell the peppermint on his breath. He'd said simply, "Young Master" and given Everett's arm a single pump.

Then he turned to Everett's father. "How's life suiting you?"

"Fine, fine. The farm's doing well. Judith and Everett are healthy. It's the most I could hope for, to have a farm and a family of my own. And you two? Do you have any plans?"

Carter smiled then, the bashful newlywed, and slipped a sly glance at his new wife, her eyes flashing, her face splashed with freckles. "Well, we figured we'd try for a child. Things at the bank are going well, why not?"

"Why not, indeed?" Both Everett's parents were beaming when Eli spoke again. "Good luck to you." His father had placed a hand on Carter's arm as they said good-bye.

Everett was missing something. The thought squirmed from him as he tried to hold it. He tried again to catch it but it slithered just beyond his reach like a greased salamander. Everett sighed. It was so close. But he was too ignorant of adult goings on to turn the spark into a blaze. Maybe his father would figure it out.

A sound spread across the fields, beautiful and strange; accompanied by an approaching cloud of dust. He recognized the sound as jazz and the cloud resolved into a car. After weeks and months of hoping for something to happen, he wasn't sure it was real. He'd prayed at night for something to change, for a chance to do something different. He had a glimmer now that the time had come.

He woke his mother who was asleep on the couch, and she joined him on the porch. They watched, holding hands, as the car drew closer.

Dill Steiner gunned the engine. She'd received a folded sheet from a delivery boy several days earlier. Stone drunk, she'd placed the message on the entryway

dresser and headed to her favorite speakeasy, the Metropole, still in her dungarees from work. It wasn't until the next morning she'd read the telegram, just before using it to light the stove.

Dill nearly tore it up, then thought better of it. The contents were an open handed slap. *A summons from Judith*. For once she wasn't lecturing. For the first time in her life, Judith was asking for help. Dill stood motionless in the kitchen.

In her mind, she wasn't in Chicago anymore, she was back home. She was back home with Daddy, Daddy and his foot soldier Judith. Only Judith could kill a good time with a single piece of paper.

She re-read the telegram, packed her bags, then descended the stairs to the fire engine red Studebaker Erskine roadster crouched at the curb.

Dill stepped on the running board, threw her bags in the backseat and took down the convertible top. At the turn of the key, the engine hummed to life with a jolt that thrilled her. The gas tank was full.

She counted her cash, ruefully thinking of what she'd spent on beer the night before. She had enough money to get there, but only just. She put her hair up in a bun with a few pins, put on some lipstick while easing the car into the traffic, and headed off to her sister and Eli, headed off to home.

The roadster gobbled up the miles: the round protruding lights drilling holes through the darkness, the narrow front grill carving the distance like the bow of a speedboat. When she felt herself nodding off, she pulled into a stand of trees and napped. She washed at the occasional rooming house, ignoring their stares at a young woman in pants traveling alone. She nibbled at fruit and cornbread from roadside stands as she rode, wondering at the events that brought her to this.

She wouldn't have left Chicago for anyone except Eli, her sister included. When her father had abandoned her, Eli had been a rock. That wasn't quite right. He'd been an oasis. Constant and consistent, his faith in her was unbroken and unbreakable.

After the airplane, he'd brought her different things to take apart; toasters, lawnmowers, and boat engines. There'd been trips to junkyards and farmhouses with her exasperated older sister in tow, stepping over spider webs and dried dog turds with equal apprehension.

Dill laughed now, remembering her sister streaked with dirt in a long ago auto parts yard. Judith spoke through a handkerchief that covered her mouth. "Watch out for the rats, and the grease, and the dog leavings. Oh, my God, this place smells."

"Yeah," Dill said.

"This isn't ladylike," Judith said. "Why are you wearing men's pants again? That's not the natural order of things."

“Cause I like ‘em. Why do you care? Being older doesn’t make you an expert.” Dill said it over her shoulder, not bothering to interrupt her scavenging.

“You don’t want people thinking you’re a boy, Dill.” The corners of Judith’s mouth were turned down, like she was swallowing something that tasted bad.

“I care less what a boy thinks.”

“How are you going to find a husband? They will have expectations.”

“Don’t need one. I’m not spending my life washing knickers or turning to dust over a stove.” She had turned square, and was staring at her sister now, her hands in fists, her head tilted forward, her incisors visible over her bottom lip.

“You’ve got no right to talk down to me.”

Eli appeared then from a stack of parts and rescued her, or maybe rescued her sister, pivoting slightly between them. He asked, “Would you ladies be interested in a slice of pie? I skipped breakfast, and I’m famished.”

The look on her sister’s face was one of a kind. His words and that smile were scalding water over a heart of frozen ice, melting her sister in two breaths.

“Yes, of course.” Judith paused, lowered the handkerchief to her breastbone.

“That would be fine.”

What a salesman.

The restaurant had been packed with people, jostling in the aisle as they waited for a booth. When they were finally seated, Dill had sat next to her sister with Eli across from them. The jukebox had poured out a song of hope. The restaurant filled with sunlight.

Eli was exuberant. “Now that I’m out of the army, I’m going to buy a farm. Someplace with lots of space. We’ll grow corn. Even have a few peach trees. I’ll need a wife, of course.” He was looking at her sister when he said it and she blushed red without answering, her eyes doing the talking. It was the most forward she’d ever seen him.

The waitress came with the pie before he spoke again and the smell was enough to fill the table. He was earnest now. “And you’re welcome to come any time, Dill. The door’s always open. You’re family.”

Peach pie and junkyard grease; that was the smell of happiness.

That was then. This was now. An approaching line of homes brought her attention back to the present. She checked the name of the town against the shapes circled on her map. Satisfied, she banked onto Main Street. The boardwalk along the nicer shops became dirt sidewalks at the edge of town, where it fronted abandoned factories. She read their faded signs with interest then the empty road rolled away from the light and she turned on the radio.

Dill looked down again at the paper map in her lap. She banked hard left and headed toward a lone farmhouse on the horizon. The sky darkened as night

approached. Fields stretched away from her, broken only by the occasional tree. For the first time since reading that telegram over her apartment stove, she wondered what she'd gotten herself into.

The family was on the porch when she pulled up. She tried to act nonchalant, but her heart was pounding. Dill asked, "Someone sent a telegram?"

She stepped out of the car and they welcomed her in, Everett and Judith carrying her bags. Then they drank sweet tea at the kitchen table.

Judith couldn't stop looking at her. Dill stared at the three of them in disbelief, silently surprised that Eli wasn't dead and that Everett, whom she'd last seen as a baby was now ten years old. Judith hadn't changed at all.

Dill looked at Eli. "You seem a little worse for wear. Are those smallpox scars?" She asked.

Eli smiled and nodded.

"Couldn't really put smallpox in the telegram," Judith said. "People have a way of gossiping and that sort of thing spreads like wildfire."

"Quite the motorcar you got there," Everett said.

"Studebaker Erskine."

"Doesn't that have six cylinders?"

Dill nodded. "The message was very cryptic. But now I'm here. So what do you want to do?"

Eli and Judith spent the next thirty minutes explaining the situation. Judith finished the thread of conversation with, "...so we need to go and get our seed loan."

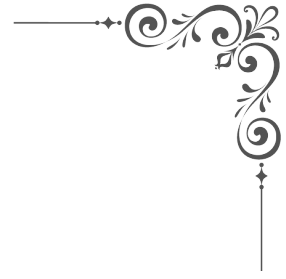
"You think they're going to give it to you looking like that?"

"Maybe," Judith said.

So she'd left a paying job for maybe.

"We need the seed loan and we've got to put in a crop in two months. We need help, Dill. Eli beat the pox but he's not the same."

Eli said nothing, just stared out the window. Dill read the emotion conveyed by his profile. He'd done something once for her. She knew what they wanted. She just wondered in the end what it would cost her. They ate and got ready to go to bed. The car keys were still in her pocket. She fought the urge to return to Chicago and see if she could get her job back.



The City of Alexandria



EVERETT FELL ASLEEP and Big Ev woke up. In Everettville the time never changed. But Big Ev could feel the sun outside dipping below the tree line, an angry red eye closing for a handful of hours. He sauntered down the hallway toward the viewing room and palmed a random canister off the shelf without breaking stride.

The praxinoscope waited in the booth. He lit the candle in the center and placed two months of images on the drum. A push of his hand set it spinning, turning horizontally on its axis.

The drum whirled. His eyes tracked the will-o-wisp images flickering in the tiny windows; and as the drum gained speed, the images began to walk. Hours of images repeated: feeding the chickens, milking the cows, walking the fields, and riding to town with Dad. He stopped the praxinoscope twice, swapped the drum with the next canister from the shelves. A trickle of sweat formed between his shoulder blades. He rubbed eyes gritty from staring.

He shifted in his seat. Sundown outside became full dark. After four more canisters, he found something. His image was walking up the rows of corn at the edge of their property line when he saw something different. He clipped out the section and exchanged the drum for a new one.

He tapped his foot as it cycled. He was searching for sunfish in a school of crappie, indistinguishable from above as exclamation points or question marks. He rubbed his neck and shifted in his seat. A Farmer's Almanac was open, laid bare on the screen. Big Ev paused the drum. The page turned in the image, the answer exposed there in bold font.

Outside full dark gave way to creeping sunrise. Big Ev blew out a long breath. Streams of sweat covered his face and arms. More speed was needed. Films for every library visit he'd ever made were removed from the canisters, spliced, and fed onto the reel.

The viewer flipped through the images. At the biography of Alexander the Great a frame sparked his interest. He put the other films in the canister and saved this one out. He gathered the films together, resting thick arms across his

knees. When sunrise bloomed a blazing orange, the eye once again regarding him with a baleful glare, Big Ev woke up Everett.

Everett knew what to do. He paused beside his parent's bed. Only Father's head was visible above the blankets. Everett watched him, unblinking. "Dad?" He placed his small hand inside his father's. "Dad?" His father's eyes twitched beneath their lids. "Father?"

Dad's eyes appeared through slitted lids. "I'm awake."

"Dad, I have something to show you."

Dad held his hand as they descended the stairs. "Son, help with the chickens and cows and we'll go."

They left a note on the kitchen table, then chugged by tractor across the fields. The subject of Everett's dreamland walk was at the edge of the property line. The spring seemed like nothing more than a large mud puddle, except for the fount in the center, where the water was in motion. Everett paced the ground along its edge, nodding his head.

His mother and aunt were on the porch when they returned. They went inside, put on a pot of coffee and ate around the wooden table. Then Everett started talking. Mom found some paper. As the plan became clear everyone joined in, except Dill.

Everett watched her. Her left hand traced an unconscious pattern on the table. She gazed out the front window, lingering on the Studebaker. Her head was still turned when she said, "You're missing something."

"Says who?"

Then Dill turned. "Says me. Look, you're assuming everything will work."

"It will!"

"I hope you're right. But we all know now that bad things do happen."

No one answered that.

"You've got to have a backup plan." She took the paper from Judith and started writing. "So think about this...."

Work was where Carter felt safe. The bank was a monolith in the center of main street, a bunker. The clerk from reception came into his office, trailed by the Steiner family. Carter was seated behind his desk, when he glanced up and there was Eli Steiner. He froze as he detected the circular scars on Eli's face.

"Good to see you, Carter." Eli caught him in a handshake. "I understand there's an issue with financing. Do you mind if we sit down?"

They took a seat around his desk, and Carter cleared his throat. "Eli, it is good to see you. Though you do seem...dissipated. As you know, a seed loan is serious business. Undertaken by those with the full ability to pay. Men and women with the ability to fulfill their obligations."

Carter knew they were just empty words. To have his confidant come to ask for money left him sullen. Life, like banking, was a system of debts. And he knew who owed who when it came to Eli Steiner.

“You know me, Judith and Everett. This is Dill, her sister.”

“I see the resemblance.”

“The four of us are going to plant the harvest and then we’re going to bring it in, easy.”

“I’m not sure if I would call it that, Eli.”

“We’re experienced farmers, Carter.”

“As you know, times are hard, Eli. I need some sort of guarantee.” Inside he was nauseous. He felt disloyal.

“My word’s always been good enough before.”

“Well, times have changed, Eli and this is a bank after all. How about collateral? I believe your farm has quite a bit of equity.”

“It does, yes.”

“How about I loan you the money against the equity in your farm?”

