

FREEDOM FICTION JOURNAL

An eclectic mix of all flavours of genre fiction

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Editor's Note	2
"Beginners" by Chris Castle	3
"They Call Me Madman" by Andrew Bud Adams	10
"The Thunderbird" by Emal Rustemi	29
"The Hood" by Cameo Rowe	34
"Jury" by Jim Spry	56
"Corner Coffee Shop" by H. Fischer.....	60
"Only Us" by L. Baehne.....	62
Artwork Acknowledgements.....	67



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Editor's Note

Hello Freedom Friends,

It's hard to believe that it's already past the 3rd quarter of 2011 for us. Time sure flies while you are having fun. We have a nice bouquet of short stories this month as well. Chris Castle returns with a tale of young love. We have 2 new stars in Andrew Bud Adams and Emal Rustemi who tell their tales with passion and artistry.

I have been meaning to push for art submissions. We have been using clipart images since past year and more. It's difficult as it is to meet timelines in this voluntary setup and to solicit appropriate images would add to our woes. However, I remind our friends that we are still open to art submissions and we most welcome any digital or traditional media artist to share their talent with our vast audience.

Here we present to you 7 fiction tales already available at our website through tags "issue 10" and "vol 03". We hope this collection in this free downloadable PDF file adds to your collection of fiction short stories. I will persist in trying out new avenues such as Amazon's editions for Kindle and other ebook readers.

From this issue, Andrew Bud Adam's story is one out of the year's 6 short stories nominated for the Pushcart Prize by Freedom Fiction Journal. Hope you enjoy this edition and any feedback or comments are most welcome.

Pulp To Grind Your Senses !!!

Best Wishes,

Ujjwal Dey

Editor for Issue 10, Vol 03.

Freedom Fiction Journal | <http://freedomfiction.com/>

“Beginners” by Chris Castle

Synopsis: Love blossoms in young hearts and the world retreats against passion.

About the Author: Chris is English but works in Greece as an English teacher. He has been published over 250 times and his work ranges from fiction to horror. His influences include Ray Carver and Stephen King. He can be reached at chriscastle76@hotmail.com, as well as facebook, twitter and linkedin.

In this romance, we find a unique couple in a unique place in uncommon love.

Beginners

By Chris Castle

Rip Walker woke up in the dark. He always left a nightlight on; no matter he was seventeen years of age, no matter the cost. As he slipped onto the cold floor he winced, then padded over to his window. The stars were bright, covering the town in a half-light, so even the shapes of the dead street lights were clear. In the distance he saw one shadow, then two. The kids were swinging from the power lines. Rip pulled on his clothes and set out into the night.

The streets were empty and even the town bar was shut up for the night; everyone knew why and no-one said a word. Under the stars, Rip felt like he might still be dreaming; he felt like a thief with nothing to steal. Two more kids clamoured up onto the cables overhead and started swinging, making four in all. Two boys and two girls, from what Rip could see; all smart enough not to make a sound, so there was just the thin, looping sound of the wires as they swayed against the extra weight.



"Some show, huh?" Rip turned suddenly and saw Mia standing in the centre of the dead road. She was wearing one of her pa's thick jackets; it was so thick on her, it looked like a life-jacket. Rip smiled and walked over to her.

"Some show. You thinking of going up there?" He asked, standing next to her, so he could see it straight on. The four of them looked more like birds flitting along the metal. It could have been beautiful, it could have been something darker; Rip wasn't sure which it was.

"I don't think so. I got a thing for heights. Plus, knowing my luck, I'd lay one hand down and the power would shoot straight back. Probably blow me all the way over to the river. You?" Mia turned, her head moving, though the hood stayed in place; it made her look as if she was trapped inside a dark mirror or something. *All these things I think about her*, Rip thought, *all these things I don't say*.

"No, not for me. I'd probably just fall and break my ass. I like being out though, under the stars..." His voice trailed off, knowing what he felt but not being able to pull the words out. She smiled all the same.

"I like that feeling, too. Feels like it's not quite day or night. You feel how quiet it all is, too? My pa's out with the rest of them, looking for John, I guess." She started to walk and Rip walked with her.

"I figure he's up in the hills someplace," Rip said, waving his hand over to the mountains behind the town. John Craddock was the local crazy, who had taken it upon himself to poison every dog and cat he could find, all in the same day.

"I saw them Rip," Mia said as they got closer to the power lines, the high-rise kids.

"All those poor animals lying out on the ground like that. Looked like they were all sleeping in the sun, you know?"

"I know," Rip said, remembering how he saw it all laid out from the roof of his place; bodies strewn along the dirt. He remembered thinking; this must be how war looks, afterwards; peaceful and terrible all at the same time. "I don't even think he's hiding up there, he's just living his life."

"He won't even think what he did was wrong, even if they take the time to ask him first..." her voice trailed off. Rip knew her pa must have headed off with the others at dusk. Rip had watched them, none of them packing tents or any such thing but all of them carrying; booze in one hand, something else in the other.

"I wonder if he's watching them hanging from the cables," he wondered, then felt himself blush. He felt Mia's eyes on him and he waited to be teased or criticised somehow. Instead, her voice was soft when it came.

"I hope he is. I hope he gets the chance to see something pretty and unusual before they catch up with him." She nudged against him with her shoulder. "Hell, Rip, maybe he's even watching the two of us right now." She winked and Rip felt his heart soar. Before he could think of anything else to say, she swung her neck up to the power lines.

"You know the power's going to come back on soon enough, hell any minute now, don't you?" Mia called up.

"I know it," said the boy, John Crowley. Rip knew he was after Mia, had heard the things he'd said about her over coffee and later, at weekends, over beer. The boy looked down and winked at her, then let one hand slip free. When he got no reaction from Mia, no gasp or scream, he grabbed back on, crestfallen.

"Sara?" Mia went on, looking a little further along. The girl was in love with Crowley and had gasped when he went one-handed. Of course, he was clueless.

"I don't care," she said, forcefully, almost a shout. Immediately the other three shushed her. Her voice was thick with drink. "I don't," she said, lower, but with more force.

"Well god damn it, I care. I care about you breaking your neck and being too drunk to even feel it." Rip watched her and smiled as she put her hands on her hips. *This is what she will be like when she is a mother*, he realised suddenly. The thought of it excited Rip and terrified him, too. For a second he watched her, the youth in her gone and replaced by things that Rip knew he would only ever be able to take guesses at; responsibility, true anger, concern. When it was over, she folded her arms and looked over to him. Her face was knitted into a frown, like she was trying to solve a maths problem and the numbers were too faint to make out.

"How about you, man?" Crowley called down. Rip didn't look away from Mia; it was impossible to, somehow. He muttered something, still looking to her and watched in amazement, as her face smoothed out into a smile for him. He knew, in that moment, that smile was only meant for him and him alone.

"Let's go someplace else," he said quietly. When she began to walk, he followed and the two of them slipped away from the cables. Rip knew the kids hanging in the sky were saying things, calling them names, but they seemed far away, like a television set heard through a neighbour's open window and unimportant.

&&&

"Can I ask you something?" Mia asked as they walked away from the town and further into the fields. Rip wasn't asking where they were going, though he knew the places well enough. It was enough to just be walking with her, listening to her when she spoke, following her fingers when they ran across the tops of the tall grasses. She looked back and he nodded. "Do you think your pa would have gone out with them tonight?"

"My pa?" he said, caught off guard. His father had died at the start of the year and the hurt in him was still raw. Rip felt himself tighten, the way he did when anyone brought him up; it had hollowed out his heart. He thought about it for a long time, not realising he had stopped walking until he looked up and saw her standing still, looking back at him. "No, I don't think so."

"I don't think he would have done, either," she said and Rip looked at her, feeling tears around his eyes. "I don't think he would have wanted any part of it." She nodded and there was something in that, that small gesture that made Rip able to walk again. He noticed her hood had slipped down and realised though it was still dark it no longer felt cold; it felt as if he were getting used to living at this time of night.

"I remember being in the shop with my old man, buying meat for the week and looking at that picture he pinned up on the wall," she said, as they reached the end of the clearing. She sat on the fallen log they all called the crocodile and he sat next to her. Overhead the stars burned, furious almost, the other kids and the town lost to the trees now.

"The meat map," Rip said quietly and felt himself smile, though he hadn't intended it. He didn't look away from the stars but he felt her nodding, heard her hair brushing against the synthetic material of the hood, sounding like rain against glass.

"And I remember how that map used to scare me but then I'd turn round and see your pa and he was so...gentle, that I didn't feel scared anymore. He was...graceful, I think." Her voice faded away and for a moment there was just the sound of the night; insects, leaves, birds. Rip almost flinched when he felt her hand slip inside his.

&&&

"Is it safe?" Rip asked as they came out by the frozen lake. The moon rose full up in the sky above them, turning the murk of the frozen water into a silver plate. He watched as she stepped out onto the water, breaking free of his grip.

"You'd let me fall?" She said, turning round to face him. His arm was still outstretched reaching for her. He drew it down and stepped out, feeling his boots crunch against the water.

"It wasn't me I'm worried about," he muttered. She giggled, copying his low voice and he smiled. He looked down to where his footprints had cleared the skim of dirt; below there were bricks of ice amongst the dark. He thought of all the fish, stilled, tails trapped in motion.

"I brought my ma out here last summer," Mia said, walking towards the centre, her voice low with the memory. "Her bones were bad towards the end," she went on as she reached the middle and started to skid along, almost skating.

"I walked her out, only as high as her shins or so, but it was enough." She stopped moving and looked back to the spot they must have been. "She was holding on to my arms and I think, after a while, I must have been holding onto her, too. But she told me, even so...how glad she was to be touching the water again, you know?"

"Sure," Rip answered, knowing he didn't have to say anymore. Instead, he watched her as she talked, followed her thumb as it pushed her hair behind her ear, brushing her cheek on the way back down. He had never seen anyone live inside a memory, the past, so completely, not even his pa when he talked about Rip's mother.

"I guess...I guess I've wanted to come out here for a long time, been meaning to...to come out to the centre and look back to where she was, or something." Her voice trailed off and Rip, for the first time, recognised something of himself in Mia; uncertainty.

"I guess you found the last place she was happy," Rip said, uneasily. He had never tried to finish anyone else's thoughts before; somewhere, in his mind, he knew it could be dangerous, a risk. Mia looked at him and for a moment he felt like a stranger.

Instead, she nodded a little and took one step over to where he stood. She was glad, he knew, but there was no smile.

"I think that could be it, Rip," was all she said and her voice was impossibly small and quiet. It was just about the most beautiful sound Rip had ever heard. He felt her arm slip through his and then her whole body pressed against the side of him. There was nothing sexual in it, Rip understood, but something more, something that went deeper. The two of them stood there for a long time, frozen in their own way, looking back to the edge of the lake. Rip tried to see her, her poor old ma gripping tight against her, but he could not; there was no way to steal another's memory. So he stood and waited, feeling like they were the last two people on earth. It didn't scare him, the idea of it, not at all; it was a comfort, a dream; something good to take and hold onto. He squeezed her arm tighter, cherishing each second, until the ice shifted a little underfoot and together they walked back to the dirt, hearing small cracks in the ice beginning to form under their feet.

&&&

They stomped their boots free of the smatterings of ice and Rip saw the moon was beginning to slip away. He turned to Mia and saw her watching the sky too. The night was almost over. The idea of it made Rip's heart sink. The lake was the furthest point for them, he understood; what was left was the journey back. He looked back to the path they had taken; they would be back by daybreak. Rip took one step towards it and stopped when Mia's hand tugged at his elbow.

"Let's go back the long way round," she said and smiled; it was the smile she had given him under the cables and he couldn't help but smile back; *it wasn't over*, he thought, *not yet*.

As they walked through the first of the two fields, the stars began to fall away; the strange, pre-dawn light, almost like mist, slipped over them. Mia led the way, ducking under branches and squeezing his hand tight when uneven ground came underfoot. For a while they simply marched on, the only sounds twigs snapping and one clear and crisp moment when her coat caught and steadily tore against a thorn branch.

"I'm going to catch hell for that," she said and laughed. It was a sound that carried, filling the field and Rip's heart. When they reached the end of the first field the mist began to rise. She stopped first and put her hands onto her knees, breathing heavily. Rip arched his back, swallowing the air, soupy as it was, looking at the flat grass ahead, low and as tidy as a football pitch.

"They put blood into it," he said, crouching down and putting his finger to the grass; it was brittle but not quite frozen enough to snap away. He saw her look over, her breath steadying but quite ready to talk.

"My pa told me once. The farmers, they used to collect all the blood from the butchers and pour it back over the fields. They ploughed it straight back into the dirt to help the crops to grow." He ran his hand over it, patted it down.

"Do they still do it now?" she asked, crouching beside him. He shrugged, bringing his hand up; it was clean, with no blood on it. Above them the stars dropped away at an increasing rate; soon, the sun would begin to appear. One last field and then the town would draw them back in.

"Do you know how to make a bonfire?" Mia said, crooking her neck over to a small rise, the last few trees around it; a perfect pitch.

"Sure," he said, pulling himself up, looking back to the last few branches and twigs.

"Well, just in case..." she said and hooked a silver lighter from her pa's coat pocket. She winked at him and Rip smiled as he scooped the first branch up.

Rip gathered the small pile up on the dirt mound and Mia crouched down to light it from the belly up. It puffed steadily for a while, before the smoke caught on.

Eventually the fire began to crackle and rise up. The two of them sat to the side of it, watching the smoke trail up, putting their hands out against it from time to time. The spot was elevated just enough to look down to the town. The cable lines were empty now, though the streetlamps were still off. Mia patted Rips arm and steered him to the far right; a thin line of men were walking back to the town.

"They're still two hours from town," Mia calculated. He looked over and saw her face calm a little. "We still have time," she said and smiled. He nodded and looked back to the bonfire, the fire looking at odds with the start of the dawn.

"A beginner's bonfire," Rip said and smiled. "That's what my pa would have called it." He looked over and saw Mia look it over, as if for the first time.

"As good a name as any for it," she said and grinned back.

&&&

The two of them sat watching the fire until at last it died away. They patted down the ashes with their feet. When it was done, Mia reached over and ran a thin line of ash under his chin; when she was done, he did the same to her.

"Almost like a tattoo," she whispered and smiled.

They looked out, past the dying bonfire and the last trails of smoke. The sun had begun to draw up in the sky. When Rip looked away, the hand she had been using to shield her eyes came down against his cheek. It stayed there for a long time, the ash under her fingernails marking his cheek. She kissed him beneath the weight of the sun and above the last embers of the fire. Rip whispered something to her, looking into her eyes as he did and she replied. He stood first and reached down for her hand; it came easily into his. They began to walk back, the sun over their heads, lighting

the town, the men in the hills and everything that went in-between. Rip tightened his grip and saw Mia was smiling against the sunrise.

****** THE END ******

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“They Call Me Madman” by Andrew Bud Adams

Synopsis: Murder is not as easy when you are a mystery yourself.

About the Author: Andrew Bud Adams is an instructor of college English, husband to an elementary school teacher, and father of three children with whom he enjoys watching cartoons. He received his MFA in Creative Writing from Goddard College, for which his master’s thesis was a fantasy novel called WINTERASTER. Until that’s available, you can find some of his older writing at helium.com.

In this modern retelling, we revisit Edgar Allan Poe’s story “The Tell-Tale Heart” as modern superhero fiction.

They Call Me Madman

By Andrew Bud Adams

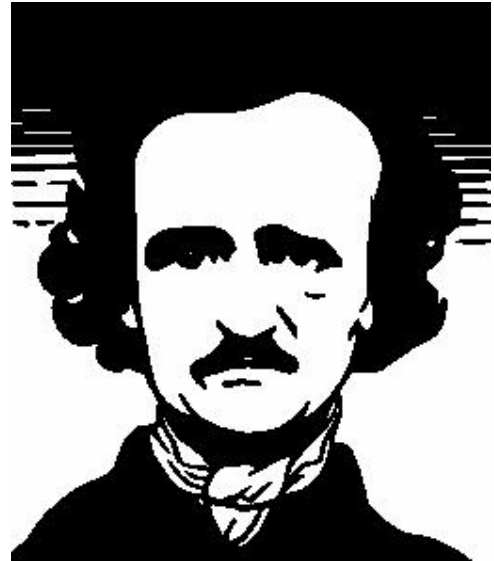
"It was the beating of the old man's heart. It increased my fury, as the beating of a drum stimulates the soldier into courage."

