

TO EAT THE WORLD

A Novel by Gary J Byrnes

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For Bernadette

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The rich rule over the poor, and the borrower is slave to the lender.

The Bible, Proverbs 22:7 (New International Version)

MICHAELIS NO-
STRADAML

Deß Weiberü-

mbten / Hoherfarnen /

Philosophi / Astrologi / vnd Medi-

ci / zwey Bücher / darinn warhafftiger / gründelich-

er / vnd vollkommer bericht gegeben wirt / wie

man erstlich einen ungestalten leib / an Weib vnd

Manns personen außwendig zieren / schön / vnd

junggeschaffen machen / vnd allerley wolriechen-

de / köstliche / freystige wasser / pulser / öl / seyffen /

rauchferglin / bisamfluglen / zü mancherley gebres-

chen dienstlich / artlich zubereyten. Vnd wie man

folgens allerley frucht auff das künstlichest / vnd

lieblichest / in zucker einmachen / vnd zur notturfft

auff behalten soll. Erstlich in Französischer sprach

von ihme beschrieben: Nun aber / unserem Vatters-

landt zü gütem / in das gemain Teutsch auff das

erwöllichst verdolmetscht / durch Hieremiam

Martium / bestelten Doctorn der

Arzney zü Augspurg.

Mit Röm. Kay. May. freyheit /
mit nach zutrucken.

M. D. LXXII.

TO EAT THE WORLD

PROLOGUE

GAASTERLAND, THE NETHERLANDS

Friday, 4 May, 1945

The taste of fear lurked at the back of his throat, acidic, nauseating. *I'm gonna throw up if they don't come soon.* He tasted blood then, from a chewed-up cheek. His watch glowed faintly, almost midnight.

The forest rested. The smell of the hot day lingered, Scots pine and marigold. Three men lay on the blue-green needles. They chewed Wrigley's Spearmint gum, but their mouths still felt dry.

A distant rumbling then, the low growl of a massive diesel engine, a beast in the dark. Major Kieran Johnson gripped his submachine gun tighter, knuckles blue white, pressed his body deeper into the soft ground, twenty yards up the low hill from the trail. There was a moonlit view to the south, a negative of a sunny day, something better than this. He looked to his right, nodded at his two best men. Brown also had a grease gun, Williams held the handle on the box that would detonate the shaped charge of twenty pounds of Explosive "D", enough to level a half acre. Certainly enough to destroy their target.

A ball of sweat fell from the tip of the major's nose. An animal scratched the ground nearby. Maybe a fox.

'Here they come.'

The dark shape of a German jeep appeared on the trail, its red, slitted headlights throwing just enough light to show the way, but not enough to attract the attention of any prowling Allied night fighters. The jeep travelled slowly. But that rumble didn't fit.

'There!'

An enormous silhouette appeared, keeping in the jeep's tracks. It was the command vehicle, followed by a heavy tractor, which towed the Meillerwagen, upon which sat the prize, a V-2, vengeance weapon. The world's first long-range ballistic missile, olive green, forty-five feet long and fitted with a two thousand pound high explosive warhead. The hairs on the major's neck stood up. What a piece of work is man!

The V-2s had shattered London and the Nazis were desperate to throw as many as possible across the Channel in the war's final fury. Germany would sign the surrender any day now, any minute, Hitler allegedly already dead. This launch was pure vengeance: the utter, depraved madness of a regime that had come terrifyingly close to ruling the world with missiles and tanks and a terrifyingly effective propaganda machine.

But a specialist US Army team was ready to stop this bastard in its tracks. Major Johnson had been assigned to a unit with a special focus on Nazi technology. So he saw the V-2 as both terrifying and amazing. After the surrender, the race would be on to secure V-2s in their bases, keep the Russians away and get the rockets back to the States. After. For now, they had to be destroyed.

The rocket was followed by its vital support vehicles, including the fuel wagon and the liquid oxygen tanker.

A sudden change in noise levels. Engines idling, turning off.

‘Shit, Major,’ was whispered. ‘They’ve stopped.’

‘Are they in range of our charge, Jimmy?’

‘Not a chance, sir. We’d scorch the paint on the jeep in front, but that’s it.’

You’re supposed to keep driving! To the clearing a mile down the road where our reconnaissance flights spotted the scorch marks.