Carter had an involuntary thought. He imagined he’d turned the Steiners down for their loan. He’d soon be forced to foreclose on the farm. There’d be a Sheriff’s sale and then the man who had held his wife’s hand as she wept would be broken as well. He wished he’d never met Eli Steiner. He wished they’d been ignorant until their child had been born, blue and motionless.

“That’s still not enough,” Eli said. “We need more.”

“You need more for what? These are hard times, Eli. And as best I can tell you’re still a sick man.”

Eli smiled like his son that day on the boardwalk. He’d never seen the resemblance until now. “Gonna build a cistern.”

Everett placed a piece of paper on the desk.

“Well, this is just for lime and the like,” Carter said. “How are you going to build a cistern with that?”

“Marine concrete,” Everett piped up. “Just like they built the city of Alexandria with.” He beamed.

Carter wondered if his son would have been this alive, this vital.

Eli was unusually relaxed. His fingers traced the band of the hat in his lap. “And a machine shop.”

Carter said, “Work like that would cost more than what you’re asking for. It would take a healthy man and a full crew to do it,”

“Well no. We’re going to buy it from you. The auction for ‘Child’s Sheetmetal’ was a bust. The machines are still sitting in that building and on your balance sheet.”

“How can you hope to succeed where they failed? It’s not even your line of business.” Carter could almost follow his line of thought. *I’ve underestimated this man.*

“We’ll have no employees and no rent. We can put the whole thing in the barn. Judith ran the numbers.”

She pushed the slip of paper across his desk.

“I’ve got an engineer on staff already,” Eli said.

Dill nodded and took a note from her purse. “Here’s a list of the machines we’ll need.”

Carter picked up his phone to place a call. But stopped in mid stroke. There were all those loans that he had written that stood ready to default. He couldn’t stand to add another one to them. Not without another guarantee. Not even for Eli Steiner. He set the phone back down.

“You came and helped us when we lost the baby.” Carter was staring at the boy now, his envy hidden behind an impassive mask. The scarlet fever had killed their child, deforming his marriage into something part love and part regret.

“You surely did. Didn’t even know he was stillborn till you said so. And your ideas do seem interesting, but that’s still no guarantee that you’ll be able to pay back the loan.”

Judith’s sister was downcast. She took a set of car keys out of her pocket, staring at them before, with a shaking hand, she placed them on the desk.

She said, “If you need more collateral, I’ve got a Studebaker Erskine worth a thousand dollars. You say the word, and it’s yours.”

He could tell she hoped he would turn her down. The way she held her breath you’d think that car was all she owned in the world. Carter picked up the keys. He leaned back in his chair and nodded once. “I will need to see your plan in writing, eventually.” And then he did pick up the phone.

“Please bring me the loan paperwork so we can get the Steiners on their way.”

They signed with his favorite fountain pen. Their goodbyes still hung in the air when they left for the lobby. Carter could see them just inside the front doors, outlined by the noonday sun.

Everett was in the center, their hands on his shoulders. Then one after the other they hugged him. Carter stared at the car keys to a Studebaker Erskine, praying it was a good luck charm. Maybe Ruby would try again.

The drive from the bank was quiet until Judith spoke. “You didn’t have to do that.”

“It needed to be done.” Dill turned to her sister then with her lips pursed, her mind already on to the next thing. “Besides, I got my heart set on something

faster.”

Judith and Everett went to the feed store for materials. Eli and Dill went to the bank impound lot. They picked through the machines, selected a handful, and arranged their delivery.

Using the sketch Dill had created, they dug around the spring, getting themselves covered up to their necks in mud. When they were four feet down, everyone got out of the hole, and Dill took her measurements. They created wood forms onsite and poured their homemade marine concrete inside. When the cistern was complete, they started the irrigation paths to feed the bone-dry fields.

Everett walked the rows. By the Farmer’s Almanac in his head, half the planting season was gone. With the first batch of seeds in the ground, the rain stayed away. They planted more seeds and it stayed away the days after that. Every seed they had, they’d planted, and still, no rain fell.

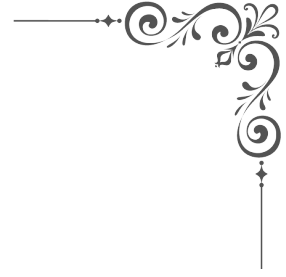
Two weeks passed. Everett woke up as he always did, before sunrise, to a welcome thrumming on the roof. He dressed and trundled down the stairs, seeing the results of rain after the two-week drought. Everywhere the soil was cracked, baked hard by a thrifty sun, reluctant to accept visitors. The raindrops bounced off the surface like it was stone, except where they’d cut the irrigation paths.

His parents and Dill woke up and came down the stairs. The rain continued to pour. The cistern and the irrigation paths were filling, nourishing their small plants. It was the most successful harvest in the Steiner family history. But the price of corn fell to an all-time low.

Without the machine shop, they would have been ruined.

“Kata: a systematic process of teaching and training that emphasizes repetitive motion, executed in a disciplined way. It can be applied to individuals or groups. Typically used to describe the learning of form in martial arts.”

Author Unknown, “Production Methods in Small Lots for the Manager of Managers”



Kata, 1999



KAHLE'S PLAN TO MEET Boomer hit a snag named Gary Queeg. Queeg was seated in his office, facing the door, like the sheriffs in the old time westerns - needed only a shotgun to make it complete. He stood when Kahle entered, closed the gap between them in a stride, and held out a slip of paper that Kahle took out of reflex.

Queeg said, "I need you to finish these reports post haste, man. Turn them in to the quality manager by the end of the day." Queeg puffed out his chest. "I'd do it, but I got a commitment." He turned off the light in his office and split.

Kahle watched Queeg pass through the turnstiles. He climbed into a Volkswagen sedan, where sun glinted off a set of titanium golf clubs strapped into the passenger seat.

It was so unfair. Kahle stalked the office, hemmed in by grey walls while the summer sun beckoned from just beyond the window. His stomach knotted. He clenched his hands into fists crumpling something inside: the list.

It was easy to read, despite Pross's florid handwriting. It was long, long enough to take him all day. He removed sheaves of hand-marked inspection sheets from the file cabinet, placed them beside his computer, and began typing them one by one into spreadsheets.

Morning turned into afternoon. Storm clouds lit from behind like Chinese lanterns rolled in off the lake, the jinn secreted inside throwing rain against the windows. *That would fix Queeg.*

First shift employees clattered by on their way to freedom, just as he finished. He threaded his way amongst the second shift who replaced them, buoyed by full lunch pails, shaking hands as he went. He arrived at the front office just as Janie, the staff secretary was locking up.

"Good to see you again, Kahle," she said. "Just go on in there and leave them in my 'in box'. I'll give them to Pross in the morning."

He deposited the report, and returned to his desk to call Boomer. While he listened to the dial tone, he took the book "Production Methods in Small Lots for the Manager of Managers" from his desk drawer.

Boomer picked up on the fourth or fifth ring. "Alright, Hoss, where you want to meet?"

"Usual."

Inside The Pressroom, a crushed velvet darkness enveloped him. Overhead vents drove fingers of heat down his collar, loosening his coat and lightening his mood. The book was in his backpack. Aggie was waiting for him. And a sliver of hope survived that he could win Bee and keep his job.

He was on a mission, until he noticed a dark haired beauty seated at the bar. The side of her face was visible in relief, cheekbone and chin standing out, eyes and mouth lost to the darkness. Bee. He felt a pressure in his chest, slowed his pace to a stop, and experienced a temporarily break from reality.

She rose from her chair and crossed the room, eyes swollen, breath perfumed in tart bourbon. Smiling now, coming close. She took his hand, guiding him out the front of the bar, out the rear of the factory, to the picnic tables just beyond the heat treat doors, where baking forgings bathed them in pungent sulfur. Blooming wildflowers surrounded them. He picked one and placed it in her hair.

She said, "I will always love you, Kahle."

And she was hugging him, her heartbeat like a butterfly in a bell jar, her aura enveloping them in licking white fire, lifting them off the ground, turning the wildflowers around them into a field of flames.

He came to with a shock as cold beer slopped on his shirt. The serving tray clattered to the floor. The waitress (Her nametag said "Candy") kneeled and her mouth twisted in a snarl; the broken bottles laid out like dead soldiers, their pristine brown bodies reduced to shrapnel.

He looked again at the girl at the bar. Long, manicured hands reached for her drink. She shifted her narrow hips in her seat. She was someone else, and he was just another damn fool. He crouched, trying to help Candy retrieve assorted shards but she waved him away, muttering under her breath, "...the fuck's wrong with you?"

He pressed through the crowd toward the back, where Boomer was in a booth facing the door, illuminated in a greasy yellow halo. An amber bottle of beer sweated in his hand. Kahle collapsed into the booth and slid the booklet across. He said, "This is the bomb! I mean, I think this guy knows what he's talking about."

"I can't read it through your hand." Boomer swiped foam from his lips and then turned the pages.

"Well, look at that picture, and that one."

"Do you know what we're looking at?" Boomer asked.

Kahle wasn't sure what he thought, but he knew what he felt. The paper was rough, but the images were lines of precise black ink, filled with blushes of color. Whomever created the sketches had put a lot of effort into getting them right. "Well, yeah. Maybe. You're the production guy. You tell me."

Boomer ignored him, turning the pages at a unhurried pace. Figures ran machines, added numbers, and followed arrows. A female figure stood in the center of her fellow sketches, her open hand above her head, palm facing the others in a pantomime "watch me."

Sometimes Boomer's confidence reminded him of Noyce. Everything seemed so certain to them. He envied that. This was the part where Noyce would have laughed. But Noyce was a world away. He focused on the puzzle sitting in front of him. "Well maybe," Kahle said, "...well maybe it's a textbook."

"If it's a textbook, it's a textbook with almost no words." Boomer turned the yellowed pages with a tentative hand, staring silently at the diagrams, rocking side to side. "If you had a workforce that was illiterate or spoke multiple languages you'd use something like this, just pictures and numbers."

Kahle knew Sanskrit and this wasn't that. But it made him think of something else. Ancient Egyptians wrote in pictures. The description evaded his tongue. The words were blue and wide. Hieroglyphs. This was like that. Of course, they had no Rosetta Stone to translate it.

Kahle was reading the pages upside down, when he was jolted by recognition. Amongst the few words, one surfaced from his past: "kata".

He was eighteen on the first day of cadet combatives; shivering with his peers in a room that smelled like blood, old sweat and faded bleach. They circled around Swiss Miss, his Judo coach, in the middle of the wrestling mats. She motioned the largest cadet in the class forward from his spot in the front row.

"Today we start with kata. Watch me," she said. "Later you will do what I do."

Before she started, it seemed impossible. She grabbed Neanderthal Man's left arm and the lapel of his judo gi, pulling his body in a ragged circle. Once she was in motion, it seemed unstoppable. Her leg whipped out to catch his foot and he slapped on his back like a table with a missing leg, confusion registering on his face. *Wherever had the floor come from? Why was all his air gone?*

Swiss Miss pulled him to his feet and resumed her former station: hands on her hips, the twin buns in her hair undisturbed. "This is how it is done," she said. "Combat is not about the muscles, it is about the will. Who do you think is the strongest?" No one spoke.

"I think smallest is strongest. As soldiers, they must fight like rodents to survive, like rats. We'll see." She pointed at Kahle. "You're next."

“Kahle...Kahle? Where do you go when you do that?”

Kahle said, “That book looks pretty old.”

“Yeah, and there's no author listed. There's something here that looks like a warehouse. Maybe this could help us improve shipments,” Boomer said. “We're at sixty percent on time right now, and dropping.”

“That's not what it says in the company newsletter.” Kahle rotated the images in his mind, searching for a pattern.

Boomer placed a hand over the book. “Bodge is just shipping stuff into storage. We don't actually have orders for those. Take that out and the numbers are worse.”

Kahle's mouth went dry. “How much worse?”

“Terminal.”

Kahle gave up on the book, replacing the pictures with images of occupying his parents couch, searching the papers for a new job. “Didn't know you watched that.”

“Well, yeah, Kahle. You have to make plans.”

Boomer's knowing attitude reminded him of his lieutenant days; when he exchanged information with the colonel's driver over a couple of packs of smokes. “Who's your informant?”

Boomer smirked, making circles on the table with the sweat from his beer. “Margaret in planning.”

Kahle blushed.

Boomer said, “I'm going to get this to her before we meet tomorrow. She might even still be in the shop.”