—Edgar Allan Poe, "The Tell-Tale Heart"

Sullivan's dreams whispered a frail web around Echo's mind:
—*watching me—unsure what he wants—noticed change in him—oo many questions—too tired to—oo much trouble—*

Echo's own thoughts pounded within like a loudspeaker:
WHAT DOES HE MEAN? HE SUSPECTS SOMETHING!
HE KNOWS I'VE BEEN WATCHING HIM! I MUST BE
MORE CAREFUL! SHUT THE DOOR! SHUT THE DOOR!
IT WILL SEE YOU...

He was worried shutting off the flashlight might wake the slumbering old man. He turned its beam away instead, pulling his arm back from inside the door to point at the hallway behind him. Then he clicked it off, ever so slowly, his ears trained on Sullivan. There was no change in his breathing, no indication he had awoke. But Echo could not be sure—those dreams, those thoughts, smacked too soundly of consciousness, of a man in fear. Would Sullivan fear him? He hadn't sensed this, not entirely. It was more like caution. Echo's abilities were new to him; they were so difficult to control, mounting as they did, day by day. His sensitivity worsened as his range seemed to capture all thoughts and sounds around him. He could admit to himself now, struggling against thoughts of insanity, that he was clairvoyant.



Echo eased Sullivan's door shut, its creeping and sliding screaming within his ears only briefly before he reined the sounds into submission. He focused instead on Sullivan, always on Sullivan. Still no change. The door was closed.

Echo waited.

He waited half the night, sensing more fear in himself than from behind that door.

There was no stirring, there was no speaking; Sullivan's dreams fell asleep like their master. They would not wake now and had no more to tell Echo.

But he had heard enough. He had collected enough evidence, evidence that could not be reported. He would have to act himself. He would confront Sullivan...give him a chance to confess...

...But the thought made Echo increasingly nervous.

&&&

Mrs. Eapperson knew that her husband admitted to killing their tenant. The officers questioning

her also said that he claimed a sort of ESP led him to it. It surprised even her that the second piece of information felt more plausible than the first. But her husband was not a violent man. This she would maintain despite his confession.

The officers were looking for signs of weakness in the character of her husband, for evidence of prior existing anxiety, stress, anger, insanity... They asked her to remember anything resembling violent behavior; she told them again, he was not a violent man. They asked about the tenant, about her husband's—and her own—relationship to the old man. She told them about Sullivan. He was intelligent, kind. He was semi-active in the community and social activities. He recently lost most of his possessions and worth in a divorce. He came to rent their room temporarily, making time to sort things out. Their friendship—Sullivan's and her husband's—was idle, static...but Echo loved everyone. He had expressed fondness for the old man, and a comfort in having his presence grace their home. His grandfatherly looks attracted the neighbor children, with whom he and Echo shared a paternal bond. Her husband had not given her children, not yet; the laughter in the foyer and front yard was encouraging.

The officers asked if her husband had recently undergone any kind of “trauma.” That word startled her and gave a pause to her sobbing. She saw they had his medical records. She nodded, and the tears returned. She had to describe for them his illness, which she and Echo had been so happy to overcome. One day they discovered his lymph nodes were swollen—more than one around both ears, painfully engorged; solid; persistent. They made his jaw heavy, his head dizzy, and his stomach nauseous. A doctor told them they were signs of an infection, as were several lesions that had spread across Echo's forehead. Did they remember a bite, a scratch, an incident of some kind? The officers seemed intent on the answer. No, nothing.

Medication cured the symptoms in time, but only after new swells and lesions appeared as the infection tried to spread, to save itself. During the last few days, as the antibiotics took effect and the abnormalities began to disappear, her husband complained of ringing in his ears. Even after his full recovery, she thought she saw him—maybe once or twice—favoring this or that ear.

The officers listened carefully. They took notes. They had cups refilled.

Then they asked if anything else unusual had occurred after this illness, if it seemed to have had any effect on her husband's state of mind.

Unusual?

She hesitated. She knew she was giving them what they wanted. But he had confessed....

They prompted her again and she told them, Yes.

&&&

His knuckles were white against the steering wheel. He didn't dare move them, but they were beginning to feel sore and sweaty around his palms. He tried staring at them instead of through them, to focus on anything except the road and the other vehicles. This wasn't successful for long: The blur of painted lines passing under his car, the roar of the interstate in his ears, was too distracting, too *demanding* of his attention, and he was repeatedly ripped back into rigid anxiety.

There was a truck up ahead in his lane, a long tractor-trailer. Such vehicles outnumbered any others on the interstate, but this one wasn't in a hurry like most. Echo glanced down at the speedometer. He was falling below the limit, but still the truck loomed larger and larger in his view

as he approached from behind. He gripped the wheel harder and groaned.

"What's the matter?" his wife asked, her tired voice sounding critical and impatient.

He shook his head absently but said nothing, staring nervously forward at the truck. He could now read its friendly sticker sign: *How's my driving?*

"Echo?"

His arms tightened while his calves began to jump. "Huh?"

"You all right?"

"Yeah," he lied.

Now he was stuck behind the truck, practically riding its tailgate. The driver wouldn't be able to see him in its rearview mirrors; this much was written on another sticker. Echo took note of these details randomly and with false ease. He was trying not to think about the cars approaching from behind—cars, a few more trucks, some within his lane, most moving over in preparation to pass. His left leg began to bounce.

"Echo?"

Stop talking to me.

The interstate roar was growing louder; he felt boxed in by the rumble of the truck before him and the hum of the traffic behind. The speed was deafening. *Too much noise...*

"Echo?"

"What?"

His wife paused, hearing the tone in his voice. "Are you going to pass?" she asked carefully, even hopefully.

He sighed, glancing for the hundredth time at his rearview mirror. He was startled to see a sports sedan on his tail, waiting to move into the long line of vehicles in the left lane. These were beginning to pass by him and the tractor-trailer.

Boxed.

He started to panic. Whispering a curse under his breath, he rode his breaks even harder, and a distance began to grow between him and the truck. He imagined the driver of the sedan swearing at him. The noise softened only slightly as the speed of his own car quieted.

"Hon..." his wife began.

"Hold on," he said to stop her, regretting the curtness but too distracted to care. His eyes darted back and forth between the truck and the sedan. The line of traffic passing beside him seemed never-ending, a merciless assault on his ears. His fidgeting worsened.

Then, to his great relief, the sports car found an opening and immediately swerved to the left,

leaving an empty expanse behind Echo that corresponded with his mind: Something had just unclogged, allowing the anxiety to drain liquid-like from his head. For a moment this felt literally true, until he realized a fresh wave of sweat had broken free. Zombie-like, he released the wheel and wiped sweat on his pant leg.

"You all right?" his wife asked again, concern in her voice.

He nodded, then turned and gave her a weak smile. "Just...gettin' used to stuff again."

Her return smile was just as unconvincing. After a pause her eyes indicated the truck that they alone trailed behind. "Are you going to pass?" she asked softly. "We're going pretty slow."

Instantly his mind began to clog again, building up around a new challenge, a new stigma. Echo shifted in his seat and gripped the wheel harder. Briefly he considered arguing.

Just do it. Pass.

His right foot added slightly more pressure to the pedal. In seconds he was up to the truck again. Chewing on the inside of his lip, Echo reluctantly slowed again.

"Just do it quickly," his wife said, trying to sound encouraging. "Don't even think about it. It's no big deal."

For you. Can you hear like I hear? Can you hear the speed, the danger?

He obeyed, and the very fact that he obeyed—that he was trying to cooperate, trying to please her—gave him unexpected confidence. He wanted to smile, maybe tap the wheel rhythmically...but these thoughts brought new nervousness, and so he concentrated, thought only about pressing the pedal. His speed increased—the sound increased—and he turned on his blinker.

That was it. He had to do it.

He moved to the left lane.

First things first: He turned his blinker off. Then he appraised the road. They were approaching an uphill grade—that would help. The truck would have to slow down...Echo could just drift by...the noise would be quick, painless...

Without thinking Echo glanced in his rearview mirror.

A giant tractor-trailer had appeared out of nowhere, its image and its noise invading Echo's senses as if to choke his mind. Suddenly his body was locked, his knuckles screaming pain, and his foot poised indecisively against the pedal. He panicked. They were on the grade; he was passing inadvertently alongside the first truck, the second bearing down hungrily behind him. The noise was deafening. His right foot refused to budge, as if the pressure applied to his brain. He was stuck. He panicked...

"Maybe music will help," he heard his wife say somewhere in the back of the violence that blared inside his head. Before he realized what was happening, she had reached over and turned on the radio.

His foot acted on its own, slamming the car break to the floor. The noise tortured Echo's mind and he blacked out.

&&&

The officers exchanged unreadable expressions when she finished describing the incident. She tried to emphasize the outcome—that Echo had recovered immediately, that he quickly accelerated and passed the truck, that no harm was done. But they seemed far more interested in how she had described his behavior—his nervousness, his fidgeting, his panic attack. They became less urgent and detailed in their questioning, and she realized she had given them what they wanted. It seemed the interview would end quickly—that she, in the meantime, would be left distraught, not knowing what to do, where to go, or whom to talk to.

&&&

Not above, but inside—inside the speed, inside the air conditioning, inside the rumble of vehicles—Echo heard someone reading. He was not even fully conscious of the fact; yet there were words there, not spoken but thought, *understood*, garnered from the page of a...newspaper. He was sure of it. It rustled in a breeze; so did leaves overhead. But the noise of the freeway met those leaves as well...it wasn't too far away....

Noise! The traffic was too much. Echo could perceive everything perfectly, *perfectly*, and he couldn't concentrate, couldn't relax, couldn't drive normally. Rain pounded overhead and his brain felt as if it might explode. But his eye caught something: a rest stop. One mile. His muscles relaxed and he sighed gratefully. He could ignore it another mile. Just one more mile...

Echo yanked into the rest stop without any amount of style or dignity, his breaks squealing and the car lurching as he caught up a free space. He remained where he fell, arms and head hunched over the steering wheel. As his body relaxed his other senses returned to normal and he was aware of sweat inside his clothes, an ache in his leg, and sore knuckles. Absently he rubbed at his temples, working down and around both ears. He could hear the rain. Now he could anticipate individual drops. Now their thudding against the car pounded inside his head. It was a cacophony. He thought he might pass out....

Too much...I can't control it...

Something banged against his window that jerked Echo back to normal. He was looking out at a drenched old man, one arm holding a newspaper over his head, the other tapping a finger against Echo's window. The old man smiled brightly when Echo sat up to look at him, an unspoken question on his face.

"I don't suppose...!" the old man yelled through the rain and the glass, looking sheepishly miserable. He gestured at Echo's empty passenger seat. "Can you give a man a lift, by chance?"

Echo studied the old man thoughtfully—yet somehow, *without* thoughts; suddenly they were elusive to him. He turned to examine the passenger seat as if to find them there. Then he turned back to the old man and nodded his consent.

The hitchhiker smiled more broadly and came around to join Echo in his car, holding the door open after he sat to flap his paper a few times, saying as he did, "Very, very kind of you sir! This is most appreciated."

As Echo held out a hand to greet his new passenger, his eyes caught the heading of the newspaper before the stranger tucked it into his overcoat. The words there struck a cord, as if he had read them already only a moment ago. KILLINGS SPREAD ACROSS COUNTIES; POLICE SUSPECT SERIAL—

“Sullivan Glaucus,” the old man was saying, gripping Echo’s fingers lightly.

Echo smiled weakly back. “Eapperson.”

“Eapperson?” Sullivan repeated thoughtfully. “Is that your first name?”

“No,” he shook his head. “Echo.”

He was used to the sort of confusion and amusement that now played across Sullivan’s face, who grimaced mischievously, nodded, then added, “Could you repeat that?” before roaring with laughter. Echo smiled along, throwing the car into reverse and backing out of the space.

“How about ‘Glaucus’?” he asked, hoping the topic and the strange atmosphere would muffle his undeveloped...sensitivity. “What is that, a character from Shakespeare?”

Sullivan acted impressed but shook his head. “No, no, but on the right path, you might say! Homer!”

Echo nodded. “Ahh. A warrior, then.”

“Correct!” the old man crowed, then added slyly, “And do you not find in me his spitting image?”

Echo gave a nervous laugh as they pulled back onto the freeway. “Yeah, you look pretty tough.”

“You had best believe it!” Sullivan declared with false bravado. “It may frighten you to know that I eat sunflower seeds *whole*, shells and all!”

Again Echo laughed, this time marveling at the stranger’s effect on him: Suddenly he felt more in control, more relaxed at the prospect of subduing his new gift at will. He had not noticed any true progress until this moment. For the time being he felt like himself again.

“You headed to the next town?” he asked.

“Is that your destination?” Sullivan returned.

Echo nodded. “My wife and I live there. I work in the city, though. Small commute...”

“What about your wife?”

“Hmm?”

“Where does she work? Oh, I see—at home with the kids, right?”

“No, no kids. She travels for work. Flight attendant.”

"Aah!" Sullivan sighed. "I see."

"What about you? You don't look like a, uh..."

"Drifter? A *bum*?"

"That's not—"

"I'm not, matter of fact. My vehicle broke down back there, and *I* am no mechanic! *You're* not, are you?"

Echo shook his head. "'Fraid not."

"Oh well," Sullivan said dismissively. "I'll phone someone. I'm headed to town, too. As a matter of fact, I'm looking for a new place."

"Oh, so first timer, huh?"

"First timer!" the old man agreed.

"You have any family waiting on you? Relatives?"

"No, not I. Just this washed-out exterior! Ha! I sound like some edifice, don't I? Yessir, just me and my books..."

"You write?" Echo guessed.

Sullivan considered this. "Well...try to, anyway!"

As his passenger continued to explain, Echo became preoccupied with his own elation. He felt in control! For whatever reason, this old man carried a demeanor, a presence, an atmosphere that so relaxed Echo that his mutated, wondrous, and punishing ears gave in to his wishes! With immense relief he realized that before long he might have complete control...then his hearing would be a true gift.

But only if Sullivan Glaucus stayed.

"You know...I may be able to find you a place," Echo found himself saying.

There was a pause. "Yeah?"

"*Our* place, actually. My wife and I have tried renting our guest room before, but it's vacant now. We could...well, we could *discuss* it, anyway."

"Absolutely!" Sullivan declared, his hesitation now over. "Splendid. I shall call a tow man from your home, then, shall I?"

Echo nodded absently, thrilled that his heightened senses, under the unusually altered circumstances surrounding this encounter, had shown potential for good use.

&&&

She was wrong. It seemed the interview was not over. Hadn't she told them what they wanted to know? Perhaps now they were prepared to answer *her* questions...to explain why she could not enter her own home, why she had not been asked to identify a body...why she was not permitted to see her husband...

The officers studied her. They had put their heads together apart from her, and now it seemed they could not bring themselves to say what needed saying. A decision must have been made between them, yet here they sat, no one moving, no one speaking, the officers clearly unsure whether their decision had been the right one. They wanted to ask her something else...or to *tell* her something else. But the courage eluded them. Or the wisdom. Watching this made her feel strangely superior, which, stranger still, brought on additional resentment and impatience. Her red face whitened, her eyes hardened, her sniffing stopped; all the while, her frown deepened, and she was nigh on getting up to leave.

The senior officer stopped her. With a sigh he plowed slowly forward, regretting to inform her that her husband was not in custody...that no one knew where he was. The other officer described for her the gravity of the situation and she wondered why, why were they telling her what she already knew when they should be out looking for Echo? Then their faces told her. She was suspect. They assumed she was involved. They wanted to make a deal. They wanted to know where to find her husband. They wanted her to convince him to turn himself in. They wanted her cooperation.

They hesitated again, glancing at one another. They were prepared to threaten her. She could feel it coming and she interrupted, insisting she knew nothing, making threats herself, and finally breaking into hot tears once again. She supported her head with one hand, wobbling it back and forth. She didn't know anything. She just wanted to talk to Echo.

The officers hesitated again. They sat awkwardly while she cried. Then the senior put a hand on her arm. She looked up angrily, surprised at what she saw.

She found compassion there.

He looked at his companion, took a hard swallow...and told her who they were. He told her what *they* believed happened to Echo. They told her not *what* had happened—she knew that already—but *why* it had happened. They showed genuine, inspiring insight into the character of her husband...and his possible motive. She listened intently.

&&&

Echo stopped halfway down the stairs to appraise his own living room; it was little more than a sparsely furnished lounge. Currently it was empty. He finished the stairs slowly, hands in his pockets and a thoughtful, discerning look on his face. Pacing to an antique bench—picked out by his wife—he stopped and stared at the coffee table there. A few magazines were strewn across its surface, but foremost among them were two children's stories—comic books. He stared as if not really seeing them.

