

















Julien J. Bismuth

Monologues for minerals

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## Criminal Habits

It was 5:30 am. and she was already awake. Not that it was her habitual hour of waking, but rather that the importance of the occasion had sufficiently impressed itself on her mind as to awaken her at 5:23 am, giving her ample time to regain her senses, stare at the ceiling, and turn off her alarm before it was supposed to ring, at 5:30 am, which is when the phone rang instead. She picked up after two rings, and listened in silence. After a brief interval, she simply said, "All right," then hung up. Having showered, dressed, primped, sipped a tea, and nibbled on an apple in less than thirty minutes, she packed a small black suitcase, sent off three emails, paid her bills, gazed out the window while finishing her tea, then left her apartment at 6:17 am.

Sixteen minutes later, she stood on the platform of a train station, pretending to read the morning paper. A man in a frantic rush knocked into her, and she dropped her suitcase and spilled the contents of her handbag. As she bent down to pick up the scattered items, he put down his suitcase, which was more or less identical to hers, and knelt down to help her. When they stood up, having scuttled around on their heels to retrieve stray coins and look for an elusive lipstick case, neither of them finding it, they smiled, spoke, he apologized, then they each picked up the wrong suitcase and went their separate ways.

Meanwhile, in another town in another country, a different man and a different woman executed exactly the same routine at more or less the same time.

Thirty minutes later, a stocky man in a tight floral-print shirt and white jeans walked into a gas station thirty kilometers outside of Avignon, and bought a map. He was passing through, he said to the attendant, and wanted to know what he should try to do and see in the thirty-six hours he could afford to spend visiting it. The clerk, surprised at the incongruity of the request, especially given the time of the year and even the time of day, then reasoning it out for himself by hypothesizing that the man was

a traveling salesman, unfolded the map and proceeded to examine it with care, occasionally marking it with circles and X's. Thirty seconds later, the clerk lay dead or unconscious on the ground, while the ersatz tourist, having stripped the register of its cash, stolen a few candy bars and a six pack of orange soda, all the while seemingly indifferent to the video camera that was filming him, drove off with a full, unpaid tank of gas. The map still lay on the counter, and the clerk still lay on the floor, either dead or unconscious, when no less than three cars, of the same make as that of his assailant, stopped at the same station, raided the same store, all the while seemingly indifferent to the video camera that was filming them, before driving off with full, unpaid tanks of gas.

The next customer to arrive alerted the police exactly four minutes after their departure. By the time the clerk awoke, unharmed, unbruised, but unable to remember how he had been knocked out, the station was being searched for evidence and roadblocks had been installed in a sixty-kilometer perimeter. The videotapes were carefully watched and studied. Warrants and rewards were posted, but only two months later, the same assault was carried out at the same station, in the same manner, albeit on a different clerk, by exactly the same group of men. Meanwhile, two train station employees, in two different cities, reported seeing a man and a woman switching suitcases after a feigned collision, both switches having taken place at exactly the same time, and on the same day. Surveillance equipment was installed, and the same routine, played out by the same actors was witnessed three additional times, executed simultaneously in both stations. The times and dates of the incidents varied each time, the second incident played out two days after the first at 6:30 pm, the third five days after the second at 1:45 pm, the fourth six days after the third at 9:12 am, and the fifth and last in the series witnessed exactly eleven days after the fourth at 6:17 am. It was, in the words of the first employee to raise the alert, "an illicit exchange of some sort." The perpetrators were, in the words of his colleague in the second location, "always impeccably groomed." In spite of energetic surveillance efforts, they were never caught.

Six months earlier, two cars of the same make but in different colors, both stolen, crashed into each other at the corner of Broadway and thirty-second

street in Manhattan, New York, at three-thirty am. Both cars were abandoned by their drivers. One hour later, two identical stolen sports cars collided and were abandoned at the intersection of Chambers and Greenwood in Trenton, New Jersey. Two hours later, four stolen Subaru station wagons, each a different color, ran into one another at the corner of Broad and Capitol in Hartford, Connecticut. The cars were found abandoned, still smoking, all four of their doors opened, without any trace of blood or fingerprints other than those of their original owners. The next morning, eight brand-new Lexus RX series four-wheel drive sports utility vehicles, each a different color (Brandy Wine Metallic, Flint Mica, Desert Sage Metallic, Savannah Metallic, Galactic Grey Mica, Bamboo Pearl, Crystal White, Breakwater Blue Metallic, and Black Onyx) collided at the corner of Park Avenue and Twenty-third Street in Manhattan, New York, at three-fifteen am. The vehicles had been stolen from eight different Lexus car dealerships in the Tri-State area. Each time, the thief had taken the car on a test drive, his accomplice (posing as his wife or companion) drugging the salesman with chloroform, the thieves then dumping the salesman, disarming the locator device in the vehicle, and simply disappearing from sight with the vehicle. The thefts were conducted on the same day, in a precise sequence, each incident taking place exactly one hour after the previous one.

At the crash site, the vehicles, once again, were found empty, all four of their doors opened. One hour later, a stolen Maserati GranSport Spyder was found, wrecked, at the corner of Chambers and South Olden in Trenton, New Jersey. It looked as if it had been dropped nose first from a great height as it stood vertically in the middle of the intersection, its front end flattened against the asphalt. One and a half hours later, thanks to the diligence and lucidity of a young traffic cop, the “dots were connected,” as he later put it, and a large police force was deployed in Hartford, Connecticut, concentrated mostly in a twelve-block radius around the corner of Broad and Capitol.

In spite of the police surveillance, at precisely 6:15 am, an accident took place at the corner of Albany, Main, High, Ann, and Ely streets in Hartford. It was immediately detected because all ten car alarms from the ten vehicles involved went off as a result of the collision. The vehicles

were identical in make and color, all of them white Fiat Sedici cars. Their origin was a mystery, as the Sedici was not being sold in the United States at the time. Later that day, other incongruities started to appear with the other cars. The Galactic Grey Mica Lexus RX for example had been custom painted in a color only used for the LX series. A closer examination of the different vehicles revealed that various parts had been swapped and interchanged between them, so that one of the Lexus cars had had its radiator swapped with that of a Subaru, while the Maserati had been re-upholstered with fabric taken from a Fiat Sedici, though none of the Sedici cars were missing their upholstery, while the headlights from the two cars in the first accident in the series had been removed and were found in the trunks of two of the Lexus vehicles. Other swaps and exchanges were revealed as the investigation continued, some of them almost imperceptible (such as the meticulous exchange of bolts and screws between one of the Subaru and one of the Lexus vehicles).

For an additional five consecutive days, the same cities were victim to similar sequences of accidents, all of them staged in similar ways. In spite of constant police surveillance, and more importantly, the relative predictability of the accident times and sites (all of them taking place at more or less the same times, and in the same general areas of each city), none of them were prevented nor were any of the perpetrators caught. The cars used were all stolen, even the Fiats were revealed to have been stolen from a Mexican dealership two months previous to the incident. Each accident involved a different make and brand of car, so that by the end of the week, the perpetrators had run through the following models: the Toyota FJ Cruiser, Hyundai Tiburon, Audi R8, Mitsubishi Lancer Evolution, Mercury Grand Marquis, Ford Focus, Hummer H2 SUT, Chevy Aveo, Citroën C3 Pluriel, Porsche 911, Chrysler PT Cruiser, GMC Sierra Classic, Honda Odyssey minivan, the entire line of vintage replica kit cars manufactured by Firestream Motors during their ten years of existence, and most striking of all, sixteen different Caterpillar machines (a Wheel Excavator, a Wheel Dozer, a Wheel Loader, a Skid Steer Loader, a Knuckleboom Loader, a Telehandler, a Soil Stabilizer, a Road Reclaimer, a Forest Machine, an Underground Mining machine, a Feller Buncher, a Forwarder, an Articulated Truck, a Skidder, a Scraper, and a Pipelayer).

The swaps and exchanges between the different vehicles continued but soon became too complex to map or even trace, the criminals having turned to modifying parts from the different vehicles before swapping them, cutting up the different fabrics and upholstery and collaging them back together in complex patchworks of leather and synthetic fabric with which they then reupholstered the different interiors. In a particularly elaborate swap, they were found to have switched the entire electrical system of one of the Citroën cars with that of the Ford Focus, the second vehicle catching on fire and exploding soon after its collision, perhaps as a result of the graft. The vehicles were found to have been stolen over a period of five months, from dealerships across the United States, as well as in Canada, Panama, Mexico, and Puerto Rico. None of the thefts or collisions were ever caught on video, in spite of massive surveillance efforts. After the seventh series of accidents, they abruptly stopped. For a period of six and a half months, nothing happened.

