

FREE PREVIEW

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Author
IS
Dead



MICHEL BRUNEAU

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To my Muse—unpredictable, wild, and surely insane.

The problem is not when somebody's watching you.
It is not when nobody's watching you.
It is when nobody's watching over you.

*Algebra [Al·ge·bra. Noun. Relationships of abstract entities
for which $A-B=0$ is true for everybody]*

My Very Own Prologue

All I want is to be normal like those kids without mad parents, bruises, and broken bones.

The rapes were horrible, but it was the killings that were unbearable.

It was the best of times, it was the worst of times.

That's how my story might have started if the Author had really existed.

But it doesn't.

Bad Start

I was born in a village of morons where nothing ever happened. So the trial was quite an event.

A very big deal.

An order of magnitude more exciting than the inaugural of the telegraph depot a couple of years ago, when the first message received launched frenetic celebrations—quite a feat for an uninspired “This is a test STOP Please reply END” sent by an anonymous bureaucrat miles away.

The trial generated a lot more excitement, for sure, but it was also a frenzy of a different kind. Like a visceral feeling that the world stood at the edge of a cliff and that all living souls had to be conscripted to prevent Armageddon—although, in reality, that world at the edge of a cliff was only a dumb village in a rut.

The excited patrons, as turbulent as self-enlisted soldiers eager to fight, filled all the available space in the village’s meeting hall. Bodies were squeezed in chairs in a continuous mass of overheating flesh, from the front of the stage all the way to the back where five layers of agitated observers stood in what was intended to be one row of standing-room space. Makeshift stands, built overnight and added along the walls, wobbled when all stamped their feet in unison, scanting improvised slogans. The luckiest of the late arrivals blocked the doorways, followed by the rest of the village and curious folks from everywhere else, arrayed as if funnels led to the doors. The mob outside, blind to the proceedings, was impressively silent, trying to hear the commotion inside. Criers were posted on the roof, ready to provide to those outside a verbatim play-by-play of the case, as transmitted to them by a chain of whispering colleagues spread through the rafters.

It was quite a show, and I likely would have enjoyed it too had I not been the defendant.

Now, don't get me wrong.
I never committed any crime.

Except for stealing a dictionary, once [*Dic·tion·ary. Noun. Alphabetical list of words whose meanings are dictated by the same invisible rascals who define what constitutes a crime; compendium of definitions in process of being revised by yours truly*]. I admit, this was a reprehensible act and it crossed my mind after the fact that it might get me in trouble someday. But this trial had nothing to do with that dictionary. In fact, most of the people in the room had not opened a dictionary since school—and most hadn't stayed in school for longer than a nap. No, this trial was about serious matters.

This trial was about having taken the wrong side.

In a village of morons, you can't take the wrong side.

I should have known.

It was all foreseeable.

Even though, in my mind, I wasn't guilty and had committed no crime, to those in the room I was guilty as charged, and the trial was a mere formality—but an entertaining one for sure, as it provided a welcome distraction from a life so dull that even roosters slept through sunrise out of boredom. One couldn't have distilled an ounce of doubt about my guilt from the cocktail of hate and anger percolating in the room. Even the presiding, hooded magistrate had a hard time keeping decorum to give a semblance of solemnity, as he would much rather have been in the bleachers cheering with the lynch mob.

"Order. Order in the courthouse," he repeated with little conviction, enjoying the ruckus. That hammering was also the cue for the guards to bring me to the dock where I was to sit silently during the proceedings. All the excitement and disorderly chitchat turned into a focused rage as soon as I entered the room.

On the stage, although overshadowed by the towering judicial bench, I had a perfect view of the audience. I could see all the village's familiar faces contorted with anger, some with foam at the mouth, among a sea of unfamiliar thrill seekers presumably attracted by the smell of blood. I particularly noticed Cassandra's father—whose big nose always reminded me of a can opener—making obscene gestures from the second row, acting as if the single row of flesh in front of him prevented him from jumping on stage to beat me senseless. Even my parents, at the left end of the last row in the stands, had joined the crowd hurling insults, care-

fully hiding any incriminating love they may have felt toward their son—if any. Grandpa, clearly embarrassed by them and exasperated by the whole circus, sat in silence at the other end of that last row next to Barbooyee who, as always, was likely mumbling the “t’t, tap t’tap, tapt’, tap tap tap, t’tap tap,” that mirrored his incoherent thoughts between long, lazy jaw pauses—although that stuttering disability turned out to be a blessing as it landed him the job of village telegraphist. The Small Visionary was perched in a makeshift box—although barely a couple of feet higher than everybody else—smack in the middle of the last row where he observed the proceedings in absolute delight.

Facing all that intimidating madness, I felt blessed to have a public defender. Imagine if I had been ordered to defend myself like it used to be before our modern times. I’d be lost. How could a fifteen-year-old know all the things one needs to master to appease a hostile crowd and win over a magistrate?

Sure, it would have been better if my public defender owned a comb, some soap, and clothes without holes. And if he hadn’t spent the days leading to the trial emptying barrels of rum one glass at the time in an attempt (unsuccessful) to cure the chronic case of hiccups that plagued him since childhood.

Sober, he was a nice person who seemed knowledgeable in the rules of procedure. He had told me that what I had done was “humanauthorian,” and his strategy was to plead accordingly. I had no clue what that meant, but given that it took him a while to come up with this defense, and that it was a huge improvement over his initial counsel to plead guilty and beg for a lenient sentence, I didn’t argue and remained optimistic.

After much hammering from the magistrate to finally silence the mob, he gave my public defender the floor for his opening statement. While unable to drown his hiccup problem, he had learned—with thirty years of practice—to keep his mouth shut to transform “hics” into “gulps,” thus muffling their impact, minimizing embarrassing moments, and making it possible to carefully time short sentences between two hiccups.

“My client is the victim of a judicial farce,” he blasted before two gulps.

The crowd immediately responded, booing, hissing, yelling “Burn in obscurity!”

“Order. Order,” hammered the magistrate, without much effect.

“What happened is entirely not his fault,” insisted my defender, with great conviction, trying to shout above the rumble—even though he and I seemed to be the only ones buying it.

“Order. Order.”

Adding to the general commotion, a roaring outburst started outdoors—out-of-phase with the indoor one as a result of the crier’s delay in relaying the play-by-play of the proceedings. I felt surrounded by thunder, wondering why lightning hadn’t struck me yet. Fists were pounding the air above screaming heads. Threats were unintelligible, drowned by the general shouting, foot-stomping, explosive outrage, and taunts of hysterical patrons [*Patron. Noun. Social or financial psychopath who expects the world on a platter in grateful return for having showed up—or for having bought a beer*].

The magistrate, amused and enjoying his position at the helm, fueled the freak show by a deliberate “laissez-faire” discipline, banging his gavel as required by protocol, but without muscle. It took him a quarter of an hour to silence the mob before the trial could continue. The jumping shoulders of my public defender testified to an intensified hiccups crisis.

“You may resume your opening statement,” calmly instructed the magistrate.

Taking a deep breath, timing his delivery, and clustering his words in small bunches, he resumed: “None of this (gulp) would have happened (gulp) if not for the silliness (gulp) of a silly little (gulp) silly girl—hic.”

He missed one, triggering some laughs, as if the slip revealed his incompetence, relieving concerns in the crowd that I might have had a shot at evading justice.

For emphasis, he added: “All that has happened (gulp) is entirely the fault (gulp) of a little harum-scarum (gulp), irresponsible, unscrupulous (gulp), and hair-brained girl named (gulp) Cassandra Dew Hawkyns.”