He didn't look up at the sound of a door opening and closing down the hallway, or after Sullivan entered the room. He saw from the corner of his eye that the old man was wearing a bathrobe and carrying a newspaper and a cup of what smelled like hot herbal tea. Without acknowledging Echo, Sullivan padded softly to the sofa.

"How you feeling, John," Echo said. It was stated, not asked, with an air of distraction.

There was a cold pause. Sullivan arranged his paper and smiled a confused smile.

“John? I’m sorry, Mr. Eapperson...are you talking to *me*?”

Echo looked over at him at last, his hands still in his pockets. “Yes. Aren’t you John?”

Sullivan gave a short chuckle. “Eh...no, not exactly,” he said, pausing to sip his tea. “Are you feeling all right, Mr. Eapperson?”

“Very nice of you to ask,” Echo said with a brief smile. “Yes. I’m fine, actually.” He took a seat on the bench.

“You’re ‘sure’? Well, are you sure you’re sure?”

Without smiling, Echo looked the old man in the eyes. “Aren’t you the one who’s ill, John?”

There was a pause as they appraised each other.

“Why is it you keep calling me John, Mr. Eapperson?”

Echo leaned forward on his elbows, twiddling his fingers slowly, his eyes squinting. Then he sighed. “No, that’s not your name, is it? I’m sorry, Sullivan...I guess...I guess I must be tired...”

Sullivan gave a knowing grunt as he turned back to his paper. “Hmm, you’ve been busy. As have I.”

“That so?” Echo asked intently.

“Hmm?” Sullivan said, distracted by his paper. He looked up. “Sorry?”

“You’ve been busy? Even...I mean...what with your illness. You’ve been out, have you?”

Sullivan paused thoughtfully. “Yes, in fact. Yes, I try to keep busy, Mr. Eapperson...same as you, apparently.”

“Hmm, same as me.”

“Sorry?”

“But you *are* ill, aren’t you...” Echo asserted.

There was a pause as they appraised each other.

“Quite right,” the old man replied, sipping his tea.

“Hmm.” Echo continued to watch Sullivan, then fidgeted, standing and returning his hands to his pockets. He paced along the bench. “Do you...” he began, then stopped, staring off, before catching Sullivan’s eyes again. “Do you follow the news?”

Sullivan rustled his paper. “Well, Mr. Eapperson, I do believe I do.”

"Oh, yes, yes, of course, right...right." Echo watched his guest resume reading and sipping. "Well, then, I suppose you caught the headline, right there, you must've seen it."

Looking up quizzically, Sullivan folded the paper over to examine the front page. "Hmm. Yes, I did notice that. Same scoundrel, it would seem. Awful business, I suppose."

Echo glared at him. "Yes. Yes, I suppose so." He paused, then returned to his seat on the bench. "Do you...have you heard the name before?"

"Sorry?"

"The, uh...that 'scoundrel.' Have you heard the name before?"

There was a pause as they appraised each other.

Sullivan examined the article a second time. "Hmm. Uh...ah...yyyyes." He looked up suddenly with a mocking grin. "Evil Eye! 'The Evil Eye of Terror!'" He chuckled, turning the paper back to his page. "Quaint nom-de-plume, no doubt. I rather prefer the funnies, myself, Mr. Eapperson."

Echo sat upright. "Oh?" He motioned to the comic books on the table with a questioning nod. "These yours, then?"

Sullivan looked around his paper to see where Echo was pointing. "Hmm?...Eh...no." He smiled patiently at him, but with slight irritation. "No, Mr. Eapperson, I had thought they belonged to you. Taken on another boarder, perhaps?"

"No. No...just you."

Echo relaxed for the moment, rustling his own hair with both hands, crossing and un-crossing his fingers, and looking around in deep thought. Sullivan read patiently all the while. Echo settled on watching him and became discerning and meticulous once again.

"Doctor didn't prescribe an eyeglass, then," he said.

"Hmm? Sorry, Mr. Eapperson?"

"Your doctor. For..." He indicated his own left eye. "For the eye."

Sullivan chuckled. "Oh, no, hardly necessary. No, not glasses, not for me, I assure you."

"It doesn't bother you?"

Sullivan looked up thoughtfully, then folded his paper with a sigh in order to give Echo his full attention. "No, Mr. Eapperson, it doesn't. It's just the cold, I'm sure. A cold in my eye." He spread his hands. "So I rest."

"But you're out late," Echo said.

"Well, then that's why I rest," Sullivan sighed, then gave Echo a paternal wink.

Echo nodded, unconvinced. "Hmm. I see."

There was a pause as they appraised each other.

The old man leaned back into the comfort of the sofa. "Forgive my asking, Mr. Eapperson...but is everything all right? Something seems to be...troubling you." At the word 'troubling' he slapped his newspaper onto the table. Echo straightened and stared at it, then at Sullivan, who smiled warmly. "I hope nothing is the matter."

"Yes..." Echo answered slowly, thoughtfully. "I mean, no. Nothing is the matter." He stood and paced around the bench, crossing behind it.

Sullivan watched him. "Oh? Well, that is good, isn't it? I know *your* illness was hard on *you*."

Echo paused. "You...you knew I was sick?"

Sullivan nodded. "Your wife told me. She seems to think *mine* is leftover from *yours*!"

"Oh," Echo said lamely, considering this. "Yes...it was hard on me. For a time. It seems so with you, then?"

The old man shrugged, pointing his teacup at Echo. "I don't know...of the two of us, I do believe you received the worst of it! Such an illness your wife described! I, as you can see...well, I *am* recovering slower, maybe, but I'm quite all right."

Echo paced back to the bench and stood there. "Yes...yes, I see." He paused. "It did strike me powerfully, that disease. Infection. Whatever it was."

Sullivan laughed. "Powerfully? Frightfully so, I should say! What is it the neighbors came to call you? Still call you, don't they?" He arched his arms and adopted a maniacal expression. "What with...ha!...what with your various episodes I've heard about! The ranting, the screaming! Pulling at your ears, trembling excitedly!" He provided an exaggerated imitation, then waved a dismissive hand and laughed again.

Echo nodded, smiling very slightly as he sat on the bench. "Yes...yes, it gave me a reputation. They called me mad, then." He watched Sullivan set his teacup on the table and noticed the newspaper and the comic books. "Madman...actually."

"I...I'm sorry?"

"Madman," he repeated, tapping the comics. "Here. I read them.... I thought they were yours, but they've been here...maybe one of the neighbor kids—you know, when they come to visit—anyway, I did, I read them."

Sullivan steepled his fingers and nodded patronizingly. "Oh?"

"Yes. And..." Echo reached out and took one of the comics, flipped through it quickly, then tossed it back. "Do you know, that's what they call him in here. I mean, one of the characters. A villain most likely"—he smiled nervously—"I'm not certain. But there." He concluded by looking at Sullivan expectantly.

The old man was confused. "What...*what* do they call him, Mr. Eapperson?"

He answered intently. "Madman. They call him Madman. A...well, you know...what did you say? 'Nom-de-plume'? Yes...that's, that's his." He tapped the comic. "In here."

"Ah!" Sullivan replied, his eyebrows suspended. "Ah. I see."

Echo nodded. "Yes. Yes, and, well, they must belong to the neighbors, then. Since the illness...well, they call me Madman, now."

"Of course."

They said nothing for a moment, until the silence was ruined by a sudden sneeze from the old man, who rubbed at his left eye.

"Ah! Well, damn. You know, I had begun to think I was cured, but here it is again." With effort he rose from the sofa. "Well, Mr. Eapperson, I think I shall return to my room for some tissue and a warm bath. Pleasant day to you."

Echo remained where he was. "Yes, of course...good day, John."

Sullivan paused, then turned to grin at Echo. "John, Mr. Eapperson?"

"Oh, yes, I'm sorry. Not John. Mr. Glaucus. Sullivan."

"Quite all right, I assure you."

The old man turned again to leave, but Echo's voice stopped him once more.

"It's the disease, I think. More than just an illness. It has seemed...well, it hasn't been long, of course...I mean, I realize that...but still, even in so short a time, I've noticed...there have been...well, changes...of sorts." He looked up at Sullivan, who had turned to face him. "Have you felt differently, Sullivan?"

"You mean like *memory loss*?" Sullivan chuckled, then added dismissively, "As I said, Mr. Eapperson, you seem to have suffered the worst of it!"

"Not just that, Sullivan. That...true...I'll admit, naturally, there have been negative effects." He shrugged and smiled. "It was an illness, now, wasn't it?" Sullivan didn't answer, so Echo repeated, "Wasn't it, Sullivan?"

"I..."

"Because, well, I think there could have been—should I say it?—*positive* results as well." He gestured at the comic books. "Like...you see...a-a trauma of sorts." He looked at Sullivan with a distant, eager expression. "Do you know, Sullivan...do you know, I believe...no, not *believe*, *know*...I do *know* that the neighbors are preparing to leave just now. Yes, any minute now. Their father is home, and the children are eager for...for some sort of trip. They're going to dinner, it sounds like. Their favorite place. Ha! The dog is eager, too."

Sullivan stared at him, then cautiously replied, "Yyyes...yes, Mr. Eapperson, I'm sure they are. I can't hear them myself, but you are younger than I, after all..."

"No?" Echo returned anxiously. "Can't you? Check, Sullivan, would you? Test my theory. Yeah, walk over there and peek through the door. You'll see them exit now, any moment. I'll prove it to you."

Sullivan held up a hand and edged down the hall toward his door. "No, no, Mr. Eapperson, I really must return to my room." He sneezed again, cupping his hand. "Ah, ha, see there? Yes, I must go..."

"Oh, well...a shame," Echo said. Then he spotted the newspaper still on the table and picked it up. "Ah, uh, Sullivan, you...you forgot your paper."

In the hallway Sullivan paused to look back. "Oh, eh...yes. Well, you keep it, Mr. Eapperson; I'm through with the funnies!"

Then he stopped suddenly, looking up to stare at the front door. His left eye twitched. He gave Echo a startled, suspicious stare, then scratched his eye and turned to leave.

"How you feeling, John," Echo said. It was stated, not asked. "Eye bothering you?"

There was a pause as they appraised each other.

As he entered his room and shut his door, the old man called back, "Sullivan, Mr. Eapperson. Sullivan Glaucus. I'll be just fine."

Echo sat staring down the hall, a thoughtful look on his face, then rose with the newspaper still in hand and went to the front door. He paused, listening. Then he opened the door and looked out.

Children's laughter entered the room, accompanied by a dog's bark. Echo smiled out at his neighbors, waving as a little boy yelled "Bye, Mr. Madman!" Car doors shut and an engine started, then rumbled away. He closed the door, thrust one hand into his pocket, and paced slowly to the coffee table, reading the newspaper headline—not from the paper, but from Sullivan's memory, now recorded in his own mind.

—opycat killer calling himself "Evil Eye"—olice refuting belief e is the same serial run—same calling card foun—ut cleaner crime scenes—ot moving now—not afraid—three dead in same—no suspects—

Echo stopped at the table, where he dropped the newspaper with a sigh and stood staring at the comic books. Then his gaze turned on the hallway and Sullivan's door.

Should I?

He went rigid. Was that his thought or Sullivan's? He concentrated—his control was much stronger now.

What's he doing? What is he getting at? What's he waiting for? Just standing there!

Echo's composure changed. He searched about, looking for a way to occupy himself.

Get a hold of yourself, John. He can't hear you. He can't know...

Echo paused, looking up, away from the hallway...smiling slightly. Then he passed under an archway toward the kitchen, leaving the lounge empty.

Can you see me now? he thought quietly—quieter than his own thoughts had been for weeks. *See me like I hear you? John... What's your weakness, Evil Eye? You'll be just fine? Not if I can help it.*

&&&

Her eyes were wide when the two men—the two agents —finished their story. Her hand had remained poised before her mouth, at first for her to bite at her thumbnail, but now loose and forgotten. She only stared.

Finally, one of the many questions that paraded behind her eyes found its way to her lips. She asked why they were telling her these things. They didn't respond. More questions followed. What did this mean for Echo? How would this affect a trial or sentencing? Could they prove any of this? Did the police know who they were? Should she even be talking to them?

The senior agent quieted her easily enough—she was tired, overwhelmed, frightened. Without breaking eye contact he urged her to tell them where they might find Echo. She began to respond as she had before and he silenced her by squeezing her hand, forcing her eyes back on him. He asked her to think. They trusted her. They knew she was innocent. They just needed a lead. They needed to talk to Echo. He urged her to think: Where would Echo go?

She sighed. Then she thought. She was too tired not to. The images and memories cascaded through her subconscious. She could not have stopped them.

The agent read her face. Color returned to her cheeks and he sat up hopefully, smiling even. He prompted her again. She hesitated, looking from one to the other...then admitted she might know a place.

&&&

It was now natural and involuntary for Echo's hearing to function of its own accord, alerting him to the various levels of sound—inaudible, imperceptible, monotonous, ranged, anticipated, suggested... No wave in the air went undetected. No stir of the prime material and its atmosphere could escape his noticing. If he wished it, the conversations among the fleas and the signals between the birds were his to study, his to understand. Their very minds were his literature.

He allowed the agents to approach and find him unarmed, unprotected, unfed. He didn't need to hear their memories to know how they had found him, but he listened anyway. Caution was still his closest ally, nervousness still his greatest weakness. They found him trembling and bouncing, jerking his head compulsively and at random, his eyes troubling to focus. He ignored their thoughts of discomfort and tried to reject their pity, but part of him welcomed it—the part that was still human.

"Can we speak with you?" the senior agent asked politely, holding his hands aloft. His partner did not imitate him. Echo heard why. The junior agent's hand clutched a pistol inside his coat, but he had no intention to use it. He was afraid of Echo. He was afraid for his partner. He was being cautious. Echo could understand caution.

"If...you like," Echo stammered, trying to control his body. After a moment, the fit ended. He sighed with relief, but made no attempt to rise or to welcome the two men. Instead he regarded the senior

agent sourly and recited, "Art is long and time is fleeting, and our hearts, though stout and brave, still, like muffled drums, are beating funeral marches to the grave."

"Longfellow," the agent said with admiration. "My favorite poet."

"I know," Echo replied, tapping his temple.

The junior agent asked what had happened to him, what was wrong with him, and Echo responded harshly. "I don't know!" Only then did he realize the question had been thought, not spoken. He sighed again.

"You can hear inside our heads," the senior agent said.

"Yes," Echo replied.

"Like you said you could. Back at the house, at the scene of the crime. You told us your tenant was still alive. You said you could *hear* him under your floorboards."

Echo stared at the agent. If he allowed the listening to persist he would eventually suffer another fit of anxiety...but it came too quickly, too clearly into his possession, and he was greedy for what he sensed there. His eyes widened.

"Sullivan...lived, didn't he," he said quietly.

The men nodded, each seeming either confused or exasperated over this truth. Echo was equally confounded. For whatever reason—maybe because he didn't want to know the answers to his questions—he chose to focus his hearing instead on the world around them. The agents told him anyway.

"His name was John Sullivan, but he changed his name to 'Glaucus.'"

"I know," Echo said sadly.

"He was...eh...*dead* long enough for the coroner to match an identity. The state you left him in..."

"I know."

There was a pause. The agents clearly were unsure how to approach Echo, how to measure his personality and, most importantly, his aberration. Likely it was unreal to them. Echo chose not to listen and find out.

The junior agent continued slowly. "We...we feel we owe you an apology, Mr. Eapperson. Not that...well, how could we have known?"

"We knew some," his senior cut in. "Not that you need us to tell you this, Mr. Eapperson...but we deceived you earlier, just as we deceived your wife last night. When we arrived at your home that morning, we introduced ourselves as detectives. That wasn't entirely true."

"I know," Echo said impatiently. "Even your own thoughts are muddled concerning your affiliates. How can you describe a department you yourselves hardly seem to know? Save it. Just...do with me what you came to do."

The agents looked at each other. “We’re not...arresting you, Mr. Eapperson. Didn’t you know that?”

He stared at them, then laughed dryly. “What do you call it, then? You’re kidnapping me. You’re taking me in for questioning. You want to study me. Some higher-up needs to see inside my head. The president wants to use me to win the war. I’m Project Echo. Whatever. Just do it.”

Again the agents were confused. They thought long and hard and he did his best to ignore them. He tried listening for his wife’s thoughts somewhere in the outside—

“That trembling before,” the senior agent said suddenly, awed and humbled. “It’s a reaction, isn’t it? You’ve got a weakness. I’ll be damned.”

