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DEFENDING THE DEAD: A CRITICAL AND CREATIVE EXPLORATION
OF THE EULOGY

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Dan Leach
May 2020

Accepted by:
Keith Lee Morris, Committee Chair
Nic Brown
Dr. Jonathan Beecher Field

ABSTRACT

Two components make up this thesis—a critical essay that analyzes the mode of the eulogy in William Apess’s “Eulogy on King Philip;” and a creative excerpt from a novel-in-progress titled *The Eulogist*. Though distinct and self-standing as respective projects, both components reflect my continued interest in intersections of language and memory, in addition to connections between function and form.

In “Here Am I: The Disruptive Presence in William Apess’s ‘Eulogy on King Philip,’” I analyze the ways in which Apess’s visual and sonic presence might be understood as instruments of resistance in his larger anti-colonial project. In particular, I rely on the theories of Christina Sharpe, Judith Butler, and Michel-Rolph Trouillot in order to discuss how Apess’s eulogy managed both spatial and temporal disruption.

In the following excerpt from *The Eulogist*, I prepare for the later sections of the novel (sections which deal more explicitly with eulogizing by establishing a sense of place, building a sense of character, and setting into motion significant dramatic action. Written in a style that draws equally from hard-boiled noir and speculative fiction, these early chapters depict V (the novel’s protagonist reacting to a series of strange intrusions and wrestling with the implications of a possible conspiracy.

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Outside of these specific committee members, I want to thank my larger Clemson family, particularly Dr. Matt Hooley, Dr. Jaime Rogers, Dr. Lee Morrissey, and Dr. John Morgenstern, all of whom have made these past two years some of the most generative and most memorable years of my life.

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Here Am I:

The Disruptive Presence in William Apess's "Eulogy on King Philip"

There is no shortage of salient critical work on the degree to which William Apess's "Eulogy on King Philip" subverts Eurocentric accounts of settler colonialism and, in the process, reframes the figure of King Philip in American history. Aptly classified as "resistance literature," Apess's text contains a robust inventory of rhetorical techniques that make it an ideal site for critiques interested in connections between language and power.¹ Though I attend to several such rhetorical techniques here, I am not primarily interested in Apess's rhetoric. What interests me is how the mode of the eulogy (particularly a eulogy composed for a series of public performances) was unique in its capacity for disruption and how, in many ways, we might understand that disruption to extend to both space and time.

Though an argument involving disrupted space and time might appear theoretical (or even metaphysical), my methodology here is driven by practicality. I recall the night of January 8, 1836, where Apess first delivered "Eulogy on King Philip" to his audience at the Odeon lecture hall in Boston; and, having recalled it, I consider how Apess's

¹ Jace Weaver, *That the People Might Live: Native American Literatures and Native American Community*. (New York: Oxford UP, 1997), 55.

eulogy utilized his body and his voice in ways not afforded by print mediums.² Using the work of Christina Sharpe, in addition to theorists such as Michel-Rolph Trouillot and Judith Butler, I argue that the performed eulogy allowed Apess to leverage visual and sonic realities in order to disrupt colonial logic and participate in what Sharpe calls “defending the dead.”³

The first disruption afforded by the eulogy is the Apess’s literal and physical presence. At the time he delivered his speech, the myth of the “vanishing race” was prevalent across North American discourse. This myth (made famous in novels such as James Fenimore Cooper’s *The Last of the Mohicans* and subsequently validated by actual segregation and dislocation) meant that Apess’s presence in the Odeon lecture hall was, in itself, a disruption of the false narrative that Indigenous people no longer occupied space in the New England region. I stand on Eric Wolfe’s assertion that “In the imaginations of his Euroamerican listeners—who would have been the majority of the audience who came to hear the Eulogy in Boston—Apess’s self-identification as Pequot might have already transformed him into a ghostly presence that disrupted the Euroamerican fantasy of Indian ‘vanishing.’”⁴

I go further than Wolfe, however, in arguing that it wasn’t merely Apess’s “self-identification as Pequot” which raised tensions during his speech—it was his actual

² Gussman, Deborah. "'O Savage, Where Art Thou?': Rhetorics of Reform in William Apess's 'Eulogy on King Philip'." *The New England Quarterly* 77, no. 3 (2004): 451-452.

³ Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Duke Press: Durham, 2016), 10.

⁴ Wolfe, Eric A. “Mourning, Melancholia, and Rhetorical Sovereignty in William Apess’s Eulogy on King Philip.”

body, his actual skin, and his actual usage of the Quiripi language that contributed most significantly to his eulogy's disruptive qualities. Unlike modes in which a Native author might be rendered invisible (such as the books, articles, and pamphlets that Apess himself often published), the publicly performed eulogy installed Apess's body in the same room as his white audience. If printed medium could be said to "require" a reader to think, then the publicly performed eulogy necessarily requires sensory impressions of the eulogist.