That’s when the riot broke loose. Everybody stood up at the same time.

Fortunately for me, the crowd had been packed so tight that, with everybody up and the empty chairs becoming obstacles impeding movement across the floor, the mob got jammed in place.

The generalized pushing and shoving match that this triggered only made things worse, perpetuating the paralysis.

Strangely, from what was first a cacophony of anger and outrage, slowly emerged a rhythm, as if hate had a pulse.

“HERESY! HERESY! HERESY!” chanted the crowd.

Those at the front, crushed against the stage, unable to free themselves to jump on it, swung their extended arms wildly, hoping to grab me in their claws.

“KILL THE HERETICS! KILL THEM BOTH!”

My defender shuddered at the thought that a mob could link his destiny to mine. Given his opening statement though, it wasn’t a surprise.

Everyone in the Dominion knew Cassandra Dew Hawkyns by then. Arguably, nobody would have disputed that she was a little twerp—particularly those from the village who had known her for years—but after having been glorified by the Small Visionary for her recent actions, she was untouchable. Not adulated, but off limits, even though—as correctly stated by my defender—she was the harum-scarum, irresponsible, unscrupulous, and hair-brained initiator of this entire mess. Even I could have told my defender that attacking her wasn’t a brilliant strategy. Had he warned me that this was his grand plan, I would have told him to slack off on the rum; I would have chosen to defend myself instead.

It’s on days like those that I wondered why I had to be born in a village of morons. Was there really no other option?

More pressingly though, why did I land in such a hostile courtroom, awaiting the only sentence that would appease the vicious pack of wolves that was once a peaceful flock of sheep? A flock to which I once belonged.

There’s an explanation.

A long one.

Let’s start from the very beginning.

No Better Start

Cassandra was a little pest whose perky righteousness could be your worst nightmare. I didn't know it then. We were only seven years old.

What I knew at that age was that Cassandra would cling to you like burdock; once the damn thing was glued to you, getting rid of her was challenging.

Some people cling to others because they have no life of their own, no initiative, no imagination, or simply because their sad puppy face is desperate for a sympathetic person that could serve as a pillow. Cassandra wasn't such a poor sap. Her clinging was instead driven by an unquenchable desire to spy, admonish, and denounce—with a determination most exhausting to her victims, because once she had latched onto a prey, ditching her wasn't simple.

One might think that simply stopping all activities and sitting on a rock while waiting for her to get bored and leave would have done the trick, but that strategy only offered her a tribune to lecture, endlessly repeating word-for-word the millions of rules we were taught in school, while emphasizing the need to obey those rules and the consequences for failing to do so.

One might think that telling her outright to disappear, get lost, or eat shit and die would have hurt her feelings and left her running home crying, but it only served to harden her shell and her resolve in catching deviant behavior—if there is indeed such a thing as a hardened seven-year-old criminal.

One might think that hurling rocks would have kept her at bay, but it only gave her ammunition—and satisfaction—to denounce improper behavior liable to harsh punishment.

No, the best way to get rid of her was simply not to be found by her in the first place.

One day, it occurred to me that a good way to do that might be to sneak into the forest first thing in the morning—escaping the village before the monster left her lair to start annoying people. This was a relatively simple thing to do given that my house was at the edge of the village, so I gave it a try. For extra safety, I traveled deep into the woods, far from the village and from the reach of Cassandra’s stalking, until I eventually discovered a hollow, near a stream, that seemed like a safe haven. For a while, day after day, right after sunrise, I would travel to that peaceful hideout with a homemade sandwich, only to return for dinner, and it worked: for the entire week, I didn’t see Cassandra. I didn’t see my parents during daytime either, for that matter, but they were too busy running the general store to care about how I kept busy during the summer holiday.

So my plan was phenomenally successful—except for the fact that spending entire days alone in the forest was utterly boring, even when I brought along playing cards or puzzles to kill time. Swimming in ponds along the stream while trying to catch crayfish got old too after a while. Yet, I continued to go every day because in my unexplored, uninhabited, undeveloped piece of forest, the company of shy squirrels, ugly toads, dull slugs, and biting flies was a thousand times better than that of shy, ugly and dull kids who were not particularly friendly—and it rid me of the most unfriendly and biting one.

As I arrived at the hollow, on the eighth consecutive day of my self-inflicted exile, convinced more than ever that absolute solitude was better than suffering the nagging personality of Cassandra, a girl sprung up from behind a rock. She had hidden there when branches snapping underfoot announced my approach, fearing the arrival of an adult, and was both surprised and pleased that I turned out to be a non-threatening presence.

Her name was June; we were the same height; and she was the total opposite of Cassandra. She also had lilacs in her hair—hair that, some might say, was of golden flax. I didn’t know where she came from, but it definitely was not my village.

Unfortunately, I don’t remember all the details of our encounter. I was seven years old, and this whole escapade-into-the-woods story is one of my earliest childhood memories. There are holes in that story that time will never be able to fill, but while many specific details are forever lost, what remains is a certainty

that her presence was soothing. She was the first kid my age with whom I was at peace. We met for many consecutive days at the hollow, and I thought of her as my first friend. Even though childhood remains a fuzzy memory at best, some powerful images forever remain etched in one's mind, and I have kept two such images from my chance encounter with June.

The first one is of me giving her my leather necklace. It was a rather ordinary leather rope at the end of which dangled a small apple carved in basswood. Not a big gift—just a trinket—or so it seemed. A gift presumably offered as token of my love—as far as a seven-year-old can be naively in love, of course [*Love. Noun. Mysterious and uncontrollable binding force and affection for a person; known to trigger bouts of insanity and ripping apart daisies; sometimes incurable*]. Since we weren't of an age to carve initials in trees, I gave her a little bit of sculpted wood.

The second image is more vivid. Unforgettable.

It starts with June and I, stark naked in the woods, staring at our differences. Two seven-year-old kids, baffled by the mystery of it all, trying to figure out why they were physiologically mismatched. How it happened, I don't recall. What I do remember though, is feeling like an explorer discovering a new continent.

In those days, even at that age, boys, as a group, knew they were somewhat similar to each other—thanks to pissing contests and other crude sillinesses of youth. Presumably girls also knew they were the same within their group, for reasons a boy wouldn't know. Furthermore, in villages, naked babies are a sort of permanent exhibit, so June and I knew that the flagrant differences confronting us weren't anomalies within our gender. We had been created that way, for reasons unknown; with time, and paying close attention to animal life, we would eventually figure it out, but at seven, the fact that animals and humans behaved similarly in some aspects hadn't been realized yet. That extrapolation would come in due time.

For the time being, in that mesmerizing moment, it was just an unprecedented and privileged opportunity to scrutinize the mysteries of the other sex, free of parental obstruction. Besides, naked June was a lot more intriguing than a naked baby. I particularly remember that we stayed connected in some delightful way for a long moment.

Warm as the sun.

There was no shyness, no shame, no flaw in that shared experience.

I was in love.

It was all innocence.

It felt good.

Until we heard the scream.

A horrific noise—scorching, like lungs trying to escape the body in one blow.

This is how a dream turns into a nightmare.

Cassandra.