Then came the gas station robberies and suitcase swaps described above. The same young traffic cop who had first “connected the dots” between the different car collisions advanced the hypothesis that these three series of crimes were connected. Having been obsessed with the unsolved series of car accidents, he had taken to reading police blotters the world over, looking for similar incidents. “The regularity of these recent incidents, as well as their absurd and relatively harmless nature leads me to conclude that they are the work of the same gang of deranged criminal masterminds,” he said, in the conclusion to his presentation to his superiors at the Intelligence Division of the Hartford Police Detective Bureau (to which he had recently been promoted). His conclusions were met with skepticism, until, two weeks after the last suitcase swap had been performed, a suitcase identical to those used by the couple was found in the trunk of a Ferrari 599 GTB Fiorano that had crashed into the exterior wall of the same gas station, thirty miles outside of Avignon whose clerks had been drugged and whose merchandise and petrol had been pilfered weeks earlier. Based on the damage to the Ferrari, it was determined that the car had been traveling at a speed of 205 mph. Yet the driver was absent. In fact, both car doors were found open. How they had been opened before the crash, and at such a high speed was never resolved.

Subsequent to this incident, a general alert was raised in, and a combined force of Interpol, CIA, FSB, Mossad, DST, MI6, MIT, MUST, MS, NSB, ASIO, LVT, AIVD, SI, CSIS, ISI, IB, PET, BND, G2, SIRP, CNI, SND, and MJIB agents were assigned to the affair. Nothing happened for days, then weeks, then months, though the investigators met, worked, gathered information, exchanging some things while hiding others, mutually accusing one another of different forms of treachery, deceit, and concealment in private, while engaging in repeated assertions of unity, cooperation, and “substantial progress being made on all fronts” in public. After a year and a half, the bulk of the agents were taken off the case and the dossier was handed over to two Interpol agents on their way to retirement. A year later, days before they were set to retire, the affair was shelved.

Even after the affair was abandoned, the young detective from Hartford, now promoted in rank and function, was unable to let go of the affair, keeping a meticulous logbook of the case, cutting and pasting the heavily filtered and edited reports he managed to obtain from Interpol, as well as news clipping from various publications, both relating to the case or to incidents that he thought might be related to it. It is from this logbook that we quote the following passage, taken from an article in the Fairbanks Daily News Miner from Fairbanks, Alaska, dated March 16th of this year, almost two years after the investigation came to a halt.

For the past six months, residents of Fairbanks have been victim to a series of unusual acts of vandalism. Eight months ago, the traffic light at the corner of Charles Street and Illinois was destroyed, all three of its signals smashed by an unknown instrument. A week later, the traffic light at the corner of University Avenue and Airport Way was vandalized in the same way. Six days later, the traffic light at the corner of Pegel and Airport was destroyed, then five days later, the signal at University and Geist, followed by the signal at South Cushman and Airport four days later, then the light at Van Horn and Lanthrop three days later, then at Van Horn and Easy two days later, and finally, the signal at Hughes and South Cushman the next day.

An investigation was launched, video cameras were placed at major intersections, but for a week, nothing happened. Then seven more lights were

smashed, at the same intervals (seven days between the first and second incidents, six days between the second and third, etc.), though at different locations. This sequence (a week of inactivity, followed by twenty-nine days of activity) was repeated three additional times with clockwork precision. Previous to the final series of attacks, and at considerable expense to the city, video cameras were placed facing all of the city's traffic lights. The vandals simply destroyed the cameras first before destroying the signals. Additional measures were contemplated and discussed, but none of them were applied, as the incidents came to a sudden halt.

Though it was an inconvenience, and a strain on municipal coffers, the residents of Fairbanks had grown used to these attacks, as well as to the traffic problems they'd been causing.

“Why not get rid of these lights altogether?” proposed Arthur P. Owen, owner of Owen's Sporting Goods, in a municipal meeting last November, “It's not like we have that much traffic anyway.”

Though some agreed, others were keen to find the culprits and hold them accountable. In fact, some went so far as to accuse John R. Metzger, the local electrician in charge of repairing the traffic lights, of having a hand in the affair. At his request, an investigation was launched and the police cleared him of any suspicions, even going as far as posting a tracking device on his car and on his person. “I sure as heck wouldn't do such a thing for money, but what I can say is I am getting used to the additional income,” John admitted in an interview last December, “Though to be honest, the wife and I are putting it in our savings because we know it's going to come to an end at some point. I mean whoever it is that's doing this, they're bound to get caught at some point. Or maybe they'll just get bored.”

It seems that Mr. Metzger was right. The criminals, whoever they are, seem to have gotten tired of playing the same old prank, and they've now resorted to other tricks altogether. Last week, residents of Slaterville were surprised to find that the College Road exit off of the Steese expressway was closed. The exit was blocked off with flares and cones, and signs had been placed at regular intervals a mile before the exit. There were police

lights in the distance, some witnesses even saw flames and smoke, and when police finally arrived on the scene, they found an oil stain, broken glass, spent flares, and burnt tread marks, as if an accident had taken place and been taken care off. The problem was that whoever had done all of this work, it wasn't the police. None of the local hospitals had admitted any car accident patients, and as for the flares, cones, and traffic signs, it was later found that they had been stolen from a warehouse in Kodiak, of all places. The same exact set-up was repeated the next night at the Airport Way exit, a few miles down the road. The following night, police were deployed all along the Steese Expressway and Richardson Highway. At 1:30 am, a call was placed by a highway patrolman enquiring about a mysterious accident on the 10th St. exit off of the 3 at Nenana, 55 miles south of Fairbanks. I'm giving you that distance for a reason, because the 25 hours later, the southbound lanes of the Richardson Highway were blocked, this time not only by flares, cones, and signs, but also by a burning 1990 Spartan Swab Heavy Rescue truck, 55 miles south of Fairbanks, just before the Lost Lake road exit. The truck seemed to have smashed into a granite cliff at a very high speed (chunks of granite were found embedded in the body, and an estimation of its speed at the time of the crash, based on the damage, was placed at approximately 90 to 100 mph., not impossible but quite a feat nonetheless for such a heavy vehicle). The night after that, in spite of heavy police patrols in the entire district, another accident, this time involving 5 motorcycles (a 1975 Kawasaki Z1-P, a 1977 Kawasaki 900 series, a 2003 BMW R1150RT-11, a 1999 BMW R1100RT-ps, a 2004 Harley-Davidson Police Edition Electra Glide, and a brand-new Harley-Davidson FLHP Road King) that had been smashed into one another in what can best be described as a star or flower petal formation, was "staged" at the Pilcho Drive exit, off of the 1, just outside of Glenallen. That was two nights ago. Since then, no additional incidents have been reported, but it's a fair bet that we're in for more surprises sometime soon. Police are currently working to trace the origins of the vehicles used in the crash, while also investigating other leads. Any information regarding these incidents or their perpetrators should be relayed directly to the Fairbanks Police Dept., at (907) 450-6500.

In another place, at another time or even perhaps on another day, another person reads the same article, from the same publication, issued on the

same date. Putting the paper down, then carefully folding it and replacing it in its box, before replacing the box on the shelf, she lights a cigarette and leans back in her armchair. Outside, a light snow has started to fall on the Alaskan Tundra. It is 7:15 in the morning. She puts the kettle on, and when the water has boiled, makes herself a tea, which she takes, along with an apple, to the kitchen table. Just then (the time is now 7:20 am.) the phone rings. She picks up and after a brief interval of silence simply says, "All right," then hangs up. Taking another sip of her tea, and another nibble of her apple, she runs her fingers through her hair, closes her eyes for an instant, then stands up and walks to her bedroom to get dressed.

The End



## The Mystery of Henry Weissman

On the 17th of May 2002, a man named Henry Weissman rented a small room on the second floor of 12054 Wilshire Boulevard in Los Angeles, California. The building was a two-story, horseshoe-shaped apartment complex wrapped around a small overgrown garden with a mildewed stucco fountain. Weissman's apartment was in the northeast corner of the building, and had glass screen doors that overlooked the garden, while his bedroom windows overlooked his parking space. He drove a tan Chevrolet station wagon, with an old bumper sticker, partially removed, that said "I'd rather be...". What remained of the illustration looked either like part of a fishing pole or a horizon line. Other than his utilities bills and the Los Angeles Times (he had no phone), Weissman received no personal mail for the duration of his stay, with one notable exception. Two days before his disappearance, he received a telegram, a fact which the mailman had remembered because of its anomaly.

For three months, Weissman stuck to the same identical routine. At exactly 7:45 am, he came out of his apartment wearing one of five identical suits and seven identical shirts, differentiated only by their color. The suits seemed to be made of light wool or lightweight synthetic fabric. On his size-twelve feet, Weissman wore one of three pairs of shoes: brown crêpe-soled shoes, black ankle-high boots, or tan suede loafers. On sunny days, he also wore black, metal-frame sunglasses. The cut and style of his clothing was unexceptional, yet reminded the apartment manager of "a 1950's salesman," an association that can in part be attributed to her professional activity: extra for an ill-fated docudrama inspired by a recent news item on a traveling salesman. After his death, the authorities had discovered that he had several wives and offspring in the different cities and states of his sales route. The movie retraced his long and eventful life, from birth, to military service in the Pacific in WWII, to his long career as a salesman for a household appliances manufacturer, starting in the early 50's. The show never made it past the pilot stage.