Human shapes emerged from the vehicles and orders were barked in German. *Begin fuelling.* The major didn’t need to have too much of the language. *We’ve got just under two hours until launch. Shit.*

The fox ambled up the road, froze when she saw the Nazis.

A cranking, ratcheting, click-clicking noise and the fox was gone. The rocket trailer lifted its load into vertical launch position.

His men looked at him, waited.

A security detachment fanned out from the convoy. Waffen-SS, the worst fuckers that ever pulled on a uniform. *Coming our way.*

‘When these guys get in the firing line, blow the charge. Then we get to the convoy, use our guns and grenades to hit the tankers. Just stay in the treeline. Escape plan remains as is. Got that?’

Both men nodded.

Three storm troopers came.

They reached a rock that had been positioned as a visual marker.

The fox called. It sounded like a laugh.

German heads turned and night became day.

GRONAU, GERMANY

Two days later

The still air vibrated gently as a thousand cannon fired, far away to the east. A brilliantly bright and hot day. With Berlin surrounded and the surrender being signed, literally at that moment, the Third Reich was done.

A rusty aircraft hangar, a dozen thin men in shabby suits smoking inside, down the back, beside crates of 500 kg bombs and the Messerschmitt Me 262 jet bomber, the Swallow. The plane, one of Hitler’s desperate secret weapons, was like a shark out of water.

Nerves jangled, some nervous chatter. Each of the scientists had a leather briefcase and a bulging suitcase. But one stood alone, in the deepest shadows. Beside him, a beaten trunk.

The platoon of US Marines sat on aircraft part crates just inside the gaping door. They smoked and drank Coke. They had the easy manner of soldiers on the winning side, far from the front line.

An RAF Dakota came in to land, buzzed back up the runway and stopped at the hangar. The soldiers snapped to attention as a major left the plane, followed by his aide, who carried a bunch of papers, and two been-through-it-all soldiers with sidearms and stubble.

The major’s left arm was in a sling, some dark blood peeking through. Nazi lead. He was grateful for his wound in a selfish way. It meant that he missed out on the camps. News had begun to filter through. Literally mountains of emaciated bodies. Instead of all that, he was on babysitting duty, heading home.

He walked to the jet fighter. The major caressed the sky grey underside of the jet, noted the Edelweiss squadron badge.

‘Good Jesus. That was close, Jimmy.’

'It sure is one nasty-looking motherfucker. Sir.'

They were distinctly aware of the plane's importance.

Then they noticed the men.

The German rocket scientists came out of the shadows. The C-47's arrival had delivered their salvation. There would be no Russian gulags - or worse - for them. They allowed themselves careful smiles.

Crickets chirped in the yellow grass.

'Which of you worked on this beauty?' the Major asked.

Three of the Germans came forward.

'I worked on the engines,' said one.

'I designed the airframe.'

'I did some wind tunnel work, aerodynamics.'

The major nodded, happy that he would bring home the men who would give America global military dominance for half a century to come. 'So why didn't you succeed?'

One of the three said 'Because our Führer is insane. Instead of using the 262 to decimate your B-17 bombers, he decided to slow it down with bombs so any Mustang pilot could knock it out of the sky.'

'Correct,' said the Major. 'Technology is useless without tactics. Remember that.'

One of them would.

The major drank a cold Coke and set up at a trestle table, just inside the hangar door. He called the German scientists forward, one at a time. He checked their credentials against the details that had been painstakingly collated in individual folders, then took a new profile page from his aide and paperclipped it to the front of each file. *You are no longer Nazi. You are reborn, cleansed, new. Now help us to build our missile forces so that we may rule the world in your stead.*

The second last man came forward, dragging his trunk.

The major checked his file, clipped the new data sheet to the front of the folder.

'No luggage, you knew that, Dr Heim.'

'If the Major will permit me,' said Dr Death, making a lid-opening gesture.

The major nodded, looked at his wristwatch.

Dr Death opened the case. *What might have been?* Inside were dozens of paintings and original prints, flat and in rolls, as well as some small trinket boxes. And hidden blueprints, for the reactor that would spin lead into gold. He took a box, opened it, showed the pearl necklace to the major. Then he rifled through the art, grunted at a scene of moonlight on the sea, pulled out a canvas that looked like it had lain on the floor of a drunken artist's studio for a couple of busy months.

'Please,' said the German, 'a gift. Which would you like?'

'This,' he said, pointing, 'this isn't art. But I like the look of those pearls. They real?'