It turns out that my prolonged absence from the village had been noticed by creepy Cassandra—obviously—from the very beginning. So, keeping vigil in the wee hours to figure out how I had managed my disappearing act, she had caught one of my earlier escapes, followed me from a distance to the hollow, and spent a day spying on my activities, crouched behind a rock. Fortunately, that day spent hidden like a hunter had happened before I met June, otherwise she would have woven a sordid story about suspicious meetings in the woods with a stranger not from the village—embellishing the lies as needed to get me in trouble. However, as there was nothing irregular to denounce during Cassandra's initial stalking, she found my solitary exile too boring to watch on a continuous basis and postponed her bloodhound game for a while, focusing instead on other preys; there were plenty of other kids to harass after all.

Unfortunately, one morning—that very morning—she decided to return to the hollow to check if I was still a bore to watch or whether I was committing some reprehensible act that deserved punishment. She arrived there at the very moment when I was busy enjoying June's tender handling. Cassandra screamed when she saw us, entangled in a naive exploration that admittedly, in her mind, was a most unorthodox pose. Scared witless, she had found more than she bargained for. She ran back to the village, hysterical all the way.

Fear in her eyes, June grabbed her clothes and ran in the other direction.

I was alone, again. It was the end of a beautiful moment and the start of an ordeal.

Cassandra went straight to her parents. It didn't help that the Hawkyns were a family of Perfectionists: the most persnickety,

intransigent, unforgiving bunch of raging fanatics—an attitude which I attributed at the time to a possible constipation problem, not knowing what I know now. By moral duty, they felt compelled to first inform my parents of my scandalous and pernicious behavior, and then to spread the news to the entire village for good measure.

My disgraceful behavior and the shame it brought to our family—thanks to the Hawkyns’ proactive preaching—created a hysteric scene at home. I don’t remember much of what my father said. In fact, he might have remained mostly silent—maybe even, for once, proud of his son in some ways—but I do remember that he was tasked with dispensing the corporal punishment required for educational purposes with enough vigor to imprint some lasting memories as part of one’s life-long learning process [*Ed·u·ca·tion. Noun. Process of filling a blank slate and editing its content to achieve desirable communal ends and rectitude*]. Interestingly though, what I more vividly remember is my hysterical mother’s incessant crying and moaning.

She repeated the same lament over and over, emphasizing that I had ruined my life, that I’d never be a protagonist, that I had shamed them because they’d never be respected anymore by the other Authorians. Actually, to be exact, I only remember that she kept repeating “pro-something” and that I didn’t understand what it meant then. I can only assume that she said “protagonist.” Authorians don’t teach the word to kids before their tenth birthday. Before then, for simplicity, they use “good character.” In grade school, every hour, they’d make us stand up and recite: “Be of good character to become a good character,” which, frankly, was equally cryptic to me back then.

It’s funny what we remember from childhood. Being passionate about those things, I’m sure my mother started to drill me to be a good Authorian from the instant I was born, but my first awareness of belonging to that group comes from that day when my mother feared that my actions had disgraced our family in the eyes of the entire community.

The second part of the ordeal was the second serving of corporal punishment I received—adding to the curriculum of my education—when my father discovered I had “lost” my necklace. Thankfully, I had the presence of mind to lie and not tell him that I had given it away, otherwise all the members of my family—

including aunts and uncles I had never met—would have relayed each other to educate me, in a session I might not have survived. That’s when I learned that it was not an ordinary leather rope at the end of which dangled a small apple carved in basswood. Rather, it was a family jewel keeping our coat of arms close to my heart. The fact that my family could only afford leather and basswood instead of gold and gems, and pledged allegiance to a fruit where others did so to lions and dragons, didn’t make it less precious. The apple was our ancestral symbol of strength and unity, and keeping it close to our heart was our only guarantee of good luck. Admittedly, there might have been some truth to this as it seems that all my bad luck started not long after I lost my basswood apple.

The third part of the ordeal was the medical treatment [*Medical. Adjective. Relating to the most respectable field of unquestionable and unwavering knowledge*]. I don’t recall everything the doctor did, but I remember being confined to bed rest for a week, with a leech on my forehead and one on my heart. Given that leeches can suck only so much blood, they were replaced by fresh ones every six hours. The blood sucking wasn’t that painful, but the swelling and itching that followed was horrible and lasted for weeks.

Not as horrible as the return to school, though. Even before the incident, I was an outcast: the weird kid that made everyone uncomfortable. Admittedly, some of it was my fault; I probably was the only kid who thought that a week at home, away from school, with leeches slurping blood straight out, was a golden opportunity to read the dictionary once more, reviewing forgotten parts and brushing up on synonyms, as a distraction from the leech-inflicted pain.

At the same time, I was caught in a vicious circle. Not having any friends, the stolen dictionary became my only friend—I even started to memorize it, at the rate of one letter a month—and the resulting weirdness kept potential friends away. So, words became all that mattered. They flowed in my veins—even those starting with J, Q, X, and Z, because it only took a week to memorize them. As a result, I started to use words that most people didn’t understand. In fairness, some words I didn’t even understand correctly myself until much later.

It didn’t help either that it took me a few years to discover that synonyms were context-sensitive and not all interchangeable,

and that blindly abusing a thesaurus wasn't a wise thing to do. Nobody could figure out that when I said "I masticated delightful munchies," "I fancy hieroglyphs and terms," and "now is the most protracted twenty-four hours of the vintage," what I really meant was "I ate good food," "I like letters and words," and "today is the longest day of the year." No wonder everybody thought I was weird.

After I cleared up all that confusion in my mind and started using the appropriate words in their proper context, people still did not understand me because I was trying to drop all the words from my stolen dictionary in sentences longer than what the basic "subject-verb-complement" structure allowed. Even my teachers hated me. "Stop talking in a foreign language," or "Speak English!" is pretty much all they ever said to me. On a good day.

Now, thanks to Cassandra, there were no more good days in sight. The leech treatment had been bad days all the way through. My first day back to school was worse—a truly bad day. The other kids in the village had suffered the grumpy mood of their parents on a daily basis since Cassandra's revelation. These parents were upset that I had shamefully tarnished the village's appeal to the Author, and they had taken out their frustration on their defenseless offspring. Those kids were ready for some serious retribution. So the day I returned to school, I didn't even make it to the middle of the schoolyard before a mob, led by Cassandra's older brother, beat me senseless. Apparently, the pummeling and kicking continued while I was unconscious. My left arm was so badly broken that bones healed in zig-zag lines. As a result, my elbow bends so weirdly that a thumbs-up is impossible, and ten pounds is the most that arm can lift. All that after another month away from school, covered in leeches.

Apparently, some of the kids were scolded for their cruelty—if "Don't do that, it's not nice" can count as a reprimand—but most Perfectionist parents didn't even bother because they were pleased that the village's weird kid got beat up well. Clearly, not all kids had as effective an educator as my father—and certainly not the precious, little Perfectionist darlings who knew that "don't do that" is just an unthreatening and ineffective admonition by a spineless, dull-brained, idiot parent too weak to educate kids properly.

On the positive side, that was supposed to be my last beating for a while. For some reason, being condemned to live the rest of my life with an almost useless arm was deemed to be an adequate penalty for what I had done, and all concluded that further disorder wasn't going to help the village's image at that point—all, except the Perfectionists, always lobbying for more pain and suffering, always complaining that being too lenient was the road to obscurity.

Needless to say that at that point, I vowed to never ever again say a word to Cassandra, nor look at her for that matter, in spite of her never-ending and unrelenting lecturing, taunting, and badgering. For the rest of my childhood, every time she came within striking distance, unable to outrun her, I closed my eyes and sheltered in my head, waiting for the storm to pass, imagining her being dropped in a boiling caldron of cow pies, dissolving into a soup of feces, and being forever erased—as all Perfectionists should be.