Kahle nearly blacked out reliving her hammer-throwing arms carrying him up the stairs. *Had she told anyone?* Was she laughing about it right now with the other people in purchasing? He was tempted to call off sick tomorrow.

“Kahle, you okay?”

“Yeah, beer's just really strong and I missed lunch.”

Boomer tilted the book in the light and then started to pack it away. “Well, I think she could help us implement this.”

The book was important, he knew it: like a message in a bottle or a treasure map, a talisman, a lodestone guiding him to Bee. It pulled at Kahle as it sank into Boomer's satchel. He just couldn't decode it. Not right this minute, anyways.

Boomer sensed Kahle's frustration and rolled his eyes. “Stop pouting. We can't do this alone. Margaret can help us. We need to read her in.”

Margaret was a one woman Russian revolution. Kahle wondered what else she would talk him into. But he couldn't figure out the diagrams; and the way

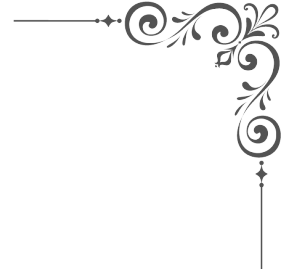
she crunched numbers, maybe she could.

Aggie was right. Kahle slouched, resigned to his humiliation. If anyone could help it was her. Unless they went higher. Anything to save face. “Maybe we should run this by Bodge?”

“How about we try it out first? You just got this thing in the mail from who knows who, written who knows when, based on who knows what. He could be some sort of crackpot or fraud. If we go straight to Bodge, we’d need something to show him. He can be hard to convince.”

Kahle drew a long gulp from his beer. “You mean to say, he can't find his ass in the dark with both hands.”

“That’s what I just said.”



Conspirators



BOOMER CHUGGED THE beer and checked his watch. "Before lunch, the weld area break room is pretty much abandoned. Let's meet there tomorrow."

Kahle nodded agreement. "I'll make sandwiches."

Boomer smiled. "I have to go. I'm gonna swing by the plant and then go buy baby formula."

A worm of envy squirmed through Kahle's heart, knowing an empty apartment awaited him. "Can I have your boots if you don't make it? Dangerous run there to the grocery store."

"Ha, ha, Kahle, very funny."

Kahle placed a closed fist on the table and spoke as low as he could muster. "Many a hardened veteran has met his end in the milk section, leaving their spirit to wander Elysium's endless fields, beneath a sun that never sets. This is the reaping of glory."

Boomer was still smiling, but his fingers thrummed on the table. "Life's not always a rush, Kahle."

He knew what Boomer meant. "You mean life out here." Margaret and her plans scared him, but he had to do something. It felt like he was dying inside.

Boomer relaxed, hearing the words himself; a man resigned to his many commitments. "I mean life out here, yes." He pushed the empty beer bottle around on the tabletop. "Sometimes you just grind it out."

"Like getting baby formula."

"Exactly." And then in a voice that was barely above a whisper Boomer said, "It's going to be okay, Kahle." He cracked a loose salute as he made for the door.

Kahle went home and hustled in the kitchen, assembling several of his favorite sandwiches, prosciutto and fontina panini with arugula pesto. He wolfed the first one down, struggling to catch his breath between swallows. Delicious. This was going to be a killer meeting.

In the morning, the break room was all theirs. Margaret arrived last with the book tucked under her arm. He looked up to see her face, and its sunny glow.

"Hi, guys," she said. And then specifically, "Hi, Kahle."

“Hey,” Kahle said. Her so close unnerved him. The memory returned of his inert body cupped in her arms, and the rocking motion as her feet flowed up the stairs. His cheeks burned. The heat conveyed to his shoulder blades where it roiled down his back. With the bewilderment of a new recruit, he wondered; how did she ever get him involved?

A warmth surrounded her. She was a good Samaritan from some alternate reality where people hugged at charities; before delivering aluminum pans of food to sick neighbors.

She’d probably already figured the book out. He disgusted himself for not doing the same, but sitting for hours at a desk repelled him.

She said, “I liked the book. I think I figured some of it out.” Her chest heaved with inhalation, shifting her attention to the paper bag on the table. “Let’s eat first.”

They devoured the sandwiches. Then Margaret wiped her hands, laid the book open, paged to the front and said, “So here’s what I’ve got, guys.” She looked them both in the eye. “Look at this picture and what do you see?”

Kahle leaned forward and said, “Monkeys from a barrel.”

The others looked at him.

“What?” He asked. “See how their arms are like loops? It’s like, a barrel of monkeys. It’s a game Noyce and I played all the time as children.”

“Ok,” Margaret asked, “what do you see besides that?”

Seated next to her, Boomer traced the looping arms on the page with his index finger. “They’re passing something, moving one piece at a time.”

“Yes, that’s what I thought too. The factory is set up to move all these orders. For starters, what if we just try to move some ourselves, from welding, through assembly, to the shipping department? Only one at a time, starting with the orders for Escargot, since they’re our biggest customer. There’s more, but let me explain...”

By the time the food was gone they had the outline of a plan.

Boomer found an order Margaret was confident they had parts for, and pushed it on a cart to assembly. Kahle assembled the parts in a plastic frame to form a kit, and buckled it shut. Then he walked the assembled kit to shipping. Over an eight hour shift, they moved seven orders. Two of them shipped. On the second day, they did nine kits through assembly. Four of them shipped.

It was Friday morning, and after a week they had expedited seventy orders. Twenty-six of them had shipped. Kahle meandered amidst forty-four pallets still stuck in shipping. That book was no help. It reminded him of the math class word problems he always hated so much. Digging foxholes would be more fun.

Cold rain blew in the open shipping doors, agitating clerks who scampered with buckets; plunking them underneath the roof leaks. A bearded man in an ocean of plaid slashed his clipboard through the air or pointed as appropriate, keeping his employees in furious motion. When he saw Kahle he made a bee line for him in loping strides.

Without extending his hand, he said, "I'm the shipping manager." His chest heaved as he took large ragged breaths. "You got your junk all over my shop. This stuff is no good. You need to move your stuff back to assembly right away."

Kahle said, "I don't understand why these aren't shipping."

The shipping manager put a massive fist in Kahle's face. "You're not blaming this on me."

"I really don't understand."

The shipping manager asked, "What does the red tag say?" Then he bent over and snatching one off the pallet, sticking it under Kahle's nose for good measure. "These are incomplete."

The old red rage came on and Kahle stuffed it down. "We packed them the way the drawing said."

The shipping manager's face was swollen with irritation. "You don't have to understand."

"This is not my fault!"

"Well, you did something wrong." The shipping manager punctuated each word with the clipboard, poked in Kahle's direction. "You take parts, little dude, or I crush you."

Kahle slumped and the man backed off just a fraction—"I'll give you till the end of the day."—then he tucked the clipboard under his arm and stalked off.

Kahle copied notes from the tags then paged Boomer and Margaret. She arrived first, accepted the list, logged in a computer terminal, and started reviewing the drawings. Boomer glided in as she typed.

Fifteen minutes later she softly swore. "The bills of material are wrong!"

"What's that got to do with quality?"

"It's a shopping list." She took out her red pen and started making notes. "The wrong parts were on the list. So you packed the wrong parts. These orders will be way late. Hello, pissed off customer. We need to fix this."

They trooped across the shop floor to the engineering department on the second-floor mezzanine. After a right at the top of the stairs, began a long narrow galley.

Kahle snuck a look at Beezor's office in the corner. The shades were drawn, and light crawled around the edges of the closed door. The Red Queen was in

study. Not one of them even considered disturbing her. Her ass-chewings were already legendary.

In the galley itself, all the flaking steel desks were empty, except for one at the end. The foreign exchange engineer occupied the cobwebbed darkness beneath the 3rd-floor stairs.

He was staring at his computer screen, lit by a green glow, intently reviewing drawings. His only company was a glass of water and a hard-boiled egg. When they surrounded his desk he looked up, startled.

“Dieter Machs, how can I help you?” he asked, in almost perfect English, his German accent detectable as a lilt on the consonants. He adjusted his black plastic frame glasses and ran a hand through long black greasy hair. He wiped the other had on his black shirt as if removing a sheen of sweat. He twisted, and the steel chain between his wallet and his belt clanged against his desk. “What is the problem that you are having?”

Margaret extended her hand. Dieter took the slip of paper and started reading.

She asked. “How can these be in production when they’re not even complete?”

“Well, I cannot know this. I can say that as part of Motomax Future we expedited several models into production.” He said it singsong and fluid, like a doctor calming an agitated patient.

Dieter pulled the drawings up on the computer. “Perhaps these got overlooked.” After a few more clicks of the mouse, he seemed satisfied. “Give me an hour or two and I will have this done for you, ok? You leave the list with me.”

When they hadn’t moved he restated the instruction. “Come back after lunch.” Like a precision instrument, he swiveled back to the screen, absorbed again in his work.

The three of them left, the conversation clearly over. They sat in the cafeteria drinking coffee, gloating as everyone around them dined on leaden meatloaf. When the cafeteria cleared out, they went back.

Dieter was as good as his word. He had updated drawings for them, with signed approvals. His watchful eyes followed them out the door.

Margaret took the lead. “Follow me.”

Her desk was upstairs in the main building, in a glass-walled cubicle that barely fit a desk, two chairs, and several bookcases. She scooped binders of paper out of the chairs, stacking them on the floor in a corner.

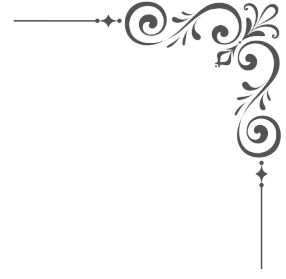
“The Boys” waited as she pecked through the list of orders, looking for the missing parts. She tallied the list, and double checked her work.

“Of the forty-four orders still open we have parts for twenty, leaving twenty-four orders still to fill. I’m sending an email to Hamish Rosenbloom in sales with an update. It’s his account. Some of these will clean up late Escargot orders. I think he’ll be pretty happy.”

Hamish called before they left. “Finally, an answer. How soon can I have the twenty?”

*I believe I can see the future
Cause I repeat the same routine
I think I used to have a purpose
But then again
That might have been a dream*

Nine Inch Nails – “Every Day is Exactly the Same”



The Healing Room



KAHLE WAS SOPPING HIS neck with a handkerchief when his pager vibrated with a text from Queeg. "Come see me."

Nausea radiated out from his stomach in waves. Queeg usually avoided him. So why the sudden interest?

Maybe he was going to get written up. He hadn't really been paying much attention to his department. Thanks to the seniority system, his inspectors were his parents' age. They didn't need much help. The production supervisors were entertained to see someone in quality actually get their hands dirty. He doubted they'd squealed.

He was calling Queeg's desk when a second text arrived.

"Meet me in department 765."

Kahle mounted his bike and arrived at the rear of the plant before Queeg. He surveyed the area. Department 765 was a factory graveyard. Physically, it was a wire cage thirty feet wide by fifty feet deep, packed tight with pallets on racks and shelving. Parts hung off the edges like the arms of cadavers.

Queeg parked his bicycle, took several limping strides and said, "Welcome to the healing room." He actually smiled at Kahle's blank look. Then he said, "Reject parts come here from all over the plant. We 'red tag' them as bad and shelve them. Sometimes if an order is short, they cry to Bodge. He writes a deviation and lets them go. Part healed. We ship them to the customer."

"I thought engineering had to sign deviations?"

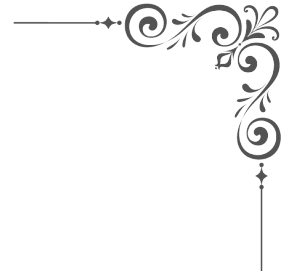
Queeg stood in rock solid silence and then proceeded on as if he'd never been interrupted. "And since you have time to help production..." Queeg gave Kahle the fish eye and continued. "You can work on clearing this place out, man. I've already scheduled you for the next six months approved Saturday and Sunday. Best get started, bucko."

Gary turned on his heel and promptly left.

Kahle stared at the dusty shelves without seeing them. He was going to be chained to this room until the next ice age. He was so close to Beezor yet so far away.

In his mind's eye, she was at the safety railing to the engineering mezzanine. Her jet black hair blew loosely behind her in an impossible wind. Her khaki slacks and dark green shirt ruffled. Her perfume, this time, the gunpowder smell of cordite, carried to him on the breeze.