“Did you think I was putting on a show earlier?” he spat.

The junior agent gave a short laugh. “No, we thought you were nuts! Seemed pretty cut-and-dry: guy goes insane, chops up an old man, feels guilty and confesses.”

“It was not a confession,” Echo insisted stubbornly. “I couldn’t stand it any longer. I hear everything, gentlemen. *Everything*. From the top of heaven to the core of the earth, a baby’s dreams and a killer’s nightmares...they’re all mine. I’m the world’s most powerful receiver, with a stronger signal than the phones in your pockets. They’re noisy. It’s all noisy. Sullivan’s *life* was noisy!”

“So you killed him,” the senior finished.

“What should I have done?” Echo screamed. “Who would have believed me? Here was this serial killer, *living* in my home! I *liked* him! I don’t know why...I just...my, my *problem* was different around him. He was a distraction. He seemed to suck it all away!”

“We think he did, actually,” the junior agent said. “We didn’t come that night because the neighbors heard Sullivan scream. *We* heard him. We were parked right outside. That’s why we were there. When the killer started calling himself ‘The Evil Eye’ his murders were even harder for the police to track. We took notice. We started investigating your neighborhood.”

“Why?” Echo asked. “What drew you there?”

“Your disease.”

He stared at them. Now it was too hard to resist: He trained his ears on them. On their memories. On everything they had uncovered. It was long and wearisome, and they seemed to realize something was happening because they did nothing but watch. He listened until he knew what they knew. When he stopped, he was surprised and grateful that he maintained control of his muscles.

They continued to watch him, though they must have seen a change in his features. He carried their knowledge now, their research. Parts of it granted him an air of confidence and satisfaction; others sickened and infuriated him.

He looked up. “There are others.”

They nodded.

"You know shockingly little about this disease."

They nodded again.

"That you recognized it in my area is unlikely, though clearly true. Something so random... How ironic. My doctor was right. It really was an infection."

"Yes, we think so," the junior agent said.

Echo smiled at him. "Yes. I know. An insect, probably. It's spreading all over the eastern states with isolated reports in the west. Its victims...develop a disease. It's different every time. Some aspect of their physical composition is...overly developed. Heightened to supernatural extremes." He smiled again, a tone of admiration in his voice. "Some are using it to help you."

The senior agent nodded. "Yes. We're the only ones they can go to. We help them, they help us."

Echo nodded, his smile waning. "Because some are using it...like Sullivan."

"Sullivan was already a killer. But he picked up the disease from you...or, more likely, from whatever gave it to you, since it doesn't seem to be contagious."

"Right," Echo mused. His thoughts went to his wife. He knew from the agents' minds that she was safe, untouched by the disease...but what they didn't know troubled him: Where was Sullivan?

"You said I was right. I *did* hear Sullivan's heartbeat. When I attacked him, two things spurred me on: the awful, random anxiety that accompanies my hearing and takes control of my body...and Sullivan's own resilience. I thought I knew how the disease had affected him...but I discovered something he must not have known himself."

The senior agent nodded. "Regeneration. His body...his parts...they regrew. Like a lizard's. It must have been slow, but his core never really stopped living."

"I didn't actually kill him," Echo sighed, unsure whether from relief or from shame.

"No," the agent replied hesitantly, then added, "that's the problem."

Echo turned sharply. "I know what you're thinking. Remember? He escaped. Killed the coroner. You think I'll help you because it's personal now. Well, I'm not like those others...the vigilante group. The ones who're cooperating. I'm too unstable! I can't promise I won't do something drastic...something like what I did in the car...something like what I did to Sullivan!"

"Can you turn it off?" the junior agent asked boldly.

Echo glared at him, then shook his head. "No."

"Better with help than without," the senior agent said, approaching Echo peacefully. "Your wife is worried about you. We expected you to be worried about *her*. She wanted to come with us. We told her we didn't know what to expect."

"I know," Echo said wearily.

The agent gave him a patient smile. "You won't be able to resist what you hear. What you're privy to. You know people's guilt. You know people's *innocence*. There are ways we can use that. Ways we can...at least for the time being...avoid the public scrutiny. In the long run...maybe we can find a cure."

Echo had heard all this already. He had tried shutting himself off from it, but something inside him must have wanted to hear it, was even anxious to obey.

"Most of the others have taken on new names," the agent was saying. "They're trying to separate themselves from their former selves...try to maintain a distinction between their former and present realities. Some hope those realities are temporary...others have latched on more tightly. Are you going to separate yourself from your wife? Are you going to let Sullivan find her? He will, you know...without your help."

"Don't tell me how to care for my wife," Echo snapped.

The agent paused. "What do you say?" When Echo didn't reply, the agent stepped closer. "What would your name be?"

Echo chuckled dismissively, waving a hand in ridicule. He shook his head and looked away, staring at something unseen. A few particular sounds came to the forefront of his memory. He laughed with mixed amusement, admiration, and frustrated wonder.

"They call me Madman," he said.

****** THE END ******

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“The Thunderbird” by Emal Rustemi

Synopsis: On the streets, justice is not always an option. Sometimes, what is isn't and what isn't goes wrong.

About the Author: Emal is from Long Island, New York. He started writing as a young teenager and continues to do so while attending college. His passion for writing comes from the desire to express the true depth of life's experiences, both great and small, and exhibit the beauty of it. Life is challenging and hard at times, but taking initiative and embracing it leads to a life never forgotten. As Dr. Hunter S. Thompson once said, you have to “Buy the ticket, take the ride”.

In this pulp story, we find a man haunted by uncontrollable situations.

The Thunderbird

By Emal Rustemi

The thunderbird.....what a car she was. Ford put everything they had into making that beautiful little creature. It was just me and her cruising the streets every warm night in LA. Miles is blasting the trumpet on the radio, his sounds fusing in with the laughter and chitter chatter coming from the nightwalkers out and about in the beautiful city. Fresh young faces exit and enter the theatres, the diners, the ice cream shops. They're talking about Cary Grant and how handsome he looks, about the summer and what plans they have, about the new Ray Charles record and when the next Beach Boys record will be hitting the stores.



It's a beautiful time. There's nothing wrong in this world; my world. The cool wind never dies down. The weather is always perfect. The car looks as new as the day I got it. I'm going the perfect speed, catching every little thing that's going by. My brain feels numb. Miles never gets too loud or too soft; the perfect sound. I never really actually think about where I'm going, but it doesn't matter. Everything else is enough for me.

Everything is going smooth, and then I lose the sounds of laughter and the sweet young voices. The soft, delicate words spoken by the lady in the red dress on the corner die away. The width of the road gets smaller until my tires are riding the sidewalks. I see a black hole at the end of the road getting bigger. It swallows me up and I black out.

Its 4:30 in the morning and I'm back to hearing men cry. The ultimate sounds of misery. It's the same shit every night. Some of them believe they actually shouldn't be here. It's such a culture shock to everyone of them. It's the first day of school again, and they're all looking for momma because they're scared of what's about to come. The stench of fear brings in all the sharks. Fresh meat and they spot it before anyone else thinks to even do so. Sharks wait till the showers to make their moves.

Some of the fuckers are wailing like newborns right about now. I grab my pillow and throw it over my ear. I can't start off tomorrow right without my beauty sleep. I want to go back to my world again. I try to pull out the thunderbird, the streets, the light, and all that excitement, but it just isn't working. The pillow isn't helping either because I could still hear one of the fuckers still crying.

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May 15, 1954. I come out of Frankie's on a hot Saturday night. Frankies was the spot back in those days. It wasn't a place where a two faced, devious and treacherous motherfucker was welcome. You had to have class. If you were in Frankies, you either knew somebody special or you were someone special. You had to be singular. You had to be elite.

Everybody was dressed admirably. You take the best thing out of your wardrobe and hope it was good enough. We're talking about class like no other. That night, I remember picking out my shoes first. That's the way I always picked out my outfit for the night. It came down to the white and burgundy spectators. The shoes glistened every time I held them up in the light. The rest of the attire just came together right after that; a burgundy suit and tie, along with a nice angel white shirt to match. The cherry on top of it all was the stunning burgundy felt hat. I threw everything on, but it wasn't until I put the hat on that I could look in the mirror and smile. I wasn't standing in my bedroom looking at myself anymore. I was standing on a mountain, the highest mountain in the world. Everything was in my sight and I had the crown on top of my head. There was only one size and it fit my head. I was young, energetic, and it felt like life could only get better. You're probably thinking, how does a nigga like me end up having so much money? That's another story to tell for another time.

Frankies was spectacular that night. The beats were smooth and the trumpets were dazzling. The sax player blew into his instrument with the fire that God gave him. Sweat was trickling down his face, his hips were moving from side to side, and his exquisite sounds were carrying themselves throughout the room. The piano man was cruising. Empty glasses once filled with rum and coke paraded the top of the piano and shook from the vibrations made every time a key was hit. The ashtray left next to the glasses was stacked with Lucky strike butts. The piano man's head was bumping up and down at a steady pace to the quick rhythm. His head never moved any other direction other than up and down, and it was moving since I walked in the door and gave in my coat. It was like somebody pressed the "on" button and left the machine running without the single thought of ever coming back to turn it off. Women moved to the rhythm and danced with all the juice they had and more; their hips swaying left and right, forward and back. Arms moved to the sounds with the grace of God. Every man had their eyes on at least one girl, not able to take their eyes off for a second. When a woman moves like she did at Frankies, it didn't matter how much of a sin it was. The men are thinking about every sinful thing they can think of doing with a woman who had moves like the ones at Frankies.

I came out of Frankies sometime after midnight, started the Thunderbird up and headed straight for home. Home was a little apartment for me on the edge of town. It was small and could get real tight for a big man like me, but it was where I laid my head at night.

The night was warm. My windows were down and the air was blowing into the car, into my face. My eyes widened and I felt the blood moving through my veins again. I was tired, but it was something in the air that brought me back. There was something that wanted to keep me awake. The fog like look in the air was mischievous and sly. It was luring me in like a beautiful dancer luring me in with just one look of those slender thighs and tight, well shaped ass of hers. I couldn't quite hit the hammer on the nail. I knew I was driving home, and once I'd get home I knew I would sit out on the balcony for a little while, enjoying a smoke and my last glass of Johnnie Red for the night, and then I would hit the hay and sleep soundly for the rest of that sweet and beautiful night. For some reason, I got the sudden feeling that I wasn't even close to doing any of those anytime soon.

As I'm driving down some local street, only about four or five blocks from home, I turn my head and I'm staring down some alley way. I stopped the car in the middle of the street, but didn't take my eyes off the alleyway. The warm air suddenly felt cold. My stomach turned inside and a Johnnie Red at that moment was the last thing my stomach could take.

I'll never forget that fat motherfucker's face. He was white, mid-thirties, heavy blue eyes, and a squished face. It looked as if someone put his head in a four-sided vice and never stopped turning the shaft. His hair was dark brown, but his sides were graying; sideburns completely gray. His fat,

stubby fingers were wrapped around some young girl's neck. She was on her way back home after a late night out to the movies with her friends. She kissed her friends goodbye after the show. Her friends insisted on walking with her, one the papers said, but the sweet little girl reassured them that she would be fine. On her way home, some fat motherfucker was wandering down the same street she was, only a short distance away. He grabbed and threw her into the alley, probably punched her a few times, and then got his big hand around her neck to shush her. You only heard the quick and short rusty sounds of her fighting for air, but nothing too alarming for the fat man to worry about.

She probably fought like a gladiator to keep him from getting in. I was too late to prevent that from happening. I don't remember getting out of the car, and I don't remember thinking about how I was going to save her. I just remember running into the alleyway, screaming something out and tackling the fat bastard. He was a sturdy fuck, but I hit him hard and he fell over colossally against the ground. I fell to the ground with him and tumbled a bit because I was moving so fast. I hit my head as I was coming down pretty hard so I stayed down for a little bit. The pain and the dizziness I felt caused me to take a lot longer to get up. I slowly got to my feet. I turned my head to go after the bastard again, but he was nowhere to be seen. Before I knew it, I felt a thump on my head and hit the floor again. Everything went black.

I don't remember how long I was out for, but when I woke up and got to my feet, I look back now and wish I never woke up from what I saw and what happened. The poor little girl had bullet hole in her forehead. The gun was on the ground only a few feet away from me; the fat bastard nowhere to be found. Everything came together after right then and there. The fat bastard had a brain on him. I played it back in my head: he takes his pistol out and knocks me over the head with it, shoots the girl and then tries to pin it on me. With all this going through my head at once, I dismissed the sounds of sirens in the air that had been playing since I woke up. I didn't even realize they were sirens until it was too late. Nowhere to run. *Put your hands up nigger!* I heard.

It's been so many years since that night. I've forgotten so many faces that were so familiar in my early life. I've even forgotten Frankie's face, after so many nights with him in his place. No matter what happens though, I don't think I'll ever forget that fat motherfucker's face.

&&&

I miss the days of the hot and steaming summer when I woke up and could hardly keep my eyes open because of the brutal sun. Sun rays would invade the room, coming in from the window and startling everything in the room. My dog Milo would wake up first and signal me next. He would whip out his big tongue and slobber my face until I threw him off and cursed at him. I wish I could take back every bad thing I ever said to that poor little mutt. I should've woke up and wrapped my big black arms around him, rolling him around the bed and giving him the love that every man should give his one and only real companion in the world. And yes ladies, I do mean a man's ONLY REAL companion.

Milo was passing on God's message to me. He was telling me to wake up; telling me that God was giving me another chance to live in his beautiful palace. A palace that was so cold and looked lost in the eye of a hurricane. It wasn't till you lost it that you realized how beautiful it was.

Where I was now, God didn't exist. There were no sun rays, no windows, no Milo, and no beautiful palace. It's a place I don't think God ever planned on having in his beautiful palace. God was nowhere to be heard. I called out to him every night, but he just never answered back. I don't think he heard any of Jack's prayers either. He was the cellmate living in the cell over to my right. They

found him with his throat slit on the floor of his cell. Some think he did it himself. Most just don't give a shit. It had to be him, in my opinion. Some of the newcomers just can't handle the change.

It's August 18th, 1955. The guards ask me what I want to eat. I could have had anything I wanted. I shook my head and said no. One of the guards couldn't quite believe my answer. I gave him one hard look after I saw his face, saying nothing. He quickly regarded it and walked away, following the other one who was already down the other side of the hall.

Black man deserved to be in a cage. That's what every white man and woman thought who read the paper and saw my face with the words "rape and murder" scattered across the article like sprinkles on an ice cream cone. There were nights that I thought this whole sentence was all a dream. I thought I would wake up and go back to the world I know. The world I loved. Life couldn't really be this unfair, I thought to myself. All these thoughts would die away when I would go back to the color only bathrooms, the "white only" lunch counters, the back of the bus. Our bathrooms, a dog would be scared to shit in because it was so god damn nasty. Their bathrooms, Julius Cesar would have been able to eat lunch in. Maybe it was ok to be leaving this "beautiful palace". If they let me out of this cage, I would only be going out to a bigger cage; a much larger one where the barbed wire fences were not seen but felt. The guards didn't carry gun and sticks. They carried smiles with the superiority they held in their skin color. The food was the same shit, at least the food they served us on the outside. At least this place I'm in is honest. They're upfront and straight about captivating you and holding your spirit down.

"It's time."

I turned and saw the guards in front and got up. They opened the cell door and I got out, following the two in front of me while the other two followed behind me. The other prisoners said nothing, knowing there was nothing to say. We walked into a corridor and walked down to the last door on the left. I walked in and saw a priest waiting with his Bible. I saw the chair there but didn't want to acknowledge it. The guard took my arm and motioned me toward the chair. I walked over there slowly and sat down, taking a deep breath.

The Priest started reciting verses from the Bible. I wasn't paying attention to a word of it. All I could think of was the Thunderbird. I was back to that warm night in LA again. The Priest's words dissipate as the sounds of laughter gets louder and louder. Miles never sounded better on the trumpet. The lady in the red dress is back on the corner speaking with a sweet soft tone that brought shivers up my spine. The lights were piercing through the night, unmasking the excitement and activity in the street. Everything was just as good as before, except something was different this time around. As I passed by the movie theatre, I noticed the young girl from before. She was alive and the fat motherfucker was nowhere to be seen. She looked straight into my eyes, and I looked back, taking my eyes completely off the road. She lifted her hand, blew me a kiss, and said, "You won't be forgotten."