Weissman then left in his car and returned at approximately 2 pm, sometimes later, though never earlier, with a bag of groceries and a stack of documents or books, whose bindings and markings led his neighbors to surmise that he had borrowed them from a library. Though an extensive search was conducted, none of the municipal or university libraries in the greater Los Angeles area had any records for a Henry Weissman, or even for any other resident of 12054 Wilshire Boulevard (except for Mrs. Donahue from apt. 3G, a regular at the local branch library). At precisely 6:30 pm., loud orchestral music could be heard playing from his apartment. Though none of the tenants were able to identify what music he played, a search of his apartment after his disappearance turned up the complete works of Shostakovich and Anton Webern. A survey of the tenants revealed that while he had definitely played the former, none of his neighbors could recall hearing the latter, for, in the words of his immediate neighbor, they would “definitely have remembered it if he had.” At 8 pm, the music stopped, and Mr. Weissman went for a stroll, returning anywhere between 8:15 to 10:30 pm. It was the only part of his day that was not predicable. One of his neighbors remembers him once returning “late,” with « wet hair and muddy shoes » on a memorably hot and clear evening. Upon his return, Weissman often cooked dinner, then stayed up. No one knows at what time he went to sleep, for it seems his light was always on, or that he only turned it off after his neighbors had all gone to sleep.

On August 18th, Henry Weissman disappeared. Due to the precedent set by his inflexible routine, his absence was immediately apparent, though for the first week, the manager assumed that he had left for a brief trip. It was only eight days after his disappearance, when a policeman rung at her front door looking for Weissman, that she understood that something had happened. His car had been found on the outskirts of Ontario, California, a satellite city thirty-five miles east of Los Angeles. There were bloodstains on the back seat and no less than sixty spent gun cartridges, some of which had been fired from a military issue Browning M1918 service rifle, others from a Colt 22 caliber Diamondback revolver. There were no bullet holes or even bullets in the car, nor were any weapons found in the vehicle or its vicinity. Subsequent tests showed that the blood was that of an older male collie. The car was registered to one Harry Wiseman,

deceased since 1998, and had been traced back to Weissman by the discovery of an unpaid gas bill in his name found under the front passenger seat of the car.

The same policeman returned with a warrant, a detective, and a CSI unit. The manager tried to open the apartment with a spare key, but soon found that Weissman had changed the lock. A curious noise, like a ticking clock, was heard coming from the apartment by one of the detectives. The complex was immediately and rather efficiently evacuated (the cause of the alarm kept under wraps until everyone had been safely removed from the premises), as were the three neighboring buildings. Thirty minutes later, the bomb squad arrived. At this point, most of the tenants had left, but a few had remained behind, standing behind the police barrier, watching as the bomb squad suited up and entered the building. One and a half hours later, the building was declared safe, and the bomb squad left. The ticking was actually an audio recording, played on repeat on Weissman's stereo. As for the apartment, it was empty, impossibly and inconceivably empty, except for a stereo, the aforementioned classical recordings, a stack of unpaid bills, an antique dagger (blood-stained), and a note pad, whose top page had been hastily ripped off.

The crime lab established that the dagger was stained with the same blood that had been found in Weissman's car. Examination of the note pad revealed that a map and a message had been drawn on the top page, which had then been hastily ripped off. The forcefulness of the writer's hand had made a deep impression on the underlying pages, and after a painstaking analysis, the map and the message were reconstructed by police experts. The map was that of an apartment, similar in many ways to the one formerly occupied by Weissman though with certain noticeable differences in scale and form (among other things, there were two additional closets in the sketched apartment, as well as an alcove in the living room). There was an "X" drawn in one of the additional closet spaces. The message was a single truncated phrase, chilling and enigmatic: "I am your judge and jury, nemesis and fury. Now is..." The rest of the passage was undecipherable.

The evidence having been seized, fingerprints and DNA samples having

been taken from the apartment, a statewide search was launched. The fingerprints turned out to be those of the landlord, manager, broker, cleaners, and previous tenants (as if Weissman had worn gloves at all times in his own apartment). The search was expanded into a nationwide alert. The FBI was put on the case, and a police- portrait based on his neighbors' descriptions was broadcast on the news and on various TV shows. Meanwhile, a diligent search was conducted through the city archives for apartments similar in layout to the one sketched by Weissman. No progress would have been made, had it not been for a zealous young recruit who, after fielding a call from a landlord in Rosemead, "connected the dots," as he later described it, and alerted his superiors to the fact that a certain Erwyn E. Shasmyn had disappeared without a trace from his apartment in Rosemead, on the same day as Henry Weissman. The two names were found to be anagrammes of one another, and two L.A.P.D. squad cars, one Crime Scene Investigation Unit, two helicopters, a five-member S.W.A.T. team, two ambulances, a fire-truck, and an undisclosed number of FBI and possibly even CIA agents were dispatched to the scene. The landlord of the second apartment quickly recognized Weissman from the police sketch. The apartment was found to correspond exactly to the drawing found in Weissman's apartment. In the closet designated with an "X," a thin strip of microfilm was found. After lengthy negotiations between the different agencies involved, the microfilm was dispatched to an FBI crime lab, at which point things took a severe and dramatic turn.

For the first two days, the different agencies involved would not disclose the contents of the microfilm, some because they felt them to be too sensitive, others because they were not being granted access to them. Their silence was not remarked upon because the discovery of the second apartment and the microfilm had been kept secret from the press. A day after the discovery of the microfilm, however, several facilities in the Greater Los Angeles area were placed on high alert, including the El Segundo oil refinery, the San Onofre nuclear power plant, several water treatment and power plants, the Los Angeles, Burbank, and Long Beach airports, all nearby military facilities, as well as all of the major shopping centers, transit centers, and sports complexes. Searches were conducted in random locations, and sixty people, forty-five of them immigrants,

both legal and illegal, were placed under temporary arrest (though twenty-five of the forty-five immigrants were later transferred to INS facilities). Meanwhile, the nationwide search for Henry Weissman was intensified. This turn in events sparked the interest of the press, so that a press conference was finally given by the mayor, in which he briefly described the discovery of the apartment and microfilm, without disclosing anything about the latter other than the fact that it contained “what looks to be preliminary research for a terrorist attack.”

This statement, with which the mayor abruptly ended his press conference, set off a media frenzy. Police operators were flooded with angry requests for additional information, as well as unverifiable or verifiably unfounded sightings of Henry Weissman. A hotline was set up to free up the 911 switchboards, and another press conference was given, this time by the police chief. He gave a more precise description of the contents of the microfilm. It contained, he said, “maps and photographs, as well as incredibly precise sketches and diagrams of various potential targets of terrorist attacks in our district.” The sites were in fact those that had been placed under surveillance in the preceding days, though the microfilm also contained drawings of highway overpasses, bridges, and tunnels, leading the authorities to suspect that he may even have been planning to blow up a section of the freeway system. The sketches were detailed drawings of the exterior perimeters of some of the facilities, as well as of ways of penetrating them, and even of disabling or circumventing their security and surveillance systems. The photos and maps were marked with large “X’s,” drawn with some sort of oil pastel or crayon (the substance itself was unverifiable from the microfilm images), placed at precisely those points where an explosive device would do the greatest harm. There were no images, nor was there any mention of associates, times, affiliations, purposes, or even weapons or explosive devices. All that the images contained were diagrams on how to break in to these facilities, as well as indications of their most sensitive spots.

But that was not all. The film also contained images of a typewritten text, a short story to be precise, written in a dense and arduous prose. The story was released to the press, and all eighty-eight pages of it were posted on the web. The different media agencies were content to provide

a summary of the story, of which that of one Henriette Whiteman, special correspondent to the Antelope Valley Press, is by far the most interesting, if only for its author's amusing asides and digressions. It is from her summary that we cite the following description of the piece:

...the anonymous author of the story (assuming Henry Weissman is an alias for some other, more sinister figure, but also taking into consideration the fact that he may not have written the story) starts with a description of a traffic jam as clogged and unendurable as the real thing. The cars are likened to "metal pills," their passengers to "test monkeys on a space flight." There's a dreadful rendition of a talk-radio show, with embarrassing attempts at replicating the various "lingos," as the author calls them, of the Los Angeles basin. The narrator then abruptly switches to a description of a sunset, a "toxic reddish hue falling, like a curtain of blood, over the sewer-infested sea." Night falls, and all of a sudden, seeing as it is nighttime, we are led by our author into a nightclub. The music, of course, is "blasting," and the people there are "riding high on their chemical trips," dancing like "Auto-matons" while "exchanging fluids and friction with their stoned neighbors" or "guzzling down fluorescent drinks." Then the narrator wanders through the club, witnesses sordid things in corridors and bathrooms, and suddenly he's in an alleyway. He stays in the alleyway for what could be hours, and witnesses everything from "junkies shooting up some of that wicked South-of-the-border smack," to underage sex, several rapes, three homicides, and even a gang-war, with "spaced-out locos getting crazy with their switch-blades and pistols."