If the story had ended there, it wouldn't be so bad. In fact, for a long time, it seemed like it did. I came to think that I had been the victim of the worst thing Cassandra could do to a person, and that the whole incident had taught everybody a lesson.

Was I wrong!

What had happened to me then was nothing compared to what was to come a few years later.

The Sordid Affair

The crisis happened on my fifteenth birthday. Coincidentally.

“Adam. You’re a man now, so come with me,” my father said.

The words suggested that I might have been able to escape the whole thing if my birthday had been a day later; in hindsight, it would have made no difference. What was clear, though, was that we weren’t out to get me a birthday gift. Quite the contrary.

In those days, my father was a member of the village’s Review Panel. Given the size of our village, we only had one Small Visionary, and the Rules required him to seek counsel from a Review Panel consisting of no fewer than four Lackeys.

My father served as Second Lackey, which I guess was a prestigious position. At least, that’s what he kept telling my skeptical mother, who was convinced that this whole panel gimmick was just an excuse for guys to escape domestic responsibilities, to instead play cards, drink booze, and make dirty jokes—to my mother, all men were ordinary, weak, lying, and untrustworthy, except for the Visionaries, as she believed that truth only lay in the rulings from those consecrated to speak with wisdom and moral authority.

Unfortunately, the Lackey’s meeting room had no booze, no playing cards, and the stern faces of those sitting around the table didn’t forecast a shower of dirty jokes. My father had warned me on the way that this was an emergency meeting.

“Gentlemen, this is a major crisis,” announced the First Lackey, to break the ice.

“It surely is.”

“A sordid affair.”

“Scandalous.”

All four Lackeys nodded, presumably already aware of what had prompted this emergency assembly of the Review Panel.

“It’s a major pain.”

“Worse than ever.”

“Worse than sitting on a protruding vertical root.”

“Worse than screwing a sandbag,” said the Fourth Lackey.

Maybe there were to be dirty jokes after all, but the frown from the first two Lackeys quickly shut down that avenue.

They remained silent for a moment, evidently taking their counselor’s role very seriously.

“Do we know for sure?”

“We know.”

“But do we really? It wouldn’t be the first time with these Perfectionists, you know.”

“The Small Visionary has personally questioned her, and concluded that her testimony will stand.”

“But what if she lied?”

“Her testimony will still stand.”

“You can’t get the cat back into the toothpaste bag,” added the Fourth Lackey, again displaying his brilliance.

Silence again. This didn’t seem to leave them many options to contemplate, or much room for debate. So much for providing counsel.

“I’m not convinced,” timidly offered my father, to test the water.

“Why?” responded the First Lackey.

Taking some time to look at the others, trying to gage if his disagreement could find some footing, he suggested: “This is the testimony of an Authorian who broke a rule. Shouldn’t her transgression render her word suspicious? At least a bit?”

“So what if it did? The Visionary has already made up his mind.”

“The Rules require the Visionary to seriously consider our recommendations,” countered the vertical root guy, rescuing my father. “We’ve discussed many times the fact that he has grown to systematically disregard our counsel, but we’ve never done anything about it. Maybe this is the time to bring him in line?”

“Maybe this is not the time to do so,” countered the First Lackey, visibly upset, and waiting for the sandbag-screwing guy to side with him. Unfortunately, for him, the sandbag lover was

Jasper Stone, owner of the village's only funeral home, a man respected enough to end up on the Panel, but whose prosperity had been achieved without the need for any decision making—clients continued to show up, no matter what he did. Even a fifteen-year-old like me knew that it would be futile to wait for him to commit one way or another if there was dissension. I guessed that his usual role was to cast a vote when unanimous decisions were obvious, and abstain from fueling any fire otherwise.

“Actually, if there was ever a time to do so, this may it,” insisted my father.

I wasn't sure if this was brave or foolish. Probably brave, but I had never thought of my father as being brave before.

The First Lackey, much like the Visionary it seemed, didn't like being contradicted. One can safely assume that Woodruff Oak, as owner of the door manufacturing plant, owed his First Lackey appointment to his ability to please those above him, and that confronting the Visionary was the last thing he would ever do. There weren't enough buildings in the village to use all of the doors his plant produced, even if it had been decreed that all building walls were to be three feet thick and entirely built of piled-up doors, so his prosperity depended on his servility [*Ser·vil·i·ty. Noun. Art of keeping political friends happy; plucking lips on the big cheeks where power sits*].

“That's beyond the point. We've been given a specific task within the scope of this crisis, and it is our duty to fulfill our obligation—but nothing more.”

“I'm still not convinced,” insisted my father. “This will be a dangerous expedition. Before risking the lives of our sons, our only real obligation is to be absolutely certain about the facts.”

“That's why it's good to have your son here,” replied the “First Oak,” quick to erase the ugly smirk that had started to form on one side of his face.

My father was clearly upset, seemingly understanding at that point how the slick politician had played him—although I had yet to understand what was going on.

“The only reason you asked me to bring my son was to see how our youth would respond when learning of our mission for them—on the basis that his reaction would be representative of the more timid and less daring among them—and we will keep it

at that. On the other matters, I think we can make our own decisions here.”

“You are correct, and I’m not interested in asking him to decide for us either. But since you questioned the validity of Cassandra’s testimony to the Visionary, essentially questioning her character and suggesting that she may have lied, it may be enlightening for us to hear from your son of his... say... ‘experience’ in this regard.”

The political maneuvering behind the scenes might have been thicker than I could follow, but Lackey Woodruff was probably eating from the hand of the Visionary. I was starting to feel like the sandbag mentioned earlier. I obviously was more than an accidental tourist to the Panel.

“Well, I’d like to hear that too,” added the other Lackey. It was two against one—and the usual abstention.

“Let’s be serious here. He was only seven years old. He doesn’t remember,” said my father, as if I could have forgotten all the education I got when I was seven.

“So if he doesn’t remember, you can’t possibly mind if we question him then.”

“Even if he remembers a few things here and there, how credible can childhood memories be? Memories from a seven-year-old kid! Not eight, not ten. Seven!”

“We certainly can trust that the Author will put the right words in his mouth.”

That always was the killer argument. Invoking the almighty Author for the right words.

The right words.

Now, that’s an argument I never understood. Lies happen. In fact, there are lies everywhere. So how can we trust the Author for the right words? This is like admitting that lies can be the right words, that lies can be as legitimate as truths. What is right then? To me, it was one of those mysteries without an answer. Actually, there was an answer, the one we were force-fed in school, the official answer that the Visionaries professed with conviction: The right words are whatever the Author wants. The Author’s wisdom cannot be questioned. There’s a greater purpose. It may escape us, but in due time it will be revealed.

My father intensely looked at me. The signal was unequivocally clear. He wanted me to answer “I don’t remember,” no

matter the question. All I had to do is repeat that answer, over and over, to make my father proud and (as I now know) nip this whole thing in the bud. Yet, I could see the fear in his eyes: the fear that I would fail him.

“Adam,” smoothly said the Oak, with a broad grin intended to reassure, as if that was ever possible with so many missing teeth—it was a mouth forever free from the annoyance of a stuck piece of lettuce between teeth, unless an entire head of lettuce got jammed in there.

“You wouldn’t mind answering a few questions now, would you?”

I couldn’t answer “I don’t remember” to that one.

“Uh-huh,” I replied.

“You know who Cassandra is, right?”

Another one I couldn’t answer with “I don’t remember.” That Lackey was slick.