I shed a tear and drew a smile. I hadn't smiled in over a year and it felt good. The Priest uttered last few words of his verses and then went quiet. The roar of the Thunderbird's engine, the music of Miles, and the words uttered from the young girl only got louder and more assuring. I was completely back to my world.

**** THE END ****

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“The Hood” by Cameo Rowe

Synopsis: Welcome to the neighbourhood.

About the Author: Cameo Rowe is an engineer and fiction writer in the Pittsburgh area, and a graduate of the University of Pittsburgh. He received finalist standing in the 2008 Gertrude Johnson Williams Short Fiction Contest and semi-finalist standing in the 2009 American Gems Literary Festival.

In this pulp story, we see a mysterious organisation changing a man into a fighting machine.

The Hood

By Cameo Rowe

Riley Jordan enters the warden's office wearing his bright orange jumpsuit. He has short black hair cut close to the scalp and piercing eyes. He sits opposite the warden, who wears a white shirt and red tie with a "Corporation" pin on his lapel.



The Corporation funds juvenile detention centers all over the US. It's advertised as a rehabilitation program for young offenders, but Riley knows better. It's a place to keep them away from the rest of society. And before him sits the man with the keys to the gate. He knows it, and relishes in it.

The warden lets Riley sit in silence for several moments while he types on his laptop. Nothing of consequence, and nothing he can't come back to later, but Riley's time means nothing to him.

After some time, he closes his laptop and looks up at Riley with a smile. He opens a manilla folder on his desk with the typed words "Riley Jordan" in black courier lettering across the front.

"Well, Riley," says the warden. His tone is measured and exacting. "You've been here two years now. No incidents or fights, no disruptions, you've been a model citizen...in here."

Riley nods and says, "Thank you, sir." Riley knows to call him sir. Stroke the warden's ego and get rewarded.

"Of all the other students here, I'd say your spotless record warrants special recognition. Special recognition warrants special privileges."

"I don't know if..." Riley's voice trails off. The last thing he wants is to be picked out as the "warden's pet." It would be like painting a bulls-eye on his back. It's hard enough to stay out of trouble without being called "special."

"You don't want out of here?" says the warden.

Riley's ears perk up. He wonders if he heard correctly. He's not supposed to have his case reviewed for at least another year.

"The Corporation has a program for early release," says the warden. "You participate in it and they'll wipe the slate clean. It starts tomorrow. Are you interested?"

"Yes, sir," says Riley. He can't help but smile.

"No one is to know of your involvement. You tell anyone, and the deal's off. Got it?"

Riley nods in agreement.

"Good. You're dismissed." The warden presses a button on his desk top and the door to the office opens.

Two guards in blue shirts and slacks with a full arsenal of "non-lethal" restraints and discipline tools around their waist approach Riley and walk on either side of him as he leaves the office. They trek through the halls in silence, passing empty corridors lined with simple doors that are metal save for a single plastic inlet. It extends in every direction. The blank emptiness has been Riley's existence for two years. But, it's all about to change. All he has to do is get in a program and he's out. For a moment, Riley worries that he doesn't know what the program's about, but he lets it pass. Anything is better than being in here.

He can't wait to surprise Mama, or Jasmine. He smiles as the guards lead him to his cell, open the door, and push him in.

At 5:00 AM the next day, Riley is led out of his cell and down the hall in silence. The hall lights are dim, and their footsteps make the only noise. The other inmates won't have to get up for another few hours. Riley hasn't eaten, but he's careful not to ask for a stop.

He leaves the detention center and looks out at the dusky landscape. A patch of nothingness surrounded by a barbed wire fence. Riley's used to seeing a sea of orange jumpsuits standing outside. People gathered into their respective gangs making deals, playing ball, or lifting. He doesn't know how he's made it so far. He promised Mama he'd never be in a gang again, and he kept it. And Riley's been looking over his shoulder ever since. He thinks about being out in the yard with the eyes breathing down on him. The subtle whispers and gestures...everything and everyone sizing him up; checking him out.

A van pulls up to him. It's all white; nondescript. Riley walks in and straps himself in beside the guards. The driver pulls off without a word, and he smiles as he feels the wheels of the car start to churn, sending him farther and farther away from the center. Before he can react, one of the guards takes a needle from a black case on the floor of the van, and injects it into the back of his neck. Everything goes black.

Riley wakes up handcuffed to a metal chair. He looks to his right and left, noticing that he's seated in a row with three other boys about his age. There's a white kid with sandy blonde hair and blue jumpsuit on.

He's got soft, almost feminine features and looks like Justin Bieber. There's a black kid next to him with dark skin and corn rows styled in a "z" pattern across his scalp. He wears a red jumpsuit. The fourth kid is Mexican from what Riley can tell. He wears a green jumpsuit and has an ornate tattoo styled up his neck and on his forearms.

The others start waking up and looking around. When Riley opens his mouth to try and speak with them, no sound comes out. He tongue falls flat. He knows they're all from other detention centers, but he doesn't know where they're from or who they are. At the end of the room, a panel in the wall opens and a man in a blue suit and red tie walks in. Like the warden, he has a "Corporation" pin on his lapel. He smiles as he enters the room and looks from side to side.

"Good," he says. "You're awake. I know you're wondering why you're here. You've each been selected to enter The Corporation's Conditioning Program, a new facet to our Rehabilitation initiative in conjunction with the government. Our administrators have picked each of you as standouts in your respective centers. After completing the program, you will receive commissions

from The Corporation and early release, subject to your compliance with our contract requirements. Are there any questions?"

Each of them tries to open their mouths to respond. Silence.

"Good," says the man pleasantly. "Let the program begin."

Four men in white coats enter the room and hold small test tubes with red liquid in their hands. They approach the boys and push their heads back, opening their mouths with gloved hands. The men pour the liquid down their throats. Riley coughs, as do the other boys. He wants to kick and fight, but the restraints keep him fixed to the chair.

The liquid burns like hard liquor as it goes down his throat. The taste is a mixture of vomit and urine, with a worse smell. Riley feels as if the liquid has tiny claws that grab hold of his throat on its way down. His eyes big out and his limbs shake. The light in the room explodes into an infinite array of colors, and every sound is like thunder in his ears. The hum of the air conditioner, and the air rubbing against the clothes and chairs was inaudible moments ago. Now he can't escape it. Every sense explodes and his mind races to process it. His eyes move from side to side and his hand shakes. The first sounds that leave his mouth are indiscernible screeches and grunts.

The man leaves the room, and the men in white coats stand in front of the boys, staring at them blankly. When Riley feels the liquid hit his stomach, his muscles lurch all at once and his cry grows louder and almost primal. The other boys join in and create a desperate symphony of pain and anguish. After several moments of screaming, each boy closes their eyes and slumps in their chair.

Images flash through Riley's mind. He's back in the convenience store with Jim and Rob. Each has a black hoodies, blue jeans, and a blue bandana covering their mouths. They walk down the street, empty this time of night. Boarded up buildings and vacant lots within the decaying yellow street lights, surround them. Riley feels, sees, hears, and smells everything as if he were right there.

They walk into the 7-Eleven. The Arab man stands behind the counter and eyes them suspiciously. His eyes grow wide. He knows what's coming, but isn't quick enough to react. Jim and Rob pull out 9 MMs and point them at the cashier.

"Open the drawer!" they say.

Riley's heart is racing. He doesn't really know if he should go through with it, but he has already. The actions play out in front of him. Jim pulls the drawer. Rob gets the snacks. Riley's the lookout. But, he freezes. He doesn't see the cop pulling up to the building. He doesn't signal the others. When the police yell "freeze," he stands there stupefied. Jordan and Rob fire. Riley stands there. The cop clips both of them. Riley hits the deck. Jim and Rob are carted to the morgue. Riley goes to jail.

A flash. Now Riley stands before the judge. He's wearing his court and church suit. The judge slams his gavel on the bench. Guilty. Mama cries and has to be escorted out of the courtroom. Jasmine can't look Riley in the eye as he looks back. Jasmine.

Another flash. Riley and Jasmine in the theater. They sit together with the armrest pulled up. She leans up against him and eats his popcorn. She feels soft and warm. He likes that. Another flash...

"We don't need a condom," he thinks. He doesn't dare say it though. He just lets everything flow.

They sit in Mama's station wagon and make out. Her lips are soft. His heart is pounding. He can barely think. His hands rub up against her. Both breathe heavy. He looks into her eyes.

Another flash...Jasmine is crying; calling him every form of jerk, and cussing him out. Riley doesn't say anything. He just takes it. She walks away. He just stands there, knowing in a few days she'll take him back. She always does. He goes back to the stoop and sees his boys decked out in blue and white. Cops roll by. The colors and sounds blur together. Every street...every sign...

The flashes are more rapid now. Baby crying...Mama with a switch...standing in front of a classroom reading...kids laughing...Dad walking out. Walking into jail...his life racing by at light speed, but every feeling and image occurring vividly. It's like drinking a tidal wave. Riley feels as if he'll drown. A flash that pops his ears.

He wakes up. Riley's lying in a hospital bed with test tubes feeding into his arms and mouth. He turns to his right and sees the EKG. When he moves to reach over to touch the monitor, he finds his arm chained to the bed. Riley stares at the metal handcuffs for several moments. His eyes focus deeper and deeper on the metal, into the specs of dust on the metal itself. The buzzing of flies and whispers of the air conditioner fill his ears. He feels the coolness of the metal against his skin and the scrape of his paper hospital gown. He hears heavy soled shoes approaching from the hallway.

The slight shake of the fluid bags beside him is seen out of his peripheral vision. Riley looks around at the white paneled walls and ceiling. The wooden door swings open, and a man in a white lab coat with frizzy gray hair and thick plastic glasses enters. Riley watches as he approaches. The man smiles.

"I'm Dr. Williams," he says. He looks at a clipboard and makes some notes with a pencil. He walks to the computer terminal and makes a few more notes. "Good. Everything looks good."

"Wha-what?" says Riley. His mind is racing. He's processing a million things at once, or at least it feels that way. His hair stands on end.

"The others...well, they're not doing as well," says Dr. Williams. "But you...yes, very nice."

"What did you do to me!" asks Riley.

Dr. Williams gives a quizzical look and then smiles. "They didn't tell you? No, well I suppose The Corporation doesn't do that so much. Not that I blame them..."

Riley screams.

"Calm down," says Dr. Williams without looking up from his clipboard. "You have agreed to participate in a study to examine CC-01. It's a chemical compound with integrated nano-circuits and integrators for information processing. What do you know about computers, Mr. Jordan?"

Riley shrugs.

Dr. Williams smiles. "Most computers today use chips made of silicon...the same material used to make glass. The Corporation has designed carbon-based chips which have the unique property of

being able to be integrated into biological organisms. They can process information using DNA. Your DNA."

Riley returns a quizzical look.

"Imagine what processing power a biological computer could have. With DNA-based processing, every molecule of your body can be optimized to move, think, and respond like a computer—several times stronger and faster than human norms. It's amazing."

Riley doesn't understand a word the doctor just said. He says, "What happened to the others?"

"Mr. Anderson is in a coma, but he should pull through in time," says Dr. Williams. "The others couldn't process the compound."

"They're dead?" says Riley.

Dr. Williams nods. "Several runs of testing, and you are the first survivor, Mr. Jordan. This is very exciting."

After several moments of silence, Riley says, "When do I get to go home?"

"Home? GO home? We've got several round of testing. We don't know what you can do, how the compound will hold, or even if there are any side effects. We'll need to scan several organs and possibly dissect--"

"Dissect!" Riley knows what that means. His heart pounds like a bass drum. He imagines them cutting him up with little knives and staring at his mutilated body under a microscope.

Without thinking, he pulls his arms forward and breaks free from the bed. He kicks his legs up, freeing his body completely. Riley leaps into the air, flips over Dr. Williams, and hits him in the back of the head, knocking him out cold.

On a television screen, Riley's image is visible in the hospital patient gown. He runs up the hall moving like a blur through the corridor. Guards turn to face him, but fall to the ground before they can fully turn about.

"Freeze it," says a man in a blue suit. "Enhance."

The image freezes, and Riley's frightened face comes into view.

"You told a boy with no security clearance top secret information," says the man. "The Corporation has a strict policy on security. Need to know basis, Dr. Williams...need to know."

Dr. Williams sits opposite the man with a bandage wrapped around his head.

"Now, Riley Jordan, our only successful trial subject for CC-01, is missing," says the man. "What can be done?"

"My report--" says Dr. Williams.

"I wasn't asking what your report said. So far, your report's been a bunch of hypothetical crap."

The man in the blue suit shakes his head and his face sours. He can't stand scientists. They're a bunch of virgins living in a family world, letting their equations and theories leave them numb to the real world. Now he has to clean up this mess before it grows and impacts The Corporation. He looks in front of him at the release sitting at his oak desk. He gets to his feet and turns to stare out the window, letting the cold skyscrapers with their black steel frames and prisons high above the streets where men scurry like ants from building to building. He turns back to Dr. Williams, who sits fidgeting in his chair. The man in the blue suit shakes his head, knowing this will be a long day.

"As his body accepts the formula, he'll become stronger, faster, both in body and mind," says the doctor. "His metabolic rate will increase as will his nervous system's own innate abilities."

"I thought you said he would be a computer," says the man. "Smart."

"He'll be able to process and access information quickly, yes, but computers are controlled by the users. A computer has hardware. The formula turned Mr. Jordan into biological hardware. His mind will dictate how his body responds."

The man in the blue suit nods. He knows he has to get to Riley before he learns what he can do.

Riley gets off the Center City bus at the corner of Wilhelm and Lake. When he looks up at the green street signs, several flashes of memory rush to his mind at once. He sees the signs during the day, night, rain, shine, running, walking, and standing. The closer he gets to Mama's house, the stronger the sensation becomes. He has managed to deal with it. Somehow, the moments only cause him a pause, and then he resumes normally.

He turns and walks up Lake street, seeing the corners where he used to hang out with his boys. Some of them are still there. He smiles as he recognizes the blue shirts and Kansas City Royals baseball hats, their trademark. Now in a white shirt and blue jeans, he's given up that life.

Riley passes the line of row houses of dilapidated red and mud-colored brick, some boarded up, others broken into, and still others looking barely lived in. He doesn't look up or talk to anyone. He recognizes faces, and can tell that some recognize him, but he's not ready to be seen just yet. Not until he gets inside Mama's house, where he knows it's safe. The words of the doctor never left him, nor has the memory of how he escaped the hospital. Everyone was moving in slow motion. When he hit them, they just collapsed to the ground. Riley's been in enough fights to know that only happens on television...or at the very least, that it doesn't happen to him.

He passes "Salim's," a convenience store two blocks from his house. It became the defacto grocery store. Riley shakes his head, knowing that he must have helped rob that store at least a dozen times. He continues walking, seeing the park where most of the neighborhood kids gather. Some of his old boys are making drug buys and flirting with girls by the bleachers. Others play basketball on the blacktop, and others just hang around. Riley met Jasmine while he was playing ball there. The memories flash. His team won and he hit the game winning shot. He walked over to her feeling like a million bucks. Riley remembers her smile, and how she tossed her hair delicately with her left hand.

Riley continues walking and reaches Mama's house. A few neighbors hang out on the concrete steps nearby. Their conversation stops when he arrives. He sees Mrs. Andrews and her husband, a frumpy older couple that serve as the neighborhood gossips. They sit on the steps day in and day out, talking and looking at the passersby. Ms. Linn is at the opposite step. She runs the nail salon up the street next to the Andrews' Hair Salon and Barbershop. At first they were rivals but

now they stand united as friends by telling everyone's business. Riley waves hello to the group, knowing that he has now broadcast his arrival to the entire neighborhood.

Riley walks up the stairs to his house hoping they will let him walk past them in peace. No such luck.

"Is that Riley?" says Mr. Andrews. "Riley Jordan? Lookin like a runaway slave?"

The group laughs.

"Hello, Mr. Andrews," says Riley with a forced smile.

"Hello," says Mrs. Andrews in a mocking voice. "Went to juvie and got sophisticated?"

Ms. Linn points and laughs at Riley.

"Riley," says Mr. Andrews. "Come into the shop tomorrow and I'll get you a cut. Ten o'clock sharp. Don't be on C.P. Time. Can't go walkin' 'round looking like that."

"What do you say, boy?" says Mrs. Andrews.

"Thank you, Mr. Andrews," says Riley.

Riley gets ready to knock on the door. Before his hand can strike the wood, Mrs. Andrews beats him to it.

"Junie! Junie! Get out here, girl!" says Mrs. Andrews. "Ha ha, your boy's back!"