It would be tedious to follow the author on his travels around what he describes as "the sunlit Babylon that we call Los Angeles, as if angels could ever be associated with this festering pool of sin and decadence." We visit a millionaire's villa in the Malibu hills, and witness his domestic squabbles and extramarital affairs, then see him humiliate his various employees and assistants, before being done in by his wife with a steak knife. From there, we descend into the valley of darkness, and meander through dorm rooms, low-income housing, seedy bars, strip joints, gas stations, gang headquarters (our author seems to think gangs live in underground caves filled with money, weapons, and drugs), movie studios, offices,

museums, etc... All of these locations are backdrops for morality plays so obvious and clumsy as to be immediately predictable from their first opening sentences. The only mildly interesting or surprising element is the fact that every living being in the story (including children and animals) is corrupt, aggressive, immoral, and even lascivious. In fact, some of his descriptions of children at play are so grotesque as to be intolerable, and there is a very perturbing portrait of two newborn puppies engaged in a form of play that alternates between sado-masochistic violence and soft-core pornography. Yet there is also a strikingly evocative underwater tableau. A burning car improbably drives off of the Santa Monica pier and plunges into the sea. As the car sinks, its charred passengers struggling to escape, the author describes a fantasmagorical chain of carnivorous violence: different-sized fish eating one other in a sequence, sharks attacking swordfish, swordfish spearing dolphins, whales fighting with gigantic squid, and even a giant clam trapping and ingesting a deep-sea diver. Soon enough though, our author's waterlogged pen has dragged us back onshore, this time for a clichéd description of contract killings and labor disputes in the boat-yards. This apocalyptic urban portrait ends abruptly, in mid-sentence, and the rest of the document deals with another narrative altogether.

The second part seems to have been written by the same person, but it's a better read. The prose is lighter, the tableaux and images are far more evocative, even beautiful at times. The section even bears a title, or variations thereof, all of them crossed out ("The Crystal Chain," "The Crystal Sea," "The Crystal World," "Dark Crystal," and "Salt Flats"). It is a description of a flood, though perhaps flood is the wrong word. The world, like a sponge, slowly becomes gorged with water. Water starts to seep from the ground, into basements, subway stations, then into streets and houses. The liquid itself is saltwater, but in a more concentrated form than seawater, as concentrated as the Dead Sea or the Nevada Salt Lake. There are moments of incredible pathos, as the author describes the slow inexorable drowning of the world, everyone surviving (the seepage being too slow to drown anyone or anything, and the liquid too buoyant for anyone to drown in, though so concentrated as to burn and even temporarily blind those whose eyes are exposed to it), but being pushed to the upper stories and rooftops of buildings, or forced to float on makeshift rafts.

Then the seepage stops. It stops, as he awkwardly describes it, “at the third story of buildings built at sea-level.” Entire communities and districts are spared, while residents of lower-altitude areas are moved to higher ground. Then, for several pages, nothing happens. There is a meticulous description of the trials and tribulations of a noble and charitable immigrant family as they move from camp to camp, struggling to stay alive amidst the chaos and confusion. Meanwhile, the temperature has started to rise, climbing just as slowly and gradually as the saltwater in the first part of the narrative. As things literally heat up, the narrator meticulously describes the chemical processes by means of which crystals form with the evaporation of a concentrated saline solution. Then the text stops, only to pick up again on a new page. The narrative more or less unravels at that point into a series of fragments and sketches of alternate endings. The author seems to be stuck. He imagines the saline solution evaporating, the crystals drying, then crumbling. He also pictures another flood, then an infinite or indefinite series of floods, the earth gorged with water after a torrential rain, the water dissolving the salt, then the solution evaporating, the crystals forming, drying, crumbling, followed by another series of torrential rains, etc... There is even a curious fragment, rendered almost indecipherable by the author’s defacement of its lines, in which he seems to be imagining a future wherein mankind has evolved into a crystalline or mineral life form. In the end, it seems none of the imagined endings were satisfactory as all of them were crossed out or buried under handwritten notes and smudges. The actual conclusion is instead a long, meandering digression on endings. “How does one end a story?” he asks. Do stories need to end in particular ways, or can they just be suspended or interrupted? Could a story end in mid-sentence, for example, or could a story simply end with its author’s “confession of his inability to end it?”

The End





## The Silent Life of Rocks

A man wakes. He wakes before his alarm, or so he remembers it, he remembers later having woken up before his alarm, yet he neither remembers it ringing nor does he remember turning it off. He wakes, and, in waking, feels, no, knows that he has awakened into a world at war.

Outside, for his first instinct is to look outside, and though he suppresses it at first, when he does eventually look outside, it is to see nothing. Nothing special or unusual that is. Nothing out of the ordinary. Nothing to indicate or reveal the incipient growth of the war that he knows is not simply brewing, but actually taking place. There is a war out there and yet there is nothing, out there, to reveal its presence, nor even to simulate its absence. A veil, a translucent veil of lies, no, not lies, a veil of happenstance, a veil of habits and happenstance conceals it from the world at large.

His thoughts are jumpy, building up in awkward spurts, but that too has lost its significance, at least for now. Later, he will be asked or forced to phrase them more eloquently: these suspicions, no, these revelations which he has awakened into. He will be forced to do so if only to successfully make his case in front of what can only be an audience of sceptics and mockers. When the time has come for him to speak, he knows that it will be, at least at first, to a crowd of mockers and sceptics, layabouts and vagrants, in short to those for whom the rantings of a lunatic are a welcome diversion instead of an irritating distraction.

But for now there is nothing. Nothing for him to hold onto. Nothing for him to arch up against, to turn against, to turn over, or turn around or into... There is nothing. Nothing other than the hum and the drone, the drone and the drum of habit. Even the most violent of incidents, the most unexpected of effractions and infractions, even these jagged shifts do not register, or rather, inasmuch as they register, it is in compliance with a hidden expectation for trouble and disruption, as the elements of a dispersed pattern of contingent violence in the gaudy fabric of the everyday.

His thoughts have shifted from jumpy to the overworked, overambitious, overextended, overly intricate workings of a mind trying to relieve itself of the anxiety of awakening into a world it no longer cares to know.

His thoughts, from jumpy and jump-started to startled and ornate have sunken into silence, the silence of composure, the composure of admiration, the admiration of a single, enchanting purpose. A purpose that is not his. A purpose that will never be yours to see, to seize.

Hours later, he is outside. The sun is stiff, unrelenting. The air is thick, unseasonably thick and warm and dense with an unfamiliar, unexpected, unexplained, and unexplainable humidity. It is winter or rather fall but it feels like summer. There are just as many people outside today as there were yesterday at the same time, in the same place. There is a sound of laughter, of drops falling (a fountain? a sprinkler? an eruption?). He wants to slice through this momentary congelation of life and limb like a blade, to separate it with his trajectory, to splinter it according to the selfish demands of his trajectory.

Or, sponge-like, to absorb what he can of it and with a “plop!” fall.

The End





## The objection

To describe it as resistant is absurd. It does not resist. Things do not touch it. They do not affect it. There is only its hardness, its brittle hardness, and its indifference. Though it is alive, it is alive only to one sensation. Like a mineral, it reacts to one thing or rather two (a signal and its interruption). The rest of the time it is asleep, and its sleep is like death, an interval of death between two spurts of life.

To describe it as alive is not just incongruous, it is almost meaningless. It strips the word “alive” of all meaning. It says so little, so much as well perhaps, as to inhibit even that slight movement between signs that we call meaning. The creature does not move. It does not warm to the touch. It does not swivel, shift, feel, perceive, record, or communicate. It simply releases and drops upon detection of a host. Sensing either the movement or the warmth of its prey (but how and with what organ?), its pincers, akin to a dime-store hairclip, let go of whatever branch, stem, or tuber it is attached to. It then falls, lands, pins itself to its target, and feeds. Its feeding tube is a hollow spike that penetrates the skin of its host when it lands, then draws in the few droplets of blood that the creature requires for its nourishment with the capillary action of its spongy inner core. Once sated and rested, the parasite falls off its host, then climbs up the nearest tree or plant and falls back asleep for another long night, a night that can last as long as twenty of our human years.

One can either choose to welcome this host, or destroy it. Its toll is so slight as to make its destruction risible, yet its parasitism remains so repulsively invasive (the breaking of skin, the sucking in of bodily fluids) as to make it less a matter of reason than instinct.