Her eyes, liquid and black, stared across the plant floor, searching for him. Seeing nothing she shook her head, returned to her office and closed the steel door. A green light pulsed beneath it.



The Cage



KAHLE WAS TRAPPED. Everyone strolled beyond the chain link cage of Department 765, enjoying a casual Saturday, laughing and drinking coffee.

Department 765 was like a boil, distended with every reject part made at Frampton. Racks formed a cavern around him, loaded with components: plastic connectors, bowl-shaped aluminum stampings, circuit boards in anti-static bags, pill-shaped filters, and bits of twisting copper pipe were stacked higgley piggley without labels, their original purpose lost. He imagined the parts all cascading off the shelves, raining down on him in waves, pounding him into unconsciousness.

He propped his box fan in the cage opening where it exchanged one block of hot air for new, pushed the dust from one shelf to the other, where it combined with his sweat to form a paste. Where it dried, concrete-like chips formed in his clothes, his hair, and the folds of his neck.

He stared at his hands wishing they were around Queeg's throat, cutting into his beard, squeezing off his sellout hippie banter. His anger transferred from Queeg to Bodge, the brains behind cutting off the air conditioning.

His rage expanded to include all of Motomax, Wesley Brummert, Bee Wasikowska, and mostly himself. How could he be so stupid? How could he be so reckless? Now he was trapped belowdecks on the sinking Titanic, waiting for the band to stop playing. He squeezed his eyes shut to choke off the thought. Blood rushed to his head and he fought off a rising red tide.

The lights flickered.

A text arrived from Boomer. "Where you at, Tiger?" It lanced his anger like a popping soap bubble.

Kahle tapped the keys. "765."

"Roger that. Intercept in five." Boomer arrived on his bicycle hauling a six pack of water. They split the bottles and Boomer sat on a coil of hoses, nursing his drink.

Kahle was pretty sure his dejection came out in his voice. "This place is a dump."

“Yup.”

“Queeg’s got me scheduled in here every weekend until all this garbage is gone. It’s punishment.”

Boomer half-turned his head, like a dog on a scent. “How do you know that?”

“Someone’s been watching us. And apparently they told Queeg.” Kahle’s face was flushed red, the anger rising again. “We need out from under their thumb.”

“Likely.” Boomer stared at the racks surrounding them.

Kahle asked, “Where did all this stuff come from?”

Boomer frowned. “Rumor is, the last engineering manager, Oroszco finagled ownership of Department 765 to stop the ‘healing’ process. Pross took away the people to re-inspect the parts. Then Orozco got canned.”

“How did we still make shipments?”

Boomer stood. “We didn’t. The buyers ordered extra and prayed.” He plucked another bottle of water out of the bundle and climbed onto his bicycle. “The point is, if there’s some sort of map to this place, Oroszco probably had it. All his old stuff should be in engineering records now. Guess who we’ve got to see?”

“Dieter Machs.”

Dieter’s greeting was rubbing his hands together. A death metal god reached for them from his black t-shirt. “Good day my friends. Did the drawings help you?” His eyes sparkled with interest.

“Yes, thank you,” Boomer said. “But we’re here for something else. We need the files from Manny Orozco.”

“I see.” In a fluid motion, Machs produced a key, opened the file cabinet against the wall, and extracted a clipboard from the bottom drawer. “You will come with me, yes?”

They spiraled down the back staircase to a narrow room beneath the mezzanine. Dieter pulled the chain for the lights, illuminating a dense semi-organized stash of file cabinets, extra wide file cabinets, cardboard boxes, wall lockers, and shelving.

Kahle asked, “Wie sagt mann ‘hoarder’?”

Dieter said, “That would be ‘hamsterer’. But some of this is still good, yes?”

They bypassed all of it for an alcove stacked with cardboard boxes. Dieter hooked the stack with a trolley and rolled them to a row of wooden tables against the wall. Each of them took a box.

Forty-five minutes later, Boomer held up a pad of typewritten pages along with a sheaf of graph paper. “He’s got everything here,” Boomer said. “It’s a

detailed grid: serial numbers, descriptions, dates, even suppliers.”

Kahle thought about all the hours it must have taken to create. “Dude was pretty thorough.”

“I have found something as well,” Dieter said. Kahle and Boomer looked over his shoulder.

Kahle said, “Old drawings.”

“Yeah,” Boomer said, “but for what?”

Dieter turned the pages, folding them flat as he went. “This is for ansible system...pneumatic transport.”

Kahle asked, “Like the tubes at the bank?”

“Yes. This is like that only more powerful,” Dieter said. “This is vacuum physics. I studied this in Frankfurt.”

“I haven’t seen these anywhere,” Kahle said.

Dieter pointed to the factory ceiling. “That is because they are following the upright beams that support the roof. They are almost invisible. I have seen these here.”

“Well, what would we need one of those for?” Boomer’s face contained a cross between boredom and exasperation.

Dieter pushed away from the desk. “To communicate in secret.”

Boomer asked, “Why would we want to do that?”

“I have the key to this place. The last person to possess it was Oroszco before he was fired. Department 765 is a no man’s land. Anyone who sent you there is sending you a message. They need to make you quiet, without anyone knowing what is happening here.”

“What’s happening here?” Kahle asked.

“We are dying here, yes? Five maybe six months and we are done.” Dieter said. “If you’re trying to make the factory better, I can help. I am a maker.”

Kahle and Boomer looked at him blankly.

“This is joke. Machs in German is Maker. I am a maker.”

“You want in,” Boomer said.

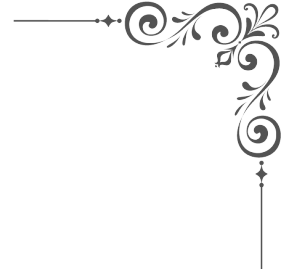
Dieter adjusted his black plastic glasses. “That is right. I want in.”

Kahle and Boomer looked at each other, turned to Dieter, and said at the same time, “ok.”

“Before we tackle the ansible,” Kahle said, “let’s see what we can do with Department 675.”

Boomer looked at him sideways. “765.”

Kahle rolled his eyes. “Whatever.”



Calling Kresky Systems



HELP ARRIVED UNEXPECTEDLY: chirpy and caffeinated. “This place is a goldmine.” Margaret’s was beatific, as if actual gold nuggets were scattered beneath the dust on the racks.

“More like a crypt,” Kahle preferred some time in bed studying the insides of his eyelids. “What are you doing out here on a Saturday?”

Margaret made blue cursive notes in the margins of Oroszco’s cheat sheet, comparing it to the Department 765 shelves. “I told my manager I needed to finish an inventory report, which is not a total lie. Thought I’d help you out before Queeg shows up again.” She stepped closer, well inside his personal space. “Glad to see you too. Keep it up and I’ll put you over my knee.”

A warm, not unpleasant feeling radiated from his chest to the rest of his body.

Boomer rolled up on his bicycle while they were talking. A Texas A&M baseball cap covered most of his skull. “I called her.” A pair of work gloves, stained near to black, poked out of the basket between the handlebars.

Margaret took a step back and headed for the shelves while she read from her clipboard. A blush of crimson began at her collar and crawled up her neck. “Parts for your fifteen missing orders might be in here,” she said. “Let me show you something.” She slid between the racks to the last aisle, covering her shoulders in chalky lines of dust then pointed. “There’s the control boxes we need.”

Black Bakelite cubes protruded from a nest of dust bunnies. Steel terminals screwed to the outsides pointed dejectedly into the air. The reject tag read in copperplate print:

Company: Kresky Systems.

Manufacture Date: 1-14-1990

Reject: 3-24-1996

Issue: broken solder joint

Inspector: Phan

Kahle said, "Good night! These things are already nine years old!" Why hadn't Oroszco already thrown them away?

Boomer said, "If the design hasn't changed we could still use them."

Margaret plucked one of the boxes and held it up to the light. "What about repairs?" She asked. In her oversized hand, it looked like a toy, left on the playground by an absent-minded child.

Boomer said, "Let's call the manufacturer." He climbed back on his bicycle, the issue decided.

"I can get the number," Margaret said.

"Since we're not supposed to be here, let's be a little stealthy. I'm not interested in losing my job." Boomer sketched on his spiral notebook then tore off two pages. "I know a place. Each of you take a different route. We can call him from there."

Kahle locked the cage and followed the map to a steel safety ladder that disappeared into the rafters. He climbed up to a catwalk and followed it to a second ladder, the heat increasing as he approached the top. It opened into a wide room with desks, couches, several weight benches, and an aged rotary dial phone.

"Maintenance group crash pad," Boomer responded to their amused glances. "The guys found this room a few years ago and neglected to tell management. They come up here on their lunch break to lift weights, play cards—" He plugged the phone into a speaker and microphone system. "—or make phone calls." Margaret passed him the number and Boomer dialed, listening to the rotor click through its stations.

They jumped when the ancient ringer brayed over the speakers and Boomer adjusted the volume down.

A flat voice picked up on the twenty-third ring. "Kresky."

"Boomer Lorenz at Motomax, how are you?"

"Good." Kresky asked, "Tell me who you are again?" There was a scrabbling noise in the background like the shuffling of paper.

Boomer leaned forward in his chair, his elbows on the tabletop. "Boomer Lorenz at Motomax."

Kresky asked, "What's got you calling?" The delivery was brusque, making Kahle think he had bitten off the end as if he were going to add "on a Saturday" at the last minute.

"We've got your control boxes here on reject," Boomer said. A small smile was on his face, as if Kresky's question had been the punch line to a good joke.

"Haven't had issues in years." Kresky said.

"I suppose these are from then."

There was a decrease in sound at the other end, as if Kresky had just closed his office door. "Your engineering manager called a few years ago. I called back several times without luck. Even sent a letter. Then Motomax cut my contract." The silence that followed seemed forced, as if he had more to say.

In what sounded like a speech she'd given many times, Margaret said, "I don't know about that, but if you can help us maybe we can help you."

There was a soft wheeze like a large man sitting in a leather chair. Kahle visualized his burning eyes, reminded on a Saturday about a cancelled contract and the money still owed him.

Margaret said, "Maybe you can help us with an engineering question."

Kresky spoke slowly. "I should be able to. I designed this product myself. You got something saying why it's not working? A tag or something."

"We have a red tag," Kahle said.

"Read it to me."

They did.

"Ok. A broken solder joint you say?" Kresky sighed in his throat, like a swimmer taking a quick breath of air. "A solder joint is like a blood vessel. Only instead of carrying blood, it carries electricity. But we can fix it."

The low hum of a computer powering up was followed by the flap of Kresky turning pages. "Here's what you need to do. You're going to need to write this down..." After fifteen minutes they got off the phone and darted to the local pizza place in Kahle's hatchback and returned when work ended at two thirty. They transferred the control boxes to a pizza tray before the restaurant owner fed them into the oven.

Boomer said, "Consistent heat over an exact period of time. I would never have thought of using a pizza oven to reflow solder."

"Furnaces in the plant were too hot," Kahle said. He imagined the solder inside the boxes melting and reforming, brought back to life by a little bit of heat.

"And monitored," Margaret said.

Kahle said, "We won't know this worked until we test them."

The control boxes rolled out of the oven, their cycle complete. The owner accepted the hundred dollar bill but didn't charge for the breadsticks. He waved goodbye as they pulled away.

The secon shift cars occupied the Motomax parking lot as Boomer took a key from his wallet and unlocked the door to Bodge's private entrance. "Never expected I'd be breaking into this place."

"Tell me again why we're going this way?" Kahle asked.

“No badge swipe record,” Boomer said. “Means we were never here. Do you want to explain why we came back into work on a Saturday after everyone else left? Queeg would just love a chance to say it was theft.”

They locked the control boxes in the cage of Department 765 racks to cool. They retraced their steps, locked Bodge’s entrance, and stepped out of the plant.

Early Monday morning, Kahle wheeled the control boxes to Mei Phan in inspection. She was amazed to see her rejected product resurrected from the cage. She powered up the test stand, verified current through the electrical contacts, and cycled through the boxes. The lights on the front glowed green for “Go.”

Mei said, “All okay boss.”

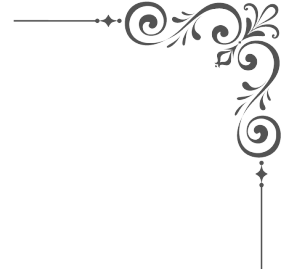
Kahle tapped a text to Boomer and Margaret, still in a state of shock. A surge of power disoriented him as if a circuit inside him had closed. It had worked.