In a few moments, the door opens and Mama is standing in front of Riley. She stands a head taller than him with a buxom build wearing a thin oversized shirt and jeans. Her hardened face softens into a smile. Tears stream down her face. She opens her arms and wraps them around his body. Linn and the Andrews gape at the sight and smile.

"Boy, what you doin' home early?" she says. She looks up and waves at the others on the steps.

Riley hears Mr. Andrews whisper, "Boy probably broke out."

"Oh," says Mrs. Andrews, who gives a pointed look to Ms. Linn.

The Asian woman already has her cell phone out and starts the rumor mill.

"Come on in boy," says Mama. "I know you're hungry."

The man in the blue suit stands before three men dressed in black jumpsuits with utility belts and high powered rifles strapped to their backs. Each looks like a walking arsenal of handguns, knives, and ammunition.

"Good morning, gentlemen," says the man in the blue suit. "Thank you for coming on such short notice. You'll find in your dossiers information on your target. His name is Riley Jordan. He has stolen information and assets of high sensitivity from The Corporation and United States

government. I want him brought in dead or alive as soon as possible. Consider him armed and extremely dangerous.”

The man in the blue suit looks at the three, operatives of The Corporation renowned for their ability to operate swiftly and decisively. They're former US special forces agents of highest distinction...and higher cost. The man in the blue suit smiles, knowing this should be more than enough to bring in Jordan.

Riley descends the stairs to his house, racing down them several at a time. He's done it since he was a kid. Mama shakes her head as she exits the kitchen with a plate of eggs and grits in hand.

The living and dining room is a shrine to puppies; Mama's favorite. The furniture is worn in, homely, and comfortable. Vases of flowers on end tables and shelves are spread around the room as well. Riley's memory flushes with experiences, reliving everything in the house all at once. Christmases, arguments, bringing Jasmine home for the first time. Every hair stands on end, but Riley keeps moving. He sits at the table and eats.

I'm so glad you're home,” says Mama. “Early parole program. That's fantastic. I told you, you leave that mess alone, you do right, and you'd get out. Now you need to keep away from them boys of yours and stay out of trouble.”

“Yes, Mama,” says Riley.

“Can you look at my computer? I can't get it to come on right.”

Riley nods as he shovels the food down. It hits his throat and the taste explodes in his mouth. The gruel from juvie was nothing compared to this. After a few moments, he has his plate wiped clean.

“Would you like some more?” says Mama.

Riley nods.

Mama takes the plate, kisses his forehead and returns to the kitchen. When she places another plate in front of him, he scarfs it down just as quickly. After a couple more plates of food without without getting full, Riley wipes his hands and mouth.

“I'll look at the computer now, Mama,” he says.

Mama brigs a clunky Dell laptop into the dining room from a cabinet. Riley places his finished plate in the kitchen and turns the computer on. When he touches the “on” button, sparks fly from the computer's keyboard to Riley's body. He feels a rush as the screen lights up and Windows boots. The computer starts normally. Riley thinks about getting online. Internet Explorer opens and the window races through page after page, moving like a blur. Mama stands over Riley's shoulder.

“How did you do that?” she says.

Riley feels energy surge into him and his brain absorb each page individually and all at once.

“Riley?” says Mama. “Riley!”

He takes his hand off the keyboard and look up. The computer screen returns to normal. Riley's mother looks at the computer and scrolls the mousepad. She clicks on a couple icons and sees different applications open in an instant.

"I didn't tell you what was wrong with it," she says. "How did you fix it?"

Riley shrugs his shoulders, smiling as the rush of excitement makes his hair stand on end and goosebumps rise up on his arms. He gets up from his seat and hugs Mama. He then places a white t-shirt on and walks outside. When he walks down from his stop, he sees a group of his old boys decked out in blue baseball jerseys and jeans. Anthony, who everyone calls Ant, steps forward. He has a low cut, brown skin, and beady eyes with a slight build.

"My man, Riley," says Ant. He turns to the others in the group and smiles. "Heard you busted out of juvie to come back with the boys."

Riley shakes his head, knowing the rumor mill has already been working.

"They take your gear, Riley?"

Riley shrugs his shoulders.

"This is a Crip block, Riley, and you's a Crip," says Ant. "So, where's your gear?"

Ant walks up to Riley and pulls up his sleeve. The tattoo he sported for years marking his initiation date as well as the names of several of his former friends is gone. Only Jasmine's name remains.

"Arm's looking a little bare, son," says Ant. "We'll fix that."

Riley pulls his arm free and turns to walk the other way.

"Where you goin', Riles?" says Ant. "Where you at?"

Riley keeps moving, pretending as if he doesn't hear him. He walks several blocks, seeing several of his old boys hanging around on different steps and benches. He nods to them and shakes their hands, but doesn't say too much. He sees their quizzical gazes, knowing they think he looks off without his blue. After walking a couple more blocks, he gets to Jasmine's building. Riley walks up the steps and presses the buzzer to her apartment, hoping she hasn't left for work yet.

Jasmine's parents had kicked her out when she got pregnant and with a gangbanger no-less. She's been living here ever since, working to support their child. Riley doesn't know if he can even look her in the eye, but he has to. He promised Mama he'd get clean, but he wants to stay straight even more so because of Jasmine and their son, Mark. He wants to be the father he never had, and figures he can start by being present. The rest...he's not so sure. Riley keeps ringing the buzzer and feels his heart pound inside his chest. After several minutes, he decides she's not home. He'll go to her job and surprise her there. That might be better. At least she can't curse him out too badly.

Riley walks up the street to avoid backtracking, and makes the long walk back, passing the street his house is on and turning down the same street as the park. Jasmine works as a cashier at the Popeyes a few blocks down from the park. Riley's drawn to the game and finds himself on the court before he notices he's deviated from his path.

"Who's got next?" he says.

A couple boys he doesn't recognize raise their hands. They seem young, and a little short. Riley sees one of Ant's friends, Terrance, and his friends running the court. Terrance streaks up and down the court, catching passes on the run and dunking the ball. The crowd cheers for him at every made basket. Riley remembers Terrance embarrassing him on several occasions, jumping over, around, and through him while beating him and his boys. Riley looks at his potential teammates and shakes his head, not knowing if he wants to be humiliated in his first game. When Terrance makes his last shot he throws his hands up. He pounds the Nike symbol on his chest.

The three other boys who are playing with Riley approach him. Their names are Steve, John, and Adam. Each is average height and build with blue shirts and shorts. Riley recognizes them as junior Crips from years ago, junior high kids that have now grown up a bit. They recognize Riley and are beaming with pride to see him fresh out of juvie. Riley looks over at Terrance, who nods at Riley and smirks.

"How you been, Riles?" he says. "Heard you busted out. Learned any new moves?"

"You'll see," says Riley. "Word is you've got scouts talkin' about you."

"Everyone's talking 'bout me, Riles, same as always." Terrance smiles. "I like playing you, Riles. You make me look good."

Riley shakes his head and gets in a defensive position, ready to check the ball. Riley looks around, seeing that Terrance's teammates are being defended. Terrance checks the ball, passes to his teammate and gets the ball back. Riley moves in on him, and immediately remembers that he likes to dribble through his legs left to right. When he does so, Riley reaches in and pokes the ball away. Riley picks up the ricochet and dribbles downcourt. He's all alone and lays in a basket. The people in the crowd oo and ahh at the act. Riley doesn't showboat, but finds Terrance and gets back on defense. He fronts the inbound pass. Terrance stands several inches taller, so he catches it easily.

Riley remembers seeing Terrance spin to his right when fronted. Riley moves to his left, intercepts Terrance and strips the ball as he turns. Riley dribbles back to the 3-point line and sinks a jumper easily. The audience cheers. Terrance shakes his head. He gets the ball and runs upcourt. Riley keeps pace with him. He remembers Terrance pulling up from the elbow after jump-stopping as he dribbles first to the sideline. Terrance does just that, and Riley waits for him, grabbing the ball on his way up.

This time, Terrance gets on defense after the strip and hounds Riley upcourt. Riley remembers Michael Jordan turning away from his opponent and faking left while spinning right, finishing with an easy dunk. Riley moves close to the baseline and performs the same move with ease. As Terrance stands frozen, Riley finishes at the rim. The score is 4-0.

Terrance manages to score a couple baskets off pick and rolls, using the defensive switch to free himself from Riley. But Riley goes on a tear, leaving Terrance flat-footed on several drives to the basket. The crowd is screaming as Riley brings the ball up leading 10-2, gamepoint. Terrance has his hands on his knees, winded from trying to keep up with Riley. Riley then performs the classic MJ move, faking to his right and pushing Terrance away as he steps back and rises for a 3-point jumper. The ball swishes with ease and Riley stands in awe.

The crowd goes wild, and points at Terrance, who was taken to school as if playing a pro for the first time. Riley's never beaten Terrance. Never came close. The game moved so slow, and Riley could see the moves so easily...that's never happened. He shakes hands with Terrance, who shakes his head.

"Good game," he mutters, looking as if he's ready to cry.

Out of the corner of Riley's eye, he sees Jasmine walking up the street wearing her bright orange polo and jeans, her typical work uniform. He races off the court without a word, and tries to get Jasmine's attention. When she ignores him completely, he smiles, remembering how he used to say hi to her before.

"A whole new world," he sings. His voice, which usually cracks comically in the attempt has a smooth vibrato that stuns Riley and freezes Jasmine in her tracks.

She turns to Riley and smiles, "Riley, is that you?"

Riley smiles. "Hey, baby," he says. He opens his arms to give her a hug.

Jasmine's smile fades as she says, "Bye."

"Woah," says Riley. He moves to get in front of Jasmine and backpedals up the street. "I got out on early release for good behavior, Jasmine. I did it for us."

"Us?" says Jasmine. She pauses, shaking her head, and says, "The same us you left to go runnin' with the boys time and time again? The same us you used to leave at home while you took your ho out on dates? The same us you haven't bothered to call or write in months?"

Riley keeps smiling and says, "The same us I told you I'd stand by no matter what. The same us I took out and made my girl." The retort came so quickly, it surprises even Riley, but he doesn't show it.

"My folks told me not to mess with your gangbanging behind, but I didn't listen. Thankfully, that's not a mistake I have to live with."

"But, Jasmine," says Riley. "I'm not hangin' with them anymore. I gave it up in juvie."

"Give it up," says Ant. He emerges from the street with several of his boys.

In moments, a sea of blue jerseys surrounds Riley.

"Gave it up?" repeats Ant. "You don't give up cripin'. You don't give up shit. This ain't the boy scouts. You need to get your mind right."

The others nod. Some pull out knives, others pieces of metal pipe. Riley sees some handguns out of the corner of his eye as well. Jasmine clings to Riley's arm.

"Now, we got a jersey for you," Ant says. "You're gonna wear it. And you're gonna come back with us. All this leavin' bullshit will be squashed, after you prove yourself of course."

"Let Jasmine go," says Riley.

Ant smiles. "What? Your bitch is with us. She a crip bitch, right, Jas?"

"She was out when she had Mark, Ant," says Riley. "You know that. That's the rule."

"Rules change," says Ant. "Big Sam didn't say nothin' bout her leavin'."

Riley shakes his head. Big Sam has been running the Center City Crips across several neighborhoods, and has gained national notoriety. The O.G. is known for moving kilos of coke, meth, and heroin like a regular Wal-Mart, getting the product from Mexico and on the street with ruthless efficiency. His secret, employing junior thugs like Ant and his boys to do most of the leg work. Big Sam used to give Riley assignments as well. Riley remembers when he was proud to steal or shoot or fight for Big Sam.

"Take the jersey, Riles," says Ant. He holds out an all blue jersey and glares at Riley.

Riley reaches for the jersey and grabs Ant's hand, breaking his fingers with a single deft move. Ant screams, but before he can react further, Riley tosses him through a group of Crips. When a hole develops, Riley takes Jasmine by the hand.

"Run!" he says.

Jasmine nods and runs through the open path. Riley then turns to the others in the group and punches two in the stomach, kicking three more across the face at the same time. He elbows two more in the chest, and spin-kicks four more. Riley moves like a whirlwind, plowing through the entire assembly like Jet Li. Before anyone can lift a knife or shoot a gun. Riley incapacitates them with a single blow. Riley stares at his hands, quivering from the effort. Not wanting to draw anymore attention, he runs home, not taking the time to look back.

When Riley storms up the stairs, Mr. and Mrs. Andrews sit and gape, whispering to each other as they watch him enter the house. Riley thinks about Mr. Andrews offer to get a haircut, but thinks nothing of it. He didn't forget, but he had better things to do. Riley makes out the words Crip, fight, and basketball, and can figure out where the conversation is going. He enters the house and finds a black man with gray hair and a warm disposition sitting in the living room laughing with Mama.

"There you are," says Mama. "This is Mr. Smith."

"Oh, please, call me Red," he says in a friendly, inviting voice.

Mama smiles. "Red. He's from The Corporation. Here to help you get reacquainted."

"Reacquainted?" says Riley.

"Our reclamation program, son," says Red. "Surely you're aware that it was part of your early release. I've given your lovely mother the forms and all the information, but why don't we talk...alone." His voice takes a darker tone on the word "alone."

Riley nods, not wanting Mama involved in whatever Red planned. He motions for him to join him upstairs in his room, and leads the way all the while calculating every angle and method of attack. He figures out just how much force to use to incapacitate him, not sure how he knows it, but confident he'll be able to execute. Riley opens the door to his room. He sees the poster of Lebron, Kobe, and Michael, or as Riley calls them, the trinity of basketball, and pictures of Jasmine. His bed is made with military precision, and his shoes are lined up at his bedside.

When Red closes his bedroom door, Riley kicks him in the head, knocking him into the door with a third. Red shakes his head and smiles.

"Good," he says. "Very good."

"I'm not going back there," says Riley.

"I'm not asking you to. Quite the contrary actually, Mr. Jordan. I'm here to help you."

"Help me? And how exactly are you supposed to do that?"

Red smiles. "I'll admit, I can't learn karate in a minute or leap tall buildings in a single bound, but I know how CC-01 works, and more importantly, how The Corporation operates."

Riley backs up and keeps his eyes fixed on Red, listening but not entirely believing him.

"I worked for the program, Riley," he says. "Let's just say we had a difference of opinion. We'll get into that later...maybe. But now, we have to leave."

"Leave?" says Riley.

"Mr. Jordan, if I could find you, The Corporation can find you. They'll know to come here, and if you want your mother safe, this is the last place you should be."

Riley shakes his head. He doesn't want to leave. He can't. What about Jasmine? Mark?

"The Corporation administered a multimillion dollar chemical compound to you, Mr. Jordan," Red says. "They're not just going to let you run away."

"What do you suggest?" says Riley.

"Come with me. I can get you someplace safe, where we can figure this out."

"And when I get in your unmarked car, how do I know you won't cart me off to The Corporation? How do I know you don't work for them now?"

"That's not how they work, and you know that. They didn't sweet talk you into taking that formula, they held you down and forced it down your throat."

"After lying and saying I was in an early-release program," says Riley. "You want to prove to me you're on the level, then leave. If in a day or two, everything is straight, we'll talk."

Red shakes his head. "We don't have that much time."

"Well that's the best I can do." Riley turns and says, "I've got things to do."

"Very well." Red opens the door and leaves.

Big Sam holds court at his pool hall, a cozy bar where people don't ask questions. The lights are low, the music is soft, and people keep to themselves. He owns the bar, but merely uses it as a headquarters. The police know better than to enter.

When word comes to him about Riley's confrontation with Ant's crew, he sits at his table and continues sipping his drink. Big Sam is a businessman, first and foremost. He maintains shipments and money transactions, using force as needed to keep business moving. He doesn't act rashly. He shakes his head, seeing Ant's tear-stained face hung low in front of him. Big Sam clears his throat and motions for one of his lieutenants to top off his drink.

"Who told you to move on Riley?" says Big Sam. He's heard enough of Ant's blubbering. Ant shrugs. Big Sam knows the answer.

"Your job is to hold down your block," says Big Sam. "My job is to deal with Riley and people like him. See, losing half of your crew in a fight with an unarmed man doesn't just reflect on you. It reflects on me. How are you going to fix this? How are you going to keep rivals from taking our territory?"

Ant shrugs again. Big Sam shakes his head and points to a lieutenant, who nods and fires a 9MM at Ant's chest. He slumps to the ground with a whimper.

"Mr. Blue," says Big Sam. "Where were we?"

The man in the blue suit emerges from the shadows and smiles, taking a seat at Big Sam's table.