I wanted to reply: “Yes. She’s a snake with crooked fangs, a wart-covered monster, a rotten-egg-smelling witch. She’s an annoying wheel that always squeaks, oil or no oil. She’s a fork scratching a plate. She’s garbage that even quicksand refuses to swallow.”

I wanted to shout: “I don’t want to have anything to do with this living nightmare, this stupid bird of ill omen, this righteous freak, this slanderous fanatic, this vicious twerp that only lives to do harm, this malevolent weasel who would do anything to satisfy her thirst for violence.”

I wanted to yell: “Get me rid of her! I don’t want to know her!”

I was trying to remember all the synonyms for revulsion, dread, and hate that I had learned from self-study in my stolen dictionary and scream them out to bury Cassandra in them.

But it was impossible to get rid of Cassandra. She was like a fruitcake so horrible that people preferred dying of starvation to touching it.

I knew it.

They knew it.

“I asked if you know who is Cassandra.”

“Everybody knows her.”

“Indeed. And your father is a good father, isn’t he?”

“Of course he is.”

“So when he educated you, he did it well, didn’t he?”

“He surely did.”

“That’s good. I thought so. For sure, your father would have never failed in his duties to properly educate you—that would have tarnished his reputation. Only honorable men like your father can serve on this prestigious panel.”

My worried father seemed to know where this was leading and I was trying hard to guess where that was.

“Now, I’d like to ask you a few questions about Cassandra’s character.”

I burned to tell him that all her angelic posturing was nothing but a fake front to her evilness, that she was a corrupt devil rotten to the bone. I sure was ready for his questions.

“So, Adam, tell me. In all the years that you have known her, has she ever said anything about you that you know, with absolute certainty, was not true?”

That took me by surprise. He hadn’t asked me if Cassandra was of good character at all (she was not), or whether she had less compassion than a worm (she had), or whether she was a nuisance to society (she definitely was).

I didn’t immediately answer. “I don’t remember,” wouldn’t have helped. I had to say something to discredit her.

“Your hesitation is telling.”

“No, no. Wait. She’s... she’s...”

One had to pick his words carefully when describing the little darling of the Visionaries. More education was the last thing I wanted at that juncture.

“Kid, I don’t care to know what she is. Everybody knows her. We know her. She’s a Perfectionist after all, isn’t she?”

“Yes.” It was an undeniable fact.

“What I asked you is whether she ever said anything about you that you know, with absolute certainty, was not true. With absolute certainty. Has she?”

Obviously, if I said yes, I would then have to explain in detail what it was that she had said that was untrue. Everybody knew that I had purposely avoided talking or listening to her since my earliest childhood memory—there’s only one school in town and no secrets in a small village—so my answer to this question could only refer to the day of my adventure with June, and it would no doubt be extrapolated to serve some dark purpose I ignored.

“Yes there is.”

There was no doubt in my mind that, like the vacuous girl she’d always been, she had embellished her story to transform my sweet and loving encounter with June into a horrible deed that deserved no less than a crippled arm.

“There is?”

“Yes.”

“That’s interesting. Can you tell us when that happened, Adam?”

My father stared at me. His eyes screamed: “Say you don’t remember!”

“Uh. I was seven.”

“That’s not a problem. I trust your father has educated you well, as we discussed.”

“He did.”

My paternal education had been impeccable.

“So what happened then?”

As if he didn’t know what happened then.

“Well, there was the whole incident. Remember?”

“So what were Cassandra’s exact words?”

“Exact words?”

It just struck me that while I knew that Cassandra had run to her parents, I didn’t know the words she had used to denounce the activities at the hollow. I didn’t hear firsthand what Cassandra’s parents had told mine either. To be honest, all I remembered was the education.

“The exact words, I wouldn’t know, but the facts—”

“You don’t know the exact words.”

“No, but the fact of the matter is—”

“Adam. It’s pretty simple. Yes or no. Has Cassandra ever said anything about you that you know, with the upmost, absolute, unquestionable certainty, was not true?”

Giving Cassandra any credibility was worse than sitting on a porcupine while holding a fifty pound rock. The pain was sure to last.

The other option was to lie and claim that Cassandra had made up the whole story about June. However, the Lackeys would then probe as to why I didn’t deny the accusations back then, instead of shaming the entire village by my deception and, worse, embarrassing my father by letting him educate me on false pre-

tenses. Besides, I had been found guilty and had paid my dues, so contesting my sentence and complaining eight years after the fact would have sounded disingenuous. My own credibility didn't stack-up.

"Is it a yes or a no, Adam?"

"No"

"There. That's all we needed to know."

The strained grin vanished.

Like a swaggering rooster, shoulders pulled back and chest thrust out, chin slightly up, he surveyed the room, daring others to dissent. In a sense, my mother was right about the Panel: this was a big poker game.

Addressing the other Lackeys, the First Lackey added with authority: "Are there other concerns that need to be aired about Cassandra's credibility?"

"It remains that this is the testimony of an Authorian who broke a rule," replied my father, without a skipping a beat.

"Yes, she broke a rule. And she'll be educated for it. However, it's not a sacred rule."

"It was sacred under the previous Kritikillar."

"Well, it's not now."

"She associated with Kafkaists. It's not a small thing."

I didn't understand why my father was suddenly so scrupulous about the Rules. If anything, he was far from a Perfectionist, even though he never openly criticized the Rules and the Kritikillar—not even within the confines of the family walls.

"Association for commercial purposes is not forbidden," underscored the First Lackey. "Not anymore."

"The fact we can sell doors to Kafkaists doesn't make them less wicked and insidiously dangerous."

"He's right," supported the Third Lackey.

"Insidiously dangerous they are. But remember that we are talking about a Perfectionist here. Perfectionists have the moral rectitude to counter the moral turpitude of the Kafkaists."

For a tense moment, all remained silent.

My father seemed particularly exasperated. I couldn't tell if it was because I had failed to support him by falling into the First Lackey's trap, or because he despised the First Lackey as much as I despised Cassandra.

“So there’s nothing else to discuss then,” my father said, standing up. I followed.

“We still have the duty to advise the Visionary as to whether we support his proposed course of action.”

“As if he didn’t already know that nobody here has the balls to stall him,” shouted my father. “He’s going to start a big mess—a very big mess. All because of a damn, stupid girl who couldn’t mind her own business.”

“She gave the rite—”

“She could have fornicated with a snake for all I care! It’s still going to be a huge mess. It’s happened before, thirty years ago, and it was a mess then. Imagine what it will be now, with the new freedoms and liberties.”

“There’s only one solution to—”

“Just tell your boss what he wants to hear. I’m going home.”

I rushed through the door before my father so that he could slam it on his way out—the superior quality of the doors crafted in our village makes them slam louder than any competitor’s products, which is apparently a selling point.

I had no idea what the Panel had been taking about in that meeting, but it looked serious.

“I should have drowned you in a barrel the day you were born,” is maybe what my father would have told me if our entire father-son relationship had not been built on a solid foundation of silences and unshared emotions.

Important Rules

There are so many rules.

Rules dictating how to put on socks (right before left, and always sitting on a chair), which day one is allowed to sing (only calendar dates divisible by 3), where not to put your fingers (in your nose, among many places), what to drink before six o'clock (only water) and how much (two quarts, minimum, unless the water is darker than your nails), when to get married (eighteen), which side of the bed to sleep on (wife to the right of husband), how many children to bear (tons), how much skin to show in public (depends on age, gender, and location of skin), who can talk to Kafkaists (nobody, except for business purposes), and so on.

Important rules to follow.

Rituals one cannot violate.

