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Volume One / Issue Four

strawberry press magazine

New fiction by Billy Ramone, whit frazier
and Brian Seabolt

Perspectives on going to prison

STRAWBERRY PRESS MAGAZINE
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VOLUME ONE ISSUE FOUR

Check out the new look of www.strawberrypress.net online. We publish print and online fiction from all different types of authors and we are currently working on our second book publication – a collection of short fiction. We are also accepting submissions for upcoming issues of strawberry press magazine.

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Volume One Issue Four

Volume One, Issue Four of Strawberry Press Magazine is our largest issue to date. All goes well with Strawberry Press. Our website has a new look. Thanks to my friend Patricia for that! She sort of grilled us about its shortcomings until we gave in and updated it. We'll be working on it all the time now, so check back often. We've been adding new writers and new material to the site. It's good to have things back up and running. We were slowing down for a minute there.

This issue of Strawberry Press features new fiction by writers Billy Ramone and Brian Seabolt. Billy Ramone is new to the press, but Brian's work can be found on the "Gardens" page of our website. There are also a few emails on the website that Brian and I have shot back and forth arguing this and that point about literature. You should give them a gander on the "Freestyles" page.

This issue also features a long perspective on a night I spent locked up in the slam. An interesting piece, and one that covers (as far as I could gather) the perspectives of several people who were locked up with me. It's written more like fiction than an essay, and I hope you enjoy it. Finally I begin this issue with a short fiction piece that's a nod to Edgar Allan Poe and Charles Baudelaire. Happy Halloween, folks.

Cheers,

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correspondences

whit frazier



There is an old house out on the fringes of West Strawberry. It sits by itself and has sat there for as long as anyone can remember. These days nobody lives there. The windows are boarded up and the front door is barricaded. Sometimes children go by and dare each other to break inside and spend the night. Nobody even gets up the front steps to the porch. The house looks like a face, with two wide windows on the top floor looking out over the little dirt path that folks call Wendy Lane. The door in front, rectangular and lopsided looks like a crooked mouth. The house bulges out, pale blue chipping paint like overblown cheeks, and in certain moonlight, the rust against the chipped pale blue paint makes the whole place glow.

The last person to live there was a poet who worked at a small community newspaper in West Strawberry. When he disappeared he had no friends, no acquaintances and no living family. He'd grown up in Southport, and he'd lived there all his life. After he finished school he felt he needed to move someplace that would nurture his poetic vision. He traveled to West Strawberry one afternoon on a lark. He fell in love with the old houses, the small town feel, and the local community. But what he loved most of all was this large old house that was for sale way on the outskirts.

He worked and saved for two years living in Southport. When he had enough money to strike out on his own he was happy to find the house was still for sale. It was a fixer-upper, but that didn't bother him. He could get it at a great price, and he could set it up where all day he'd look out the window and write verse.

It didn't take him long to find work with *West Strawberry Press*. They were happy to have someone with his talent, youth and energy. He started as assistant editor. Every now and then they even let him slip one of his poems into the paper. Folks around town started to know his name. After work he and his coworkers would go out for a beer and a bite to eat. After that it was the long walk home back to his quiet old house.

He liked to sit upstairs and watch the bats flap against the windows with the moon large, and the stars aglow, and the quiet chirping of the evening. He'd light candles and write. He drank bottles of red wine and wrote late into the night, going back over and back over again the same verses, writing and rewriting until they felt perfect. Then to bed, and then back to the same verses the next night. When he was feeling too tired to write, he'd stay up late reading. Usually poetry. He didn't have hopes of being well known. He didn't care. He

was known in West Strawberry and that was enough. All it was ever about was improving the poetry. He wasn't prolific, because nothing was ever finished. Every night he'd edit a poem to his satisfaction, and the next night he'd go back to it. He'd revise it and revise it until his verse turned into terse, tight, compact experiments with language, sound and sensation. In the morning he'd get up with the red and auburn dawn to watch the birds plummet from his roof, dive down and swing back up. His evenings at home were his poetry, and these mornings were his poetry. He loved them both, and they inspired him. But something was missing.

What was missing from his poetry was what was missing from his life, and that was love. He didn't know this. One night while he was out with the folks from the paper, he met a girl with hair like autumn. Auburn-gold Wendy.

"So you're him," she said. "I wondered what you looked like, what with all your creepy little poems." They talked late into the night. The folks from the newspaper went home. "See you tomorrow, fella. Don't stay out too late. We'll talk to you in the morning." Wendy was a poetess. She wrote much different verse than he did. Her verse was light, airy and confessional. She showed him a couple things she wrote. He was impressed. He didn't like confessional poetry, but he was impressed. He said, "I'd like to take you out to dinner sometime Wendy." She said she'd like that. They exchanged numbers. He kissed her quick on her little lips. He walked home. In his small orange room where the candlelight weaved to and fro he sat at his desk and watched the bats crash against the window. He couldn't write, and he couldn't read any of his own work. He couldn't edit it, because it wasn't good anymore. He couldn't go to sleep either. All he could do was think about Wendy and that wonderful kiss. He sat in bed with a bottle of red wine and talked to the walls. He put phrases together. Rhymes and words and tried to say what he was thinking in poetry. Or even in language. Wendy resisted poetry. He didn't sleep that night.

Folks around the office gave him a hard time about his "new girlfriend." It made him feel pretty good. All that day at work he smiled. He couldn't stop thinking about Wendy. He wanted to write a poem about her, but he didn't know how. He went home and forced himself to write. He went through sheet after sheet in his notebook. It was all too romantic. He didn't write romantic poetry. He would write a verse and edit and re-edit. Reduce it to its most essential language. Wendy resisted poetry. He tried to write his usual stuff,

but he couldn't do that either. He forced himself to read. He needed to get to know Wendy better. His life was changing. Things like this happened to poets. In the end it would make his work stronger.

That weekend he met Wendy for dinner. He was completely himself with her. He told her about how she'd made an impression on him. He told her he'd tried to write about her and couldn't. She was charmed. She'd written about him too, but only as an aside to a larger idea in one of her confessional poems. They went out and saw a play at a small theater. It was a beautiful summer night. They walked down the main strip. He pointed out constellations to her. They admired the small town with the people and the shops and the sparse lights running down the block. He told her how the bats against his window in the evening, and the swooping birds in the morning inspired him. She told him how her childhood, her old friends and the people she loved inspired her. They stopped and had a few glasses of wine. Somewhere into the evening she flushed red and giggled and said she liked him a lot. When they parted for the evening, they kissed for a long time, like he had never done before. He walked home glowing. When he got home that night he went straight to bed. He slept like a rock or a man that's dead.

The relationship blossomed. At first he only saw Wendy on the weekends, but after a while he saw her all the time. They never ran out of things to say. Her poetry blossomed and so did his. Things at the office were going well. Wendy got along well with everyone. She would come along for afterwork drinks. Everybody liked her. When will you marry that girl? they asked. He said he didn't know. He would marry her. He didn't know when. It would make itself known in time. He told Wendy she should move in with him. She was paying too much for her apartment. His house was already paid off.

The first day she moved in, Wendy turned into a ghost. She was consumed by the presence of the house. The giant face, with its rectangular mouth swallowed her up and her presence disappeared. He was drinking red wine every night. They stopped going out as much. Sometimes at work he said he didn't believe Wendy existed; when he went home every night she was there.

Wendy stopped working when she moved in because he asked her to. She'd sit at the downstairs table and write confessional poetry that became more and more about the house. Her long sprawling lines shortened, like his. They became terse and focused. Always about the

house. Never about herself, the confessional poet. The birds swooped down in the day and the bats flapped at night and the sun never broke through the windows. She lost weight and turned pale.

His poetry was getting stronger. The folks at the office were impressed. He compressed language into vital blocks of words, like music. The tones were dark, but they were effective. In the evenings he sat up all night drinking red wine and writing poetry. She would sit with him. They would write together. Neither of them could remember being more in love, or being more fulfilled by the presence of another person. When they made love, they made love all night, the sweetest, strangest lovemaking ever made. He would stand up from his desk, where his wine and poetry sat orange in the candlelight. Pale Wendy would look up, and she would smile. "Wendy." Her hand in his. Silent, violent sex where the bed groaned and the house glowed and the bats flapped crashing against the window with the night chirping silent on and on and on.

All around the house a deep quiet grew nightly. It grew within Wendy's disappearing voice and in the strange wonderful lovemaking and in the isolation from the rest of the world. He loved Wendy and Wendy loved him with an intensity that made it more and more difficult to speak to each other. They couldn't bear to be out of each other's company. He was withdrawn at work. He didn't have anything to say to anyone. He was less friendly. He never went for an afterwork drink. He hurried up the long worn path to the house where Wendy sat waiting, writing poetry sinking in on itself. He unlocked the door and she stood up. They didn't speak. The house whispered, "Wendy."

They spent evenings outside where the bats circled overhead and the stars blinked bright and the moon grew red and the clouds dark. Seasons passed and each season transformed the setting. Beneath the full weeping summer trees, and the brisk ghastly autumn color and the skeletal, white murdered winter, and the always too precious spring, he did not change and Wendy did not change and their love did not change, not for each other and not for nature. His poetry continued to improve, but it mattered less, because Wendy was the only thing that mattered. Her poetry disappeared. In the end she stopped writing, maybe because somewhere in all this silence she'd finally found just the voice she'd been looking for. The silence droned its own romantic tune. The stars went out and so did the moon.

He woke up one morning, and something had changed. Wendy slept dead ghostly poetess on the

unmade bed and the birds swooped down from the roof in the orange dawn. These were facts. He opened the window and the fall came cool through the window, and the little road ran quaint off where before he used to sometimes smile in the mornings. These were facts. Morning coffee brought him little to no joy. Once outside the trees were banal. Inane red and gold testaments to their own mortality. He went upstairs to where Wendy lay sleeping. She was beautiful maybe, but dead like the trees. He drank a glass of red wine hoping to recapture the past, but the transformation was stronger. Back outside the day sank black bright orange morning blue skies nothing. Work was worse. He went out for afterwork drinks, but he ended up regretting it. Why stay? There was nothing to say.

He came home listless. Wendy stood up from the table where before all her old notebooks used to be. He didn't say anything. The house whispered, "Wendy."

He kept walking. The sun was going down like it does everyday. Wendy said, "let's watch the sunset."

Outside the sun went down like it does everyday. Wendy didn't speak and neither did he. He couldn't stand how she sat there and felt when it was just everything the same as always as everything else. He said to her: "I need to go inside and write."

The pages of poetry in the notebook were competent music. He read them over a couple times and wondered why he'd bothered. He wrote a few more verses. Tight, terse, enigmatic words strung together, phrases rephrased in strange music, neither harmonic nor discordant; indifferent. Outside the twilight gave in and it was night. The bats flapped idiotically against the windows. He drank wine until the stars came out and Wendy came trembling up the stairs. She said, "there's something changed about you."

"Yes."

The next morning was the same or worse. The stupidity of everything even more annoying. The birds in the morning made him angry. The trees made him angry. The colorfully fallen fall leaves made him angry. Work was okay. The enthusiasm of his coworkers made him angry, but work was okay. He avoided everyone. There was nothing to say.