Judith Butler, in her speech "Bodies in Alliance and The Politics of the Street," captures the importance of physical presence as it relates to political resistance:

For politics to take place, the body must appear. I appear to others, and they appear to me, which means that some space between us allows each to appear. We are not simply visual phenomena for each other – our voices must be registered, and so we must be heard; rather, who we are, bodily, is already a way of being "for" the other, appearing in ways that we cannot see, being a body for another in a way that I cannot be for myself, and so dispossessed, perspectively, by our very sociality. I must appear to others in ways for which I cannot give an account, and in this way my body establishes a perspective that I cannot inhabit.⁵

Because Apess's speech was inherently political (aimed not only at reorienting King Philip's place in history but also at securing the future rights of Indigenous people), it is significant that his Indigenous body "appeared" before his white audience. Moreover, the spatial disruption caused by his body might also be understood as a complement to Apess's demand that his audience "look" at historical facts. Consider the following moment in which Apess brings into view the capture of King Philip's family (emphasis mine):

⁵ Butler, Judith. "Bodies in Alliance and the Politics of the Street." Lecture, Mary Flexnar Lectures from Bryn Mawr College, Lower Merion Township, 2011.

But we have another dark and corrupt deed for the sons of Pilgrims to *look* at, and that is the fight and capture of Philip’s son and wife and many of his warriors, in which Philip lost about 130 men killed and wounded; this was in August 1676. But the most horrid act was in taking Philip’s son, about ten years of age, and selling him to be a slave away from his father and mother. . . Only *look* at it; then stop and pause.⁶

“Eulogy on King Philip” is saturated with appeals to visibility such as the imperatives employed here. Twelve times over the course of the speech Apess demands that his audience “look” at unsettling facts of violence against Indigenous peoples. And though these appeals would have functioned rhetorically (which is to say, intellectually and emotionally) if engaged in a printed text, the eulogy allowed Apess to invite his audience into two forms of looking—looking (via language) into America’s troubled past, and looking (via sight) at the Indigenous body presenting this past. Visibility was key to Apess’s project.

In a 2016 conversation between Natasha Lennard and Nicholas Mirzoeff (published in *The New York Times* as “What Protest Looks Like”), both Lennard and Mirzoeff pointed towards the importance of visibility in protest. When Lennard asked why white audiences so often “rely on images of broken black and brown bodies in order to recognize the oppression they face,” Mirzoeff gave the following response:

When Mamie Till-Mobley insisted that the body of her son Emmett Till be displayed in an open casket in 1954 after his murder in Mississippi by white supremacists, she dramatically broke with convention and insisted people look at what they would rather not see. It was Ferguson residents, outraged by the callous treatment of 18-year-old Michael Brown’s body — in full view of many children — who tweeted the picture of his corpse to social media. . . Both these forms of protest create what I call a “persistent looking,” a repeated return to the place of

⁶ Apess, William, and Barry O’Connell. *On our own ground: the complete writings of William Apess, a Pequot*. (University of Massachusetts Press, Amherst, 1992), 300-301.

loss so that it is possible to move past the first shock of violence to an understanding of the systemic violence that brought it about.⁷

Although there are significant differences between Apess's use of his body during the performance of "Eulogy on King Philip" and the posthumous employment of Till's and Brown's bodies, I include Mirzoeff's point here because, insofar as visibility is related to disruption, Apess's body clearly participated in drawing attention to the ongoing and systemic erasure of Indigenous peoples. To see Apess, on the night of January 8, 1836, was to see the embodiment of resistance to colonial violence and, as such, an exposure to that violence's continued existence.

My analysis so far has dealt with how the eulogy allowed Apess to disrupt the shared space of the Odeon lecture hall. However, I want to turn now to the work of Christina Sharpe and Michel-Rolph Trouillot in order to consider how his presence might also be understood to disrupt temporality. In *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Sharpe recalls the systemic anti-blackness that facilitated the deaths of her family members. Rather than treat these deaths as isolated events occurring in a fixed past, Sharpe argues that racial violence will necessarily "appear, now, to fracture the present."⁸ Sharpe extends this theory of temporality to American history at large, drawing connections between chattel slavery and more recent forms of anti-blackness such as police brutality, incarceration, and other systemic violences. In showing how America's

⁷Natasha Lennard and Nicholas Mirzoeff. "What Protest Looks Like." *The New York Times*, August 3, 2016.

⁸Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*. (Duke Press: Durham, 2016), 9.

historical anti-blackness continues to drive its contemporary anti-blackness, Sharpe writes, “In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present.”⁹

To read Apess’s eulogy in light of Sharpe’s theory is to understand that Apess was not simply recalling past events for the purpose of challenging Eurocentric narratives—he was cultivating a moment in which America’s bloody colonial history could “reappear” and “rupture the present.” Just as his visual presence disrupted the shared space of Odeon lecture hall, it could also be argued that his visibility combined with his speech disrupted any notion of time that relegated Indigenous suffering to a distant past.