"It appears we have a common enemy," says the man in the blue suit. "Mr. Jordan. One of yours."

"One of ours," says Big Sam. "Remember our arrangement."

The man in the blue suit smiles. "The Corporation has been generous, but our arrangement was never a partnership...only an arrangement. Our business is separate. This has nothing to do with that."

Big Sam smiles. It's a sinister, almost serpentine gesture. "I need Riley Jordan dead to avoid further injury to my business elsewhere, which injures our business everywhere. You need Riley Jordan--"

"Period," says Mr. Blue. "I have the people necessary to lead the strike."

"Then why come to me?" says Big Sam.

"Because this can't be a Corporation operation. How would it look?"

"Almost as bad as you selling drugs to school children."

The man in the blue suit smiles. "Of course."

"When," says Big Sam.

"Tonight. Someplace discrete."

I know just the place. It'll be a real clean. You can take him, but everyone needs to know I brought him down."

"Not a problem," says the man in the blue suit.

"What about my pay?" says Big Sam.

"What pay? Call it cost of doing business."

"I thought this has nothing to do with that?" says Big Sam.

"Call a cop."

Mr. Blue walks away.

Riley walks downstairs and plops down on the couch opposite Mama. He doesn't know what to do or what to say. He knows his boys will come back for him. Jasmine hasn't called or bothered to return his since this afternoon, and The Corporation is after him. His body's changed. He knows it. He feels it. Riley stares up at the light fixture filled with cobwebs and sighs.

"What's wrong with you?" says Mama. "You been lookin sour since you got home. You talked to Jasmine yet?"

"Tried to, Mama," says Riley.

"Need to do right by her, Riley. She's a good girl, not one of these triflin hoodrats you see runnin' roun' here."

"She don't want much to do with me. Don't blame her."

"Oh, don't be bothered with that. Jasmine loves you. She wouldn't have been comin round here askin bout you all the time when you were away if she didn't."

"She came by?"

Riley perks up.

"You two look good together, and you love each other. That's important. You need to do right by her and that boy."

"I got out the gang, Mama," says Riley. "I left them be."

"You only been here one day. Being a good father is gonna take a lifetime, son. You're gonna have to get yourself straight, get a good job and be loyal to them for years. It's hard. Folk run from it, cause it's hard."

"Riley nods, thinking of his father walking out the front door in the middle of the night. He thought Riley was asleep, but he saw. Riley sighs, knowing he doesn't want to be him, but he doesn't know what he can do, especially if Jasmine won't talk to him. And if she finds out about The Corporation?

You don't have to do it all at once, but you have to try," says Mama. "Start workin, finish up school...get to church, Lord Jesus..."

Mama goes into her rant, one he's heard over the phone and when she visited juvie time and again. Riley knows he needs to do better. He listens, knowing she means well.

"Everyone knows you and Jasmine are a couple, but you've got lot of work. You're a father, and you need to be a husband," says Mama.

The words stick in Riley's mind. "Everyone knows." Red said The Corporation had him pegged. Know everything about him. What if they go for Jasmine instead of Mama? What if they go for Mark? What if Red is right? Can he warn them all in time? He should go to Jasmine's. Mama will listen to him. He can call her, but Jasmine won't...or she can't. His mind races, thinking of her being kidnapped when she runs into her apartment.

"I'm going to go talk to Jasmine," says Riley.

"You do that," says Mama. "That's good. That's real good."

Riley jumps out of his seat and races to the door. "Mama, maybe you should go stay with the Andrews for a little bit."

Mama gives a quizzical look. "Thought you were done with that mess, Riley?"

"I am, Mama, but you know for some people it ain't that easy," he says. "I got to see about Jasmine." With that, he leaves.

Riley runs up the street to Jasmine's apartment. When he gets to her door, he sees a piece of paper taped to the front door. It reads:

Mr. Jordan,

Jasmine requests the pleasure of your acquaintance at the East End tenement. No police.

Mr. Blue

The Corporation

Riley shakes his head and crumples the paper in his hands. As he descends the stairs, a white van pulls up to the curb. Red exits from the driver's side.

"What did you do to her?" says Riley. He storms towards Red, ready to pound his fists into him.

Red holds his hands up, saying, "I haven't done anything to your girlfriend, Riley."

"You say your name is Red, right? Who's Mr. Blue?"

"He's part of The Corporation," says Red. "He's part of the program. He's got his hands in a lot of other things too. Look, I'm here to help you. Let's get out of here now."

Riley shakes his head. "I've got to get Jasmine."

"But it's a trap, you know that."

Riley walks up the street, starting the trek to the East End tenement.

"Everyone keeps saying how I've got all these powers. Maybe I should use them," he says.

Red runs up beside Riley. "You're going to have to work to have your abilities, and learn things to absorb information. You can only do what you learn, just like any computer."

"I'm not a computer, I'm a man," says Riley.

Red sighs and says, "I know that, Riley...Riley!"

Riley stops in his tracks.

"If you're not going to listen, the least you can do is go in prepared. Let me help you," says Red.

"What do you want with me? Why are you here trying to help me?" says Riley. What's your angle?"

"I spent 10 years developing that formula for The Corporation and 10 years watching kids like you drop dead taking it. I left, but that didn't stop them. They want to turn it into a weapon, to turn you into a weapon. CC-01 can help cure diseases, repair injuries, regrow limbs. The processing capability alone could help us develop systems to solve the world's problems. They just want to make soldiers. Killing machines."

Riley shakes his head. "What does any of that have to do with me? You think I can do all that? End world hunger and cure diseases?"

Red says, "You can't do that if The Corporation gets its hands on you. I don't know what you can do, but I'm here to help." Red runs back to his van, opens the back hatch, and pulls out several assault rifles.

When Riley sees them, a small smile crosses his face. Her runs towards the back hatch. An entire arsenal of handguns and rifles is lined and secured perfectly.

"You know how to use these?" says Red.

Riley shrugs. He has held an AK before and some handguns, but this is serious. Red hands him a smartphone and presses a button. Flashes race across Riley's mind as the screen blinks several times. He sees rifles and guns of all kinds, sharpshooting techniques. He can take each one apart, clean it, and put it back together. Riley snaps back when Red takes the phone.

"How?" says Riley.

"No time for that," says Red. "Use it well. Get in."

Riley runs into the passenger side and closes the door. Red pulls off and speeds up the street to the East End. They pass liquor store, dilapidated houses, other quick-stop shops, run down gas stations, and generally a sea of despair washed over in dying yellow street lights. Riley sees sullen gloves, sunken eyes, and dead expressions as he passes them by. Figures lurk in alleys, stake out corners; they pass tiny packets and money back and forth. Riley looks out and wonders what he can do to help with this. If Red's right, and he can do so much to help people...what about the neighborhood? He shakes his head. This is about Jasmine. Making a life for her and Mark. He hasn't even seen Mark yet.

"What will The Corporation do to Jasmine?" says Riley.

Red shrugs. "They want you, Riley," he says. "They'll keep her alive until they have you."

"And then?"

"We get her out and we lay low," says Red. "That's the plan. We don't worry about anything else. Agreed?"

Riley nods. "Thanks," he says.

The East End tenement is a run down apartment complex shaped like a "U." The windows are dark, as if not a single tenant is home. The metal door is swung open. Big Sam has used the place as a hub for his cocaine operation for years. Riley's been here once before. He wonders why The Corporation would choose here.

Riley has a hoodie on, with handguns and knives strapped to his body underneath. He knows how to feel a casual pat-down, and didn't need any superpowers to do that. He approaches the door and looks around. He's in the tiled foyer by the mailboxes. There's a piece of paper taped to 7B with his name on it.

Riley enters the elevator, seeing a small camcorder inside. He waves to it and presses the button for the 7th floor. The only sound is the hum of the elevator. The door opens with a beep when he reaches his floor. Crips line the halls and two grab his arms as he exits. Each one is a head taller than Riley, stone faced, and wearing blue fatigues. They wield assault rifles and stare straight ahead. Riley's never been here. But he absorbs his surroundings, and feels his mind working to figure out the angles and best places to attack. The trajectory of cross-fire and best targets run through his mind.

The men lead him to 7B and open the door. Riley enters. It's a plain room with tiled floors. Jasmine and Mark are handcuffed to the radiator by the window. Riley looks around, seeing an open window adjacent to the kitchen. He notices the angle. He looks around to where the hall bedroom is and sees cracked doors. He's being watched. Possibly targeted. He expected no less. He knows he has moments to act. Riley rolls on the ground, avoiding successive bullets from the kitchen and living room windows. Bullets begin raining into the room. Riley reaches Jasmine and wraps his arms around her, shielding her from the attacks. He knows it's not time to fire back. Not yet. They didn't pat him down. Didn't check him for a weapon. He can't figure out why. He knows he can't get Jasmine out, but he can at least try to free them.

Riley pulls on the metal chains holding them and snaps them like string. He lowers their blindfolds and gags. Jasmine sees Riley and clutches him tightly. Mark begins to cry. Riley knows the noise has to bother him. But better the noise than the bullets. He can't see where the shooters are. After several minutes, the shooting stops and the room is filled with holes. Plaster and dust is everywhere. The front door opens, and Big Sam walks in.

"My man, Riley," he says. "Spider-man. You've been a bad boy. Caused a whole bunch of trouble. You see this?"

Big Sam opens his arms and points around the room. "This is a factory. A warehouse. I've got seven more hubs just like this, sending out the product. Just like Wal-Mart. This is a billion dollar business. When you attacked Ant and his crew, you interfered with that business."

"What about The Corporation?" says Riley.

The man in the blue suit enters the room.

"Business, Mr. Jordan," he says. "You have something we want. Come with me, and Jasmine and Mark will be fine."

Riley shakes his head. "How do I know you won't just kill them?"

Mr. Blue says, "You don't. But what you do know is that I won't hesitate to shoot them if you resist. Mr. Jordan this is bigger than you. If you help us, we can help your family. You don't want anything to happen to your little boy, do you? Or your mother? She wants so much for you. Now, how can you protect her as long as you hide from us? Do you really think sending her next door is going to stop us?"

Riley perks up.

The man in the blue suit sees the fear on his face and smiles. "Come with us, and they'll be fine. All of them."

Riley looks down at Jasmine, who starts to cry as she holds Mark. "You should've heard her calling for you, Riley," says Big Sam. "That baby crying..."

Riley knows he's trapped. Even if he could shoot his way out, he couldn't guarantee Jasmine and Mark's safety. And if they have Mama? He needs to be responsible. To be a man. That's what he promised Jasmine. What he promised Mama.

Riley nods and stands up, holding his hands up. The man in the blue suit smiles and waves his hand at the hallway. Three men emerge and handcuff him.

"So, you're Mr. Blue?" says Riley.

The man in the blue suit nods and says to one of the three soldiers, "Now take those two outside and deal with them."

Riley's eyes grow wide.

Mr. Blue says, "Don't worry, we're just going to inject them with high doses of deadly drugs. It shouldn't kill them, right?" He turns to Big Sam.

Big Sam shrugs.

"Oh, that's a shame." Mr. Blue walks out of the room. Big Sam stays behind and watches.

As two soldiers drag Riley towards the door, he plants his feet into the floor and stops in his tracks. When the soldiers turn, he throws his arms forward and breaks free of his cuffs. He then grabs one in the head and knees him, knocking him unconscious. The other soldier pulls out a knife and slices for Riley's head. Riley sweeps his legs. The soldier tosses the knife into the air when he hits the ground. Riley catches it and stabs him in one fluid motion. The third soldier holds a needle to Jasmine's throat and backs away from Riley slowly.

"Not one move," he says.

Riley draws a 9MM, and shoots him between the eyes. He then turns his gun on Big Sam, who holds his hands up as he stands by the door.

"We're getting out of here," says Riley.

"I'm a business man," he says. "Let's do business."

"Your life for theirs."

Jasmine turns to Riley, who doesn't take his eyes off Big Sam.

"They'll need a way out of here," says Riley. "Do we have a deal?"

Big Sam nods. "Service elevator at the other end of the hall."

Riley approaches Big Sam and roundhouse kicks him in the face, sending him flying through the wall. He opens his hoodie and pulls another gun from his side. He then exits the room and fires, hitting three Crips between the eyes. Riley brings down four more before grabbing two more guns. The men in the hallway drop instantly, and the survivors race for the elevator and Emergency staircase. Riley returns to the room and sees Jasmine gaping back at him.

"What did you do in juvie?" she says.

Riley says, "You need to take the emergency elevator. There will be a white van parked around back. Get in."

"What about you?" says Jasmine.

"I'll meet you."

Riley knows he has to get to Mr. Blue, and makes sure Mama is all right. Jasmine kisses Riley on the lips and runs for the emergency elevator. Riley watches after them. When the door closes, he runs to the other elevator and takes it down to the ground floor. He assembles his assault rifle and stops the elevator to do so. When he presses the button for it to resume, the elevator drops for another second and the door opens. As expected, the foyer is filled with Crips. Riley squeezes the trigger and clips several before they can react. As the survivors watch, he continues firing and pushes forward. It's a closed space, and Riley uses the element of surprise to his advantage. When his gun is empty, he pulls out another handgun, kicking two in the chest and firing at three more. He's a whirlwind that works his way out of the building just in time to see a black limousine pull off.

Red's van pulls up around the corner. Riley gets into the passenger side.

"We need to get to Mama's," he says.

Red nods and peels off.

The white van pulls up as a man in an all white suit exits the Andrews' house. Riley recognizes him. It's the Bieber boy from the facility. He sees Riley and waves, pressing a button on a small remote in the process. The Andrews house explodes. He gets in the black limo and drives away. Riley gets out of the van and runs for the house.

Red stops the car and runs to cut Riley off. Another explosion erupts, more powerful than the first. Riley and Red are thrown to the ground from the force of the blast.

"Mama," says Riley.

"Riley, we've got to go," says Red.

"Let's go after them. Come on!"

"No, Riley, that's what they want."

Riley shakes his head. He feels as if his entire world went up in smoke with that house. Riley stares after the limousine as it drives away.

Inside the limousine, the boy in the white suit lights up a cigarette and smiles.

"Did Mr. Jordan see you?" says Mr. Blue from the opposite seat.
He nods.

"Well good. Now, he will come to me. Welcome to The Corporation, Mr. White. It's a pleasure doing business with you."

"The pleasure's mine," says Mr. White as he stares out the window.

****** THE END ******

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“Jury” by Jim Spry

Synopsis: A tale of vengeance and pop culture.

About the Author: Jim Spry lives in the South of England and works as a decorator. He has recently returned from six months travelling the world. His adventures, both at home and abroad, can be followed here: www.dirtymercsbarandgrill.blogspot.com .

In this raw story, we witness brutality against the brute.

Jury

By Jim Spry

I grimaced as bass-heavy beats pounded the fillings in my back teeth. Sipped at my coke to alleviate the pain. Grunted as the ice-heavy concoction added to the laser-spike. I felt ancient among the young people. Among the lithe, prime bodies bouncing and thrashing and gyrating to Heavy Metal riffs. Felt dazzled by the reds, blues, yellows and greens painting their skins and faces and weird clothing in rainbow colours. Felt like a pervert at a school gate.

A shaven meat-head barged past me to the bar. Older than the rest by a good five years. Younger than me by a good fifteen. He spat on the floor as we made eye-contact. Sneered with his insolent mouth. I felt the urge take his head off. Rip it clean off his neck and kick it into the crowd. Instead I acted casual. Tried to act casual. Checked my watch and tried not to look like a middle aged man in a pea coat and loafers in a crowd of teenaged thrashers, Goths and stinking punks. I failed. Failed hard.



Twenty minutes later the band strutted off stage like fighting-cocks. Lights flashed up. Picked me out among the grunge and rock crowd. Highlighted the conformist old boy in a sea of uniformed alternatives. The kids didn't notice. Meat Head didn't notice. They ambled past bouncers like good little sheep. Too interested in tongues and joints and half-finished pints to give a shit about the old boy. The bouncers. The world outside their tinnitus-scored bubble. Fuck 'em and their youth. They'll get here eventually.

I hit the men's room. A hyena-haired punk flashed me double thumbs as he splashed liquor-puke against carpet. The girl getting chewed by a uniformed midget seemed too busy to notice me pass. The barman in his blue liveried polo shirt. At the end of his shift. Knackered. Pissed off. Looking to toss one off over the black-clad lovelies. He didn't notice the pen I slung into the Employees Only door. Didn't hang around to check the lock snap shut. Didn't see me stroll back-stage like I owned the joint. Didn't give a fuck about anything but finishing the shift and getting blown by his missus. My kind of guy.