Going home was worse. Wendy loved him. She felt compelled to say so. He didn't say anything. He went upstairs and tried to write poetry, but what was the point of writing poetry if there's nothing worth saying? He went downstairs and opened a bottle of wine without saying

anything. He poured a glass and drank it, but it was foul. He left the glass on the table and went back upstairs. The twilight was setting in and the last orange blue rays of sun were running back up behind the clouds. He went back downstairs and outside. He walked a few feet down the path, turned around and looked at the house he'd loved so much. It looked like a face, looking right back at him, and looking right back just as angry, detached, and indifferent. How come he hadn't seen it like this before? The house was disturbed, but everyone needs a face.

When he went back inside Wendy was sobbing.

"I don't know how much longer I can do this," he said. "Maybe it will just be a matter of time and everything will be the same again. For now I don't know if you should stay here. You can always go back to your mother's house."

After Wendy left her ghost remained. He worked all day and paced all night. He walked from the front door, to the upstairs bedroom, downstairs to the kitchen, through the hallway, back upstairs, downstairs to the kitchen over and over again while Wendy's ghost followed him and kissed him and they made love and he'd wake up sweating in his bed in the middle of the night. He didn't drink and he didn't write. The stairs and the floorboards creaked with his pacing while the bats clattered up against the window where the moonlight fell just short of the floor, always outside. The candle spat orange, weaving the same spells, scents and memories of Wendy where she followed him, dressed white, ghost white in a wedding dress, sometimes stopping on the stairs he'd kiss her where her hair, red-gold like autumn leaves fell auburn from the meaningless trees.

Work was work and the evenings were ballets with spirits. Every object transformed into every object. Doorknobs shook his hand going from room to room. Wendy's ghost followed him, kissed him, they had silent, violent sex and he was always pacing from room to room. Up the staircase and back down again. The candle and the house and the bats and the birds and Wendy's ghost and the house and himself silent, everything the same. He looked for answers in his old notebooks of poetry. The words ran together like one, like how everything was one. Wendy stopped him on the staircase.

The house whispered, "Wendy," over and over. He turned and hurried down the stairs into the kitchen where he poured himself a glass of wine, which was Wendy. Wendy followed him through the kitchen, into the foyer, out of the foyer

where the doorknob was Wendy's hand. He went back up the stairs, where her ghost still followed. In the bedroom the bats crashed against the window, and the little orange candle weaved Wendy on the walls.

The walls whispered, "Wendy," over and over. The din of whispering ran together like lines of poetry, like how everything was one. He walked over to the windows, and pulled them open, one by one. The moon came crashing through in a crescendo where the bats blackened the glow and blew out the candles and circled into the bedroom. He stood in the middle of the room, and listened to the house. The house sank dark music in on itself like lines of poetry, like how everything was one, like how he stood in the middle of the black bedroom with a glass of wine in his hand and hordes of bats circling him and the walls whispering "Wendy," and Wendy in her wedding dress, ghostly dead poetess.

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SAXO

BILLY RAMONE

"You can turn this shit off," demands Charlie from the passenger seat, pointing to the car stereo.

"What shit? The music?" Brent replies.

"Yes the bloody music, if that's what you call it. I call it shit."

"Shit? Shit? This ain't shit," says Brent, immediately on the defensive. "This is Cypress Hill."

Charlie gives him a shrug before coming back with: "I don't care who the fuck it is, just turn the cuntung thing off. It's three o'clock in the morning and we're lost on the pissing moors and I fancy a bit of quiet, alright?"

With a huff Brent ejects the tape and switches off the stereo. "Alright," he says. "God you're a bloody miserable bastard."

For a while they drive through the dark in silence. Charlie, the eldest of the two, stares blankly at the map, which he can't even see, and wouldn't understand if he could. Brent just keeps the car moving steadily on the road they're on, hoping it is traveling in the right direction.

"I think we should've taken that right," says Charlie all of a sudden.

"What right? We haven't passed any turn-offs for miles, man."

"We just passed one, and I think that you should've taken it. On the map it shows a right turn we have to take and that fucker could've been it."

"There was no right turn there. We're on the road home now. This is the way we came, I recognise the area." Brent's voice is sounding stressed.

"How can you recognise anything, it's impossible to see more than a couple of feet in front of the car this fog is so fucking thick. And you never noticed that turn-off did you?"

Charlie didn't realise that he was shouting until he saw Brent wipe spit from his cheek.

"There was no fucking turn off Charlie, now will you fucking leave it," Brent snaps back at his accomplice. Then, feeling a little guilty for shouting at the older man he says.

"We'll be home soon, I know it. Why don't you try and get some sleep."

Charlie throws the map into the back and, sighing, throws himself back in his seat.

"I can't sleep, this bastard is uncomfortable," he says to Brent after a bit of fidgeting. "I can't believe you brought a Saxo on a job like this. We hardly look like professionals in a bloody Saxo do we?"

"Look I told you, my Jag's in the garage 'til tomorrow afternoon. This is Julie's car." Brent explains to Charlie for the fourth time today, and sounding a little agitated. "Besides I don't hear our fare complaining, do you?"

Looking at the corpse in the backseat Charlie replies, "Well, no. But he is dead, Brent. Try not to forget that."

"Of course I won't forget that. I'm not a goldfish. I just hope that the bastard isn't bleeding all over my backseat; Julie'll go barmy."

"Well we could have put him in the boot if you'd have brought a car big enough. There's no way a sixteen stone guy like that is fitting into the boot of a Saxo. They were designed to accommodate little hairdryers, you know. A hairdresser's car, a Saxo. Is your missus a hairdresser, Brent?"

Brent slams on the brakes bringing the car skidding to a stop in the middle of the road. "Look," he says, turning to Charlie. "I know that the size of this vehicle is a bit inappropriate for our mission, but can you please shut the fuck up? You're doing my head in, man. It's after three in the morning and we're lost somewhere on the pissing moors and now I fancy a bit of quiet, alright?"

Charlie chooses not to reply. Instead he turns to look out the window at the enveloping darkness. He obviously has the tit on.

"Right, thank you," Brent says as he takes his foot off the brake and they continue on their way. The silence that surrounds them becomes loud and uncomfortable, but in Brent's opinion it is still better than listening to Charlie whinge about everything.

After about fifteen minutes the silence in the car is interrupted by a noise from the back seat. A groan. Charlie instantly sits up and rotates his head to look into the back. He says to Brent: "Did you just hear that?"

"Yes I did. Of course I bloody did. I thought that the fucker was dead," he replies, sounding a little panicked.

"Well yeah, so did I," says Charlie. "I mean, he was, wasn't he?"

"I don't know, you shot him, not me."

"Well, he looked dead, didn't he?"

"Looked dead? Looked? I thought that you was supposed to be a bloody professional, man. You should have checked. You should fucking know."

Another groan.

"He's groaned again, Brent. Did you hear that?" Charlie says, sounding a little worried.

"I can't believe it. I can't believe he's groaned again. Dead people don't groan. You shot him in the fucking head, Charlie. You shot him in the fucking head, and he's still fucking groaning."

"I know," says Charlie. "Twice."

"Twice," Brent repeats as he drives on, shaking his head. Charlie simply stares at the groaning man in the back. Then he reaches down and grabs his gun.

"Shall I shoot him again?"

"No," shouts Brent in a panic. "Not in Julie's car man, she'll fucking kill me. Besides, what good can it do? You've already shot the fucker in the head. Twice. He's obviously indestructible or something. A survivor."

"I haven't got any bullets left anyway," says Charlie putting his gun away.

Brent turns to face him in disbelief. "What do you mean you haven't got any bullets left? What kind of a person only brings two bullets on a job like this?"

"Look, you brought a fucking Saxo so don't moan at me," he shouts back. "Besides, what kind of a person survives two bullets, man?"

"Hit him with it. Now, go on, hit him with the gun, just in case," says Brent, eager to end this uneasy situation. "Then we'll pull over and bury him somewhere. Go on, man, don't just fucking stare at me, hit the bastard!"

"Calm down," Charlie says to him. "Don't panic, he's still quite dead. He's just sitting there again now, looking dead. I think it might have passed. Just his body reacting to his demise or something, like when chickens..."

"I don't give a fuck just smack him really hard in the face will you!" Brent screams at Charlie.

Caught off guard by Brent's girly screaming Charlie shrugs his shoulders, picks up his gun and smashes the butt into the groaning man's face. The man groans.

"There now, does that make you feel better? He's groaned again."

"Again?" Brent is slowly shaking his head in disbelief, while Charlie hits the man again. "No," says Brent. "Not hit him again, I mean how can he groan again? He's supposed to be fucking dead. I don't fucking believe this, Charlie. This can't be happening. Come on, let's bury the bastard right now."

The Saxo speeds to a stop at the side of the road, finding a rather conveniently placed lay-by, and the pair jump out. Deciding that from now on he would carry his gun in his jacket, just in case he needs the butt again, Charlie puts it there. From the passenger side he opens the rear door, standing well back to avoid any rebellion from the should-be-dead man. Nothing happens.

"Come on," he says. "Let's get this fucker into the woods."

Together they haul the man out of the car and dump him on the dirty ground while they gather breath.

"God, he's a fat fucker ain't he. I can see this being fun," Brent says to his accomplice.

"Come on you puff, grab his feet," responds Charlie, lifting the guy's arms. "He won't walk himself into the middle of these woods you know."

"I know," says Brent, taking the feet.

Struggling slightly they manage to get the body over an old wall made loosely of brick and slate. Getting themselves over proves a little more difficult though. Charlie goes first and is doing fine until the point where he is mounted on the wall with one leg at either side. Then he stops.

"Brent, I'm stuck," he says. Then after a bit of jiggling his face turns red and the big man shouts:

"Oh fuck, one of my balls is trapped on a sharp rock!"

A little more subtle, careful jiggling and Charlie's mug is all screwed up in pain. Then, with an "Aw fuck!" he throws himself over, kamikaze style, and takes half of the wall with him. Once grounded he rolls about in the dirt, hands covering his crushed testicles as if to protect them from anymore punishment. He is crying. With a slight grin Brent hops up onto the now rather small wall and then hops off the other side.

"Are you alright, mate?" he asks Charlie, who replies with a whimper. Looking at his friend who is still holding his nuts and rolling around in the dirt Brent can't help but burst into laughter.

"Stop laughing. Stop fucking laughing you cunt," shouts Charlie from the ground. "This shit is fucking painful."

"Well it's a good job you don't need to use them, ain't it," Charlie shouts back, now laughing his tits off."

With a growl Charlie jumps to his knees and punches Brent square in the bollocks. With a loud, almost terrifying scream Brent drops to his knees and now uses his hands to cover and protect his own balls. Feeling slightly better from this, Charlie manages to laugh. Feeling much, much worse than he did, Brent starts to cry. The role reversal doesn't last though and pretty soon both men collapse into fits of hysteria, laughing and crying at the same time; crying at their own pain but laughing at the other's.

Then, in a much-needed moment of clarity, Charlie remembers their task. Pulling himself together he looks over at Brent, who is still withering on the ground, and just about holds back another chuckle. "Come on," he says in a calming voice. "We are not just here to have a bit of fun y'know, we've got a body to bury."