'Of course, quite natural. Gold detailing, too. Very expensive. Please take them for your wife, your sweetheart. A nice souvenir from this terrible war, yes?'

'And show me that little picture there. I like that.'

'By Cézanne. The master. Are you sure?' Hesitation. He loved that painting.

'I think my wife would like it.'

'Here, take it.'

The major folded it into his big combat jacket hip pocket, in with some loose .45 inch bullets, a crumpled pack of Lucky Strikes and his diary.

'Okay. Get your trunk on board. We're going to New York.'

So Dr Death put the Jackson Pollock painting, *Composition with Pouring 1*, back with the

other works and boarded the Dakota, ready to corner the American art market.

The final German offered his identification papers.

The major looked at him, saw the sweat on his forehead. It's hot. But...

'Jimmy, where are the mugshots?'

'Here, sir,' passing a folder.

The shuffling of papers as the Dakota's twin Pratt & Whitney engines thundered back to life.

The picture matched. Jimmy saw it, released his Colt .45's safety catch.

'Erich? You worked at Mauthausen?'

'If the major will permit me, I have some very important blueprints...'

Major Johnson stood up from the table, took a step back. The beat of the plane engines went up a pitch. He looked at Jimmy. Jimmy shot the German twice in the face. When he was on the ground, he got another bullet in the back of his head.

It was the easiest way to deal with a complicated situation.

Pale faces at windows.

Johnson gathered up the German's papers, said 'Let's get the hell out of here. I need New York.'

The major sat in the cockpit, enjoyed the smell of jetfuel and hydraulic fluid, the sight of an experienced pilot nursing the sweet beast into the air, the thrum of the twin propellers, the cup of coffee sitting, deliberately, behind the controls. The adjustment of power, the tapping of the throttles until the engines were in complete unison, the ripples dancing across the coffee, echoing the perfect harmonics, the beat becoming a hymn and the aircraft and its passengers leaving mainland Europe forever, lifting comfortably into a perfect, hopeful sky.

FORT LAUDERDALE, USA

Thursday, December 1, 1955

The talk in the veterans' bars on East Las Olas Boulevard was all *nigger this* and *nigger that*. Some black lady had refused to give up her seat on the bus to a white man. That was up in Alabama. Montgomery. Indignation. *Why can't some people just keep in their place?*

The lady's name was Rosa Parks.

'You fought in Korea, Kieran. Which is lowest, gooks or niggers?'

Major Kieran Johnson (retired) looked up from his Pabst. Just the thought of Korea made his right knee ache. 'Lowest, eh? The lowest form of human being I ever did meet was the common or garden Nazi. And you know the funny thing about Nazis?'

'Huh?'

'They're as white as we are. Whiter even than a lot of good men who fought and died beside me.' *I really don't want to go into that bad place tonight.* 'And with that, gentlemen, I bid you *adieu*.'

He walked east on the boulevard, towards the Atlantic. *Might loosen up my knee.* It was a perfect night, quiet, just a couple of cars pattering by, one or two couples on their way home from the movies. Oddly, the moon brought him back to that night in the Dutch forest. He rubbed his arm, the shattered ulna that had brought him south.

He lifted his collar against the oh-so-gentle December chill, dug his hands into the deep pockets of his overcoat. Over the lagoon bridge and there lay the sea ahead, shining silver. It reminded him of a painting, but he couldn't remember which.

His knee had eased up a little. *Fucking Korea.* Just a few years' worth of jet and rocket

technology, developed by all sides from the spoils of a shattered Germany, had taken war to a whole new level of madness and horror. *What will the next war be like?* He shuddered at the idea of it.

He reached the sidewalk at the edge of the beach and turned right, south towards Miami.

It was like a storm was starting to whip up, out there in the dark blue.

Nobody around. Just how he liked it. The problem with people was, well, people.

A man walked towards him, held his hat against the building wind.

As he passed, a flicker of recognition.

‘Major?’ A European accent, no j.

Kieran stopped and turned. He twisted his knee a little, felt that jabbing shrapnel again.

Trying to tell me something?

The man came towards him, his hand extended. ‘I’m Doctor Heim, Aribert Heim. You helped me escape from Germany after the war.’

Paperclip. ‘Oh? Yeah.’ They shook hands. ‘How are you liking the land of the free?’

‘Oh, it’s wonderful. The love of art among the rich here. And so many rich! Do you remember the painting I gave you? Where is that I wonder?’