He considered the other parts lost on those shelves. If it was good for one, how many other orders could they clear with those parts?

First shift left the plant in a hustle of heavy boots. He was packing to go home, when his pager buzzed with a text from Margaret.

Factory Rat: an artisan who creates in the cathedral known as the manufactory. They are clever, committed, and resourceful problem solvers. They gain satisfaction from fashioning products that give joy to others. They are the salt of the Earth.

Author Unknown, “Production Methods in Small Lots for the Manager of
Managers”



Green Light

HOW LONG COULD SHE keep this up? Pressure spread from Margaret's neck in feelers across her shoulders. She watched daylight flee across the lake and thought about going home. "There's an issue with Hamish's latest order."

"The Boys" on either side of her glowed green from the light of her computer screen.

"Like how?" Kahle asked.

She watched his shuffling feet and bit back a reply. *You want to be somewhere else? That's right Kahle, go see your girlfriend. It's only Margaret here.* Instead she said, "It doesn't use parts from the cage. They're not rejects. We're out."

Margaret had been pushing her arms into her coat when Hamish called. Escargot had given him an order several months ago, they now demanded he deliver two months early. She had felt to blame for the frustration in his voice, as if all of Frampton's failings had begun with her.

The screen blurred. "I'll have to look at these again when I'm fresh guys, sorry." *I have to go anyways.* It was time for a pilgrimage to Walgreens for Grandma Fischback's blood pressure pills.

There were none at home and driving was a burden for her. So was the eighty dollars (with insurance) from her social security check. Margaret would pick up. Margaret would pay. She watched the guys leave then slid through the restroom door.

Madge was applying blood red lipstick in the mirror over the sink, so Margaret took a quiet step backward. But Madge's brown eyes caught the movement and she dangled a high heeled shoe from her foot in greeting. *Too late to escape.*

"I got a date tonight."

"That's great, Madge."

"He's a salesman with an expense account and a sharp dresser. Said he'd pay for drinks." Madge dabbed her lashes with a brush then turned her neck, stroked the side with her hand. "I need it after today. Either the fucking new guy gets it together or he's gone." She shrugged to herself. "What a screw-up."

Margaret knew who the new guy was. He was one of the stronger employees. The problem wasn't him. She took a tentative step toward the door, but her curiosity got the better of her. "What do you mean exactly?"

"I had no trouble getting parts before the last guy quit. I mean, purchasing is not rocket science," Madge said. "Now I have Alex but no parts and I'm choking on requests."

A suspicion, small as a pilot flame sprung to life, dancing around Madge's comment, niggling at Hamish's order.

Madge brightened and tore herself from the mirror. "You could reduce the number of orders until we get caught up!"

Margaret asked, "And shut down the factory?"

Madge abandoned the lipstick to her purse and turned to stare. Her feet spread, arms crossed under her breasts: a challenge. "You make it sound so bad. It would only be for a little while." Madge huffed. "We're late on everything anyways."

"I can't do that, but let me see how I can help." Margaret returned to her computer. The pilot light was now at full blaze. It took fifteen minutes of clicking to find settings for the bill of materials. A little gasp escaped her throat. She could fix this. They didn't have parts because none were on order.

She typed her supervisor's password from memory and increased the orders. Costing Motomax another fifteen thousand dollars gave her a pang of guilt, but Hamish's orders came to half a million dollars, easy. She hit 'enter.' A field at the end of the list glowed red, stopping the process. Defeated, she sent a text message and logged off. Maybe if she hurried the pharmacist would re-open for her.

Boomer's pager awakened him, fast asleep at the kitchen table. Becky had taken the kids to soccer so he could have some quiet. He hit a button triggering the backlit screen and then sat motionless.

Margaret needed a favor. They were short of parts and his department was the problem. But she needed more parts than he could make. He was at an impasse.

He'd taken that little book home but hadn't seen anything that directly applied to this. He certainly couldn't just quit and relocate. He was thirty four. Not quite a kid. People were counting on him. Benji's school was good. Actually, it wasn't good, it was great. Becky worked. So a neighbor watched the baby like their own child. Taught her sign language on top of that.

The automatic sprinkler passed back and forth outside the kitchen window. He looked around the kitchen itself. The sink was full of dishes so he hung up his uniform shirt, washed his hands, and started with the plates.

He worked at a steady pace now, making sure to use a lot of soap. He was doing too many setups to keep up. Setups were taking too long. He needed to clone himself.

(Grab the next plate.)

The sprinkler outside stroked back and forth, lulling in its regularity. The connection dawned on him. He needed a robot. He was doing too many setups.

(Rinse.)

How could he do less setups?

No.

(Grab another plate.)

He needed a robot to do less setups, all at the same time...all at the same time. The dog stared at him, appearing concerned.

His people were forming and welding parts that often went into the same assembly. What if all those components were made at once in one part? The idea picked up steam as he started in on the forks. He needed a progressive die. It could make all those little parts at once, no welding, and no assembling.

He couldn't figure this out on his own. He fished in his computer bag and plucked out his pager. He scrolled to Margaret's name and started to tap out his question.

He got an answer back just before lunch on Monday.

The text was prototypical Margaret: upbeat but succinct. "Found a good one."

Then she quickly got into a lot of detail he didn't have patience for. He read to the end where she said, "...You could combine a couple of these, it looks like. But I'm not an engineer. Sounds like another trip to Dieter Machs."

Boomer was an industrial engineer but his heavy lifting was on submarines. Dieter could earn his bones. Boomer made a list and emailed it to Kahle.

Kahle's reply was almost immediate.

"Sounds good. Give me a few hours. Let's see him at 1400 hours.

Beat Navy,

Kahle"

Kahle finished printing all the drawings and got ready to go upstairs. By that, he meant he was writing another letter to his parents while he waited for a text from Boomer. He tried to sound upbeat without lying. It sounded like something written at band camp. "The food was good and he'd made a lot of friends."

He had made friends: Boomer, Margaret, maybe even Dieter Machs. Not only was he going to share what they had found about department 765, he was going to show Dieter the book.

He was even kind of getting used to not putting on a uniform. Everything the Army had asked him to do he'd been trained for. That camouflage suit made him feel indestructible. Now he wrote the manual as he went along.

He still missed the certainty. That he knew exactly the place to eat. That he knew exactly what his boss thought of him. That he knew without a doubt that he was included. He was accepted. This was different than that. He was walking places that had no roads.

Kahle added another line, "I feel I've been growing here in Frampton." And then he said below his breath to just himself, "I just haven't gotten what I wanted." He was jolted out of his thoughts by a page from Boomer.

"Not going to make it. Stop. Mission must go on. Stop. Please take plans to Machs. Stop. God Save the Queen. Boomer."

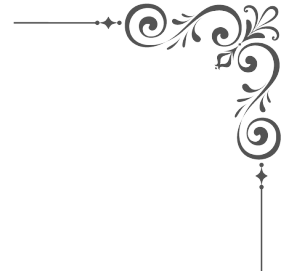
Kahle sighed and hit 'send' on his email. He closed his computer, picked up the drawings, and ambled onto his bicycle. *God Save the Queen, indeed.*

Mounting the stairs to the engineering mezzanine, he knew that something was different. The door to Beezor's office was open, spilling green light from her desk lamp out into the galley.

His eyes focused on Dieter, seated at his desk looking very uncomfortable. Kahle was too far away to hear, but clearly, he was wilting under interrogation from Bee Wasikowska. Kahle's heart hammered. A giant hand squeezed it's fingers around his chest. Her aura was a brilliant red, the color of anger. He thought of running away, but she'd already seen him.

She looked as good as always. She had on a pair of black slacks and that same oxblood shirt. Black lipstick covered those full lips. They formed a question that was clearly aimed at Kahle.

"What the hell have you two been doing?"



Fever Dream, 1939



SEVEN YEARS OF PROSPERITY hadn't come easy. Eli could feel it in the way his legs tingled as he tried to keep up with the rest of the family. They paced amidst undulating hills on the only piece of land that had any curve. Everett had been watching him these last fifteen minutes from the corner of his eye, when his hand clamped down on Eli's forehead.

"Dad, you've got a fever."

Eli pushed Everett's hand away, impatient and irritated at the attention.

"You shouldn't be out here," Everett said.

"Son, I've got as much right to be here as anyone else." His own voice grated in his ears, childish and petulant.

"I don't mean it like that. You know what I mean. Your shirt is soaked all the way through and we're already out of water."

Seven years after the pox and they still acted like he was a faded warhorse threatening to collapse in the dirt and die. He realized that this was why they had insisted on bringing the car. Involuntarily he raised his hands, staring at useless fingers that fumbled with bolts and struggled with buckles. Everett's hands were larger than his now. His little boy was taller than he was. Broad across the chest with hands powerful as shovel heads, Everett worked sun up to sundown in the fields with ease.

Everett said, "Why don't you go back to the house?"

Eli looked at Judith for support and she bit her lip, shining red in the shadow beneath her straw hat. It was tilted forward, hiding her eyes. Dill avoided his glance.

"Please." Everett was crying now.

Eli would do what his son asked. The outside had changed but the inside had not. He felt ashamed, guilty of scaring his little boy. *He's afraid.* Eli looked at each of them again in turn. They all were.

"Fine," Eli said. "I can make it back. Keep working."

The walk to the car was harder than he anticipated, the dirt rising up to block him with every step. He was fine until he topped the rise. It tilted to the side,

sending whirls of dust downhill to the Ford at the edge of the field.

He needed water. He hadn't realized until Everett's comment that he'd gone through the last of it. Right on cue, with the car in sight, his legs started to cramp. The pain started at the bone and radiated – bunching muscles into lumpen knots beneath his pants. They fired of their own volition forcing him to crab step, swinging forward at the hip.

The sun bore down depositing its heat inside him. It started in his head and poured into his extremities turning his body into living fire. The car was close now. A few feet more and he'd get a break from the sun. *Will they would find me if he I collapsed before I die?*

Then his hand closed on the lever. He opened the door and took the crank from the floorboards. His muscles proceeded though his mind was exhausted. He attached it through the grill to turn the crank and it started on the first try.

He managed to stay on the rutted dirt track during the drive to the house, all the way to the yard. Two long pulls of water from the pump out front and he struggled inside. Falling forward into the shade felt so good that he spent a moment seated on the stairs. He reached the master bed room, opened the windows for a crosswind and slept.

An hour passed. Clouds blocked the sun, and a fever dream ensnared him. He frowned in his sleep and tried to sit up in bed, but found he couldn't rise, frozen between sleep and wakefulness.

Rabbits. He was dreaming about harmless rabbits. Two occupied the center of concentric rings, on a broad rolling field of grass surrounded by their brethren. Some were in color, others in black and white, staring to and fro at things outside of view. He remained motionless. Silent.

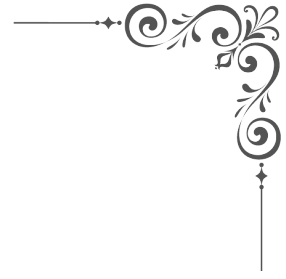
On closer inspection, their eyes were large and iridescent with fear. Their teeth were stitched with blood. Their fur matted and twisted where it had torn and re-healed, survivors of the hunter's trap. Bitter stink carried downwind where it assaulted his nostrils, settling on him like fog.

The wait went on forever until they turned in unison as if he'd shouted, and all of them began to scream. It was a high pitched keening as if they'd been pierced. It carried to the roots of his teeth, traveled up his jawbone to vibrate his head. Their screams continued and they turned as a wave and attacked. Feral eyes now followed him cloaked in hate. Their long teeth fully exposed, black with coagulated blood, their burrowing legs hooked into claws shredding the flesh from his bones.

Eli came awake then, extracting himself forcefully from sleep, darkness retreating before the burning light of day. The inside of his mouth was blistered,

his head was a gourd, ladled with fire. With wavering hands he sketched what he'd seen, his sweat already smearing the drawing.

Then the sun slipped out from behind the clouds, burning away inspiration. He stood, poured enough water in the basin to cover the bottom. It was calming cool on his splayed hands. He splashed it over his face and arms, anxious to be rid of the cloying musk of wild rabbits.



Mustard Seeds

THEY SHOULD HAVE RETURNED by now. Eli padded down the stairs and out the front door with the folded sketch in his pocket, realizing that he was listening for a sound but heard nothing.