The wind rises and both men feel a chill. Finally on his feet Brent takes hold of the dead man's arms. Lifting the feet, Charlie informs his partner "We'll take it a few hundred metres into the woods and then you can come back for the shovel."

Hearing this Brent instantly lets go of the arms, dropping the man on his head and bringing a "Ooh, careful!" from Charlie.

"What do you mean I'll come back for the fucking shovel? Why can't you come back for it?" Brent asks Charlie.

"Why can't you come back for the fucking shovel? One of us has to. Besides, I'm older than you," Charlie replies. "You're younger, fresher, more able."

"Well why don't we both come back for the fucker then? Save arguments."

"Don't be stupid, Brent. What's the point in us both coming back when it only takes one? What's the matter? Are you scared or something?"

Brent takes a quick, worried look around him. "Course not. But, y'know, it's dark as fuck, man." Another look around; "What if I get lost or something? What if I get lost in that fucking jungle?"

"Jungle? Well what if we both get lost? If one of us stays with the body then you can shout to me if you get lost in the..jungle," he smirks to himself before adding: "Now come on, quit bitching, it'll be light in a couple of hours."

Brent picks up the arms again and they struggle off into the forest with the heavy corpse. The white, bare trees give off a very eerie glow in the moonlight, and nothing can be heard for crunching leaves under their every footprint. And the wind, the perpetual wind blowing and gushing in every direction, in and out of their ears, with a frosty bite.

The battle is fought in silence. They wrestle the man about two hundred metres into the woods and then lay him down on the dry, crunchy leaves. Both men are panting heavily, and beads of sweat coat their foreheads. They aren't used to this much exercise, being criminals and not athletes.

"Right," says Charlie, puffing and spitting. "You go back for the shovels, I'll sit here and try to light a fag."

"Oh yeah, cheers," replies Brent with drop of sarcasm, before reluctantly starting off at a jogging pace back toward the car.

Charlie chuckles, then sputters, and then coughs up a bit more phlegm before ending his set by spitting it out. He pops a cigarette into his mouth and it is immediately snatched away by the wind. He pops in another and the same happens again. On the third attempt he gets clever and bites it between his teeth. He takes out his lighter and tries to light the end, but in the wind it fails to create a flame. Giving up as a bad job he pockets the lighter and releases his grip on the cigarette so it blows away, after it's brothers.

Now feeling a little naughty and mischievous, and sensing Brent returning pretty soon, Charlie quickly gathers up a load of leaves and covers the body with it. Then, seeing Brent's silhouette jogging toward him, he slowly makes his way towards it waving his arms in the air.

"Charlie..." Brent calls to him.

"Is that you Brent?"

"Of course it fucking is who else would it be?"

"He's gone!" Charlie shouts back in reply, filling his voice with false horror.

"What the fuck do you mean he's gone?"

"What the fuck do you think I mean? He's gone. He just got up and ran off. I nearly shit myself"

Now close enough to see each other in detail, Charlie says: "Come on, look." He leads Brent to the spot where they laid down the body. The ground was just full of leaves, and not much else.

Brent looks around, eyes glued to the floor, muttering "I can't fucking believe this. What the

fuck do you have to do to kill someone around here?"

Seeing Brent's horrified expression is enough for Charlie and he cracks out into laughter. "I'm only kidding you, man. I covered him with a few leaves, that's all. He's right here. Fuck, man, you should have seen your face though. That was great."

"You fucking cunt, Charlie. For fuck's sake I can't fucking believe that you've just bastard fucking done that! Nearly gave me a bloody heart attack," Brent raves at Charlie.

"I can't fucking believe you. Shit!"

Thinking that maybe he pushed his partner too far, Charlie apologises and starts brushing his hands through the leaves in search of something solid but still slightly soft, a recent corpse for example. Brent looks on, shaking his head. Then he continues with his offensive, though in a much calmer tone than before.

"You're a knob, Charlie. A big one. Do you know how much a knob you are? You're fucking enormous, man, bigger than you could ever imagine. A huge, gigantic prick, that's what you are, with shining bells on," he pauses as he realises that Charlie is still looking for the body, his face showing sickly white concern in the moonlight. "You've lost it, haven't you? You've lost the fucking body. You fucking cock man."

"All right, all-fucking-right," Charlie stands up to defend himself.

"Dick."

"Ok then, you've made your point. I've lost him. Now are you going to help me find him, or are you going to stand there until the sun comes up thinking of every alternative to the word penis like you're a fucking dick thesaurus? Why don't you pass me the shovel you went to the car for and we'll scrape back the...where is the shovel anyway?"

Brent jumps into the air and smacks himself in the face with his hand. "Fuck," he shouts. "I forgot to tell you man, with you winding me up like that it slipped from my mind. The fucking car's gone!"

Charlie looks Brent deep in the eyes in a very suspicious fashion, trying to work out whether he's bullshitting or not. After being so smug about hiding the body he doesn't want to fall for a similar prank. That would be embarrassing. Brent stares back at him, eyes wide open, waiting patiently for Charlie to stop analysing him and get on with it.

"Are you sure that the car is gone, Brent?" Charlie finally says in a cold voice. "We haven't got time for fucking about now, lad."

"Charlie I'm telling you," replies Brent. "Swear to God the car isn't there no more. I went back and it was gone. No trace of it. Like it was never there, man."

Still looking suspiciously at his accomplice Charlie decides that they should go back and check.

Brent is eager to go too, but he just wants out of the forest, and so they trek back to the car.

When they reach the lay-by a few minutes later Charlie discovers for himself that the car has indeed, as Brent said, gone. Charlie is pretty stressed out now, and is pacing over the space where the Saxo had been left. Brent is stood off to one side, where he'd be standing waiting to open the driver's door if the car were still here like it should be.

"Where the fuck has it gone?" Charlie shouts at Brent.

"I don't fucking know, man. It must have been nicked or something."

"Nicked? Who's going to nick a car off the fucking moors at five o'clock in the morning in the middle of fucking winter, Brent? You stupid bastard," Charlie shouts.

"I don't know, someone who is cold and has a long way to travel, maybe," he replies, and then before Charlie can react says: "Anyway, it's my fucking car."

"I don't give a fuck whose car it is, or was, insurance will cover that shit. All I give a fuck about is getting home. It's freezing man."

From down the road an approaching car can be heard. Both men are instantly attracted to the sound; they're turned on and uplifted by it. A car represents hope, even if it is traveling in the wrong direction to home. Silently they both step slowly forward, into the road, never taking their eyes off the patch of darkness from where the sound is coming. The humming gets louder and louder and as it does, Charlie and Brent stare harder into the darkness.

Suddenly a small car leaps out of the darkness, without headlights, and straight into Charlie, not stopping until it hits the wall, crushing the big fella in the middle. Brent doesn't move, he's in too much shock. After a few seconds he rotates his head to see the mess. Charlie is as dead as dead gets. His insides are all over the car bonnet and his head hangs limply onto his right shoulder, with thick blood pouring

from his mouth. Then, snapping out of his trance, Brent realises that the car is a Saxo. He looks down to the license plate and starts moving slowly toward the vehicle. "Fuck," he says, stopping dead in his tracks. "That's my car!"

The driver's door springs open and a foot steps out. Then very slowly a figure climbs the car. It appears to be a man, about seven feet tall, wearing some kind of hooded top. His face is hidden behind a decorator's dust mask and sunglasses.

Brent nervously steps back. He wants to run but is frozen with fear.

"Who are you?" he asks. The man doesn't respond, instead he stares back at Brent, who is getting more and more scared by the moment. After a few seconds the man swiftly strides over to Brent and smacks him in the head. Doing nothing to protect himself Brent collapses face down, with his head in the mud. Nothing happens for a couple of seconds, allowing Brent a little breathing time before plucking up the courage to roll onto his back. He does so and there he sees the large shadowy figure, stood over him with a steel bat. Without saying a word the man bashes Brent's head into the ground and repeats the motion until it explodes all over the lay-by.



PERSPECTIVES





West 54th Community

The subway station at Grand Central in Midtown Manhattan is large, and during rush hour the amount of people that come and go through the turnstiles is dumbfounding. Right next to the turnstiles there is a small service gate where commuters exit the station and where people with bikes and strollers can enter the station with a minimum amount of effort. Having worked near Grand Central for most of this past year, I've been in the habit of slipping through the gate amid the throng of people whenever I don't have a MetroCard and I'm low on cash. It's a simple, easy and anonymous way of getting on the subway without having to pay. It's not unusual for New Yorkers to do this. In fact, it's difficult to spend ten straight minutes during rush hour watching that gate and not see several people do the exact same thing.

Six or seven months ago I did this and was accosted by an undercover cop. Basically getting caught for this kind of crime is about as serious as getting a parking ticket. You're written up a ticket, cough up the cash, and kick yourself for your bad luck and/or criminal competence. It's not a big deal. The one thing you don't want to do is not pay the ticket. A friend of mine once told me how someone he knew got caught jumping a turnstile and didn't pay. Several months later the guy was picked up and spent the night in Central Brooklyn for pissing in public. That's the kind of ridiculous shit it's best to avoid. My normal frame of mind is to ignore tickets and bills I don't like to pay, but given the circumstances, I figured it was just as well to go ahead and pay the sixty bucks, avoid an arrest warrant, and live the rest of my life in peace.

Just last week I was in the position of not having very much cash on me. I was coming home from work, and figured I might as well go through the gate. No big deal, I do it all the time. Just as I was going through the gate though, a big man yelled at me from behind. My first instinct was to run. Having gone over the first incident of getting caught in retrospect, it seemed clear to me I could easily outrun the two-hundred fifty plus pound undercover cops that come lumbering after you. I've actually seen folks get away with this. It's not that hard to do when hundreds of other people are swarming through the station. The only problem was, just as I was gearing up to go, another undercover cop came lumbering out in front of me. There was no escape.

Things started just the way they had the first time. The cop took my ID, asked my address, and

then went to call in my name. I wasn't worried. I don't have a record, and the one violation I'd been caught for, I'd paid off. All my debts to society were in good order. That's why it was a little perplexing when the police officer came back, pulled out his handcuffs and told me, "you're under arrest."

I gotta say, I'm not the type of cat who just willingly turns around and lets the cops handcuff him.

"The hell do you mean? I don't have a record. Get the hell off me."

He had to physically turn me around and force me up against the wall. He put on the handcuffs. "Shut the fuck up and cooperate. You've done this before. Bloomberg just issued a 'one time too many' law, which means if you've done something like this once and you do it again, you get arrested."

Just my motherfucking luck.

"So what does that mean?"

"It means you're going down to the precinct. When you're there the precinct sergeant will decide whether he'll issue you a DAT ticket, or whether you have to go before the judge."

While the cops had me handcuffed, people came and went through that damn gate. The police were getting frustrated that my lack of cooperation was keeping them from doing their job. Eventually they managed to apprehend a clean-cut young man from the Dominican Republic. He held up his MetroCard. "I have a card," he said, and kept walking. One of the cops, the bigger one, a blond buzzed man with a belly that bulged out over his sweats pushed the young man against the wall, like "where the fuck do you think you're going? Let's see some ID." This, tragically, was the young man's downfall. He'd lost his wallet earlier that week, and hadn't replaced his ID yet. He did have a work ID that he tried to show the police officer.