‘That little thing? It’s hanging in my living room.’

‘At home? Good. Good. Major, can I buy you a drink? For old time’s sake?’

‘Thank you, no. I need to get along.’

The man rummaged in his pocket. ‘Then this?’

The major didn’t have time to react. The needle pierced his arm and he collapsed heavily onto the cold white sand.

ONE

NEW YORK CITY, USA

Today

Speeding, spinning hearts. Thumping as a glorious, bloody chorus. Can you *feel* it? Faster again, building to some kind of crescendo. So these were as one, connected by dizzy madness. One point six million more beating out there on that tiny and wild and scared and suffering island, once the calm home of the Lenape Indians who smoked a peace pipe with strangers and the game was up. The Dutch took it, called it New Amsterdam. The British renamed it New York, finally losing it to the New Americans and the beat, the beat it made would shake the planet. Another heart in this drama, Manhattan the nervous ultimate.

The Butcher was excited. This was why he did it. The sly thrill, the adrenaline, the aching heart, pulsing blood, tingling palms. He needed this to feel alive. He knew it was wrong, sick, that he should be locked away in a mental institution, put down, even. He knew this yet he still committed the acts. *Truly, this is the definition of beyond crazy.* He stared at himself in the bathroom mirror, eventually decided that he liked what he saw, smiled.

'I'm coming, sweetheart,' he called over his shoulder.

He admired the ornate mirror, with its blemished reflection.

He washed his hands again, checked his fingernails. He pulled on a pair of non-latex surgical gloves, flexed his fingers. He selected the required items from the tray of surgical equipment, left the bathroom and marched down the brightly-lit corridor, with its early Pollock, dripping red and green and black and white, and its Picasso litho print, *Head of a Young Boy* from 1945. The living room was dark, dominated by a wall of window, the office towers and hotels of downtown Manhattan shimmering in the dying light, 1 WTC's angled planes ablaze. The silhouette of a girl tied to a chair, back-lit by the loathed, hating, fighting, conspiring city. He glanced at the clock, one of those old French designs, and saw that it was time.

Once you listened for it, its low tick filled the room.

He found the leader for the intravenous drip tube and jabbed it into her forearm. She recoiled, her eyes pleading, her mouth silenced by the gag. The drug - propofol - had an instant effect and she slumped forward. From now on, everything was timed to the minute. This was what his heart craved. She slept soundly, twitching gently like a newborn.

He took her hand in his and made the first incision.

Sophie cursed, but under her breath. She wasn't the kind of chef that gloried in foul language, bullying or ego. It was about the food, not about her. But, Jesus, the Speaker of the House of Representatives is out there and he's waiting for his pesto chicken á l'orange and what's with the oven? *The oven!*

Basil and citrus took their vows and began a beautiful, if short, life together.

‘Timing and communication, Carl! Can you give me an ETA on the mains for table four? What's wrong with that damned oven?’

Carl knew not to do a visual, not to open the oven door. That would cost an extra two minutes’ cooking time. He calculated from experience that they would be ready in three minutes. He also knew that his boss knew. She was just venting. But he would still get the oven temps checked tomorrow.

Three hundred and sixty degrees Fahrenheit - a *hot* 360 - same temperature as a match igniting.

‘Three minutes, chef.’ *Just don’t fucking burn it!*

‘Will they be perfect, Carl?’

‘Yes, chef,’ he said, wiping his sweaty forehead with a filthy-looking towel from over his shoulder. *Yes, chef. Your recipe always turns out perfectly. The congressman adores it, as do many more of the richest one percent of the city.*

The food would be great, she knew this, but still she fretted, needed the approval that only a clean plate could deliver and her heart, her heart.

‘How are the sides doing, Carl?’

‘We’re there, chef,’ he replied, a bead of his sweat falling, as if in slow motion, onto the vast, bubbling potato gratin dish as he raised it from another oven. The bowls of salad were all set and the broccoli was just gone into the steamer. The broccoli could not be overcooked, that was a sin. Contrary to the Law of Sophie.

Sophie paced the kitchen at Oral Pleasures. She sucked on a stick of celery, fought the urge for a cigarette, made sure that every dish for every diner was perfect. She wondered what it was that drove chefs to seek approval so, to work sixteen hour days, to avoid the idea of life outside the kitchen, away from the brigade of chefs. *Did they all have love-free childhoods like mine?*

‘Table four?’