It dies with a pop, leaving a few crumbs of shell, a few drops of blood, and a temporary swelling around the wound, a wound which itches, but whose itch is relatively easy to ignore and soon disappears.

The End



## Borderland

One day, a man arrives at the edge of a town with a black box. It's a black box on a white stand, a black box on a white stand in a green plain, behind a dun river and its accompanying margin of trees, just outside of a town (its white spires, pink and brown houses, grey streets, varicolored flags and banners). At first he is not seen, for he arrives early, far too early for anyone to notice. When he is seen, he is looked at, approached, then hailed by one John T. Smith.

At first the stranger does not respond, but when his interlocutor (a father, a son, a husband, a brother, an uncle, a baker, a singer in a choir, a pillar in a tavern, a lover to his mistress, a player on a team, a debtor to his creditors, and a credit to his community) steps closer, he stops him with a raised hand.

John T. Smith scratches his head and chortles, snickers, laughs, then regains his composure, only to lose it again when faced with his interlocutor's withering look, before defiantly inflating his chest, opening his mouth, and stepping forward.

The same raised hand stops him just as suddenly in his tracks. For a second, John T. Smith wonders at the authority of the stranger, and wonders even more at his instinctive act of obedience. From where did the impulse to stop come from? He had not willed it. In fact, he had intended to keep going at all costs, but something, call it either instinct or habit (but not both nor even one or the other, for a distinction, once made, has to be preserved) had halted his progress, stiffened his legs, and even raised one of his arms in self-defense (against what, he wondered again, the box?).

Having collected himself and steeled his will, our hero steps forward defiantly, sees the stranger reach for the box or rather for what he sees is a large dial on one of its sides, then ... he wakes up, he is on the edge of the river, his clothes are soiled, his ears are ringing, his eyes or is it his head? are swimming, his forehead is bleeding from a superficial scratch. He stands, takes to his feet, and stumbles back home as fast as he can.

If you were filming the scene, you could show John T. Smith stumbling back into the village in the early hours of the dawn. Though a few lights are on, many of its citizens are still sleeping. Smith enters one of the houses (his own?) and the lights turn on. Minutes later, another set of lights turns on a few streets away. Then another, and another, until one by one, almost all the houses are lit up. Men, hurriedly dressed, some of them clasping pieces of toast or cups of coffee or both, others lighting cigarettes or pipes, file out of the houses and gather in a public building (the town hall? the bar? the church?). Hours pass, and finally a small group of men, armed to the teeth, exit through the back door and head towards the trees, the river, and the stranger.

The camera lingers in the village, unwilling or unable to follow the posse. Minutes or even seconds later (but seconds stretched to the length of minutes), the posse returns in a soiled, frightened, stumbling heap. A thin cloud of smoke forms, rises, then dissipates from behind the treeline.

Were the camera to risk peeping through the trees at the stranger, it would capture a wide chalk-line drawn on the perimeter of the grassy plain, extending in both directions as far as the eye can see, behind which the stranger lies asleep, his head resting against one of the legs of his contraption.

Minutes later, a door slams. It is a young man, flushed with anger and excitement, who mounts a horse or a motorcycle and rides off towards the stranger. Behind him a woman (his mother? his lover? his wife?) runs out, as if to stop him, but he has already disappeared behind the trees, never to be seen again, or rather, no... he returns, but he has lost his horse or his bike, and like the others, his head is swimming, his forehead is bleeding, his clothes are soiled and muddy, and he is running and stumbling back towards the village.

From behind the treeline, a large sheet of fabric, strung up on an improbably tall pole slowly rises, quivers, quakes, then firms up, and gently ripples in the breeze. It is a large piece of red fabric with a black square sewn in the center of it.

Again, the camera, if there were one, would linger outside, perhaps wandering the streets of the silent village. Everyone by this time, all the men, women, children, and even certain well-loved family pets, has taken refuge in the town hall. The lights of the town hall are ablaze, and the sounds of a vociferous discussion, debate, or argument filter out from it into the street.

Hours later, a small group of heavily armed men strides purposefully, though with noticeable care and apprehension, towards the outermost line of houses. Walking into the tallest house of the lot, they take up their watch from its second-story windows. Meanwhile, the sun sets and night falls. The town hall remains illuminated for some time. At a certain point, some of its lights are turned off, yet no-one leaves the building, so that it is safe to assume that the townspeople will be spending the night there. Two of its windows, however, remain lit, and in the early morning, a large group of men, vehicles, and perhaps even horses can be heard making its way into the town from the direction opposite to that of the stranger, whose flag casts its shadow over the roofs and spires of the village as the sun slowly but steadily rises behind it.

As light starts to filter into the village, a large army of armed men, wearing different uniforms, riding different steeds or vehicles, and bearing different arms, slowly gather in front of the trees shielding them from the river and the stranger. Were the camera to rise improbably into the air and pan along the river's edge, it would capture an impressively large contingent of armed forces, all of them assembled behind the treeline. Once again, out of fear or perhaps a certain unconscious understanding of the situation and its inevitable conclusion, the camera would shy away from peering over to the other side, the stranger's, waiting until it had descended back to the ground before panning around and zooming in on his cryptic flag.

The rest is the stuff of legend, hearsay and hyperbole. The forces, once assembled, are given the signal to charge, which they do, crashing through, flying over, or even burrowing under the tree line and the river if they can before emerging onto the plane and finding ... nothing. Or rather no, just a flag, his flag, and as for the rest (the stranger, his box, its stand, the chalkline), all of that has disappeared, never to be seen again.

Years later, all that remains of the incident is a watchtower and its rotating group of watchmen, standing guard over the plain from behind the treeline, as well as an improbably long wooden pole and a flag, both stored in the basement of the town hall. The only other trace of the incident is a subtle yet unmistakable shift in the habits of the townspeople. One can detect it in the hesitation in their step whenever they cross over to the other side of the river, as well as in their tendency to travel across the plain in groups, or even in the difference between the cautious speed at which they enter the plain, and the furious pace of their return. In a few more years, this too will have faded, and the watchtower will have been abandoned or perhaps even dismantled, for it is safe to assume that they would not want to preserve it as a monument to this, their elusive and incongruous defeat.

The End





## MAN, MANNER, SHAPE, and FORM

If it is a man we are talking about, and not just a man, but a full-grown male of a man, then he has awakened. He is awake. He lies in his bed, staring at the ceiling, waiting for his alarm to ring. Soon enough it rings and he turns it off with a satisfied smile. Then, in one swift motion, he propels himself out of his sheets, into his slippers, and towards the kitchen of his small, sparsely furnished, one-bedroom apartment.

He would be a plain man, not unremarkable, but as close as one can be to having no definable characteristics, were it not for his distinctive heft and swagger, as well as something else, call it a bent: a sinuous and unnamable bent, like that of a thread drawn and subsumed into an undecipherable tangle.

It is still dark outside, a darkness increasingly attenuated by light.

Outside, women and children of all shapes and sizes are running and playing. As for the men, their absence is less alarming than it is significant. It speaks, at least to him, the one we have been examining. To him it speaks volumes. He notices, evaluates, and latches on to the form, manner, and degree of their absence. The activity of the women and children is unusual, given the time of day (it is early, it is still dark outside, a darkness slowly diluted by the incoming light of day), or even the time of year (it is winter, let us say that it is winter, it is the deep of winter, the weather is cold, the ground is burdened with snow, varnished with ice, which is why it is so dark outside, which is why it is still dark outside even at this late hour).

He is a plain man, he would be an unremarkable man were it not for the peculiar bent of his gait, not a limp but a lean, a curved lean, as if one side of his body were being drawn in like a bow with each step. As he makes his way into and around his kitchen, he smiles hastily at nothing and no one, as if evacuating a nervous impulse. He opens his

door, snatches up the morning paper, lays it on the kitchen table, and grins. Then he sits at the kitchen table and starts to laugh.

He is laughing at nothing. He is laughing for no one. Yet his laughter increases, its pace and volume rising in intensity as if this were a deliberate act, a calisthenic exercise of sorts. Then he stops. Abruptly, deliberately, he stops, rises, and starts to prepare food (toast) and drink (coffee).

The newspaper (which he does not read nor even open, but instead carefully stores in the last of eight identical filing boxes, each marked with a different set of dates) contains five different sections (the news, the local news, business, arts, and sports), and a total of one hundred and twenty-one different items, including editorials, album reviews, obituaries, and news blurbs. Among them, there are reports of a president acknowledging his public's anxiety about an overseas war, how ultrasounds could soon come to supplant biopsies, an abortion pill that fights breast cancer, what appears to have been a false terrorist scare in Los Angeles, a sexy latina actress who having successfully "made the leap from the small to the big screen this year, insists she has nothing in common with seductress Gabrielle Solis and wouldn't be friends with her if they were neighbors," a party girl seeking help, astronauts rewiring a space station, a rash of unexplained car thefts and accidents, a quiet hurricane season raising doubts about the actual threat of global warming, the continuing vitality of the Floridian drug trade, a huge snowstorm canceling hundreds of flights, a pope performing a P.R. miracle, the disappearance of a successful romance novelist and her fiancée, a massive tropical storm burying a mountain village under mud and boulders, hysteria resulting from the radiation threat posed by a dead spy, a minor-league English soccer player's unusual ability to throw the ball 70 yards with a "somersault lob," and a foreign dictator's absence from a military parade.