For example, one must remain in character. Being found out of character is a serious offense. One small slip, by a single person, could bring obscurity to an entire village. Too many slips and it's the end of the world as we know it. One cannot recover from that.

Basically, there are rules for everything. That's the problem.

To make things worse, there are sacred rules too! That Cassandra could get away with breaking a sacred rule—of all rules—was outrageous.

And most upsetting.

To think that I had the chance to call her a liar, to wipe that smirk off her ugly mug, to tarnish her aura of invincibility, and to prevent the mess that was to follow—and I blew it. If there had ever been an ounce of doubt that maybe the sacred rule had only been broken in her vivid imagination, I had stupidly spilled that ounce down the drain before it could be used. It was now indubitably real [*In·du·bi·ta·bly*. Adjective. *That which cannot be doubted, chal-*

lenged, or questioned, even though it may be far from evident, or be absolutely untrue].

Yet, it remained that she broke a sacred rule and got away with it.

A sacred rule!

I can't even break a silly one without creating a commotion.

Like how one opens an egg.

It shouldn't matter from which side you open a soft boiled egg. But it actually does, because that's what the Author has apparently dictated.

In one of my first acts of defiance—as a ten-year-old rebel way back then—I had decided to open my egg the wrong way.

On purpose.

So I did.

Disappointingly, the world didn't explode when my spoon crushed the top of the shell. Now, it so happens that when I cracked that first egg of doom, I was alone in the kitchen. Maybe there had to be a witness to the crime for the world to end. So I repeated the experiment the next day, making sure that my mother was in the kitchen at the critical moment, but she didn't notice my transgression.

She didn't even notice!

I repeated my sacrilegious deed every morning, day after day, wondering if she would ever notice. On the seventh morning after the start of my rebellion, my ritual was no different than on the other days, but, somehow, for some reason, from the other end of the table, her blank gaze caught sight of the egg. She looked at it, emotionless, for a minute. Then, the blankness evaporated as she focused more intensely on the egg, puzzled, suspicion kindled by maternal instinct, sensing an anomaly but unable to put her finger on it—until she noticed that small but important detail. That small lapse that shouted anarchy.

She should have laughed at the naive defiance of a silly ten-year-old kid trying to push the boundaries of decorum.

But no.

Instead, she freaked.

Totally freaked.

To the extent that she didn't wait for my father to educate me. She schooled me on the spot, with her own hands, drilling the Author's rules into my brain by using a lower contact point.

“Adam Chad Kilroy! What are you trying to do?” she’d scream in synch with each bit of corporal education. “Are you trying to kill me? Are you trying to stab your mother in the heart? Are you trying to become a Kafkaist?”

Why would I have wanted to be a Kafkaist? First, I’d never met one. Second, it was made pretty clear by all those educating us that Kafkaists were lower than worms and cockroaches in the Authorians’ world.

Once calmed down, mostly due to exhaustion, she pulled me against her chest, crushed in a bear hug to remind me that mothers love their kids—that she loved me, in spite of my flaws. She whispered in my ear: “Don’t ever do that again. Don’t ever tell anybody what you did. Let’s keep this in the family.”

In the family.

Of course.

What else?

For all practical purposes, my mother was crazy. The Small Visionary had told my father that having kids solidifies couples because it helps parents discover their true nature. Indeed. It turned out to be so true that, after discovering my mother’s true nature, he decided to never have another kid. No matter how much pressure the Small Visionary put on my mother to expand the family, my father resisted all her cajoling, pleas, and sneaky attempts to do so. If she was passionate about the Author and the Rules before their wedding, she revealed herself to be totally insane about the whole thing after my birth, and once she realized that I was to become her only offspring, I had to also become perfectly obedient to all rules—the perfect son, in her eyes and, most importantly, in the eyes of others.

I suspect that my mother would have loved to be a Perfectionist. It sometimes seemed as if all women in my village would. Why they so fervently honored all rules was—and is still—beyond my understanding.

But Cassandra was a Perfectionist, and—damn it—she broke a rule and was getting away with it.

To be frank, it shouldn’t have surprised me. As far as I can remember, she always got away with everything. As a little girl, she was a monstrous critter poisoning the other kids’ lives, who could at the same time play the innocent victim, batting her eyelashes with a sad face to make everybody—particularly Perfectionist

mothers—swallow her side of the story. When kids slapped her, usually in an attempt to shut her up and chase her away, she ramped up the drama, with exaggerations that far transcended reality, to ensure that the reaction would always exceed the actions.

From those formative years, perfecting the art of embellishing facts without having to lie, she grew up to become vicious, rotten to the bone, and always scheming, finding satisfaction in spreading injury and suffering.

Sticking like cobweb, she has been a living nightmare to all those who inadvertently came in contact with her. To the point that a few kids at school would have been willing to run straight into quicksand if only they were certain that the hound tracking their footsteps would have followed them all the way there—unfortunately, she was despicable, but not dumb.

I long wondered who would want to marry such a mudslinging, self-righteous, sermonizing witch whose only pleasure in life seemed to be officiating as a rule-police, dutifully denouncing violators with more spite and virulence than even the Visionaries and Kritikillar themselves—maybe with a vengeance, out of frustration that women were not allowed to hold such positions of authority. But I later learned that Small Visionaries, in their presumed infinite wisdom, typically brokered arranged marriages to help the Perfectionists deal with their little demons. These grand matchmaking schemes also served to impress upon the Perfectionist parents the idea that the Author will always reward their daughters for service to the cause—the reward, in this case, being the poor sap ordered to wed the otherwise unmarriageable girl and spawn multiple offspring of Perfectionist allegiances.

The thought of a brood of little Cassandras growing up into a whole pack of intolerant Perfectionists always made me shiver. Not to mention the bloodcurdling vision of a dozen nagging mini-Cassandras, all hung up on details and denouncing the transgressors of stupid rules, but conveniently allowed to break a sacred rule. An army of little Perfectionists, crawling around, spreading their antipathy toward all fun things to do in life and their ingrained hate of Kafkaists.

In fairness, everybody hated Kafkaists—understandably, as this was required by a rule taught at a young age and regularly reinforced, that also prohibited kids from any contact with Kafkaists. Given the grim portrait of the typical Kafkaist painted by our

educators, the rule protecting us from such a frightful encounter was understandable. But Perfectionists hated them more and better than all of us. If Kafkaists and Authorians were like cats and dogs, Kafkaists and Perfectionists were like cats and skunks.

Sometimes I wondered if Perfectionists didn't just hate everybody who was not a Perfectionist. They sure didn't miss a chance to act as if they did—even though they always said otherwise, claiming to be servants of the greater good.

Damn it, they even hated magicians!

That animosity alone was sufficient to discourage any kid from trying to learn a few tricks from the traveling magicians that visited the village every now and then. Yet, all—except for the Perfectionists—loved these shows improvised in the middle of the street during which cards, scarves, eggs, birds, rabbits, appeared or disappeared in exchange for some applause and a few coins. Of course, money and jewels tended to disappear more than they appeared, often discovered days after the fact, and as a result these buskers tended to get blamed for more than they deserved. For example, once, a villager claimed that his wife disappeared with the magician, never to be seen again, but that was eventually discovered to be a lie when her remains were found buried in his basement.

Yet, Perfectionists didn't despise magicians because of their skills of larceny. No. They hated them on the belief that making things appear and disappear is creating illusions that are perverting the Author's narrative. Typically, a magician who couldn't run very fast always risked being stoned to death when Perfectionists were numerous enough in the vicinity of their impromptu magic show to rally themselves into a raging mob.