‘Ready, chef,’ said Carl as he carefully took the dishes from the oven, the cherry tomatoes pulsing, the reduced orange sauce honeymooning with the pesto, pulsing, bubbling, to fill the kitchen with the uniquely delicious aroma.

He stuck his index finger into the chicken. *One, t -, ow!* If you can’t reach three, the meat’s hot enough.

Sophie smiled, inhaled the buzz.

Better than sex? Depends on the lover.

She plated the dishes herself, using a cookie cutter to pick out a perfect disc of gratin, placing the moist, dripping chicken breast on top, arranging the broccoli florets and cherry tomatoes around the perimeter, pouring the zesty sauce over the top. Then she added a sprinkle of fine sea salt and a shower of roughly-chopped basil from the roof garden, freshest possible flavours. ‘What do the Chinese say, Carl?’

‘We eat with our eyes first, chef.’

The dishes were laid out under the hot lamps, all in a row.

‘Beautiful,’ said Sophie, going around the rims of the plates with her towel one more time. ‘Happy with everything, Carl?’

‘All good, chef.’

‘Happy to hear that. Because Sam doesn’t like surprises.’

Those microseconds of condensed thought, memories that always rested just there at the front

of his temporal lobe.

'Christ,' he thought. 'My heart can't take too much more of this.'

The room was hot and wet and the tension was visible across every face. For Jacob, time dilation had begun with the very first bid. The man with the gavel looked straight at him.

'Do I hear seven point one?'

Seven million and change for a bowl? Okay, it's a French tureen from the seventeenth thirties, made by Thomas Germain for the court of Louis XV. So it's a beautiful thing from a very different and unique time, with its delicate silver branches, each leaf exquisite, and its lid handle in the form of hounds bringing down a stag. But it's still a freaking soup bowl.

Jacob nodded. *Yes. I bid seven point one million dollars for the bowl.*

'I have seven point one. Do I have seven point two?'

The frozen stag, its scream petrified, looked to the ceiling for mercy.

Jacob's gaze roamed around the auction room, sought out the other bidders. Rich people spoke on phones, made mental calculations, wondered what their other halves would say if they went any further. *What about the economy?* The hesitancy stretched and Jacob could finally taste victory.

Seven point one. Bang. The auctioneer confirmed that the sale was done and that Jacob (or rather, Jacob's super-rich client in Shanghai) was now the proud owner of the bowl. So much money to be made in manufacturing the electronic junk that kept the hordes amused. Would the smartphones and games consoles be tomorrow's antiques? Hardly - there was simply too much of the damned tat. He looked around the room, almost every person tapping a glowing glass screen. *We are slaves to our gadgets.*

His iPhone purred. A message from the office about the article, the damned article.

Jacob's heart relaxed at the proximate reality of his one percent commission, but just a little. As he made his way through the crowded room, people smiled at him appreciatively, some in awe, thinking he was Bill Gates or somebody, with his casually immaculate suede jacket and slightly gawky grin. Spectacles too. Just as he reached the sales office, Sarah, his editorial assistant from the magazine - *Antique Guru* - appeared at his side. She was young, sharp-minded and, of course, shockingly beautiful, crammed into her charcoal grey suit. She made his forty-something heart skip a beat.

'Did you get everything?'

She held up her notebook. 'Every detail, every nuance. I'll type it up for you tomorrow.'

'Good. Sorry for being so obsessive. I just *need* records. I don't know exactly why.'

'Are you staying on after you've been through the formalities?' she asked.

'Well, I do have an interest, a personal interest, in a lot that's up soon.' He wanted to say that he was shattered, bone-weary, that late auctions were a chore and he so needed to get to bed. But he hoped -

'Feel like grabbing a drink downtown after?'

'Oh? Where were you thinking?'

'Bleecker Street. A friend's band is playing The Bitter End later.'

Giddy blood coursed through hardening arteries.

Later? It's nine thirty already!

'Sounds great. I used to love Bleecker Street.'

He resolved not to comment on the unnecessarily high music volume when they reached the bar. But that would be a big ask. *Always trying to act so young, it's going to get you into trouble one day. Not your fault dad got Alzheimer's at forty.*

First, a quick double espresso at the bar. Second, business. Back in the sales room, the loud murmurs dropped to a hush, then a gasp, as the white-gloved assistant held up a slim old

volume.