Back-stage shit-holes are put together in the same factory. Endless corridors. Dark paint to cover stains. Ball-point graffiti. Loud music and swooning girls. The tart stench of beer and weed and pussy dragged me along. Pulled me through the labyrinth. Coquettish giggles peppered with retching took me where I needed to be.

The door with a star. Paint faded and peeling. Pot and Thrash metal bleeding past the jam. A cheap tarnished handle I didn't want to touch. Did so anyway. Locked. Mr. Rock God either warming up for some gang-bang action or holding out on his pals. Not knowing he'd never make it to the party.

Wood splintered. Lock snapped. The ruined door swung away from my kick. Slammed into a wall. Bounced back. The kids on the couch barely noticed. Him with his peach-fuzzed face thrown back. One hand on the head bouncing above his groin. Pushing down for maximum benefit. She with her fine black ass in the air. Rubber skirt high around her waist. Lacey pink panties exposed. Hot.

Moist. Ready for action.

"Hey grandpa," the kid barked. Eyes slitted. Head tilted. Forcing her down. Ignorant to her gurgling choke.

"Wait your fucking turn man. You can have her when I'm done."

Her chocolate hand reached between spread thighs. Pulled aside damp underwear. Exposed her swollen sex. Beckoned me on with one finger. I took a good look. I ain't nice people.

Remembered I had work to do.

"Put it away, Pete."

He ignored me. Pressed both hands into her thick black curls. Rolled back his head. Grunted. Threw her bodily off him. He stood. Flashed me his tool like I should be impressed. Zipped up his skin-tight jeans. Reached for a cigarette.

"What do you want, Old Timer?"

I let the sawn-off chat. Twin barrels from a Belfast custom-shop whipped from under the coat. Pointed at his face. Melted his arrogant smile without even barking. I took a step. Wasted a glance on the pretty little thing with her cute smile and wide-open eyes. Got back to business.

"Pete Kovacs?"

"No... no man. I'm Dean. Dean Stoltz. The drummer."

"He's Pete alright." The pretty voice matched her pretty face.

I took another step. Smashed the weapon into Pretty Boy's temple. He went down faster than the groupie had.

I reached into a pocket. Gun still angled at the singer. Flipped the girl a roll of bills. "Thanks Treacle. Buy yourself something nice."

She snatched the wad of notes. Struggled to her feet. Planted a kiss on my cheek as she bolted. I tried not to think about what she'd left smeared across my face. I guessed she was off to tell her mates she'd been the last person to blow Pete Kovacs before his untimely demise. She was probably more grateful for that than the money.

I bundled Mr. Rock God in a nice leather coat. The type popular in the Outback. Dragged his limp-ass carcass through the warren. Looked like someone's pop dragging them home after too much excess. Slung him over my shoulder as I burst out the back door. Ran to my car. Introduced the unconscious little prick to the joys of duct tape. Stashed him in the boot.

I took the ride nice and slow. Filled my head with the sound of Lead Belly. Pulled up outside the abandoned abattoir with fifteen minutes to spare. I set things up. Smoked a cigarette before the other guy pulled in.

"Mr Bradshaw?"

The words were out of his mouth before he'd climbed out of the car. Sinewy in his white shirt and

black trousers. Black tie loose around his neck. Moonlight reflecting off polished brogues. Looked like an accountant. Moved like a jackal-made-man.

"Mr. Troy."

He crossed the car park. Stuck out his hand. I shook. Felt violated. Walked him to the smashed-in doorway. I looked through the beer-bottle glasses on his face. Saw lean hunger in his eyes. Felt better about shaking his paw.

"He's in there. Take this for when you're done."

Mr. Troy nodded. Took my Belfast Baby. Crossed the abandoned threshold. Gently closed the door behind him. Left me in the cold.

I waited twenty minutes. Smoked a cigarette. Smoked a second. Checked my watch just before my baby howled. Both barrels muted by walls designed to stop decent folk hear their dinner getting ready. Figured I'd have taken longer with the punk. Figured Mr. Troy suffered from premature emancipation. Each to their own.

Troy strode back out of the abattoir with a straight back and squared shoulders. I guessed the weight had lifted. His masculinity returned. He presented my baby with a stronger grip than I'd expected.

"Thank you."

"You feel okay?" My sentiment was genuine.

"He raped my baby, Mr. Bradshaw. I lost her because of him."

I nodded. Reached into my cigarette packet. Came out empty handed. Frowned.

"Go home Mr. Troy. Wash off the gunshot residue with petrol. Then forget about this shit and live your life."

He reached a hand to my shoulder. Squeezed hard. A lone tear trickled beneath his horn-rimmed glasses. I thought he saw my own little girl. My own loss. I brushed him off. Nodded. Headed to the car and left him to find his own way.

**** THE END ****

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“Corner Coffee Shop” by H. Fischer

Synopsis: An unnamed female is reflecting on the events and mistakes of the last month. She battles with her own personal demons while trying to justify to herself why it is that she secretly enjoys everything that has happened.

About the Author: H. Fischer is a 23-year-old living in Central Illinois. Originally from the Chicago area, she (un)fortunately was one of those college students that never left the town of their University. After discovering a profound fascination with the written word at an early age, it was only recently that Fischer found the inspiration to share her pieces with others. Having been published a few times now, Fischer is constantly searching for new outlets to express herself and different circles to share her work with.

In this brief tale, we see the pleasure and the pain.

Corner Coffee Shop

By H. Fischer

Tiny droplets of city-slick water sliding effortlessly down the clear pane of glass next to the booth in which she sat, only changing course in an effort to escape the slant of the letters spelling out the name of the coffee shop in which she currently wasted another hour. Her narrow shoulders dug into the padded backing of the not-so-private booth, her best attempt at making herself stay still and not retreat to the ladies room for a second time tonight to inhale that powdered snow off the porcelain sink.

The aroma of Americano, Cafe au Lait, and the sweet taste of Macchiato all lingered on her palate, masking the grime and grit that she was bathed in from the night prior. Eyelids, heavy from the insomnia that plagued her, followed her and loomed over her head like the Grim Reaper, pulled back over glazed swamp-green hues to peer at the barista who had gone from being silent to be overly obnoxious. It was obvious to tell that it was getting close to the end of the scrawny teen's shift. The way the girl thumbed anxiously through a no-name coffee mug made her own muscles clench. She wanted nothing more than to leave the confines of her booth, march over to the counter, and demand that the girl stop acting like she has better things to do because in reality there isn't anything better. Nothing. You can go from bad to worse in this town. You can sell your soul for a quick fling, only to be left for dead in the gutter at the end of the night. You can fill your head with idle fantasies of hope and dreams, but you should always remember that in the end the only comfort you can take will be in the arms of Sister Hysteria, who will have no problem lulling you to sleep while she hollows out your septum after your last jag.

This wasn't going to happen. Her beaten and bruised ass wouldn't be getting up to deliver words of wisdom anytime soon. Finding no more interest in the barista, her eyes fell onto the chipped nail polish of her left index finger as it teased slow circles around the off-white rim of her coffee cup filled with overpriced caffeine. The events that had taken place over the last month really hadn't been anything out of the ordinary. At least, not for her. She was used to dishing out a piece of her to each of them when they wanted. They all claimed a different piece of her hardened heart, and with the ownership of those pieces came the right to use her as they saw fit. She closed her eyes.

"I'm not wearing any panties," her voice as smooth as the cheap silk he had draped across her shoulders. The patent gleam shone in his eye as he pressed his chest against the feline curve of her back. "Mmm..you'll have to show me," he murmured into the shell of her ear, his own voice carrying a timbre deeper than her own, rough and laced with the malice she knew he held for her. It was easy to forget this when she was in his arms, and he was tracing a calloused finger over the swell of her breast, the tanned skin of her stomach, down to the very core of her.

The perfectly aligned upper teeth bit down into the soft flesh of her lower lip, threatening to tear it right open if she pushed any further. Her eyes remained shut, holding off the swell of salt tears that had pushed up against the blackness. A heavy breath escaped her tired lungs as her teeth released their prisoner. Her small frame slipped from the booth, creating that hushed peeling sound that results from warmed flesh and hard surfaces. Those marshy eyes of hers held briefly on the door, but quickly moved to the back of the house where the ladies room was located.

"Looks like it might snow....".

**** THE END ****

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“Only Us” by L. Baehne

Synopsis: When religious intolerance collides with political opportunism the outcome is predictable, even in the farthest reaches of space.

About the Author: L. Baehne is a hobbyist writer. He lives in Tacoma, Washington, USA.

In this futuristic fiction, we find that the more things change, the more they remain the same

Only Us

By L. Baehne

Prime Minister Homer Cedric exhaled a sigh of exasperation, placed both elbows on his imported antique maple desk, and began to massage his tired eyes. The headache he felt coming on was only the most recent in a long, seemingly never-ending series. He looked up at his aide who stood on the plush carpet before the Minister's imposing desk. The aide's rumpled suit screamed of a similar lack of rest for its wearer since the passage of the United Religious Front resolution. Homer Cedric said, "You care to run that one by me again?"



"Sir," said the aide, "the spokesman for the Brothers of Mystic Enlightenment, brother Tescu, insists we repeal this resolution posthaste. He claims it violates the separation of church and state and infringes upon first amendment rights."

"First amendment rights?" the Prime Minister snorted. "Where does the good brother think he is--Earth?" He was shaking his head. "Forget it. What we do, we do for the benefit of all Radiganites."

"He's of the opinion, sir, that the passage of this bill serves only to benefit the religious majority of Radigan Prime. That is, all forty-two orders of the Benevolent Shepherds of the Holy Relic."

"I must say," the Prime Minister nodded appreciatively, "brother Tescu is quicker than I would have thought." A sardonic smile upturned one corner of his mouth. But he grew serious once again, "No!" He slammed his fist on the desktop. "The resolution stands! All citizens--including brother Tescu--are hereby ordered to comply with the unanimous decision of Parliament upon immediate risk of deportation to Earth," he declared. "And you can tell him I said that."

The aide cleared his throat. "Sir, you may wish to tell him yourself. Brother Tescu is waiting in the reception area bickering with the bill's lead proponent."

"Reverend Roberts is here, too?" The Prime Minister groaned and cradled his head in both hands. "Great gravity, man. Why do I bother having a security detail when every Sally-sob-story can waltz into my office at will?"

"You should know, too, sir, that since the passage of the new legislation Reverend Roberts has been busily rubbing the noses of the infidels--her word, not mine--in the inevitable deportation of all religious minorities from Radigan Prime. Come to think of it," he stroked his cleft chin in contemplation, "she seems to be rather enjoying herself. Shall I send them on their way, sir?"

The Prime Minister regained his composure, "Why--so they can interrupt tomorrow's golf game with minister Harken? No, no, send them in. Let's get this over with."

The aide departed and moments later a squat, mustachioed man adorned in sweeping red robes and a swarthy complexion burst through the door. "Prime Minister, I really must protest!" the funny little man ejaculated. "What does Parliament mean by outlawing every religious creed save for the Benevolent Shepherds? It's criminal, I tell you!" A smallish, smirking woman strode haughtily into the chamber behind the encrimsoned protestant.

"Brother Tescu, I presume?" the Prime Minister said.

"None other."

"Ah, and Reverend Roberts. What a pleasure." His tone clearly implied otherwise. "But brother Tescu, no one's religion is banned by the passage of this new bill. Surely you misunderstand."

"A misunderstanding, you say?"

"Ahem,"--interrupted the crow-like figure of reverend Roberts--"if I may, sir. What the Prime Minister is saying, dear Tescu, is that those unfortunate souls in the sway of deviant . . . er, I mean 'alternate' religious paths are merely denied certain amenities. Like, say, medical attention, housing, welfare assistance, employment, legal representation--"

"And, of course," Homer Cedric interrupted at this juncture, "any person apprehended aiding and abetting . . . ahem, I mean 'providing' such like, are themselves subject to imprisonment up to, but not exceeding, ten years in a penal colony. So come now, Tescu, as you can see, none of the members of Parliament would ever dream of outlawing religion. We have such a long and esteemed history of tolerance, after all."

"Tolerance?" Tescu guffawed. "But the new legislation makes it impossible to be anything but a Benevolent Shepherd."

"Have you considered conversion?" suggested the Prime Minister, as he stepped away from his desk to approach a maple filing cabinet. He adored antiquities.

"Conversion?" Tescu gaped. "You can't be serious."

The Prime Minister pulled open a drawer and made a show of thumbing through the files contained therein. "P-Q-R-S-T," he muttered under his breath. Finally he withdrew two red folders, shut the drawer, and returned to his desk. "So," he said, "where does that leave us?"

"We were discussing conversion, I believe," prompted reverend Roberts with a self-satisfied smile.

"Out of the question!" barked an indignant brother Tescu, his prodigious facial whiskers aquiver. "Never did I think I'd live to see the day--" he jabbed a chubby finger in the direction of the Prime Minister, "--when a democratically elected body would throw to the wind hundreds of years of tradition to bestow upon itself the absolute authority of some kind of," he groped for the right word, "some kind of . . . inquisition!"

"Let us not stoop to cut-rate melodrama, Tescu," said Homer Cedric, who turned his attention to the file upon his desk labeled 'T.' He cleared his throat and intoned, "In anticipation of your unwillingness to accommodate reason, I took the liberty of preparing your deportation notice." This had the intended affect, and, in response to the frank look of shock on Tescu's plump countenance, the Prime Minister soothed, "Don't feel put upon, Tescu. A great many such papers lay in wait for those who . . . how shall one say?" he groomed a bushy eyebrow for inspiration. "Ah, yes, for those who lack the proper zeal for the faith of Benevolent Shepherds."

"You wouldn't dare!" cried Tescu.

"Oh, but I would. It is the law, after all," Cedric replied. He brandished a flimsy pink slip of paper at the trembling Tescu, who ripped the sheet from his hand, glanced over the legalese, and turned towards the door.

The carmine clad Tescu whirled and said, "You haven't heard the last of me, Prime Minister!"

"I respectfully disagree, Tescu. I believe I have." But the spokesman for the Brothers of Mystic Enlightenment was already gone.

"Well, that was an unpleasant bit of business," opined reverend Roberts. "I'm glad it's over."

The Prime Minister eyed the good reverend and said, "I thought you would have derived considerable pleasure from this little eviction session, Reverend."

"Oh, I did," she said. "With Radigan's religious minorities out of the way, the Benevolent Shepherds may now institute the sweeping reforms we've only dreamed about thus far. For all intents and purposes we are now unopposed. Truly a master stroke, Prime Minister."

"Indeed, Reverend. Indeed." He nodded his assent. "But I fear we have one more piece of unpleasantness to address this afternoon."

"Oh, yes?" she said, genuinely intrigued. "And what might that be, sir?"

Homer Cedric opened the second red file, this one marked with a conspicuous 'R,' withdrew a pink form, and held it at arm's length for the reverend's perusal. "Interesting that you should mention religious minorities," he said.

"What is this?" she asked suspiciously.

"Why, it's your deportation notice, of course."

"What are you talking about?" she growled, and swiped the paper from his large hand. She gave the pink slip a quick once-over. When she looked up, hellfire smoldered in her eyes, "What is the meaning of this? Both of us belong to esteemed factions of the Benevolent Shepherds."

"Ah, yes," he replied, tapping his pursed lips. "But I'm a member of the Order of the Holy Mantle. You, on the other hand, belong to the Ancient and Mystical Order of Our Lady the Sacred Mistress."

"But nearly every member of Parliament is an adherent of your order, Prime Minister. The majority faction, no less. Isn't that convenient?"

"Perhaps so, madam. Perhaps so. In our defense, we are but humble servants of the law. As such, our hands are tied."

"But it was I who sponsored this bill," she whined. "It was my tireless efforts on behalf of the Faith that led to Parliament taking up the matter in the first place; my endless campaigning among the voters of my district. Many of whom, may I remind the Prime Minister, voted for you during the last election."

"And their votes were much appreciated, I assure you," he said, brushing away a non-existent mote of dust from his shoulder. "What can I say, madam, apart from: be mindful what you wish for."

And, in future elections," he continued, "the voters may wish to consider their candidates with a bit more scrutiny. May I suggest studying the issues on the ballot and perhaps their candidate's positions?"

"If I can't convince you to reconsider, Prime Minister, what would you have me do?" she pleaded.

"Tell me, dear Reverend," he said with his polished politician's smile and perfect teeth, "have you ever considered conversion?"

****** THE END ******

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