Meanwhile, the other officer had me cuffed and pushed up against the wall. He had a buzz cut too, but his roots looked brown. He was more round than big-bellied. I was cooperating. I figured the less trouble I caused, the more likely the bastards would be to let me go.

"Put that shit away before I arrest you for no reason at all. That fucking ID ain't no good." That caught my attention. The big-bellied cop had yelled it at the young man, who was trying to hold up his work ID. I'm not even making this shit up. "In fact, you know what? Turn around." He put the cuffs on. I thought the young man was

cooperating way too much. He hadn't even broken the law. Not really, because he had a month unlimited card, and so he *had* paid for his subway ride. I guess he just had faith in the ultimate justice of New York law enforcement. Yep. I doubt he has that same faith now.

They took both of us up to the police van. We were dragged outside in cuffs. We went down Lexington Avenue in cuffs, right in the middle of rush hour. The Dominican guy was kind of shook, but personally, being young and romanticizing things and having a general faith that nothing bad will ultimately happen to me, I thought it was a little cool to be dragged like a villain through the streets of New York. Fucking heroic and shit. I know it's stupid, but you can't help the way you think about things.

There was a Puerto Rican kid already in the police van. He looked about seventeen. He was handcuffed and in the far back seat. The two of us were ordered to file in next to him. To be honest, the ride wasn't that uncomfortable. I figured we'd go to the precinct, be issued DAT tickets, whatever the hell that meant, and I'd be out of another eighty bucks or something. A pain in the ass, but as any bar-dweller knows, money comes and money goes.

There were a few other undercover cops in the police van already. All big guys with the same sort of look. I suppose they get people with a particular build to patrol these subways and shit. A lot of dudes would try to knock a cop down before getting arrested. Even I'd been trying to run. After all, once you hop on the train, you're free.

The van started up and the cops joked amongst themselves. "Go ahead and say what you want, but I'll bend you over and hang you from a skewer. Ha! Ha!" "Ha! You wish." "In your dreams." "Fuck you." "Fuck you too." They saw a female cop on the street. "Hey, isn't that Rhonda? Thought she was back at the precinct." "Yeah, that's her." "Hey, Rhonda! Hey! Hey! Rhonda!" "She don't want nothing to do with you, you fucking kiss ass motherfucker." "Oh, I'd like to kiss that ass. Just push those cheeks apart and myumyum, myumyumyum." The cop put up his hands and pushed his face forward shaking it from side to side. "Myumyumyum! Myumyumyum!"

It was a beautiful early fall day. The sun was out. The air was crisp, but it was warm. Union Square was bustling with people: musicians, artist, students, workers, skaters, and the homeless. The police ordered us out of the van and dragged us down into the station. The precinct was a small square building in the center of the subway station. Inside there was an old drunk

homeless man. They were taking estimate of his possessions. "Two dollars and thirty three cents," a young officer was saying. The officer was uniformed, and in pretty good shape, which just goes to support my theory on undercover subway cops. He put the change in a box and said, "alright. Two thirty-three. We'll just round that up to seven, okay?" He wrote something down on a clipboard. "You can pick it up when you leave."

We were deprived of our belongings next. The cops sat us down on a bench, and went to speak to the head of the precinct. "No more DATs!" the precinct head decided. "It'll be eighteen hours before I get all this shit processed. Fuck it, just send them downtown." "Hey, don't gotta raise your voice. I don't give a shit what happens to them." The police registered everything that belonged to us and gave us back our wallets. We had to remove our belts and shoelaces, and then they led us back into the precinct cell.

The precinct cell was a lot like those old cells you see in small towns on television, like the *Andy Griffith* show or something. There's a large square room with a police desk facing two basic medium sized cells with the old metal bars. The doors swing open, and they're locked with a MasterLock. The three of us were led in, locked in, and then the cops went about their paperwork. "You guys might as well go ahead and get to know each other."

The Dominican sat down on one wall, the Puerto Rican sat down on another and I sat against the back wall, looking out at the cops. The floor was dirty white tile. Behind the desk were all sorts of different gadgets for fingerprinting and other arrest related necessities. The two cops who arrested us were the only other people in the room. None of us said anything. Every now and then one of the officers would yell out something like, "hey Whit, what's your height?" "Six-Two." "Weight?" "One-Fifty," "One-fifty! Ha! Ha!" etc... The questions varied between the three of us. The police left the room.

The Puerto Rican kid was starting to get worried. He stood up and paced. "What they get you for?" the Dominican asked. "Jumping the turnstile." "Where?" "West 4th Street. They say I have unpaid fines. I told them my mom was supposed to pay them, but she doesn't know. My family can't know I went to jail. They will kill me if they find out. That's why when the cops asked me if I had some family to call I had to lie. My family can't know. I'm the first one ever this has happened to in my family. Oh my God, this kind of thing doesn't happen to me!"

The cops came back into the room. The Dominican stood up. "So what's gonna happen here, man?" The cop said, "you're gonna spend the night in Central Brooklyn. Tomorrow morning you'll see the judge and you can go home. You need to report back here within three days to receive your belongings. If you don't come back in three days they, uh... get shipped to Queens somewhere or something."

"What do you mean spend the night in prison?" I said. I'd been looking forward to a cold beer all day. This shit was unacceptable. "Why can't we just see the judge tonight?"

The round cop put up his hands. "Listen, it's already late. It's going on seven. The judge will see you first thing tomorrow."

"I need to make a call," the Puerto Rican kid said. "I get to make a call, right? I have the right to a phone call?"

"This is fucking ridiculous," the Dominican said. "I'm calling a lawyer."

The same thought had occurred to me. To call my lawyer. But my lawyer isn't really my lawyer, after all. Just a good friend of mine who happens to be an attorney. And what's more he doesn't even practice in New York. So I wasn't sure how much good he could do me. Not to mention I was actually guilty of committing a crime, and had done so knowingly and intentionally.

The big-bellied police officer picked up the phone. "Who you need to call?"

"My hon!" the Puerto Rican kid said.

"Alright. What's the number? I'll talk to her first."

As it turned out, he couldn't get in touch with her at home or on her cell. The cop shrugged and went back to his paperwork. The Dominican picked up a newspaper lying in the cell, and the Puerto Rican kid sat down. I walked to the back of the cell, and took my seat against the back wall. No one said anything for a while. The cops got up and left.

"What's your name?" the Dominican sort of asked both me and the other kid.

"Whit."

"I'm M---. You ever been in like this before?"

"Naw, you?"

"Naw. This is bullshit."

"Fuck yeah it is."

"How about you, man?"

"My name is R---. I don't get in trouble like this. My family is going to kill me if they find out." The thought of it got him agitated again. He stood up and started to pace.

"Hey," I said. "It's not a big deal. Don't worry about it. In 24 hours this will be all done with."

The cops came back in. "What's going to happen to us?" R. asked again.

"Like I said, you'll be spending the night in jail. Not this cell, but in jail."

I liked the idea of spending the night right there in the precinct cell. M. and R. were pretty nice folk; it would be a quiet night. In the morning I could light straight out to work from Union Square. All in all not so bad. Central Bookies was another story. Not only would I be all the way out in Central Brooklyn, a fair distance from work, but the place is sort of notorious for the kind of riff-raff that ends up there. Not to mention the size of the place has it so there are six, seven, eight dudes to each cell. Just overall a pretty unpleasant prospect.

The cop continued, "M. and Whit will be going to Central Brooklyn. You'll be going to 100 Centre Street." He looked down and chuckled. "The Catacombs." Then he stood back up and left.

R. couldn't stop pacing. "My parents are going to kill me. Oh my God, my parents are going to kill me. They can't find out about this. This doesn't happen to me. You don't understand. Oh my God."

"Sit down," I told him. "You'll be fine. It's not as big a deal as it seems right now. Trust me."

He sat down. We were all quiet. After a while, M. said to me, "if you got caught doing this before, why the hell did you do it again?"

"I didn't think I'd get caught again," I said. "And I figured if I did get caught, since I paid off the fine the first time, I'd just get another fine, which I'd pay off. I've been doing this for a while."

"Well, you know better than to do it again now, I hope."

"Yeah." Which, I have to say was God's honest truth. I wasn't looking forward to spending the night locked up in Central Brooklyn. "I'm definitely not looking forward to a night in Central Bookies."

"Why? Is it fucked up down there?"

"Probably some pretty thugged out cats down there," I said. "I dunno."

"Fuck. I'm definitely getting a fucking lawyer."

The cops came back into the room. They took M. from the cell and fingerprinted him on the machine at the back of the room. When R. saw this he started to freak out all over again. "Why are they doing that to him? Are they gonna do that to you, too?"

"That's my guess," I said. "I think it's just standard procedure."

"You mean.... me too?"

“Yeah, probably. It’s no big deal. It’s standard procedure when you come in. You’ve never been fingerprinted before?”

“Oh my God! This doesn’t happen to me!”

They finished fingerprinting M. and he made a call. He got an answering machine and left a message for his girlfriend. Everybody calling their girlfriends. I guess you kind of have to. It felt good to be alone. I don’t have a person in the world to answer to like that.

After they fingerprinted me they took me into an adjacent room set up with a camera and a bunch of computer equipment. They had me stand in front of the camera and take mug shots. Then they brought me back into the cell and took M. for his mug shots.

“They took mug shots?” R. asked when I got back.

“Yeah.”

“They’re gonna take mine too?”

“Yeah. That’d be my guess.”

“Oh my God! Will this be on my record?”

“Well,” I said. “Here’s the thing. After six months you’ll have a clean record again. It’s no more serious than a parking ticket, and it won’t keep you from getting a job, or going to school or anything like that. It’s not that big a deal. Trust me. It’s just a little misdemeanor. Calm down, man, you haven’t ruined your life.”

“But you don’t understand. I’m going to the navy.”

“It won’t matter.”

“It won’t?”

“Of course not.”

All of which is true. But the poor bastard just couldn’t be consoled. He paced back and forth across the room. He stopped and said, “Did you smile in your mug shot?”

“Did I smile?”

“I’m going to smile in mine,” he said. “I’ve never taken a picture where I didn’t smile. I don’t care. I’m going to smile in my mug shot.”

I laughed. “I think you should!”

R. sat down. “Wait a minute though. How are you gonna get home from Central Brooklyn if you have no money? You can’t jump the turnstile again.”

I shrugged. “I’ll figure something out.”

But fuck, if that wasn’t one damn good question. I hadn’t even thought about that. Maybe they’d let me ride free, given the circumstances, but you never know.

R. opened his wallet and handed me two dollars.

“Man, I don’t need that,” I said. “I don’t want to take your money. You don’t have to do that.”

He kept his hand outstretched. I’ll be damned, but I took his little two dollars. If he had two dollars like that though, just to give away to a stranger in jail, why the hell had *he* jumped the turnstile? Especially if going to jail was such a big issue for him. Well, hell. You do stupid things when you’re seventeen. And apparently when you’re twenty-seven too.