Anyway, I always liked talking to magicians. For sure, I found the exoticism of a traveling life attractive, but more importantly, I was fascinated by the illusions and wanted to learn the truth behind the trickery. In particular, many times, I begged them to teach me how to make Cassandra disappear, but they knew it wouldn't have been wise to teach magic to an Authorian kid. They had enough problems as it was.

This didn't stop me from dreaming that I could, someday, in a grand feat of magic, make all the rules disappear. All the stupid rules about eggs, socks, and noses. All the pure nonsense that had cost me loss of functionality in an arm. Make all the Perfectionists

and Visionaries disappear too. All vanishing down in a magician's hat, leaving nothing but a clean slate on which to rebuild a better life.

Kids' dreams.

In the meantime, coming back to the egg incident, as a ten-year-old kid who had survived—at the cost of a limb—the contemptible judgment of Perfectionists a few years earlier, I wasn't about to tell anybody that I had broken the egg rule. I followed my mother's wise advice.

The problem, however, is that I sure wasn't about to stop breaking rules. There were so many. So many so easy to break.

In that sense, it's somewhat ironic that I ended up entangled in a huge mess because someone other than me broke a rule. And I sure didn't expect to be dragged into that mess by my father.

Punishing Reward

“You come with me!” snapped my father.

Last time he had said that, I ended up at the Review Panel and things didn’t turn out so well. Now, with the same order, again stripped of any justification or explanation, I feared the worst.

Usually, when he barked, “come with me”—which was already more words than he’d say to me on a good day—it was to push my face in some mess I had created, as a visual explanation for the stern education that followed. But this wasn’t about tools I left out to rust in the rain or bees in the basement that came through a window I left open. The same few words now sounded like a much bigger “come see the mess you could have prevented while you had a chance.”

Although he didn’t tell me where we were going, it sure wasn’t another visit to the Lackeys because my mother gave me an egg sandwich—made with motherly love and properly opened eggs—an apple, and a gallon of water. A trunk was also loaded onto the cart behind the horse.

When we arrived at Visionary Square’s gatehouse—by rule, the westernmost dwelling of the village—twenty of the strongest young men from the village waited there for him, including some of those who had beaten me up and crushed my arm when I was seven. They were sitting on ten carts filled with weapons and chains. For a moment, I wondered if that intimidating pile of muscles served a deadly purpose to be executed immediately on the square, but thankfully not.

All the meatheads lined up behind our cart, like a group about to leave on an expedition. Clearly, my father wasn’t pleased to be there. Best I could guess was that he had been tasked with this duty as some sort of retaliation for having voiced his dissent-

ing opinion at the Review Panel [*Re-tal-i-a-tion*. *Noun*. *The act of biting an ear in return for a punch in the face, or doing the same with words and a smile*]. My father wasn't a zealot, but he knew better than to contest orders from the Small Visionary, so he was there, fulfilling his duties.

Our cart led the way. Without a word, the others followed us around the village, heading east. Technically, the convoy should have cut through the village, using Main Street, as this was our prestigious hundred-foot-wide avenue and the shortest route eastward, but on a rainy day, the logical path isn't always what it seems—and it was pouring rain that late afternoon.

Winds had long ago blown away the thin layer of top soil that once covered the village's main street, leaving a clay roadbed that was fully functional on a dry sunny day, that was still passable in the damp of the night, but that became a bottomless mud pit on a rainy day—a problem particularly exacerbated by the fact that Main Street was the lowest point in the village. In other words, our most prestigious avenue had been perfectly laid out on the flats of a hundred-foot-wide mud swamp. That's what you get in a village of morons.

The logical thing would have been to recognize the mistake the first time it happened and move the village far uphill, or at last out of the seasonal mud pit. But no. Instead, in a village of morons, people don't move; they adapt. Piles were driven deep to stabilize the foundations of existing homes or to build new ones, and everybody learned to live with the seasonal Main Street problem, suffer with it for as long possible, complain, complain, complain, and wait for the day when someone comes up with a brilliant accommodation—which, in my village, happened the day “complaints street” reached about a mile in length.

In a burst of creative genius, our village leaders developed a system of covered wood sidewalks (also on deep piles) elevated above the roadway, that quite conveniently allowed villagers to reach all the little stores and businesses along Main Street while remaining dry, even in torrential rain—as long as it wasn't windy at the same time. While the sidewalks had their critics, mostly lamenting that the unaesthetic appendages had destroyed the architectural character of our town—as if it had any—I, for one, have always been appreciative of the luxuries of modern life. In any event, the complaints quickly faded away because the covered

sidewalk also offered a unique vantage point to watch unsuspecting travelers trying to cross town on a rainy day, horse and cart sinking deeper with forward progress, until getting irremediably stuck, being unable to turn-around, and begging for help. The elevated sidewalks provided convenient dry platforms from which the locals could profit from the misery of others, by offering rescue services, *à la carte*, at a premium. As a result, rain weeks were long awaited, as they brought with them seasonal sidewalk sales and captive buyers. Most popular offerings were thrown ropes and pulling belts for things that had to be recovered immediately, and shovels for self-service digging that could wait until after the rain stopped and the mud dried. Incidentally, once, it was attempted to use doors as temporary plank walkways to reach those trapped, but this led nowhere as the doors sank out of sight as soon as they were dropped in the mud—a costly misuse and loss of valuable merchandise, not to forget an objectionable use of the flagship manufacturing product that was the pride of the village.

One would think that after years of sinking suckers, the word would get around and travelers would avoid our main street, but no. Unsuspecting travelers got trapped so frequently, it was almost as if they did it on purpose—as if the odd idea of taking a disgusting mud bath could ever be a desirable thing to do. As a result, rescue services has forever remained the village’s second most profitable industry—although far behind the door making enterprise. The business of fishing hapless clients out of the mud also had the advantage that—contrary to the door manufacturing industry—all proceeds were equally shared between local families, as a strategy to prevent cut-throat competition that could erode profits. Not to forget the side benefits. For example, one winter, during a warm rainy week, an ill-informed convoy tried to cross town. People could be rescued promptly, but the rain was so intense, and the horses sank so deep while desperately trying to free themselves, that it proved impossible to pull them out of the mud before sunshine returned. Since it rained for a week, the horses pretty much starved to death in place. This usually turned out to be a good thing for the village, first, because replacement horses are one of the *à la carte* items sold at the highest premium, and, second, because the stuck horses are always “traded in” as part of the deal, becoming village property in the transaction. However, in that particular case, the gain from the trade-in wasn’t

as good as usual because it stopped raining during a night while temperature dived below freezing. The first person to venture on the thin ice in the morning sank through and had to be rescued from the treacherous mud. Efforts to break the ice lid that locked in all the humidity and prevented the mud from drying were futile as new sheets of ice formed as fast as they could be broken—it was that brutally cold. On the positive side, frozen horse meat preserves itself well, so the parts that protruded above the ice were still edible by the time the ice could support a crew dispatched to carve steaks that fed the village for weeks.

All that is to say that the expedition headed by my father avoided Main Street, half-circled around the village, and headed east.

He set the pace for the group; I sat next to him in the lead cart; and we both looked at the open dirt road ahead. Spending time next to each other, without saying a word—in our typical father-son relationship.

The slow convoy traveled for about an hour east and thirty minutes north, before stopping at sunset next to a wooden sign that warned: “Entering the Territory. Suspend all disbelief.” Vandals had struck out “disbelief,” written below it “humanity,” and added “Do not feed the animals.” Multiple obscenities were carved in the trunk of the oak on which the official sign had been nailed. Piles of excrements in various stages of decomposition surrounded the tree, and the thugs from our convoy took great pleasure to add their own defecation to the masterpiece—essentially emptying the entire content of their brains on the ground.