Hours later, having shaved, showered, and taken care of this or that, he dresses and leaves his apartment. He is wearing a grey wool suit, a white cotton shirt, a blue silk tie, black leather shoes, and no belt.

There is a lump in his jacket, a bulge in his pants, and a hole in his slate-grey cashmere socks. Once outside, he lights an El Rey Del Mundo Petite

Corona cigar and heads south on Grand Street, towards the bus depot, fiddling all the while with the black and white passport photo of the person he intends to meet there in precisely forty-five minutes.

But that is another story altogether. What is of interest to us is not this man, nor his premeditated actions and their consequences, however surprising they may turn out to be. What is of interest, of vital and urgent interest to all those concerned (however distant, detached, or removed) are the telltale signs of a certain foreshadowed though unfamiliar pattern, of which this man is a single, vital, though almost imperceptible mosaic piece.

The End



## Cob and Bar

Cob and Bar woke up at the exactly the same time, having synchronized then set their alarms in advance. Though they were in different, one might even say opposite parts of the same city, they followed almost identical routines: first rising from the waist up, then stretching, then farting, then sliding off the bed and standing, then stretching from the waist down, then preparing dark coffee and grilling two slices of toast that they then coated with marmalade and butter, then washing, then shaving, then brushing their teeth and their hair (in that order), then dressing, then going out in the street and directing their steps towards the same location. They left their houses at exactly the same time, both waiting between two to three minutes so as to remain in sync.

Needless to say, their names were not Cob and Bar. Nor was this precise coordination of actions all that necessary. They could just as well have left at different times, one waiting for the other to come. Nor did they have to follow the same sequence of actions, or even eat the same sort of toast with the same sort of spread. Yet the truth of the matter is that they were being watched, a fact which accounts both for their pseudonyms and their absurdly synchronized routines.

Neither the one nor the other was a creature of habit. They were foolishly irregular in their ways and deeds, so that even this brief spurt of regimented behavior was but another instance and example of their inconsistency. When they did meet, it was to sit next to one another, side by side on the same bench, and read the same set of morning papers (one Italian, two German, three French, four English, and five Russian publications, bought from two different branches of the same chain of news stands), in exactly the same sequence: starting with the Sports pages, then moving to Business, Arts, Obituaries, Personals, Wanted Ads, News, and Editorials. They ripped out the same advertisements for men's suits from the same Swiss-German periodical, then folded the same Russian periodical under their arm, leaving the same pile of papers on the bench before leaving in opposite directions, Cob going right and Bar going left (their right and your left).

Meanwhile, on the other side of town, two brothers, twins to be exact, identical twins to be precise, dressed not at all alike, their hair styled differently, their mannerisms so unlike as to seem purposefully contrasted, these two brothers met and assembled a high-powered rifle on the roof of a disaffected trade school. They waited, the one smoking while the other drank, then the one drinking while the other, his brother, smoked. What happened next will forever be remembered by those who witnessed and survived it; suffice it to say that it was devastatingly efficient, and yet perhaps a little excessive. But that is neither here nor now, what is of interest to us at this juncture are the unexplained and inexplicable disappearances of Cob and Bar, at exactly the same time, in two different parts of the same town, and at exactly the same distance from the same bench on which they had sat and read the morning papers. How this happened when they were being trailed by not one but three sleuths each is inconceivable. Yet the fact remains that it did happen, and that they were never seen nor heard from again on these shores.

The End





# Guilty Pleasures

A Continuous Romance with Intermittent Suspense

## Part I: The Sunshine State

Jake Flexman stepped out of the shower with a satisfied groan. Briskly toweling off his bulging physique, he smiled as he examined the red welt on his neck in the foggy mirror, his thoughts taking a pleasurable turn to the previous night's activities. Just then the door chime rang. Wrapping a plush yet undersized bath towel around his waist, Jake walked into the living room of his sunny beachfront apartment.

“Who is it?” he asked, but before the answer came, he already knew. He had recognized the scent of jasmine and baby powder, and a sudden lift in the terry cloth betrayed his excitement. It could only be Daria, his next-door neighbor and a stunning Southern California beauty. His pulse quickened in anticipation as he opened the door.

She was as breathtaking as always. Her firm oval breasts were barely held in place by the plunging neck of her fitted sweater. The rounded tips of her erect nipples poked through the pink cashmere weave. She smiled, slowly circling the tip of her tongue between her plump orchid lips, as she brushed a stray lock of bleached-blond hair from her opalescent eyes. He took in her rounded hips and the enticing curves of her muscular thighs, while she surveyed him with matching appreciation.

“You look good,” he said, his eyes dwelling on her tan-lines, “I see you’ve been out in the water. Making any progress, or do you need a change of instructors?”

She smiled and replied, "I'm not going to ask you how you know that, Sherlock, but yes, I have been out in the water, and yes, actually, I do need a change of instructors. Dave is no longer...how shall I say this? He moved on I guess."

"Isn't it more like you moved on?" he replied, with a twinkle in his aqua blue eyes, "I'd be glad to fill in... with the kite-surfing I mean."

"Yes, of course, with the kite-surfing. That's what you mean," she laughed, "Well I just might take you up on that, but that's not why I came to see you. I have a favor to ask."

"Shoot."

"Would you mind helping me move something into my apartment?" she asked, "It's a box of books, but it's too heavy for me to carry up the stairs."

"Not a problem, why don't you come inside and wait while I throw some clothes on, or would you rather I come out like this?"

She laughed. He smiled. There was a sound like the pop of a champagne cork. Jake chortled, his eyes widening as he collapsed into a convulsive heap. She screamed. He drooled and closed his eyes as a bullet lodged into the doorframe above him. The wind suddenly blew the door shut, locking her out and locking him in. Still screaming, she kicked ineffectively at the door, then ran out into the parking lot. A rapid burst of gunfire erupted behind her as she plunged under a passing truck, rolling expertly between its wheels, coming out unscathed on the other side, still screaming, still running, as the machine gun tore a jagged line through the truck, killing the young Hispanic driver. The truck swerved and collided into a parked UPS van, then burst into flames. Her sweater was torn and she was still screaming, a continuous note which she held for an inconceivably long time, yet her eyes were thin, determined points. She wheeled around, dipping behind a palm tree for protection, while pulling a Glock out from under her thin billowing skirt, and firing five shots, killing both of her assailants. The gunfire stopped. She remembered Jake. A hint of moisture

welled up, quickly repressed, as she slid the warm gun back into the pink leather holster she kept strapped to her inner thigh. The wind had fanned the flames of the burning truck, and the building was now starting to catch on fire.

Just then, a man stumbled out of the stairwell she had just left. She reached for her gun, then stopped and ran out to assist him. It was Jake. He was alive. Naked, bruised, blackened by the smoke, disoriented, and bleeding slightly from the tranquilizer shot in his shoulder, but alive. She grabbed him, supporting the heft of his well-hewn physique, and escorted him to her car, covering up his singed loins with a raincoat before speeding off in a peal of burning rubber.

## Part II: House Party

The thin serrated blade of the carving knife slowly insisted its way into the moist pink flesh of the ham roast, as a stockinged foot slid into John Edlermeyer's linen shorts.

The sun glanced off of Angelina Fleischman's pearlescent teeth, as Jacob Witzstein, a gardener and a spy, slowly peeled off his sweat-soaked tank top, laying it on the newly trimmed bush by his side.

Susan Pellegrino surreptitiously tugged her sparkling pink G-string above her belt line, as Juan Valloso, a waiter and an undercover narcotics agent, plunged his avid gaze down her bursting cleavage while laying a small, precise lump of puréed peas onto her plate.

It was a sunny day in Pensacola Beach, Florida, yet the shades were drawn. Among the guests sat a thin pale figure who abhorred the sun, and whom all the other guests feared: Jim Wachtel, the international financier. His thin sparrow-like features outlined against the drawn shades, he gently slid his right index finger under the trembling loins of his private secretary, Hans Grünwelt, and asked for another glass of ginger ale.

Across from him, Phil Dashell adjusted his position to accommodate the growing bulge in his canvas beach pants, which the expert hand of his neighbor, Sylvina Mayer, was kneading to a paroxysm of anticipated release under the tablecloth. Everyone was smiling, some even laughing occasionally at Jared Smith's lascivious jokes. Two doors down, Gwyndolina Fleischer was slowly massaging Frank Jameson's lubricated hands into her naked breasts, as he repeatedly flushed the toilet to conceal her moans.