And now Eli had this new thing. Rabbits. What did that have to do with anything? He lived by faith. But making decisions based on dreams seemed unreal. It felt like a lie. He wondered where he'd be stranded when he ran out of whatever was powering this.

He strode past their rabbit cages in distaste, giving them a wide berth and continued on his way to the barn, overcome as he went with a chill. His most recent dream, becoming a feast for rabbits, had felt like a threat. The aura had been cold and sharp. A bitter root remained in his mouth. A scent like burnt gasoline clung to his nostrils. Even fully awake, his hands probed absently for injuries. It was as if something had grabbed him from the other side of wakefulness, trying to pull him under. He decided to tell no one about what he'd seen. Whatever it was, it felt bad.

The team wasn't back yet. The generator had eliminated the need for Judith to hand wash clothes. It also gave them enough power to feed the machine shop. What had started as small as a mustard seed had bloomed into a second home.

Without another form of power, it was the only way to keep the lights on. It had made more sense to Dill than building a windmill or convincing the power company to bring juice to the pole. He avoided the argument.

Several notebooks full of sketches were laid out from the previous day's production. Eli smiled to himself with pride in his family team. After years of tinkering, they'd figured out how to make machine tools with the help of a small man in a brown suit.

His family rode in on the tractor, nodding smiles and sunburn. He strode inside the barn to join them. His physical power had faded, but his endurance continued. This was work he could do. The harvest wasn't in yet, but it was time now for their other business.

They set to work. Music played from a shell-shaped radio mounted on a shelf. Everett manned the horizontal mill. Eli thought he looked bored but would

never complain. He was turning into a skilled machinist.

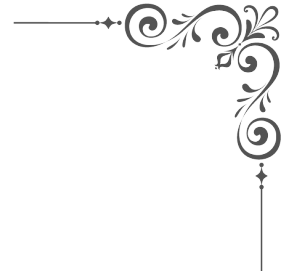
Dill stooped at a work bench, oblivious to the world. Her lips were moving silently as her fingers traced text across the page of a thick manual.

Eli was the only one idle in the evenings. The family had voted unanimously to make him team salesman. Damn them. He had no sales calls scheduled today. Speaking to people he didn't know still made him uncomfortable.

Judith had embraced the idea. His wife, ever thrifty, had bought him a second-hand blue suit. She sat now at a hand me down wooden desk, a ledger in her left hand and a pen in her right. She was either tallying their invoices or checking his count of sales calls.

She cracked the whip. Kept him on the road sleeping in his Model T Ford all last week except the Sabbath. The commitment was paying off, though. The crop loan would be put to bed in a few months when the harvest was done. Everything else still hung over their heads.

The tenor of the radio changed. It resolved itself into words, an announcement. As he'd learned a decade before, those finely tuned ears parsed the mosquito buzz. He signaled for Everett to turn off the mill.



Fireside Chat

PRESIDENT FRANKLIN Delano Roosevelt spoke for fifteen minutes. Eli visualized his polished wood desk planted just inside the barn doors.

“Until four-thirty this morning I had hoped against hope that some miracle would prevent a devastating war in Europe and bring to an end the invasions of Poland by Germany...the influence of America should be consistent in seeking for humanity a final peace....when peace has been broken anywhere, the peace of all countries everywhere is in danger...there is being prepared a proclamation of American neutrality....”

It went on. The delivery was reasonable, soothing even. The way he would lay out an argument with Everett or Dill, hotheads both. But neutrality required little argument.

Time stretched and distorted. He felt the scratch of his old wool uniforms, and the breathless power of running in boots. His heart accelerated then gave pause. After the pox, the Army wouldn't come for him again. They would come for his boy.

Eli shivered despite the remnants of his fever. The connection to his dream seemed undeniable. as if the rabbits had stalked up the rows of corn and massed in the shadows beneath the eaves. Those fearful eyes returned, trailing the smell of stinking fur.

No one spoke at dinner. The sun burned down. It illuminated the table and the faces of the people who were his world with a fierce orange glow. His son was old enough to enlist. He glanced sideways at Dill. She wasn't that little girl anymore. She could tear down and rebuild an aircraft engine on her own. In a time of war, the factories would want her.

A sense of loss expanded beyond his body and overflowed the room. His son and niece were seated beside him, and at the same time, they were already gone. *Is this how we grow old, fearing for the lives of our children?* He squeezed Judith's hand under the table. Her eyes were filled with silent tears. Everett and

Dill went to sleep while Eli and Judith sat on the porch holding hands. Sleep evaded them driven out by a future that was suddenly ominous.

In the morning, Eli went to town for breakfast with Carter. Over coffee in the cafe adjoining the bank, they discussed the news in hushed tones.

Eli started. "So you heard the address."

"Yes, we did. I never wore the uniform. A punctured ear drum and flat feet guaranteed me a quiet life in banking. But my best friend in college was the peak of fitness. Introduced me to my first girlfriend and encouraged my skill with numbers."

"He sounded like a good man."

"He was. He came to see me before he left on deployment. It was a firm handshake and then a bus to basic training. He perished within six months someplace in Europe. They never found the body. I thought the rhythms of banking would make it easier to forget. But it just isn't so. He didn't deserve that."

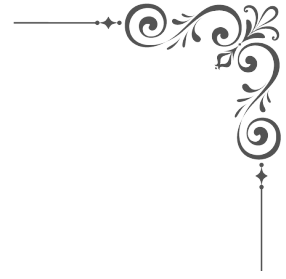
A crush of people clamored in the background. At the counter where they sat, the sound couldn't touch them.

Carter continued. "If I knew danger was coming, I'd be prepared for the worst."

Carter's words traveled like ripples on a body of water, carrying up the inlets of brackish water where Eli pushed his fears. The rabbits and all they represented were there, probing at the coastline, searching for an escape. The result squirmed free of the muck and arrived full of teeth. He needed to talk to Judith.

Eli was back to the farm when it was still morning. He maneuvered the car to where the rest of his family were harvesting corn. His shirtsleeves stayed down to avoid sunburn and he donned the straw hat off the passenger seat.

Maybe his son would let him drive the tractor for awhile. Having his arms and legs engaged helped him think, his mind floating somewhere above. Plowing through the orderly rows always gave him a sublime pleasure. He needed that feeling right now.



Doubling Down

JUDITH WAS A THIRD generation farmer, a profession that could be explained with numbers. Not so with her husband. The intuitive way he made decisions often left her faint, or angry. Clearing the dishes, she wondered again how they'd made a pair.

Eli joined her and they stepped outside on the porch. They sat hip to hip swinging with the breeze, relieved by the night air and the privacy of darkness. Dill and Everett were in the barn. Eli shared his conversation with Carter and she to the end. There was more, she knew. After all these years of marriage, in this at least he was consistent. She turned so she could look him in the eye. "What is it you have in mind?"

He told her. And it took all her will not to get up and go inside. He wanted to go on. She could see him searching in the dark for the words.

"I have a feeling..." he started.

Her shoulders tensed and maybe something tightened in her face, squeezing out words that she used to hold back. "You'd better have something better than that."

He said nothing and she continued. "What you're talking about is risky. We could lose everything." She repeated the last word slowly, for emphasis. "Everything."

She'd been through this before when he'd started treating sick neighbors. She'd told him then that if he got sick or died, she would kill him. It wasn't until the home baked pies and thank you notes started arriving that she'd relented. Then he *had* got sick and she'd ruefully failed to follow through on her promise.

He responded so quietly she barely heard him. "We could lose everything if we do nothing."

She definitely wanted to kill him now. "You don't know that. We've finally got something good."

Eli rocked the porch swing. The last seven years with the four of them had been the most fulfilling of her life. Working beside her son, and having her sister back had given her a serenity she'd never experienced. *He's asking me to give that up with nothing promised in return.*

She'd never seen him move this fast. Awareness dawned. Something had changed. She watched him exhale.

He nodded his head, as if speaking to himself. "I had another dream."

"You have got to be kidding. If this is how you get your way...." Just like his patients, her eyes traveled down to watch the hands resting in his lap.

Patient might not survive.

She studied him. He'd been a different man after the pox. More silent, if that was possible and well she couldn't put her finger on it. *Smarter maybe? Stripped down.* That was what came to mind. The old Eli had liked nice things and a bit of impressing the neighbors. He coveted.

The new Eli cared nothing for that. The new Eli wasn't interested in anything beyond family and that damn barn full of machines. How had she ended up here? So far from the farmer's daughter she'd been when they married. Now it was farming, machine tools, and ledger books.

She'd underestimated what she'd bought when she'd married Eli Steiner. He was a good husband, but oh so odd. She sighed now and moved on, hoping she wouldn't have to save them again.

"This isn't something we decide by ourselves," She said. She stood up and hooked his elbow. "Let's talk to the rest of the family and see what they say."

They crept through the doors. Everett and Dill looked up from their work.

Eli started, without preamble. "I think we should sell off all the land except the barn and the house,"

Everett and Dill tried to read Judith's reaction. Her face was immobile. She nodded curtly at Eli to continue.

"We can use the money from the sale to pay off our debt and buy new machines. The machine tool business is growing. We don't have to wait until spring to get our money. We're not tied to one place for our customers. We've already proven that we can make this work. I think we should double down."

Judith was nauseous. Gambling words. *Perhaps he's more like Daddy than I ever thought.* Her sister shifted foot to foot and a thorn pierced her heart. Dill's "happy feet" betrayed her. *You'd think she'd been paroled from prison.* She'd come to help and she had. But maybe she'd given up too much.

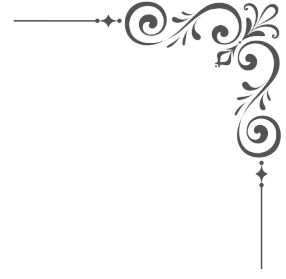
In the city, she'd had her own place, her own job, and her own life. Dill probably hadn't considered the weight of the decision until well after she'd received the telegram. But now with the door open a crack she could see all the possibilities. She was already gone.

Everett was a harder read. He could tell they were holding something back. His mouth was pressed in a hard, flat line, eyes on Father's hands, clasped low along his belt.

Patient might not survive.

Eli's turned to focus on him and said, "I had another dream."

When he finished explaining there was just the cicadas singing. From the silence alone Judith knew they'd decided. They were going to do this come hell or high water. She just hoped it wouldn't cost everything she loved in the process.



A Bobber On The Ocean

ELI ENJOYED THE SOUNDS of a sleeping house. The roof sighed. The oil furnace in the basement wheezed. SnORES carried from his son and niece down the hall. The rhythms of farm life passed like a metronome. Measured days became steady weeks. This he could savor.

But the kids weren't kids anymore. Soon they'd have lives of their own and he and Judith would be a memory. It was no different than when he left the orphanage. He'd been ready years before he signed the papers.

Menace skittered just out of sight, hidden in the shadow of war, a silent sentry beyond hope of control. They were a bobber skating on a wave amidst the ocean's fury.

They had to prepare. Even after selling the farmland there were expenses. The business devoured cash for machines, steel, tooling and suppliers for processes like heat treating. They needed more sales.

Every week he'd driving further, hunting for new customers. Even without the farm to take care of, it wasn't enough. People still didn't have money. They needed another salesman.

Judith could read the numbers. She probably already knew. Dill was absolutely necessary to the machine shop. And with her temper, they kept her away from customers. It would have to be Everett.

They would go on the road together. It would be like the old times. His questioning son beside him watching the landscape unwind. And then he would want his own car. Eli smiled at that and went back to sleep. One small thing resolved.

He awoke before Judith. He laid with his hands behind his head, watching her sleep. The rooster crowed and she regarded him through half-mast eyes, placed a warm hand on his arm.

He said, "What do you think about Everett going on the road?"

"That's not the first question I thought you would ask me this morning."

"Well...."

She ran a hand through her hair and smiled. "I was wondering when you were going to ask. Sure, then I can take over his machine."

The kids clambered in the kitchen, already eating.

“Farmer, accountant, and now machine operator,” Eli said. “You’re full of surprises today.”

“Let me show you another.”

Wafts of brewing coffee drew them downstairs like magnets.

“There’s eggs and toast.”

“Oh, thank you, Everett. So your mom and I were talking. How would you like to join me on the road?”

Everett spoke through a mouthful of eggs. “I’m ready.”

“I could sell better than my damn nephew,” Dill said.

Eli placed a hand on her shoulder. “Another salesman would give you more designs to build.”