The auctioneer said ‘Ladies and gentlemen, we are delighted to offer an original work by the famed seer Michel de Nostradame. Published in 1555, the *Traite des Fardemens* is one his lesser works, containing a variety of beauty treatments and recipes, including his famed recipes for cherry jam which, I am told, has never been bettered. We will start the bidding at \$50,000 for what I’m sure you’ll agree is a fascinating piece of history, provenance assured.’

You’d be crazy to get involved, Jacob.

He grimaced at the high starting price, which was immediately accepted by a telephone bidder. It jumped, five grand at a time to seventy in under a minute. *Christ!* Jacob had made seventy-one thousand for winning the bowl and had some more money to spare. One hundred was the limit that he’d set himself, honestly not expecting the book to reach that level. *And remember the almost nine percent sales tax on top.* He had an overdraft facility of fifty thou at twelve percent, had been living off it, couple of lean months. Forty grand left to play with there. Bank was calling it in, two weeks away. Worry about it then. How would Jacob’s generation cope when the easy credit disappeared?

Best to just stay out this time.

At eighty thousand, he made his first bid. Blame the adrenaline.

The telephone bidder dropped out.

But a tall, blond woman in an implausibly white Chanel suit wanted the book.

Something about her.

Eighty-five.

Ninety.

Miss Chanel went to the hundred thousand.

Jacob gritted his teeth and went the extra five. Worst case, sell off my art.

Turned out she didn’t want the book so badly. *Christ. One-o-five. Call it one-fourteen, with taxes. Jesus. That’s it. I’m bust.* Sarah appeared at his side and squeezed his hand. Her cheeks were flushed.

‘Oh. My. God. That was so exciting! You did it!’

‘She almost had me,’ Jacob said, nodding towards Miss Chanel, who’d been staring at him.

‘She doesn’t look overly-happy.’

‘Jesus, I do need a drink now. Just let me finalise the transaction. You want to come back to the sales office?’

‘Can I? Wow,’ said Sarah, giddy like a nine-year-old.

As they walked towards the office, Jacob noticed the woman in the Chanel suit approaching. From a distance she was striking, up close she was as arresting as a Greek goddess, her physical presence preceded by the Sicilian lemon notes of her Annick Goutal perfume. There must be a statue of her somewhere, figured Jacob.

‘Mr Johnson?’

‘Yes?’ *My God, look at you.*

‘Might I have a word with you alone, please? It concerns some business that you may be interested in.’

Jacob would have taken time for her if she wanted to talk about paint drying. As it was, he had just created a fatal hole in his finances, so new business was a very good thing.

‘Of course,’ he said. ‘And your name?’

‘Julia,’ looking at Sarah.

‘This is my assistant, Sarah. Sarah, can I see you at the bar in a few minutes?’

Sarah, utterly professional, smiled and left.

‘Sorry about the book,’ said Jacob.
‘Forget the book. I just wanted to get your attention.’
‘Wow. Okay. You’ve got it,’ he said. *And cost me, what, twenty grand?*
‘Tell me, would like a taste of heaven?’
‘I don't think I know - . Ah. Yes. Yes I would.’
‘You understand?’
‘Goodies from the bottom of the Baltic?’
‘Exactly. So, that specific lot is being auctioned here next Monday and I need you to become a member of a bidding ring. I cannot, under any circumstances, lose the auction.’
Jacob appraised the woman again. ‘Isn’t a bidding ring illegal?’
‘Flat fee. Fifty k. Are you in?’
‘I’m in.’

Where was daddy?

‘Daddy?’ she cried feebly, but it didn't sound right. Like it was somebody else talking, a little kid maybe.

It was dark, but hazy lights swam into focus. They were outside. Through a window.

‘Mom?’

She felt weird, like her body was coated in something viscous, honey or maple syrup. *Where am I?* A dull pain in the back of her neck began to pulse through her body then, cut through the honey. She became aware of a tightness around her wrists and, yes, also around her ankles. She wriggled, but she couldn't move.

The tightness turned to discomfort and - what? - what was the sensation in her hand? It began to burn. Then, all at once, the morphine wore off and her heart jump-started back to a fast rhythm, the hurt and the panic consuming her. She wriggled her fingers, felt that honey again, sticky, piercing. A dizzying awareness that her little finger was gone. Gone.