The cops came back into the room with a few other cops I hadn’t seen before. There were two new kids with them in handcuffs. They took off the cuffs, made the kids take off their shoelaces and belts and led them into the cell. They closed the door. The two kids were both Mexican. I didn’t speak a word to either of them, but they came in with a Puerto Rican cop – the kids were talking to the cop in Spanish, and soon R. joined in their conversation. I know just a small enough amount of Spanish that I could make out the basics of the conversation. I didn’t catch what they were in for though.

M. came back from having his mug shot taken. They let him back in the cell, and he sat down with a paper. No one had come for R. yet. He hadn’t even been fingerprinted. It was making him nervous all over again. “They’re playing games with me,” he said. “What’s going on? Why are they holding off? I’m going to another cell than you guys, too. They’re playing games with me! I know it.”

A few more cops came in with a young black man in handcuffs. “Put him in the other cell,” said one of the cops. “Let the drunk go. He’s slept it off enough.”

The homeless man from before had spent the entire time passed out on the floor of the adjacent cell. The young cop who’d confiscated his belongings opened the door, and said, “go on. Get out of here! Get your stuff up at the front desk. Go on, I said. Get out of here!”

The old drunk got up and stumbled out of the cell, through the room and down the hall. They took the cuffs off the young black man, made him remove his shoelaces and belt, and locked him in the cell.

The cops opened the door to our cell and took M and me. “Let’s go guys.”

“So how many dudes are gonna be with us in these cells where we’ll be spending the night?” I asked.

“Just two to a cell usually,” he said. “Not like Central Brooklyn where they have eight guys in one cell.”

“But I thought we were going to Central Brooklyn.”

"No, *he's* going to Central Brooklyn." The cop pointed to R. "You guys are going to 54th Street Community. There's been a change of plans."

The ride to 54th Street Community was ridiculous. First I was put in the tight backseat of a police vehicle. Then M. had to slide up next to me, and finally, the big belly cop had to squeeze his ass in as well. With the cuffs on it made the whole thing almost impossible. I had to sit with my knees up against my face, and my cuffed hands twisted behind my back where the cuffs cut into my wrists.

Up front a white cop was driving the vehicle and a black cop had passenger seat. We drove west on 14th street, and turned up Eighth Avenue. The pain in my wrists, my stiff legs and the spinning lights of the approaching Times Square were making me nauseous. The big-bellied cop in the back said, "when we get to the prison, they're gonna ask you a lot of dumb questions. Like do you have any medical conditions. You know what you're gonna say? You're gonna say no. Cuz if you say yes, they'll take you to the hospital and you'll end up spending the whole weekend in jail. It's your choice." The music felt out of place. They were listening to Hot97, Snoop Dog or some shit. When the new 50 Cent joint, *Stuntin' 101*, came on, the white cop said, "ooh!" leaned forward and put the shit on blast. Which just goes to show, as a friend of mine said to me when I told him about it, cops and villains are pretty close to the same thing. Only in my opinion cops are more villainous than villains, and if there's any difference, it's that a villain's more likely to be a decent human being.

When we arrived at 54th Street Community we were led up to a desk where an officer asked us for our names. When M. gave his name, the cop said, "your girlfriend called looking for you. We'll call her back and let her know that you're okay. You'll spend the night here, and in the morning you can go home. I'm only doing this because she sounded like a real nice young lady. Either of you guys have a medical condition that will keep you from making it through the night?"

"No."

They led us through the room into a narrow yellow hallway. At the end of the hallway there was a heavy metal door, with a sign on it: NO WEAPONS ALLOWED PAST THIS POINT. The round cop passed his pistol back to the big-belly cop. "Guess I got to give up my jammy!" he said. We made an immediate left in the cellblock and then another sharp left. There was a long

narrow hallway painted bright yellow all over the windows, floors and walls. To the left were tiny cells, one after the next. They each had a small sink, a silver commode and a wooden bench. The whole hallway smelled like shit and urine. The smell deepened as we walked down the hallway. There were already a few people occupying the first few cells in the block. When they came to an empty one they slid the door to the left. It made a metallic grinding sound when it opened, and it made the same sound when they shut M. in. I got the cell next to his. They shut the door, and I sat down.

Everything was bright yellow. Looking out the gate the walls were bright yellow. The walls inside the cell were bright yellow. Garish fluorescent lights ran down the hallway, outside of each cell. The cell stank like no bathroom in the world. I sat down on the bench. This wasn't so bad. I had my own cell. I had privacy. No big deal. I'd hang out for the night and go straight to work in the morning. Sure beat Central Brooklyn. Why the hell had they sent that kid to Central Brooklyn? When a cop came by my cell I asked him if he had a Village Voice or something I could read. He said reading wasn't allowed.

Time passed. I considered trying to start up a conversation with M. in the cell next to mine, but changed my mind. I sat back on the bench, facing the bars and decided to think. This shit would make a good perspective for my magazine. I'd just stay up all night, think about the whole thing, observe shit, and write about it.

More time passed. Sirens were blaring outside of the building, all around. A breathless police officer came into the cellblock and said to the cop on cell patrol, "you're lucky. It's a fucking zoo out there tonight." "Yeah?" "Yeah." "You got a lot of people coming in?" "It looks like."

You can't see the cops on patrol when you're in the cellblock. They sit at the end of the hall, out of sight. Occasionally they walk through and look into the cells just to make sure no one's doing anything they shouldn't be doing, I guess. But you hear everything they say crystal clear, and you know they hear everything you say. It's a little creepy. I walked up to the gate and looked out. Couldn't see a damn thing, but yellow walls. I went back to the bench and sat against the wall. The cell was maybe 4 by 7. Shit, that's not too bad, I guess. Right here in Hell's Kitchen. Fuck it. If it wasn't jail, and you could come and go as you pleased, New Yorkers would pay a thousand bucks a month for this shit and call it a deal.

More time passed. There was some commotion at the end of the cellblock. They were

bringing someone in. It was a thirty-something black man, tall, bald, with a goatee. Real skinny. They walked him down the cellblock and put him in the cell next to mine. I'd been sitting in there a while. It was a little surprising to have a new neighbor, but it was still early. I'd gotten used to sitting in that cellblock without a thing changing. It occurred to me, thinking about the conversation I'd heard earlier between the two officers that we'd be getting a lot more folks coming through. Maybe they'd even put another person in my cell with me. I got up and tried to take a piss, but it wasn't happening.

My new neighbor started pounding on the cell walls. An officer walked up the cellblock and he stopped. Neither of them said anything. After the cop left he stayed quiet. I got up and paced the cell. I wondered how much time had passed. It was 9:50 pm when they put me in. I wondered what time it was now. I don't wear a watch. I just use my cell phone when I need to check the time, and the cops had confiscated that. I sat down on the bench with my back against the wall. I wondered if M. had managed to fall asleep. I slid down a little on the bench and felt sort of sleepy. Time probably passed, but not much. I was in a state between being half awake and half asleep, where you have a constant stream of surreal thoughts and images in your head, and are vaguely aware of how strange they are. The sound of more commotion at the end of the cellblock made me sit back up. I took my half conscious state as a good sign that I'd be able to get some sleep if I wanted to.

There were two men being led into the cellblock. One was a husky middle-aged white man with silver black hair, and the other a very skinny early thirties white man with a beard and a stagger. He was pounding his chest, staggering and limping as they led him past my cell. Looked like he was strung out or something. The cops shut them in the cell and they started talking.

"I'm gonna get sick, man. Oh shit, I'm gonna get sick."

"Just try and get some sleep."

"Oh, Jesus. Oh, Jesus. You think they'll let you walk tomorrow?"

Chuckling. "They're not letting me go anywhere."

"Me neither, man. I'd be real surprised if they let me walk. I bet even Central Bookies wouldn't let me walk."

"Central Brooklyn's worse than this, man."

"You think so?"

"Think so? I know so. Them dudes don't play down there. I've been there a few times. This ain't shit. Just try and get some sleep."

"Aw, Jesus, man. I'm gonna get sick."

"Why don't you go on methadone?"

"That's the same thing, man. I used to be hooked on both."

"Naw, it ain't the same. Not the same as the shit the dopeman gives you. You don't know what he's putting in that shit you get off the street. At least you can go to work and function and shit on the methadone. You should get on the methadone."

"Fuck that, man. Oh, Jesus, I'm gonna get sick."

"Go on methadone. That's how I got clean before I got hooked on coke."

The conversation went on like that for a while. To be honest, I was a little happy to have these cats around. It was like listening to a radio program or something. Some sort of entertainment. Eventually the older man lit a cigarette. It took a while to notice. I barely detected the cigarette smoke beneath the stench of urine and feces.

"Yo, you got a match over there?" said the guy who'd been put in the cell next to mine.

"Yeah, yeah. We got a light. I'm passing this cigarette over to the guy next to me now. He'll let you light it."

"Thanks."

I'm a smoker myself, but right now it wasn't a big deal. Going a night without a cigarette can be a drag, but it's not worth a whole lot of trouble, and leaning over cells, and sharing cigarettes with junkies. Sure, I'd have been glad for a cigarette, but I thought about how nice having a cigarette would be in the morning when I got out, and then it was sort of out of my head. Strange how in certain circumstances you can suppress even the most addictive desires. They say cigarettes are more addictive than heroin. Well, maybe. I don't know. But that poor junkie's voice sounded like he was staring his mortality straight in the face facing a night in that box alone without anything to help him get by.

The voices got quiet. It was quiet in the cellblock again. I got up and paced a little more. I sat back down. It sounded like someone somewhere might be sleeping – a sound of faint snoring. I wondered if it would be possible.

That bench, though. It was hard, hard wood. And narrow – too narrow to sleep on, and I'm a skinny motherfucker. There was no point trying to say, curl up and get comfortable. I have bad posture too. I've heard somewhere that sleeping

flat on your back on a hard surface is good for your posture. I figured I'd give it a try.

M. next door was yelling for the guards. "Officer!"

"What's the problem?"

"Is there any way I can make a phone call?"

"Didn't they let you make one at the precinct?"

"They did."

"So, you made your call."

"But I need to call my girlfriend and let her know to call my work for me tomorrow."

"She knows you're here right?"

"Yeah."

"So she should have enough brains to call them without you having to call her. Don't you think?"

"I need to make this call."

That was that. The officer didn't respond again. The cellblock went quiet. I lay on my back and closed my eyes. It would be a miracle if I were able to sleep.

Time passed. I didn't sleep. I felt sleepy, but couldn't sleep. It was starting to get cold, very cold. There was no heat in that cellblock. The fluorescent lights were still glaring against the bright yellow walls. The stench was making my stomach ill. My tailbone ached from trying to lie flat on my back on that hard piece of wood. There was a commotion somewhere down the hall. Girls were yelling back and forth, it was hard to make out what they were saying. "Bitch," "Fuck you," "Fuck you," "Slut." Shit like that. Slamming and shit. I wondered where they were being taken, but they weren't brought through our block.