Her mouth smiled. But her eyes said she was still turning it over, as if the decision was not final, only delayed. “And who’s going to run his machine? You Judith?”

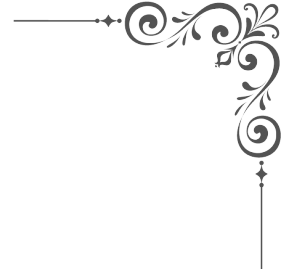
“Well, yes. You already have several.”

Dill poked her sister in the chest. “That’s because I know what I’m doing. The shop is my thing. I’m the engineer. So you’re going to have to do a better job of following orders. It’s not just numbers.”

Everett took a breath between swallows. “So you’re not going on the road then?”

“That’s quite a lot of eggs you have there, Everett and no, I guess not. Training starts right now, Judith. If you want to join production you’re going to have to give me your toast.”

Sales calls could wait. Eli listened to their laughter thinking that it sounded good and pure, like trumpets at summer festival. He could smell Judith’s perfume on the backs of his hands, and all was right in the world. *Someday, I’ll reminisce about these years and wish with all my heart that I could have them back.*



Author's Note

THANK YOU FOR READING! I hope you enjoyed reading *Revolt of the Rats*. I've had people ask already, "what happens with Kahle and Bee?" Or, "What happens to the Steiners when World War II arrives?" And, "What happened to Anise? She allowed someone to die." Well they'll all be back in book two. And Anise isn't done.

Turn the page for a preview of "Rats Ascendant: Overtime".

Read on for a thrilling preview of
Rats Ascendant: Overtime

Book Two

A dark fantasy novel

In paperback and ebook

October, 2016

Haley Stovall, 1940

ELI GRIPPED THE STEERING wheel and then released, willing himself to relax. After the radio address, he had a recurring dream of German soldiers goose-stepping through narrow Polish streets, past Everett's body; face up in the ditch with two neat bullet holes in the breast. Silent despair disoriented him, washed the color from the surrounding fields.

His throat was thick with bile. It had been two months of this. "If you threaten someone, they won't buy."

"I was trying to close the sale," Everett said.

"You were an inch away from his face."

Eli shifted in his seat, adjusting the collar of his coat, which was riding up over his suit jacket. It rubbed at the base of his neck, where remnants of last night's argument hung like a yoke.

Everett said, "He didn't seem to mind it."

"I think he did." Eli put the car in gear, pointed it for a farmhouse cresting the ridge. Another prospect maybe. Another chance to make their way.

He wanted to say more. Prospects were like eggs. Squeeze too hard and your dinner squirted out into the dust. Or enemy soldiers were malevolent phantoms. Ignore a snapping twig and it could be the last thing you hear this side of rapture.

"I was holding a sample and a pen," Everett pressed his hands against the roof. "I couldn't just drop them."

"You kept jabbing it at him. It was a pen, not a bayonet. And you weren't watching his feet."

Everett asked, "What about them?"

"They were pointed at the door." Eli squeezed the steering wheel, fearing where his hands would go if he released.

"How was I supposed to know that?"

Eli held a breath and released it. "Because I taught you to."

Everett hunched his shoulders and set his mouth, as if eating something sour.

Eli reached across the car and placed a hand on his shoulder. "There's no reason to be angry. They're not rejecting you. They're rejecting the idea."

Everett cocked his head. "I don't understand."

There was hope after all. "You're always competing. Mostly with the idea of doing nothing. Never underestimate fear, Everett. Roosevelt has given us hope, but it's fragile. What is faith, Everett?"

Everett tensed his shoulders and stared straight ahead without blinking.

Eli said, "Realize many people have no faith. They're just hoping you're the real thing. You have to lead them."

"Like leading soldiers."

"No, not like leading soldiers. Like selling machine tools."

"Why don't you want me to join the Army?" Everett asked.

Eli held his breath. *And there it was, plain as day, the real problem. Ring the bell, here goes round one.* "Soldiers pay attention or they die. It's been two months of this. Do you pay attention? Do you?" The words came out with more force than he intended, and Everett's body recoiled from their impact. "Watch me," Eli said.

"I've been watching. You don't do anything."

Between Everett and Dill I'll have a conniption fit. "Watch."

"Fine."

they turned up a driveway wide enough for two cars abreast, over ruts of frozen mud that ended at a porch.

A scarecrow man in coveralls replied to their knock with an opened door. "Help you gentlemen?"

"Yessir we're Eli and Everett Steiner of Steiner Machine Tools. Can I bother you for a cup of coffee?"

The man turned as he spoke. "Not sure we need tools but we've got coffee."

They stayed for a half hour. They talked about their crops, their families, and the new farm programs. At the end Eli thanked the farmer and wrote down their address before leading Everett to the car and backing down the driveway.

"He didn't buy," Everett said.

Eli looked both ways and pulled out onto the road. *Here we go, round two.* "He might, just not now."

Everett said, "You never even pitched him."

"He said he didn't have any money."

"When did he say that?"

Eli glowered at him and put his eyes back on the road. "When you were busy talking."

Everett stared out the window at a low brick building in the distance. "What's that over there?"

"Factory."

Everett pointed. "The sign out front says 'Haley Stovall'. Why don't we call on them? How hard could it be?"

"We don't have tools for that," Eli said. "We're not ready."

"When have we ever been ready? I'll bet they buy a lot more than onesie twosie."

Eli paused. *A real man knows when he might be wrong.* They came to the intersection where the drive to the plant met the roadway, and Eli banked left, following the crushed gravel, shimmying forward. He watched Everett's face from the corner of his eye. It was like the old full moon of before, all the stress gone out. They exited the car and crossed the ten feet to the front door, floating like skaters on ice.

The Cormorant



AN APPARITION PACED the empty lobby inside the glass front doors, a slip of paper in his hand. The click of his heels reverberated in the open. He placed the slip of paper on a desk and shook his head.

Eli let his boy go first. “You’re up, son.”

They opened the doors, and bright grey eyes as sharp as a cormorant’s appraised them, his suit a brilliant blue. Everett smiled. And when his pitch came out it was clean - smooth and natural. Fifteen minutes later they left with an order.

They rumbled over snow-packed roads, Everett talking like he was ten again. Eli nodded as the words tumbled out, absorbing the animation on his son’s face, filling Eli with a sublime contentment.

For the moment, all thoughts of war were forgotten.

Hammer and Tongs

Dill smoked as she paced. Cats made figure eights around her legs, tentative in their affections, unsure of her mood, then returned under the porch - out of the cold. Dill's eyes were on the silos that cast the house and barn in shadow, empty husks of land borne giants. There would be no help from there. All the corn was gone.

Few orders had come recent. Tedium wound inside her as the machine shop neither advanced nor fell back, churning without noticeable change, producing a feeling like a month without whiskey.

She avoided her sister, seated with her hands encircling chair arms.

Up the drive the boys came. They bounded out of the car, all smiles and swagger. She spoke before they'd stepped on the porch. "So how was it?"

"We got an order," Everett said, holding a roll of drawings and a small mechanical part.

"Only one?"

Eli's hands were in his pockets, thumbs pointed out, his necktie askew. "Everett made a sale from a factory."

She retreated into the house with the drawings and the sample and laid them out on the table, smoothing the pages. These were real drawings. The printing ink's acidic scent filled the room. Blue lines dressed the starchy paper in whirls and squared corners. They replicated perfectly the part beside them, just bigger than her fist.

The door banged behind her. Coffee cups clinked on the stove. She wiped oil away with a small bit of rag, then held it to the light, reversing its formation in her mind to a flat piece of steel. She asked, "How many do they want us to make?"

"One hundred."

"How much are they willing to pay?" Judith asked.

Dill watched Eli hand the purchase order to her sister. She whistled and showed it to Dill, who tried to remain calm as the numbers sunk in. Something warm tumbled and buzzed in her stomach.

"How much time do we have?" Dill asked.

Everett said, "Two weeks."

Her hands crossed the drawings, traced the lines. She visualized the process forward this time, the flat sheet of steel becoming a finished part. She would need the steel before she could start. She estimated the time to get it delivered and her enthusiasm drained away. What was left behind began to boil. "That's not enough time."

Her coat felt tighter, as if it were constricting, pulled fast against her ribs. This was not what she'd come here for, years of tinkering in a barn for destitute farmers and distant factories. Eli was better.

She stayed because she'd given her car as collateral to keep the farm. Her bright red Studebaker Erskine had returned again in her dreams last night—traveling wide Chicago streets framed in hanging flower boxes and jungle animals reproduced in concrete, the air sweet with the scent of blooming roses.

"It's all we've got," Everett said. "Anymore, and the regular supplier delivers and we'll miss the opportunity."

Dill said, "We'll have to find new vendors. The people we've been using can't get this done in time. "

Everett set down his coffee mug and stepped closer. "Then we'd better get started. Haley Stovall won't wait."

She resisted the urge to reach out and shake him. But she slapped her open palm on the table hard enough that her sister jumped beside her. "How about you sell something we can actually make?" *Everett be damned. It was no good to sell what a body couldn't build.*

Eli slid between them. "This is worth a month of visiting farmers. We deliver this order and there's more where that came from."

His words, as always, were a balm. She couldn't look at him without seeing the stream of little gifts: the toolset, the toaster, electric motors, books. She turned back to the table, shuffled from one drawing to the next. The answer was there someplace. Something implied. She called to mind an engine, with the initial explosion followed by a chain reaction. This account could be like that. She opened her hand, extended it to Eli.

"Give me the car keys. The west side of town is where the industry is. I'll see who can help." Dill said.

"At this time of night?" Judith asked. "All the businesses will be closed by then."

"You left off the 'little sister' part, and I realize that. You forget, I know where they all go to drink." She placed a hand on the drawing and squared her shoulders. "You want it in two weeks, then we need a new vendor in a day. That's the price. Did you think about that when you took the order?"

Eli and Everett avoided her eyes.

"I'll go with you," Everett said.

"Fine," Dill said. "Try not to duke anybody this time. And no gin...."

"I should say the same to you."

Unlike the old days, they left the radio off. The dirt roads embraced them. Oak trees paraded motionless, outlined in the headlights. Broad Street at the

center of town was a night time spectacle of electric lights. They turned left off the main drag toward the outlying streets, flickering with gas jets. Women's clothing stores and dry goods shops gave way in a few blocks to laundromats, and then night time darkness outside of bars, machine shops, and flophouses.

Dill pulled up in front of a firetrap made of dark wood. A former speakeasy gone legit following prohibition, it was within walking distance from the surrounding factories. The sign outside read "Hammer and Tongs."

Smells like axle grease or burned oil, stabled horses and old sweat emerged from a room as dark as a coal chute. She could make out sawdust on the floor and the profiles of workmen mumbling from mismatched wooden chairs.

She saw someone she knew and pressed forward, parting the crowd, ignoring the others, reaching for the prize a few feet away. She brushed a knot of seated men and ignored the tingling at the base of her skull, as if she'd just passed a dog that was ready to bite.

Closure

They passed so close she brushed Dawson's shoulder, her eyes upon some man at the bar. He was startled at first, then he seethed with recognition; his soul a borderless lake of hatred, the knife turning nervous circles in his pocket.

Baby, I found them.

He wished Anise were with him now, but his wife had been gone for awhile. She'd been so beautiful, smouldering beside him amongst the finer bars and steakhouses, flush with money from the bed and breakfast. Before the Steiners, they were known by name. He was respectable.

Then Doc Vickers had arrived beside a pair of police officers, which was unfortunate. Had he come alone, Dawson would've planted him next to the other fella out under the pines. Instead they'd interrogated Anise in their own kitchen, where she'd admitted to not reporting the stranger's pox, burying his body, selling his car.

"She did it for the money," the papers screamed, casting his love as a cold-hearted monster. Lots of beautiful things were cold. She never told his part in it, muscling the shroud wrapped corpse into the trunk of his own car, or digging the hole that became the stranger's resting place.

The more she protested that the stranger was, "already done for" and "Steiner said he would be alright." The harder they petitioned to give her the death penalty.

Then Anise went to prison. Patrons to their business became as rare as hen's teeth. He'd ended the year bankrupt; an unconfirmed conspirator tucked into coveralls, supping on potatoes and shoveling thick turds in the horse stables.

Only charity from the new owners of the bed and breakfast kept him off the street. Hidden out back in the one-room caretaker's shack, he followed a circuitous route as he left every day.