I had never been to the Territory before, and had never imagined doing so ever. Yet, there I was, contemplating a monument that aptly captured the essence of what we had been drilled to believe about the place. I didn’t know then what I know today. I had no idea. But it was pretty clear where we were going.

“Don’t talk to any of them,” said my father pointing to the sign and, then, to the road ahead, as if I could have forgotten years of education. There was no compelling reason to talk to a Kafkaist in the first place, for sure, but, frankly, I had no more desire to chitchat with the dumb brutes of our expedition than with a Kafkaist.

“Don’t talk to any of them,” he repeated. “Just do as I tell you.”

“Clear.”

My father gave me the reins while he pulled a map of the Territory with instructions in the margin, which he read using a candle in the dusk. We went north for a while longer, crossed a shallow stream, and headed southwest for about an hour.

As we approached a village, my father yelled: “Hoods!”

He gave me one as he pulled one for himself from the trunk. The red conical hoods had openings for the eyes and mouth, but I had to constantly pull back mine to be able to see the road.

Kafkaists who saw us approach either froze in place or ran away quite agitated. What struck me at that point was that, had I not known that they were Kafkaists, I wouldn’t have been able to tell. Apparently, years of education instructing me as to the moral turpitude of Kafkaists had failed to provide a single visual clue that would have allowed me to differentiate one from an Authorian. I felt vulnerably exposed to a great danger by this shortcoming.

Deep into the village, all the way to its very end, the eleven carts reached a modest house on an ordinary street, managed to turn around, ready to backtrack east—crushing flowers and damaging much shrubbery in the process—and stopped. It wasn’t a slum—the construction was of quality and the relatively new front door was a high-end model actually manufactured in our village—but the crooked shutters and peeling paint suggested an allergy to everyday maintenance.

My father pulled me by the arm to the front door. All the muscles stood behind us.

“Your job is to read this when I tell you,” he said, handing me a parchment.

It all made sense now. My father hadn’t brought me along because he wanted to. He did so because he was illiterate, and so were all the coneheads in his mob.

“Your job is to carefully hold on to what we’re here to get and kept a path clear for our exit,” he shouted to the pack of trunk-sized biceps as he banged on the door. “And don’t hurt it, no matter what!”

I expected that nobody would dare open the door, or that some monster would, to confront us, but a frail old man did.

Before he could say a word, my father asked, with firm authority: "Is this the Hipper Residence?"

"Yes. Who—"

"Move over," he said, pushing him sideways.

The mob barged in, spreading from the door into the house, securing an exit path, up to a dining room that might have been the center of the house and where a warm dinner was being enjoyed before the unwelcome intrusion. Those around the table stood up in a state of surprise and fear.

"All residents of this dwelling are to assemble here at once. No harm will be done to all those that immediately cooperate," ordered my father.

All the Kafkaists in the room lined up along the wall by themselves, in shock, leaving all of the food on the table. Two more adults from an adjacent room joined them.

"Please identify yourself," shouted my father, "staring with you!"

"Marcus," obliged the father, after some hesitation. The others followed suit, equally unsure.

"Olivia."

"Marcella."

"Casimir"

"Mira."

"Geoffrey."

"Claramae."

"Janus."

"There are people missing!" shouted my father, stomping his boot for emphasis.

One of the coneheads brought him a lit torch.

"This is my last warning. If all residents of this house are not here in one minute, there will be consequences," he threatened, wiggling the torch.

I was stunned. How did my father know that people were hiding?

Within the minute, an old woman entered the room, followed by a young woman pulling two screaming kids by the hand.

"Your names!"

"Nana," said the old woman.

"Theodors," said the little boy, crying, hanging to the young woman's hand.

“Avril,” mumbled the little girl, trying to be braver than her bother.

“June,” said the young woman.

June? I pulled my hood backward a bit to better align my eyes with the holes.

There, right in front of me, within arm’s reach, was the most beautiful face I had ever seen. Below that angelic face, barely visible around a neck partly hidden beneath the V-collar of a wool blouse, was an ordinary leather rope at the end of which dangled a small apple carved in basswood.

“Now,” said my father to me, but I was speechless. There, pinned along a wall by the violence of my father’s words, looking me straight in the eyes with anger, was a gorgeous woman. A formidably stunning woman who once was just a little lost girl who met, in strange circumstances, a little lost boy: two kids who bisected a forbidden forest that conveniently kept two isolated worlds apart.

How could she be a Kafkaist? How could such dazzling blue eyes be those of a Kafkaist?

“Now,” repeated my father, vigorously poking his elbow into my ribs.

The pain reminded me that I was surrounded by a belligerent mob—a mess that could have been avoided if I could have lied to the Lackeys at that propitious moment, but a mess that somehow allowed me the stunning opportunity to see June again.

The next hit was more than a poke. My father wasn’t about to be embarrassed by his son again.

I unsealed the letter and started to read.

“By decree of the Small Visionary of Cimmerian County, under the authority of the Grand Visionary of Stygian’s Dominion, and the infallible Kritikillar—most infinitely wise and ultimate enforcer of the Author’s will—we hereby declare that Mr. Theodors Hipper, by virtue of having been bookmarked by due process, shall be immediately brought under the Kritikillar’s protection and custody to ensure his good character transition to the Author’s Universe and protect him from moral turpitude.”

The words after “bookmarked” were most probably not heard by anyone. At that single word, screams, insults, fists, and whole bodies were thrown around with a passion that gave a purpose to the meatheads. It was an ugly mess.

If the Kafkaists had made vows of non-violence (as I learned later), that clan must have been a rabid bunch of amnesiacs as they fought with the energy of despair. Not endowed for combat, I was looking for a way to sneak out unnoticed when June jumped on me. She pummeled me with vigor, screaming like a raging beast, throwing insults between incomprehensible growls, possibly trying to kill me, while I stood motionless, mesmerized by the deep blue of her eyes, holding tight to my hood, scared that she'd pull it off to reveal my identity—as if she could possibly recognize me after all these years—until a meathead pushed her aside and dragged me to the exit.

Bottom line, the Kafkaists were outnumbered and outmuscled. In spite of the bloody commotion, the kid was thrown in a trunk and abducted from his parents—although the official term used in all subsequent proceedings was “saved.” Like a pack of wolves, we swarmed out of the village. The violated family was left battered and broken.

As for June, she showed to my father that his son could be assaulted—and defeated—by a woman, which was nothing to redeem myself from all the embarrassment I had caused him already. But more importantly, seeing June again reconnected the dots of a forgotten past, rekindling the wonderful memories of our first chance encounter—even though, on that dreadful and violent evening, it felt as if these sweet thoughts occurred while doing a headstand in a bear trap.

I had never dared to return to our meeting place in the forest—as I could not afford to lose another arm—but, for years, I had dreamt of June. In an idealized way. At first, as a kid longing for that lost girlfriend who triggered that special tingle in his heart, and then, later, as a young man, longing for a girlfriend that might have been his soul mate, enthralled by the illusions and possibilities of a mirage. But those dreams had become sparser and fewer as time eroded my naive hope of ever seeing her again, and as the reality of life had taken its harsh toll on the mind of an idealist. But now, the harsh reality of life had taken a strange and different turn.

And I dreamt again.

Even though—I now knew—she was a Kafkaist.

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