She vomited an acrid bile but the gag in her mouth blocked its escape and she struggled and choked and cried and eventually swallowed it back down. Her tears were hot and salty and she could smell roasted meat then. Like pork or something.

A vague sizzle, a ticking clock.

Her wet eyes saw something else through the distorted darkness, the city half-light. A few yards away stood an old artist's easel, rich layers of burnt umber and raw sienna and sap green on cherry wood, and on it was a picture of her dad. An election poster from his successful congressional campaign.

‘Daddy?’

The heart monitor beeped lazily, as if saying *Are you sure you want me to bother?*

The man lay in a deep sleep, his skin grey and dry as a careless fish, out of water for days. He looked older than his ninety-seven years. Something to do with the quality of his life.

The only window was in the ceiling. The sky was cobalt blue, like a fine evening dress or a high summer's star-scattered midnight.

The art on the walls of his little room would be changed today.

‘I would like a Van Gogh,’ he muttered. ‘There, beside my favourite Cézanne.’

‘Of course, Doctor,’ she said, occupied.

The nurse fussed over his morning injection, placing the syringe of thick, pink liquid into the metering device. It had been prepared in the adjacent laboratory, a scientific wonderland of the most advanced machines on Earth, a chemist's candy store of elixirs, stem cells, poisons and explosives. He closed his eyes and thought about the past. Some would say that he'd led a bad life. But he didn't see it like that. There were so many good memories, such glowing achievements, tantalising glimpses of world-conquering success. *We so nearly had it all.* Then the collapse, the escape to America with the delicate planting of the story of the second life, first hiding in plain sight in Germany, then the escape to Egypt, the conversion to Islam and the death in 1992. Case closed.

That would have been your worst nightmare, America, a Nazi Muslim!

As the liquid oozed into the plastic tube and inched down to his arm, he pondered the past and relished the future. The plans were perfect, every aspect gently falling into place.

Gently. This was how the greatest deeds were accomplished.

The world would soon be his. It was so close he could taste it.

He licked his lips, so dry. He smiled and they cracked.

His heart rate began to increase as the potion - the sum of his life's research - did its work. For a few long seconds he felt strong, excited, like he was a young man during the Great Years. *To be!*

The nurse frowned as she made some notes on a chart. She rubbed some balm on the man's lips, gently. His smile was easier now. She peeled off her latex gloves, washed her hands, got a fresh pair from a dispenser on a white cabinet. Then she sat in a worn leather armchair beside the bed, carefully took a book from the Rococo side table. He relaxed, stared at the monitor that displayed real time financial data from all the world's markets.

Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Good Quarto, printed in 1605.

The old man sat up then, the machines beeping frantically. CNN's Richard Quest on the screen, very excited. *He looks a Jew, but I like him just the same.* A graph, numbers popping. The tipping point had been reached.

The nurse put the book down. *What a piece of work is a man!*

'Nurse!' he called eagerly, some colour in his cheeks, his eyes alive for the first time in weeks. 'Get me the congressman. Get him now. The markets have completed the plan. It is time for us to take the world. To *take* it.'

The nurse began to dial the number that was written on a card by the phone.

'Please stay calm, Doctor. Your heart -'

'My heart,' he laughed, a cruel cackle. He hissed 'My heart ceased to exist in 1940. I have a muscle that pumps my vril, my life force. But I have no heart. Now if you do not make that telephone call *schnell*, you will not see sunset. Is this clear?'

She glanced at his eyes but there was a force in them that she could not comprehend, something black. Her hands shook as she hit the number keys, praying to God that the congressman would answer quickly.

Or not to be?

TWO

The crazies were out tonight, all screams and spit and empty threat. Self-defence, he mused. *Look at me, I am a person, I exist. But stay away.*

The Butcher walked across streets and up avenues and to the restaurant called Oral Pleasures. He walked past it on the opposite side of the traffic, thought through the implications of what he was about to do. But this was no moral pause, this was maximising the pleasure, the thrill, the horror that would soon be delivered. He glanced through the front windows, saw just sides of beef hanging there in the cold room, some indistinct faces beyond. Decent crowd. Good.

Frigid memories of Idaho grasslands.

He carried on, watching one ranter in particular, a youngish guy who was banging on about Jesus right on the corner of 52nd and Broadway. It was his regular spot. He screamed into the individual faces of the theatre crowd, ranted about repentance, rebirth, hell, all the usual comfort stuff. His victims, fresh out of *Jersey Boys* - musical, Frankie Valli, Four Seasons - just wanted to sing *Big Girls Don't Cry*, hold on to the hundred dollar memory.