He'd thought about joining the war. It was in Europe now, but someday it would come to the US. Then someone else would shoot him instead of putting his pistol in his mouth and pulling the trigger. *The bed and breakfast, the house, the hogs; because of the Steiners, it was all gone.*

Only memories of Anise kept him going. That last magical fall had been the best, mornings wound beneath the sheets, greeted by her cool smile. They'd walked the grounds hand in hand, surrounded by falling leaves in hues of copper and amber, a golden raiment for his love.

They'd spent the res of the day slaughtering hogs. Anise had watched the magical clouds of steam escaping the open wounds with rapt attention. She was

so close, the spray of arterial blood splattered her coveralls. He twittered remembering the blade's path, slicing the flesh like their wedding day cake.

And then it was her turn. Her normally translucent skin flushed pink, exuded an immortal vigor. His heart quickened remembering her grin, and the blade in her hand exuding the coppery sweet smell of new blood. He couldn't imagine sharing an experience so special with anybody else. They'd felt so close.

He'd seen her last month in a sickly yellow visiting room at the women's reformatory. He realized she'd entered when she shrugged her arm away from the guard, the motion catching his eye, and inhaled sharply at the sight. She had no need for pomade. Her wavy hair was gone, her bald head mottled with small red welts.

"We had an infestation," she said. "They did it to all the girls."

She sat at the table with an air of distraction, looking left and right. She'd lost weight. Hollows surrounded her eyes, and her normally full arms were gaunt and bony. She shifted in her chair, agitated.

He hated to see her like this, diminished somehow. Without Anise he was adrift, floundering through his days, all joy lost. He wanted the sheets back, and the suits, and the steaks, and the knife. *Why can't things be like before?*

Her fingers pawed at her face, her nails clotted here and there with what appeared to be dried blood. When her hand reached for his, he overcame the urge to recoil. It was warm, and the skin was still soft. He closed his eyes and for a moment it was fine. They remained silent until the guard returned to the door and out of earshot.

He said, "I've missed you."

"And I've missed you, Dawson. I have. But I've suffered so. It's six years I've been in here, Dawson. I can't take it anymore. I've asked our savior for guidance, for a vision; and none has come."

She pulled her hand from his and leaned away, her neck a series of cords. Her high cheekbones were unblemished, her eyes brimmed with cold fire. She looked down her nose at him and for a moment it felt like before. Her arrogance fanned him, the bullfighter before the bull.

Her words emerged sharp like thistles. "Eli Steiner done this to me. Steiner and that salesman who didn't have the good sense to die somewhere else."

"Yes." He was fearful to say more. His breath was as light as a passing breeze.

"What will we do Dawson? I'm lost. I need to move on. I need closure."

The world shifted as he struggled to keep up with her. In all the time that he'd known her, Anise had never been lost. He searched for the right thing to

say, retrieving what he'd heard from itinerant pastors who'd occasional boarded with them. "Forgiveness then."

She squeezed his hands tight, her nails cutting half moons on his skin, and drew in so close he thought she was going to bless him with a kiss. Her breath curdled hot on his cheeks. "I don't need to find forgiveness. Without the Lord, we must take things into our own hands. Avenge me, Dawson. If you love me—"

"You know I do."

"—destroy the Steiners. Don't come back until it's done."

He nodded without speaking, perusing again all that he had lost: the suits, the steaks, the hogs with the blood, and greatest of all, Anise. He thought of himself as a good husband. He would do what she asked.

He was still seated when she abruptly stood up. She signaled the guard who guided her to the door and proceeded through without looking back.

Motion at the bar brought him back to the present. The Steiners were leaving. It wasn't hard to pick them out. What to do next was taking shape. *Everyone has a weakness.* Anise said it all the time. You just needed to find it. He slid off the bench. And when they left out the door, he followed them.

Juke Joint

Dill threaded the bleary eyed throng with ease. Gratefulness filled their upturned eyes. They patted her shoulders with coarse hands. She was used to the smell, had called on many of them in the past with jobs. But her questions were met with shakes of negation, shrugs, and grunted commiserations.

A face below a stained Burberry cap hazarded an answer. "You need to go further down the street where the gaslights end. Bar's on the right. Looks like it was built by a crazy man."

They exited to the street, and down the block. They found a wooden shack that fit the description amidst several abandoned warehouses, scattered like so much broken crockery, dissimilar wooden boards resurrected from scrap with what she assumed was vagrant labor. Gas jets flickered inside, throwing light across the dirt floor, to the bartender and its single patron.

The patron was nearly as wide as he was tall, dwarfing the be speckled barman. His hands were as big as liter German beer steins. Below a thick moustache crusted in foam was a wide neck wrapped with a bandana stained deep red with sweat. Dark brown eyes followed them as they entered. The giant spoke. "I like the dives, the booze is always cheaper."

Dill concentrated on his right eye, trying not to appear intimidated. She was the one after all, with a customer order to fill.

"Good to hear. I'm Dill and this is Everett Steiner." She indicated her nephew without turning.

"Know who you are. Glad to meet." The giant extended a paw to shake. He did so the way you would squeeze a child's hand, though Dill could feel the tendons flex in his fingers.

"You come recommended," she recovered her hand. "We need a man can supply a certain kind of steel on short order."

He set his mug back on the bar. "You got a sample?"

She handed it over.

"We've got some alright," he said. "Hasn't had any demand for years. What farmers you got using this? Oh wait, I see, you got some factory work. How much do you need?"

She told him.

"Come by tomorrow. We're at Fourth and West Street. You'll need to pay up front. If you can cover my beer tonight it would be obliged." The giant smiled, producing an unsettling feeling. "I'm a little short."

Dill reached into her pocket and produced some coins. "Least I could do."

He nodded at the bartender whose relief was as obvious as a bed sheet on a clothesline. The giant smiled again, satisfied and happy. "Let me walk you to your car." He waved as they pulled away.

This is going to work. Dill hid her amazement, only allowing herself a small smile. They found a jazz station playing ragtime and turned up the radio.

As they left the curb, a figure pulled up short on the sidewalk. Deep set eyes following as they turned the corner.

Smart Money, 1999

Motomax deserved to die. The place disgusted Bee, but not as much as her attraction to it. Somehow it had got to her. Weekends at home she found herself smiling, thinking about clever tools made from flecks of steel, parts clinking into aluminum pans, or the motions of tattooed stringy arms. *And then there was these two.*

"If I told Bodge what you've been doing," she said, "he'd have me walk you out today."

Dieter Machs and his friend sagged and she let them dangle, weighing having them fired. Anger crashed against her resolve like waves threatening to burst a breakwater.

She'd caught them at all sorts of mischief, some of it right here in her own offices. *How long had these two been skulking with her unawares?* How much damage had they done, going off on their own? Maybe they were like the rest of Motomax, bent on industrial suicide. Cold roots of dread spiked deep inside her. It was all coming apart. *I should just let the whole place burn.*

How had a master's degree led to this? Easy as a country rube she'd fallen, from tenure track professor at the University of Wisconsin to highly paid firefighter, maniacally beating back failure, locked in a downward spiral.

Her only ally lay behind that desk, compiling on her computer. Cooling fans cooed to the software model inside. It grew stronger, suckling on data from the factory's mainframe. Maybe it knew where her heart had gone wrong.

The things it had already shown her. Every forecast had been confirmed by a flurry of emails crackling with growing alarm; hourly employees were quitting, machine breakdowns were spiking, her electrical engineer had resigned...the chance to recover was slipping away.

She turned and entered her office, skirting manuals stacked on the floor. She'd found answers there. It might be enough. Over her shoulder she said, "Get in here, close the door, and sit."

She rolled a chair before them and exhaled, her hands hanging down between her knees. "Soon I won't have to walk you out," she said. "Bodge will be letting all of us go before he turns off the lights."

They stared at her, in shock. She sat unblinking and unmoving, her legs crossed, hands in her lap. "Smart money already left." She'd been here how long? Six months? Nine? *When did I run out of time?* She turned to the engineer on the left, hardly larger than a child. He was a bonny man, more beautiful than handsome.

“I want the details of what you’ve been doing,” she said. “Or I send Machs back to Deutschland, and you back wherever you came from.”

Truth was, she’d only dump Machs if she had lost her mind. On Friday afternoons, long after the others (who she planned to eventually terminate, one at a time) had left to get their boats out on the lake, he was typically still at his desk. She checked his work, like everyone else, and found it fastidiously correct. She ignored his chains and Megadeath concert t shirts in exchange for his steady craftsmanship.

As for Machs’ little friend, she’d seen him about and assiduously avoided him. When she started working here, it seemed like he was always around. She thought she’d scared him off, yet here he was again.

She needed to think. The clanging of the stamping presses below faded to a drone, as an idea crept forward, slowly gaining form. The man-child on her couch had stopped talking. She remembered his name. It was Kahle. She asked, “What were you planning next?”

“I uh, well we were going to maybe combine some welding department tasks,” Kahle said.

“Whose idea was that?”

“Boomer.”

“Tell him to expect a message from me.” She pointed at Dieter, “You mentioned plans for the ansible. Go get them, please.” She visualized the plastic tubes passing into the rafters and splitting off, capillaries filled with information.

When Dieter left she turned back to Kahle. “You talked about a book,” she said. “Do you have it with you? I can see that you do. Could I see that?”

She extended her hand and Kahle placed the book in it. She would execute the plan now, with what she had on hand. To have any chance of success this thing would have to grow. She would have to recruit. Build the machine. There was no time like the present. Maybe they could help. Or maybe it was too late.

She asked, “You were in the military, weren’t you?” *This might be a mistake.* Did she actually need the help, or was she looking for an excuse to stare at those large brown eyes?

“Yes ma’am.”

At this point it didn’t matter. She was damned if she did and damned if she didn’t. Now that the decision was made, she felt lighter, more energetic. The stamping presses outside had stopped their god drums, and when the words rolled off her tongue they seemed right and true.

“Meet me tomorrow at The Bowman,” Bee said. “Eleven am. Don’t be late.”

She was avoiding staring at Kahle’s back when Machs placed the pamphlet in her hand. Now they’d have to find out where this ansible was located. She

found Boomer's name in the computer and sent him a message via pager.

First shift was over and dinner time hadn't come yet. She met Boomer in the rear of the plant by the heat treating area and laid out a map of the plant.

"Here," she said, "we'll make a grid."

Using the roof support girders as markers, she drew a line down the center. "You take this half."

It took three hours, but they traced the vacuum lines to the roof. The motor cover was cracked where rust had eaten through, giving the elements access to the innards. The copper windings were caked with dust. She watched over his shoulder, as Boomer tried to turn it over. Dead. They found a mechanic and Boomer showed him the motor.

Boomer asked, "You're not telling Bodge right?"

"Why the hell would I do that?" The mechanic set his tool box down. "He just cut my overtime." Diagnosis took minutes. "Can't replace this. It's too old."

"What can you do then?" Bee asked.

He leaned on his toolbox and struck a pose of feigned casualness. She knew the answer before the words were out of his mouth.

"Something compatible would take weeks out of Pennsylvania. But I got just the thing in my shop." He paused. To have management under your power was a thing to savor.

She fished in her pocket and put a hundred dollar bill in his hand. He stared at the bank note before handing it back.

"I've heard what you guys are trying to do and if you can help save the plant I'm all for it."

Bee returned the bills to her pocket. "Well, let's get a move on, then. Post haste, yes? The night is still young."

"Yes ma'am. Right away."

They took turns holding the flashlight or wrestling cables until the mechanic flipped the switch and the motor came quietly to life, humming away like a good old boy, working on a hot, sweaty task.

Bee realized Boomer was fidgeting, an unspoken question on his lips. She checked her watch. It was eight o'clock. "Go on and head out. I'm going to check for leaks. I'll leave a note in your desk."

He nodded and headed down the stairs. She and the mechanic began tracing branches, marking the breaks on the drawing from Machs. It was another three hours when she put a note in the canister, replaced it in the tube, hit the button and watched it fly away up into the rafters. *Disco*. Then she climbed into her car and rolled out of the parking lot, exhausted.



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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



REED IS A VETERAN, married with three children and two dogs. His love for reading started early and consumed whole summers on the couch, interrupted only by his mother turning on the reading lamp.

His father introduced him to science fiction by way of Isaac Asimov's "Caves of Steel."

His mother introduced him to horror by way of Stephen King's "The Shining."

His brother was Tom Sawyer.

The result is what you see here.