The noise didn't end there. Throughout the night, girls, guys, general rowdiness echoed up and down the cellblock, but nobody came through. I couldn't sleep. I stood up and paced. I sat down and propped my back up against the wall. I wondered what time it was. How many more hours of this? The human brain isn't structured to stay conscious and have no form of external stimuli. I stood up and paced. I put my hands around the bars and pretended to shake them, like in the old movies, cuz I always told myself if I ever went to prison, I'd have to do that just once. I went back and sat down and wished I was upstairs in the double or triple cells where there'd be some kind of human interaction. I stood up and paced. I wished I was in Central Brooklyn, edged out shook, with some grimey motherfuckers giving me a hard time, because at least I wouldn't be losing my mind. I wondered what time it was. It kept getting colder and colder in that quiet goddamn tomb.

I tried to sleep a couple more times. Every time was the same thing. I'd lie there for an indeterminate amount of time, and then give up, stand up and pace. I'd sit down, back against the wall and think. I'd try to focus my thoughts on how I'd write about this, about my press in general, about what might be interesting about this situation, about when it would end. The cell was starting to feel familiar, and it had only been a number of hours.

There's not too much to think about when you're locked up alone in a box like that, except how to get out. I examined the bars and the walls and the floors. Of course I wouldn't really try to escape, but there just isn't much else to think about after a while. The bars looked old. They were locked from a bolt on the outside, which would've been easy enough to reach around and jimmy if you were lucky enough to have a key. Of course, how would you get a key? And even if you managed to get the door open, how could you get past the guards at the end of the cellblock? There was no way out. I pulled at the door, just to see if the door would give, like in those hackneyed old Westerns and shit, where the fat dumb sheriff accidentally doesn't close the door tight. No luck there.

The walls were metal. People had tried chipping their names and shit into the yellow paint. I tried to chip *strawberry press* in with a coin, but it wasn't happening. There were vents in the back wall that looked promising, but on closer inspection there was no way to pull them out. They'd been bored right into the metal, and who knew where or what they led to anyway? I went up and down every part of that cell. I got to learn it like you learn a lover's body.

Somewhere in the middle of the night, the junky started screaming. The screaming turned into a wail of "officer! Officer! Officer! Officer!"

A police officer came down the cellblock. "What is it?"

"I need a match."

"Right," the policeman said, and walked off.

Ten minutes passed and nothing happened. The junky stopped screaming and the policeman didn't come back with a match. After fifteen minutes the screaming started again. "Officer! Officer! Officer! Officer! Officer!" Nobody came. "Officer! Officer! Officer! Officer!" Still no one came. He kept it up for a good ten minutes. The policeman came back. "What is it?"

"I need a match."

"Right. I'm working on it," the policeman said and left.

"Officer! Officer! Officer! Officer!"

"Yo man, stop fucking crying," the guy in the cell next to mine said.

"I'm not crying, man."

"You know what I mean. I'm trying to get some rest."

That shut him up. The cellblock went quiet again. A few minutes passed. The guy in the cell next to mine said, "why? You got a cigarette?"

"Yeah. You got a match?"

"Yep."

"Let me use it."

"Pass me a cigarette and I'll light it. We can share it."

"Come on, man."

"Okay then."

"Come on, man."

"Pass me a cigarette."

"I'll break it in half and we can each have half. Just let me use your match."

"You heard me already. You know I don't play them games."

"Come on, man."

"You heard me."

"What about the guy next to you?"

"I don't know."

"Ask him."

"Hey, man. You got a match?"

"No," I said. "They confiscated all my matches."

"Oh, man," said the junky.

"Well, that's that."

"Oh, man," said the junky.

The cellblock went quiet again. Time passed. I paced and sat and paced and sat. I wondered what time it was.

M. yelled suddenly, sounding very frustrated, "don't you ever shut off these lights?"

"No," the officer down the hall yelled back. "Twenty four seven three sixty five."

I tried to lay down on my back. I was freezing. I pulled my arms into the inside of my shirt and shivered, hugged my legs. I could tell my body wanted to sleep, but I was being forced to stay awake. Down through the cellblock there were echoes of slamming cell doors and yelling and fighting. I stood up and paced, just to stay warm. I sat back down. A lady was coming down the hall doing pre-interviews with the prisoners.

"How old are you?" "What's your height?" "What's your weight?" "Do you live alone?" "How long have you lived in the same residence?" "Do you smoke marijuana?" "Have you had a TV test?" "Do you drink alcohol?"

The questions varied a little bit from prisoner to prisoner, but for the most part they were the same old thing. The junky asked her if she could

get him a match, but she ignored him. I heard him get sick in his cell.

The lady left and more time passed and it still wasn't morning. I couldn't even tell how light or dark it was outside. I paced the cell, back and forth; sat down; got up; sat down. More time passed. Somewhere in the night another prisoner was brought into our cellblock.

"Looks like you get a roommate," an officer said to someone down the hall. A cell door opened and shut again. Two men started speaking in Spanish.

From there things started to pick up. A few hours later, maybe not even, it's hard to say, the same thing happened to another prisoner. I wondered if I'd get a cellmate. I hoped so. It didn't matter how small this cell was. It didn't matter who the other prisoner was. I was losing my mind. Anything was preferable to that.

The junky started screaming again. "Officer! Officer! Officer!" His voice was high pitched, he was wailing. He sounded like he was in an awful lot of pain. A policeman came down the cellblock. "What is it?"

"Officer, I need a match."

"Smoking isn't allowed in here."

"Then I want to go to the hospital."

"Alright, prisoner. What's your name?"

"That's not what he means, officer," said the guy who'd come in with him. "What he means is that he needs to lie down and try to sleep. You need to lie down and try to sleep. That's what he means."

"Good." The policeman left.

The cellblock got quiet again. I stood up and paced back and forth. I went up to the bars, pushed the door hard, walked back to the bench. I couldn't bring myself to sit back down. I paced. I stopped at the bars and stood looking at the wall. I turned around and turned around again. Someone was walking up the cellblock. I turned around thinking I should sit down. I turned around again and walked up to the bars. A police officer stopped in front of my cell. Someone was with him. A dirty looking young, man, wildeyed and dazed. He took the cuffs off the prisoner, opened the cell door and shoved him in. The prisoner sat down on the bench and started tapping his foot. He was a scruffy looking Puerto Rican kid, my age maybe. He looked down at his tapping foot. He looked up at me, and belched. "You smoke in here?" he asked. "You can get away with it." "You got a cigarette?" "No. Do you?" "No." "Well there we are." "Yeah."

He went back to watching his foot. It was weird and quiet and uncomfortable. I walked up

to the bars and looked out at the walls. "What you in for?" he asked. "Going through the subway gate without paying. Stupid shit. You?" "Stupid shit," he said. "What's that?" "Stupid shit." "Yeah, what?" "Drug shit." "Yeah?" "Yeah."

"What time you got?" I asked him. "It's about six o'clock," he said. "Why? What time we get out of here?" "Court opens at eight. We'll see," I said. "Yeah." "Yeah."

It got quiet and uncomfortable again. But it was better. I was happy for the company. Time started to pick up. "You do drugs?" he asked. "Yeah," I said. "I used to." "What drugs?" "I dunno. Weed. A little coke. What do you do?" He threw his head back and rolled his eyes wide. "Diesel." He sniffed in hard. "Diesel. They got me on the street. I didn't even get to get high. Fucking. Fucking. Cops. Didn't even get to get high." He dropped down on the bench. I looked over at the wall. When I looked back a minute later he was knocked out. He was snoring loud, and his leg twitched sporadically so that his whole body would lift a little off the bench and then slump back down on it. A couple minutes passed. He leapt up. "I gotta get the fuck out of here," he said. "What time is it?" "I dunno." "Officer!" he yelled. "What time you got?" "Seven," the cop said. "Stand away from the bars. Breakfast is coming through."

By the time they came through with breakfast, he was already out again. His arm hung limp over the side of the bench and his leg was twitching like before. I shook him. He jumped up. "They brought us sandwiches. Have mine too if you want. I don't want this shit." He gobbled one down and threw the other aside. Then he was out again. I had to shake him a few minutes later when they brought coffee. It was a little nerve-wracking. He jumped up every time he woke up. You never knew what to expect. He drank the coffee. I let mine sit. I looked out the bars. The time actually went pretty quickly from there, even though my cellmate was mostly incoherent. A lifelong New Yorker from a rent stabilized apartment on the Upper East Side. Same age as me. Unemployed. He was a pretty good guy. He went in and out of consciousness like that, but when court opened and the guards starting letting the early inmates out, he made the sign of the cross. "Let's hope things work out for both of us."

"Amen to that," I said.

They took us upstairs in a chain gang. It was the first time I'd seen a lot of the prisoners in my cellblock. M. was directly in front of me. He gave me a look like, *what the fuck is this?* when the

cops cuffed us to the chain. We all looked pretty tired and miserable. The guy behind me said to the prisoner at the front of the line, "let's get this thing moving. What's the holdup?" The guy behind me was the bald thirty-something black man from the cell next to mine. The guy in the front of the line was another black man, probably around the same age, a little shorter, with dreads hair. "That's what I'm talking about," he said. "I'm ready to get moving." M. looked like he was exhausted half to death. He could hardly stand. I felt the same.

"You was playing games last night, nigga," the guy behind me said to the guy in the front. "Games? Man, what are you talking about? You don't even know me." "Don't fuck with me. You was playing games." "I don't play games motherfucker. You feel me? That's real. That's as real as it gets."

The line started to move. The cops were directing us out through a courtyard into another section of the building. The guy behind me was pulling up on the chain trying to reach the guy at the head of the chain gang. It put me in a pretty awkward position. They kept staring back at each other. The day was cold and cloudy. I felt dead cold from the chilliness of the night in the cell and the lack of sleep. The courtyard was small. We made it through before the guy in back of me could reach the other guy. The police brought us into a large white room and undid the handcuffs. Then they left and locked the door.

There was a small dirty commode to the back of the room and all around the sides of the room were benches. There were probably about twenty of us in there total. The two men were at each other the moment the door shut. "I was trying to get at you about a cigarette," said the guy who was in back of me. "Shit, man, we smoke one now." "Smoke one now, they'll keep you in here another night." "Fuck that, I'll *jump* out the fucking window." "That's what I was trying to tell you out in the courtyard man. We coulda got one out there." "Man, fuck these cops. Who got a match?" "I got you, but I ain't gonna smoke in here." "Man, I got you too. Any of these motherfuckers tries to step to you, you know it, I'll fucking smack 'em down." "Shit, it ain't gonna come to all that."

A lot of the prisoners had already taken seats. I ended up with a seat next to the forty-something white man who'd come in with the junky. The junky was sitting next to him on the other side. Both of the men I thought were fighting on the chain gang remained standing. The one with dreads was animated. He lit a cigarette and started talking. "I can't believe this shit. I don't even

know why the fuck I'm here. Ready to get out of this shit." Looking around you could tell that was pretty much everyone's sentiment. A lady cop came to the door. She pointed to the cigarette and then the commode. "Put that thing out and come with me."

Her tone was terrible. Everyone got real quiet. We heard her talking to him outside the door. "You light up in there again, and you'll be the last one out of here. And I'm talking 5 o'clock. We'll throw you right back downstairs."

"I told him," said the other guy. "I told him what they'd do." He pointed up. "They got this shit on lock." "Oh, shit," said the guy sitting next to me. "I didn't even see that."