Outside, the sun was suddenly obscured by a passing cloud. There was a sound like the stunted exhalation of a geyser, followed by a loud explosion in the front yard. Helicopters appeared over the edge of the cliff, strafing the yard with their side-mounted machine guns, quickly killing off the hired help as they ran through the front yard. Concealed behind

the low-brick wall which surrounded the pool, Jacob Witzstein ineffectively emptied his automatic weapon at the helicopters as they flew past him and faded into the distance.

He rose slowly and surveyed the scene. Corpses of waiters, maids, and busboys littered the lawn. There was a large crater where the pool had once been, water shooting up into the sky from the burst pipes. He wiped his brow, then sat and collected his thoughts, while trying to ignore the buzzing in his ears. Slowly rising to his feet, he carefully sidled up to the house. Everyone inside had left, vanished, disappeared, with the sole exception of Juan Valloso, whom he found asleep in the broom closet, slightly disheveled and reeking of chloroform.

### Part III: Catch and Release

“I... we, we can't go on like this José. Not now, not after what happened.”

“I know. Believe me, I know. Look, we've just got to... I don't know, if we could just keep it together for a few more days, I could plan something, I could, I know I could, I mean... I don't know. There's got to be a way to just...”

The two drew closer together then quickly jumped apart, as if the air between them had suddenly expanded. An empty gas canister had fallen to the ground, then rolled to a corner of the dark room. Within seconds, the air was filled with a dense white smoke. José Ramirez of the Fort Lauderdale police force slowly sank to his knees, his head tilting under the weight of a deep narcotic haze. As he struggled to resist its effects, he saw a group of armed men in gas masks advance towards his companion. Then his eyes closed and he collapsed into a limp heap.

When he woke up, it was past midnight. He stood up, still reeling from the gas, and slowly made his way out of the abandoned warehouse. The building was empty. It was late. There were no traces of his companion. No one knew about them, no one could know about them, not now, perhaps not ever. Or so he thought until today, until he realized that someone did know, and that they were going to use that knowledge against him, for he knew that Juan's freedom and even his life could only be secured in exchange for something, something he would not be willing to do under other circumstances. Yet this was not what he was afraid of. In fact, as a former undercover narcotics agent in one of the most important transport hubs for the South American drug trade, if José was afraid of anything, it was that there would be no such demand, and that this was simply the opening act in an elaborate scheme of retribution.

Exiting the building, he walked unsteadily towards his car. A folded piece of paper was stuck under one of the wiper blades. He pulled it out, his hands trembling, and opened it after a momentary hesitation. As soon as he started to read it, the trembling in his hands stopped. He looked up. Now he knew what had happened to Juan, and more importantly, he knew

who had done it. He also more or less knew what was expected of him. But there was something else, something that had made him almost optimistic, that had made him feel (for the first time in what had been months of agony, guilt, and indecision) as if something of a way out had opened up for both of them. He allowed himself a furtive smile, then burned the missive with the gold-plated lighter he had received from his colleagues for his birthday. He had to call his wife, he thought, but first he had to come up with some sort of an excuse. Pulling out his cellphone, he saw that she had called several times and left a few messages on his phone. He also saw that he had a text message from an unlisted caller. He opened it. It simply contained a phone number. Inhaling deeply, running his fingers through his hair several times in succession, he quickly dialed the number. There was a brief silence, then the sound of a phone ringing somewhere close by. He lowered his phone, then looked at his car and opened his mouth as if to scream, but was instantly interrupted by the sudden explosion of the nitroglycerin car bomb in its trunk. Needless to say, the device (loaded with four pounds of nails, bolts, shipyard confetti, and fish hooks) killed him instantly.

Two hours later, the remnants of a bloated, half-eaten corpse washed up on the shores of Turn Key in the Everglades National Park. The corpse was found by a park ranger the next morning, the papers in the victim's waterlogged wallet (which had been shrink-wrapped and duct-taped to his waist) identifying him as one Juan Valloso, secretary and nephew to the former Peruvian ambassador to the United States, informer for the Miami Vice Squad, and suspected mole for Paquito Gomez's newly minted Rincon cartel. The victim had been drugged, suffocated, possibly beheaded, then cast out to sea. The sharks had done the rest. A posthumous search of Juan Valloso's hotel room at the Sheraton Miami Mart Hotel revealed no substantial clues or evidence, and the case was abruptly dropped, in spite of the fact that both detectives in charge of the investigation had expressed doubts as to the real identity of the victim.

Two and a half years later, after a grueling yet essentially fruitless investigation, the assassination of Juan Valloso was declared unsolved, and blamed on the various drug syndicates and cartels targeted by Valloso in his brief yet illustrious career as an undercover narcotics agent. His wife

remarried that fall, then moved a year later to Puerto Rico with her new husband, one J. Witzstein, to start an orchid farm. She later discovered a talent for writing, starting with a book of memoirs, titled *Undercover Widow*. The success of her first book inspired her to try her hand at her favorite literary genre: historical romance. She soon established herself as one of the leading practitioners of the genre, thanks to the success of her immensely popular “Duchessa” series, of which the last and final volume, titled *Silver Jubilee*, is due to come out this November.

## Part IV: Curtain of Blood

“It was a dark and...” she started to write, then stopped, lit a cigarette, repressed a smile, and took another sip of her Frozen Midori Sour. Outside her window, the sun was setting, painting the turquoise waters of the Gulf of Mexico a crimson red. A curtain of blood, Janet thought, and wrote the phrase down in the notebook she kept by her side for that purpose (earlier that afternoon, she had written “commuters- test monkeys on space flight,” and “erect nipples poking through cashmere sweater – weave?”). It was a shame, she thought, she had been looking forward to dinner at the Tsunami Grill with Herb. She smiled and glanced at him. He was standing on the balcony, talking to Sarah. What a bitch, thought Janet. Herb couldn’t stand her either, but he had no choice but to put up with her until the Closetron deal was sealed. Then, he’d always say, once it was all said and done, maybe he could talk to the other partners, not that they were aware of anything of course. She was such a two-faced... Janet’s thoughts were interrupted by a bright flare of light in the distance, followed by a loud boom. She rushed outside. It had happened sooner than she had expected. Herb was trying to get off the phone with Sarah (“I think something happened... Look, I don’t know, let me call you back...”), when both heard another explosion. This one had come from somewhere behind them, somewhere close behind them because the sound was terrifyingly loud, and the windows, walls, and even the floor shook with the aftershock.

She fell into his arms, sobbing. A thick acrid smoke wafted in, quickly surrounding them. Something was burning. A deafening concert of car alarms and hysterical shrieks had been set off by the incident. Reacting quickly, Herb scooped Janet up in his arms and quickly escorted her out of the apartment, grabbing her purse and his briefcase on the way out. Seconds later, he ran back, unplugged her computer and shoved it in his briefcase along with her notebook and diary. As he turned to leave, he glanced out the window and saw a fire burning miles away on the darkening waters of the Gulf where the first explosion had taken place.

Above her desk, four faded newspaper clippings had been taped to the window. One of them detailed the life of Carlos Lehder Rivas, co-founder of the Medellin cartel, illustrated by a photograph of the bronze life-sized statue of a nude, helmeted John Lennon with a bullet in his heart he had erected on his property, on the island of Norman's Cay in the Bahamas. The other three were more recent, part of a series of articles in the Naples Sun-Times on the resurgence of the drug trade in Florida and the widespread corruption of local officials. The first was of a judge who had been caught smoking marijuana within sight of an elementary schoolyard by two jogging off-duty policemen. The second was of a Fort Lauderdale building and zoning official who had been fired after traces of marijuana and crystal methamphetamine were found in his briefcase. To make money, he had started selling the paintings of a friend of his, the daughter of a famous mid-century abstract artist, from his van. He was also working on a novel, titled *City Hall is Murder*. He was requesting access to all the documents and emails related to his firing. He needed them, he said, to "clear his name," and also to use in his novel. The third story was of a police cop who had been caught stealing drugs from a simulated crime scene. Suspected of drug theft, he had been sent to investigate a staged car crash, and was apprehended after having failed to disclose the fact that the vehicle contained cocaine and marijuana. The drugs had actually been planted by the department in an effort to catch him red-handed, and were later found in his gym bag.

Herb ran down the staircase, calling out for Janet, who should have been waiting for him outside the apartment door. As he stepped out into the parking lot, a police-issue nightstick slammed against his skull, knocking him unconscious. Two masked men swiftly tied and gagged him, then dumped him along with his briefcase in the rear of a blue Chevrolet Uplander van next to Janet, who was busy making a phone call. She nodded at the two men, who then quickly closed the back of the van, entered the cab from opposite sides, then drove off, skidding past the burning carcass of Herb's Mustang GT California Special and the perplexed stares of Janet's former neighbors, Jill Watford and Tosh Sandler, who had been gagged, bound, and handcuffed to the rear bumper of their black Cadillac Escalade.