The ranter was clean, visually normal. So he made his move, went up to the guy, looked him right in the eye. Guy's name was Paul and all he wanted to do was save some of these souls, y'know, *just save them.*

'You served?' asked the Butcher, nodding at Paul's army coat, didn't look bought from a stand down on Canal Street.

'Afghanistan,' he replied. 'Dirty sons of bitches. I did my duty for my country and it drove me crazy. VA won't even give me a goddamned doctor's appointment. You?'

The Butcher pushed up a sleeve and showed his Rangers tattoo with campaign ribbon.

'We almost got that mother in Tora Bora.'

Hell took on the form of cold, dusty caves then.

'Spin Ghar? Shit,' Paul's eyes opened. 'That was too close. Still, we got the fucker. Eventually.'

'Eventually.'

Got you.

So they smoked Marlboros and traded war stories and the Butcher told him about the man in the restaurant opposite, just over there, who's made homosexuality not just legal, but almost mandatory.

'And he's made it a criminal act to criticise the Koran. The Koran! 9/11, I mean, is this how we remember the good Christians who were cut down on that day? How are we supposed to just *tolerate* that filth?'

Paul loved this.

'Who is this guy? I want to kill him.'

Then he glanced uneasily in every direction. Was this some kind of trap, set by the liberals? *Damn them all.*

'He's right in that restaurant and there's a way that you can hurt him, but without becoming a martyr yourself.'

'Okay. I'll do it.'

The Butcher took a small package from the pocket of his leather jacket.

'Deliver this to the congressman. You won't get near him, just make it to the bar, get a

drink -'

'I don't drink.'

'Get a Coke, watch the congressman, he'll be at his usual table just beyond the far left corner of the bar. See who his waiters are, then choose one them. Offer him fifty to deliver this to the congressman.'

'I don't -'

'Take this fifty for the waiter, and one more to get your Coke. Okay?'

'Thank God for bringing you to me. What's in the package?'

'Better you don't know. It'll ruin his night, trust me. Maybe his whole life.'

'Praise the Lord.'

'As soon as you pass on the package, get out of there. If the cops stop you or track you down, tell them a guy with a beard gave you a fifty to drop a present off for him. You needed the money. He looked legit. Actually, he looked a bit like a Muslim now that you think of it. That clear?'

'Clear. How do I get past those cops on the door?'

'Tell them you've got a reservation. Name of O'Malley. Too late for service, but the name's on tonight's list so they'll let you in.'

'Okay. Then what?'

'What?'

'After this?'

'If this goes smoothly, I'll be in touch. We are an army of two now.'

The Butcher smiled warmly then, put his hand on Paul's shoulder and squeezed fondly. His first lieutenant.

'I'm always here,' he said, pointing at the sidewalk. 'Hey,' he added nervously, his voice catching, 'I'm not going to get in any trouble, am I?'

'What for? Your prints are on the outside of the package, but that's it. You needed the fifty, yeah?'

'Yeah.'

'Kill twenty minutes before you make your move. I need to get part two done before they get the scent.'

The Butcher grinned as he straightened Paul's hair, winked, retreated slowly. Paul waited a few minutes on the sidewalk. Then he made it past door security and the game was on.

The Butcher hurried back to the girl.

That feeling, that good feeling at the end of a busy, smooth service. Uneventful but for the trainee chef dropping his spectacles into the pot of boiling water and the customer who didn't want to pay for his steak. Sophie put her hand into the water to retrieve the glasses without thinking. 'All the nerves in your hands will become numb over time. And get a cord for the spectacles, yeah?' Steak guy said he didn't like it. 'He should've realised that before he ate the whole damned thing. He even licked the T-bone clean! Now tell him that we've got police officers on the premises and I can get them to sort it out for us.' So he paid and apologised. It reminded her of the time the diner complained that her Vichyssoise was *simply freezing*. This kind of stuff happens every single day. Part of the reason she loved the job. It was all about meeting the key primal need for food, which comes even before sex and shelter in terms of daily importance.

Her dad, who brought his French culinary skills over during the War, always impressed on young Sophie the importance of food as a business. *People can put off buying a new car or a coat. They can never put off eating lunch and dinner. And, in the end, hunger will make*

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