To be honest, neither did I. Which is pretty stupid. There was a giant camera looking right down into the middle of the room hanging from the upper wall near the ceiling. Everyone laughed a little nervously. The other guy came back in. "Camera," said the guy next to me pointing. "Oh, shit. I didn't even see that. I was probably standing right in front of that shit."

"Yep."

The junky stood up, wavered a little, and collapsed on the floor in a fetal position. The bald black man stepped over him and sat down.

"So what are you in for?" he asked the guy with the dreads.

"Nothing. For sitting in the motherfucking park reading. I'm sitting there, it's a beautiful day out. Just reading my book. Two cops come up on either side of me, and I'm like what the fuck. So I just keep reading. They take seats next to me, like 'so what you reading there?' I'm like, it's Iceberg Slim." He looks at the white guy next to me. "You know who Iceberg Slim is?"

The guy says, "yeah, I know who Iceberg Slim is."

The guy with dreads goes on: "Anyway, so they're like, we gotta search you. Nothing they find on me. They're like, 'damn, you ain't got no kind of drugs on you? You must have something.' I'm like, sorry man. I'm clean. I'm just sitting here reading. They say, 'well, we're gonna have to arrest you for trespassing.' And so that's why I'm here."

"Where were you?"

"I don't know man. Gramercy Park, some shit. I don't know. But I got no prior record for anything. Nothing at all. And still they drag my black ass in here. How about you?"

"Cards. Swiping MetroCards," the bald headed guy said. "They got me at Grand Central. I was there just swiping motherfuckers through all day. It's a hot hustle." He broke out a stack of ones

the size of four decks of playing cards. He put it away. "But you ain't got nothing to worry about. This is your first time? You're gonna walk. I've been arrested over a hundred fifty times. I walk every time on these little bullshit misdemeanors."

"What you bend the cards?" asked a kid across the room. "That's my hustle." He smiled.

"Naw, I don't bend them shits. I don't fuck with bent cards. Shit is a felony. Naw, they must've been watching me. Caught me as I was leaving the station, they ran up on me. I put my hands up and stood against the wall. These cops'll shoot a nigga quick. I ain't getting shot over no damn MetroCards."

"You know?"

"Anyway, that's it for me. I'm done with this shit."

"Right on. I feel that. What goes around comes around," said the guy with dreads. "I don't hustle at all man. I don't steal, none of that. The shit comes back to you. God sees what you're doing."

"Yeah," said the guy sitting next to me, "but sometimes bad shit keeps happening to good people. I don't see nothing wrong with stealing from a big company. Fuck them, man. They're already stealing from me. You know what I mean? I got busted knocking off a Duane Reade, man. Fuck Duane Reade."

"Those shits are getting hit hardcore. Motherfuckers are killing Duane Reade out there," the kid across the room laughed.

"Okay," said the guy with dreads. "I feel you there. These companies are stealing from us. But does that mean you stoop down to their level? Like I said, God sees what you're doing. You get your reward in the end. One time, I seen these jeans I wanted to buy up in Midtown. Them shits was sixty dollars. I was like, damn. Mad as a motherfucker, stomping around, making the earth shake and shit. You know? Walked down the block and found a hundred twenty bucks right there. Paid me back for them jeans and gave me sixty to boot. I'd thought about snatching them shits, but I didn't. You feel me?"

"Sure, man. But you know that doesn't always happen. Some people struggle their whole lives, good people, and die broke."

"That's what I'm talking about. Life is a struggle. Look at all us sorry motherfuckers. Can't one person in here say this life is easy. It's like coming through the womb. You push and struggle, push and struggle for nine long months. But at the end of that struggle, there's life."

"Being broke ain't living. No one's happy dead broke."

“See that’s what’s fucking you up. Being happy isn’t having money, man. Motherfuckers rich as shit, miserable as hell. You keep that mentality you gonna keep coming back to the same dead end.”

“Yeah, well. Nothing sucks like not being able to make ends meet.”

“I respect all that morality shit, man. But I gotta call you out on it,” said the bald headed guy. “I mean, you’re sitting in the park reading *Iceberg Slim*. So, what is you a pimp?”

“You goddamn right.”

“And you think preying on women is okay.”

“If they consent to whatever, man, they consent to whatever.”

“Taking they money and sleeping around and calling them hoes and all that.”

“So long as you don’t force shit. And I’m not into that pimp shit where niggas be hitting women and shit.”

“So, say it’s your sister. And I’m pimping her. And she’s giving me her money. And she’s giving up that ass. All that shit. All by her choice. That’s okay?”

“All I could say to her is,” and the guy with dreads throws a condom down on the floor. “Be careful out there.”

“Well, if that’s really how you feel, I guess that’s you and I respect that. But that’s not how I get down, and I don’t starve for nobody.”

As they were talking people were being called out of the room to speak with an attorney. The attorney explained what their charges meant, and what the court had decided the proper punishment would be. As people went in and came back into the room, they’d talk about challenging their bids upstairs with the judge, but everyone knew that would just end up more hassle than it was worth.

They came in and called the guy with dreads. When he came back in he said they’d given him a day of community service to be served that day. “I ain’t doing that shit,” he said. “My first chance, man, I’m gone.”

When it came time to get the junky the officer had to call his name several times. “Someone shake him,” said the guy next to me. “I ain’t touching that motherfucker.” Another person came around and gave him a nudge with his foot. The junky shot up. “Huh?” “Yo, man, they’re calling you.” “Oh, oh, okay.”

Once he was out the door we all started laughing. “Yo, that motherfucker was off in fucking *Alabama* or some shit. He was gone as a motherfucker.”

When they called the guy sitting next to me, he was gone for a good ten minutes, which was a

relatively long time. When he came back in the room he slumped onto the bench, put his hands in his head and said, “I’m not going to Rikers. Thank God, I’m not going to Rikers.”

“Upstate or some shit?” asked the bald guy.

“Yeah, probably.”

They called me next. I went out and sat down in an adjacent room with the attorney.

“They have you for theft of MTA service. How do you plead?”

“Guilty.”

“Why did you do it?”

“I didn’t have any money.”

“Do you work?”

“Yes.”

“So why didn’t you have any money?”

“It happens.”

“Well, I have good news and bad news,” she said. “Which do you want first?”

“Whichever.”

“The good news is your case is dismissed in six months. It’s completely off your record.”

“Okay.”

“The bad news is that you have to do a day of community service.”

“I won’t do it until the weekend.”

“Well, that’s something you’ll have to discuss with them upstairs.”

“Okay.”

And that was that. They took me back to the room.

M. leaned forward as I was coming in. “So what happened?”

“They gave me the same shit as G.” I said, nodding towards the guy with dreads. “I have to do a day of community service.”

“What did you do?” asked G.

“I went through the gate at Grand Central without paying.”

G laughed. “I almost did that same shit the other day, you know that? I was stepping to the gate, and some cat walks up on me, and says, ‘hey brother, you don’t want to go through that gate.’ At first, you know I can be stubborn as a motherfucker, I’m like, hah! Not go through that gate. Who the fuck are you? But then I thought about it. Like, what does this motherfucker know? So I stepped off it and bought my little MetroCard. You know when someone comes up to you like that they must know something.”

“Wish he was around for me last night,” I said.

We laughed.

“Well, that’s the thing about being locked up. All us sorry motherfuckers. No one is better than the next cat. Everybody’s locked up, same predicament. You can’t get to stepping and

neither can the next guy. Great equalizer shit, like death.”

The police opened the door and called the names of everyone who’d already been to see the attorney. We were led up a flight of stairs into a courtroom. We sat on a bench and waited as one by one they called our names. When your name was called, you stood up, were read what you did and how you plead, and sentenced. It was all finished in about fifteen minutes. From there we were led upstairs to another room. This was the final step of the process. It’s where they completed the paperwork and told you when you had to complete your community service, sentence, etc... The lady asked me when I wanted to do my community service and I said Saturday. It wasn’t a problem. M. got the same bid, Saturday shit. Walking out, he said, “let’s grab a cab and get our stuff from the Union Square precinct.”

“Sounds good to me.”

It felt good to walk out of that building free. It was a cold cloudy day, but it didn’t matter. We hailed a cab on Eighth Avenue. M. said, “I can say this for sure. That shit has changed me. I didn’t hate police before, but I fucking *hate* them now.”

“Yeah,” I said. “I know how you feel.”

We were quiet for a while.

“So you gonna tell your work what happened?” I asked him.

“Hell no. This shit has messed me up for work for the rest of the week. I don’t even want to see my girl. I just need to be alone.”

“Of course you want to see your girl, man,” I said. “That’s the first thing you should do.”

“You don’t understand,” he said. “Nothing like this has happened to me before. It was

absolutely humiliating. I don’t even know if I can talk about it. With anyone. I don’t know how to deal with it myself.”

“Yeah,” I said.

M. had a point, though. When I first got arrested I’d been thinking of it as romantic and heroic and shit, but that was ridiculous. There was nothing romantic about spending the night in that box. The cell had become familiar over the evening, and it was a familiarity that would stay with me. There’s nothing you can say to those bars to dispel the isolation and humiliation of being locked up like an animal. There’s no way you can get out of that prison, and being locked in that prison locks you in your head and locks the experience in your heart. G. said life is a struggle, like coming out of the womb, and Dostoevsky said life begins on the other side of suffering, and maybe all that’s true, but I don’t know. The problem is how do you go about the business of living when you’re haunted?

There were no problems with getting our stuff back from the station. The cops stole my Discman batteries, but I figured they were bound to walk off with something and it might as well be that. M. and I shook hands before heading off on the train. “See you Saturday, man. It won’t be so bad. Go there, talk some shit, goof around and be done with it.”

“I’m gonna be miserable,” he said.

“Yeah, me too.”

We laughed.

A Moment Among Others

Brian Seabolt



There is the matter, first, of whether he is late, and although he sees that he is not late he feels certain that he is, so he pauses before knocking and waits for this feeling to subside. Already he is framing answers to whatever the one on the other side of the door will wish to ask him. But the answers which he settles on, lacking origins, only trail off. He believes that if he were authentically prepared he would produce both questions and answers in advance. The strength of his answers would seem even to bring the questions into existence. Earlier (while dressing) he composed an informal list of answers to whatever he believed he may be asked, but now that he is here he feels sure that this fraudulent preparedness shows in his face, and he wonders if he might be punished for it by having those questions answered for him before he has been given time to speak, finding himself necessarily, then, without answers. Preparedness might involve clearing his mind of all questions and answers, leaving a spotless and seemingly infinite terrain for viable conference.

Even when he knocks he feels sure that he is late, although he is not—he is early, something which he has every reason to believe. He is at once called inside by a voice which he will find to be different from that which he will hear once he has entered and closed the door behind him. Inside there is a small leather chair, which he takes. The answers he struggles to frame in his mind have become reduced to noises. Occasionally some of these noises will seem to contain an anticipation which he must believe could redeem him.