Ten minutes later, there was a hushed explosion in the bedroom closet of Janet's apartment. The closet door abruptly caught fire. Within minutes, the synthetic rug serving as a lethally effective transmitter of the flames, the entire apartment was ablaze. Her captive neighbors later recalled hearing four more muffled detonations, as if devices had been planted in various parts of her apartment. In spite of the rapid response and valiant efforts of the Naples Fire Department, the Gulf Shore Arms apartment complex was quickly reduced to cinders.

## Part V: Between the Sheets

“And is there an end to your story?” she asked as she drew rapidly shrinking circles around his left breast with the tip of her red nail, “Or is it not that type of story?”

He laughed and drew her closer to him, feeling the warmth of her strawberry scented breath on his neck.

“It’s not a story baby, you know that, look...” he paused and inhaled deeply, “The point is, this really happened, and...”

“I know that. I was there, remember?” she said, stiffening slightly.

“I know that, baby, I know that, that’s not what I meant,” he nuzzled against her earlobe and kissed her gently, “What I meant was that... it’s like.. well for starters, I don’t really know, you don’t really know, I guess we’ll never really ever know if and when it’s over, I mean this thing could lie dormant and flare up again after we’re dead and buried.”

“Is it really that big and terrifying of a thing?” she asked derisively.

“Do you even doubt it?” he replied, “After what we saw last month, can you even doubt that it’s something really big? I mean,” he exhaled deeply, then laughed, “To me it was a job. That’s what it was for you too. A job. We did what they told us to do. What she told us to do that is, whoever she is, and maybe she’s just a cover for something else, like an organization or something. Whoever they are, they’re pretty well organized, and well funded, and they seem to have a lot of people working for them. But what gets to me is not so much the how, though that’s mysterious to be sure, but it’s not what gets to me, no, what gets to me is the why,” he paused once more, then continued, “If I’ve been going through it all with you, it’s because I’m trying to find a reason, or even a pattern, some sort of a thread. But I’m not finding anything. It’s like reading the news. An accident here, an incident there. Every day there’s a fresh crop of invasions, abductions, assassinations, robberies, kidnappings, floods... but nothing to connect

them together, and for all we know, many of them could have been done by people like you and me. Maybe for the same employers or..." he sighed and raised his arms in exasperation, "Well, you know what I mean. These things happen day in, day out, and we've somehow become immune to them. Immune is not the right word. Do you even see what I'm trying to say?"

"But if it's so complicated to think about it, and so easy not to, then why worry about it?" she asked.

"You're probably right. Why worry about it? I guess I can't help it in a way," he smiled and turned to her as she gently slipped out of his arms, interrupting his nascent query by gently raising her finger to her lips as she entered the bathroom and closed the door.

He settled back into the mattress, and closed his eyes. He exhaled and inhaled deeply, surprised at the speed at which his anxious thoughts were dissipating under the warm flood of his well-sated fatigue. Drifting into sleep, he envisioned the world as a shimmering ball of colored pixels. Like a high-powered camera, he was zooming in on the globe from afar. As he drew closer, he saw that some of the pixels were waxing and waning, changing colors, or even growing in size. But these events and flare-ups were short-lived. Still he drew closer to the hypnotic mosaic, until he found himself above a town, then above a building, then entering the building from the roof exit, and walking down its stairs, through a metal door, and into a long white corridor. The corridor was blindingly white, its walls like uninterrupted streaks of light on both sides of him (uninterrupted by doors, windows, stairs, or elevators). At the end of the corridor was another door. The door opened. He saw a large glass desk at the far end of a vast room. Behind the desk was a seated man, similar to him in build, and size, his darkened features backlit against a translucent white curtain.

In spite of the darkness, he saw that the man had smiled at him. He bowed his head slightly and continued to approach, but only after having been invited by a gesture to do so.

The man smiled again. On his table were a map, a box of multi-colored pins, and a neat pile of slides. By his hand was a notepad, a simple, white notepad, whose marked top-sheet the man ripped off rather violently, rolled up into a ball, and placed on the table.

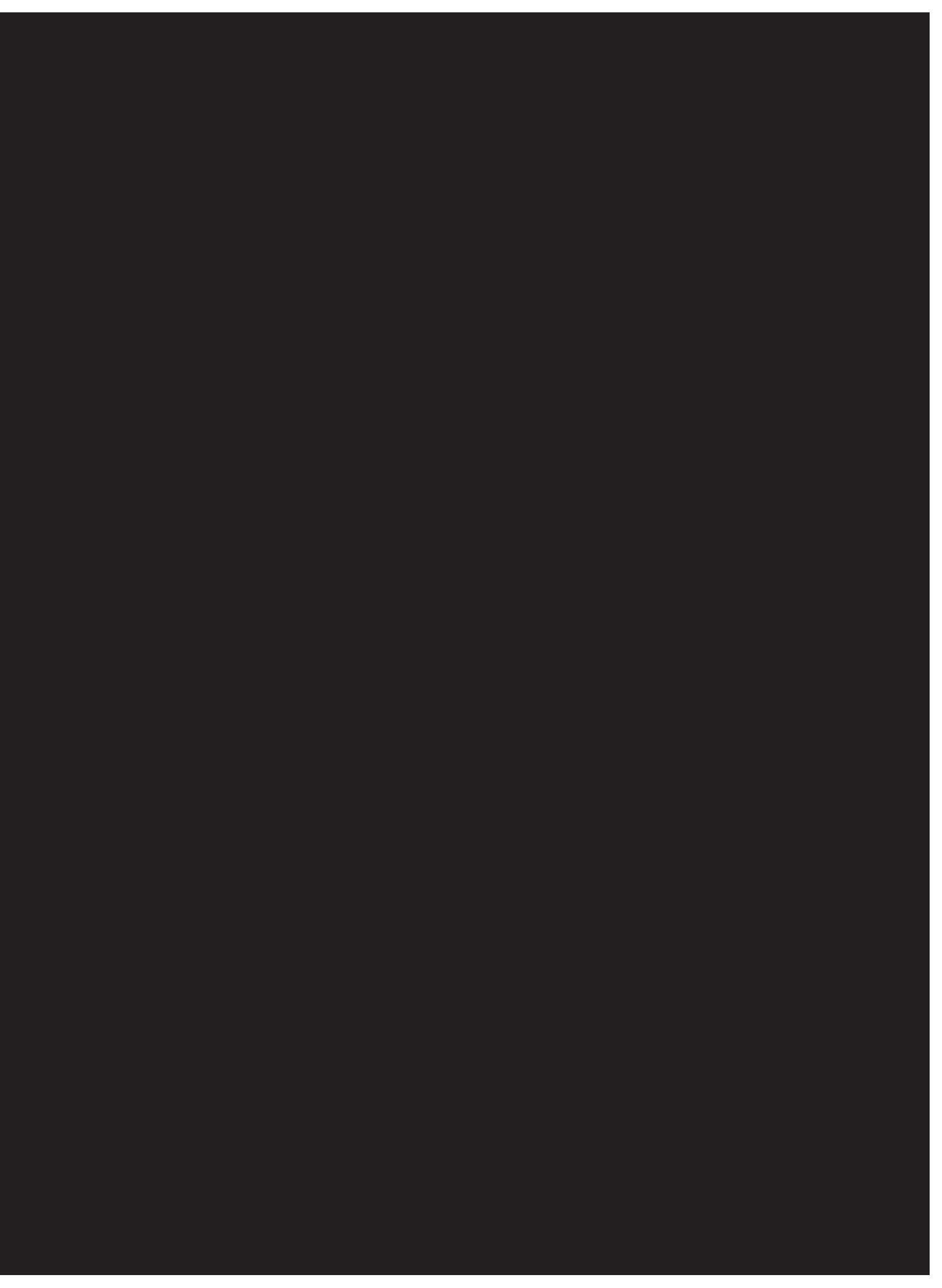
He came to a standstill in front of the desk, looking at the smiling man in front of him, looking as his interlocutor started to laugh, his laughter increasing, its pace and volume rising in intensity as if his were a deliberate act, a calisthenic exercise of sorts. Then the laughter stopped. Abruptly, deliberately, the seated man stopped, smiled, then rose from his seat. From behind the curtain, a woman stepped out with drinks, cigars, and a horseshoe-shaped copper ashtray. Where had she come from? he wondered. He smiled at the woman as she drew closer, thinking all the while that he had seen her somewhere, but unable to pin a name to her face. The woman smiled. The man behind the desk smiled, grinned, then started to laugh, his laughter increasing, its pace and volume rising in intensity as if his were a deliberate act, a calisthenic exercise of sorts. Then the laughter stopped.

The dreamer awakened.

The End























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