But when the other speaks, it is as though all traces of questions and answers have already annihilated one another. He is sure that this is a deliberate trick. There was an occasion—too long ago to be sure of—when he employed the same—or a similar—feint. And although he no longer remembers he is certain now that he must have enjoyed the same unease in another which he now finds in himself. But part of the performance, he feels sure, must be in maintaining a perfect opacity in his features. The one behind the desk speaks with a calm that nearly makes him shudder. The longer the trick goes unexposed the more potency it accrues—but if he were to point a finger at the other and accuse him he would feel the despair of those unformed answers, all at once, and then the questions would surely begin to come forth, impenetrable and seemingly infinite. He tries for a few seconds to imagine another time—a time in which he might be able to address these things to the other, and by then a sense of humor will as though have found itself. But for now this

is something worse than conjecture. Even an hour from now all of these possibilities will have found their way to certainties, however dull. And the pressure of questions which have not been posed and answers which have not been offered will have vanished. But if he thinks of this now for more than these fleeting seconds, it will take him the remainder of the interval to regain his pace. And all the while the other—the one behind the desk—is speaking. Every so often he refers to a sheet of paper, holding it outward or pointing with a fountain pen to a particular line or column. Soon the telephone rings, seven or eight times. There are still neither questions nor—even less so—answers. All of this speech will have to remain like silence until the penetration of at least a single question—then it will be as though those words had suddenly appeared, as though having pushed themselves up headfirst out of snow. When not speaking aloud, the other forms words on another sheet of paper, and even these are, for now, nearly invisible. He finds this to be so intolerable that he cannot resist rising from the chair—now he will make an effort to pretend, without speaking, that he had never sat down at all. But when he looks at the chair it is as if he sees himself sitting in it. And he cannot be sure that the other does not after all direct that inaudible speech toward the chair.

All of this must mean that the anguish he felt before, regarding questions and whatever answers could ever be put to them, no longer has a place; but he feels no relief, in part because the absence leaves him with no sense of what might come to replace it, in part—and maybe moreover—because he knows even now that the questions will come in their time, and he is less in a position now than ever before to invent appropriate replies. Now he finds himself missing the former quandary, because it was, however impossible to resolve or circumnavigate, at any rate relatively clear. The only course now would be to will every element of the situation to come apart, himself last of all. What he requires is an absolute beginning, one unqualified by any trace of endings. He will—again only by force of will—need to stretch this interval into an eternity which could hold so minuscule a moment. This will have to be how to forget. Every piece of advice he has ever been offered—whether taken or not—seems to hover now, just out of reach. This is the instant he will need to maintain, until all of the jointures of the hours before and after have eased and allowed him space simply to stand up, brush off his knees, and walk away calmly, unmindful of anything.

For a while all of his thoughts are of this dismantling. The one behind the desk talks on and

on, folding and unfolding pages from a file. Chances are the sun has moved noticeably in the sky. In no time he has forgotten the chair and the notion of answering questions has disappeared, though there is not very much relief in it. If any of this succeeds he will know because it will have led him to an unmistakable pause. And his belief in these things seems to have its proof in the fact that the one behind the desk has not asked a single question. The truth is that for the first time he is afraid of relief, something which he is certain exists like the rudiments of a language which is no longer spoken. In the midst of all of this he feels a profound desire to take pen and paper and begin writing out anything at all—he is even sure that the other would fail to detect it, but there is something else standing in his way—because he thinks this must be the only form of himself still worthy of manifestation: his questionable handwriting. But he cannot be sure that no trace of pretense—an inevitable result of the manner of fear he feels now—would find its way into that script, and even the slightest trace would alert the other at once. So he stands still.

He suspects that these things have forced into existence another moment, one in which he is feverish to accomplish what might—with luck—leave room enough for this moment to complete itself. He hopes to borrow some discipline from the other moment. It may be helpful to him to think of what may be happening outside—two people who have stopped on the sidewalk, because one of them recognized the other, and who are now laughing together as though all of it had been planned. But it's the part of him which despairs at how little he could ever know about these people, even if they did exist (and they do not), that threatens to bring him right back where he began—with unspoken questions and his obligation to answer. He considers such a danger embarrassing. If he were to seize pen and paper now, there would be not only the principal desire to assert himself—more dramatically, there would be the effort (irresistible, once begun) to catch up with the things which he might have written already had he begun when the thought first occurred to him. And this strikes him as a game hardly worth playing—but, again, if he fails to forget the idea completely there will probably be consequences. Chances are the pressure will become a sort of gravity which will prevent any movement away from that which frightens him now. He is making a renewed effort not to think of the two figures who might be outside the building, and the worst way to make the effort is to remind himself that there is surely no one there.

He cannot exit through the door he used for entry—he'll have to follow his own frantic inertia until he has worked his way authentically out of this, into another, more tolerable stillness.

While he is thinking of these things he begins to wonder—indistinctly at first—if the questions may in fact already have come, that his patent unawareness of those questions may very easily have been taken for answers. And if this has been the case he has an additional problem: to ascertain what answers his silence may have seemed to provide. There may presumably be another silence which he might—if only he knew what it was—manipulate in such a way as to force the other to disclose that information in detail. There may be no sense thinking of that now. Nevertheless, there could be no reasonable possibility of speaking—every word would ricochet until the room and the entire moment were filled with unintelligible groans and exclamations. And all of these would belong to him. His words would amount to a kind of audible scribbling. No doubt the other would apply—as though by force—whatever organization to the words, but this would surely be most inexcusable of all. The goal now is to maintain a particular silence which will keep speech unnecessary. A single word from him now would be more silent than a thousand hours of sleep.

But also while he is thinking of these things, his left arm becomes detached at the shoulder and falls through his sleeve. The one behind the desk has stopped speaking and watches the arm as it strikes the floor. There follows a different kind of silence, something more total and intolerable. He crouches and picks up the arm in his right hand. Without looking up he begins to work the arm, shoulder-end first, through the cuffs of his shirt and jacket. The other becomes annoyed and says that he had better unbutton his shirt or else he'll never get the thing attached again. And so he lays the arm on the face of the desk—the other disapproves, so he moves it to the seat of the leather chair—and carefully unbuttons the front of his shirt. When the arm has been restored and he is dressed again he smiles as though to encourage the other to continue where he left off. Once again, questions and answers hover behind something, and although their natures—their particularities—remain hidden, they work on the moment with a different potency. It seems likely to him now that he is sweating. He touches his brow and is surprised to find it completely dry. Likewise, when he glances for the first time at a small clock on the corner of the desk he realizes even now that he is early, although nothing could

make him feel more late. A part of him tries to believe, or to pretend, that the clock could be running backwards. But he finds this for the most part too easy, too much—as so many things already should have been—to concede to himself. And he is all but certain now that the questions he dreads will remain implicit.

If the other is arrogant, it is because the perfection of his phrases precedes anything that he might be saying or trying to say—and by now he is likely to be saying almost nothing. Evidently he has long ago won his own battle against the void behind his arsenal of language—he has, by speaking, projected himself to a place where he can hear nothing except his own dumb insistence. He has won the right to allow changes—if they come—to determine their own natures, and he was won the privilege not to care. This may even be why he feels safe with a clock that tells nothing but lies.

The two figures outside the building would undoubtedly be women, and as he thinks of it more carefully he comes to assume that they are still in their late teens. One of them pretends to console the other, who is pretending to need consolation. It is a perfect game, and they hope they will be able to go on playing it forever. If they move closer and begin to embrace each other, it is really because they don't know how to embrace themselves. But they will not think of this, or else it will come to feel like a sickness. For a moment, though they don't know it, both are thinking the same thing: they are desperately hoping that the telephone does not ring.

So now the encounter has become something different—the speech of the other has succeeded in burying every trace of the initial possibility. He would like to admit to himself that this is something for which he would never have come. And the arrogance which seemed moments ago so quickly explained turns out to be a theft. The other has not begun to answer these questions because they have not begun to be asked. He must be secretly terrified that they will be asked—but again his thoughts begin to seem unlikely, if not gratuitous. He cannot remember at what point he made the ridiculous mistake of believing he could take ownership of the things he feared by putting them in deliberate arrangements. He would be only a little more surprised to discover that he has succeeded in doing the opposite, and even then only by virtue of the propensity of opposites to present themselves as identical. It would be better now to have something to ask the other—and it excites him to think of liquidating those too easy conclusions from a moment ago. But, if any

questions remain, they have come to conceal themselves behind the guise of certain answers. He would be no more at a loss trying to return an infant bird to its shattered egg.

He does not wish to acknowledge that his anguish would be quieted if he could begin to believe that all of his actions and the other's were the unfolding of something written out by an indifferent intelligence. There would be relief in the uneasy sense of being the physical and living manifestation of sentences. The logic of sentences would bear down like the epitome of indifference. But—again—he does not wish to admit this, even if he is forced to wonder, even somewhat consciously, how it could possibly matter less. And he would feel no reluctance if he could put his hands on the notion that the elements of these things do not really belong to him. Things of this order either do or do not belong to the one affected most by them. Nothing could unmake the ink of sentences except the refusal to own them. But, when he considers how remote such a possibility could be said to be now, what he feels most acutely is a particular guilt. He does not feel sorry for himself, nor does he feel sorry for the other, who has for some time been going through the minute details of what appear to be very old documents. All of the questions that seemed imminent seconds before the discussion began have dissolved in the impossibility of their answers, a mutual suicide of insensible forestalled accidents. And his new longing takes the form of a complete thought, if not itself a sentence. What would rescue him—the only thing that might rescue him now—would be the certainty that this was, after all, *a moment among other moments* and nothing more. A circumstance like that would no doubt reduce even the other to a byproduct of the recent past. For the first time since coming to this place he can nearly identify the void around which he would like to wrap his arms forever. It also seems likely that what, above all, appealed to him in the notion of being the living manifestation of something written was the eventuality of the ink flowing, finally, out of the pen, bringing this sham of being to a halt.

Once again he feels an indistinct disturbance within himself, and both his right arm and his left leg become detached at the points where they meet the torso. The leg begins to slide down his pant-leg, but he catches his balance with his right leg and clutches the loose thing in the fingers of his remaining hand. The loose arm, however, falls summarily through the sleeve and lands sideways against the base of the abandoned leather chair. For several seconds he leaves the fallen arm

where it landed and shifts his weight in all directions in order, he hopes, to reattach the loose thigh. As before, the one behind the desk is neither amused nor sympathetic. In a while the leg seems to have reattached itself, but he has no time to begin to react when the other leg—the right—becomes detached in exactly the same place. This time he is unable to prevent the lost limb from falling through the pant-leg, and in a moment the leg lies beside the arm. The other shakes his head—he can see that the man is helpless—and rises from behind the desk to assist. It takes only a short time for both of them to return the limbs to their original positions. He wants to apologize, but he cannot, because just as he begins to speak his entire face falls to the floor in pieces. Now the other is disgusted—he returns the eyes, nose, cheeks and mouth to their regular places, and then instead of reattaching the chin he slips it, a little

smugly, into a breast pocket, explaining that he will have to keep this trifle for himself. It is not immediately clear how sorely he is likely to miss his chin. The two women outside must have gone away by now, though in a short time he feels sure that they have not. They are no longer embracing—it seems possible that they now stand facing opposite directions, both wishing silently that there could be others to talk to, through whom to justify what they now admit to be their unremarkable disinterest in one another. And the more disinterested they are the more identical they become, moment by moment, until they are forced to turn around again, and they both wish to collapse in unbridled laughter, because they realize that they have taken part in something which their absolute importance there would not allow them to see.