In this sense, the past which Apess describes in “Eulogy on King Philip” was not past at all, but rather what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls “pastness.” Trouillot advanced the following argument in *Silencing the Past: Power and The Production of History*: “. . . the past does not exist independently from the present. . . In that sense, the past has no content. The past—or, more accurately, pastness—is a position.”¹⁰

Like Trouillot, I treat temporality in Apess’s speech in terms of “pastness” (rather than “the past”) and in terms of a “position” (rather than an inaccessible set of events). In other words, one way we might understand “Eulogy on King Philip” is to say that Apess is illustrating (via his presence, his voice, and his reoriented account of King Philip’s War) the various ways in which the past cannot be separated from the present. For Apess,

⁹ Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, 9.

¹⁰ Michel-Rolph Trouillot, *Silencing the Past: Power and The Production of History* (Beacon Press: Boston, 1995), 15.

the crimes against King Philip in the 1600s are inextricably connected to the crimes against Indigenous peoples in the 1800s. In disrupting temporality, Apess not only exposes the cyclical and ceaseless nature of racialized violence; but, more pointedly, he attempts to “return us to a productive relationship with history, one that reopens the past to point towards a potentially different future.”¹¹ Apess wasn’t submitting the historical events of King Philip’s life for consideration, he was “reopening” a position which, to the European imaginations that made up his audience, must have seemed closed.

Just as Apess’s visual presence participated in this disruption of space and time, we might also consider the role of his voice. A moment worth considering comes towards the end of “Eulogy on King Philip,” where Apess suddenly recites the Lord’s Prayer (a present fixture for all Christians in attendance) but does so in Quiripi (a dead language for his English-speaking audience). Here again we see a commodity unique to the eulogy (actual sound imparted from one speaker to many listeners):

Noo chun kes uk qut itam at am unch koo we su onk, kuk ket as-soo-tam oonk pey au moo utch, keet te nan tam oo onk ne nai; ne-ya-ne ke suk qutkah oh ke it; aos sa ma i in ne an ko ko ke stik o da-e nut-as e suk ok ke fu tuk qun neg; kah ah quo an tam a i in ne an num-match e se ong an on ash, ne match ene na mun wonk neet-ah-quo-antam au o un non og nish noh pasuk noo na mortuk quoh who-nan, kah chaque sag kom pa ginne an en qutch e het tu ong a nit, qut poh-qud wus sin ne an watch match i tut.¹²

¹¹ Wolfe, Eric A. “Mourning, Melancholia, and Rhetorical Sovereignty in William Apess’s Eulogy on King Philip.”

¹² Apess, William, and Barry O’Connell. *On our own ground: the complete writings of William Apess, a Pequot*, 308.

From a rhetorical standpoint, we can understand this decision as Apess “converting his Indian identity into a rhetorical asset and reinforcing his authority before the audience for whom he had ostensibly translated the indigenous critique of colonialism.”¹³ While this claim appears to be true, I would add that the mode of the publicly performed eulogy carried an additional “authority”—the sonic strangeness of an Indigenous language imposing itself onto the necessary silence of Apess’s audience. Spatial disruption occurs because the lecture hall is now filled with an alien sound. Temporal disruption occurs, however, because Apess is inserting something considered “past” (Native language) into a present moment. By submitting the proximate English-speakers to Quiripi, Apess effectively offers an echo from the past; or, more accurately, he confronts them with sounds that have been kept out of the present because of the genocide against Quiripi speakers and survival of English speakers.

Another disruption occurs when Apess recalls King Philip’s speech in the English language:

Brothers, you see this vast country before us, which the Great Spirit gave to our fathers and us; you see the buffalo and deer that now are our support. Brothers, you see these little ones, our wives and children, who are looking to us for food and raiment; and you now see the foe before you. . . Brothers, these people from the unknown world will cut down our groves, spoil our hunting and planting grounds, and drive us and our children from the graves of our fathers, and our council fires, and enslave our women and children.¹⁴

¹³ Tiro, Karim M. "Denominated "SAVAGE": Methodism, Writing, and Identity in the Works of William Apess, a Pequot." *American Quarterly* 48, no. 4 (1996): 673.

¹⁴ Apess, William, and Barry O'Connell. *On our own ground: the complete writings of William Apess, a Pequot*, 295.

Apess becomes a conduit for Philip's 160-year-old message for at least two reasons. From a historical standpoint, he means to prove that Philip's concerns were not only rational, they were prophetic. I say prophetic because, later in "Eulogy on King Philip," after having painstakingly detailed the various atrocities committed against Indigenous peoples, Apess refers back to this speech and reminds his audience that ". . . by this time you have been enabled to see that Philip's prophecy has come to pass."¹⁵ Secondly, since prophecies necessarily point towards a future, I believe that Apess is allowing King Philip's prophecy to continue its reach even further into the future—further, in other words, than 1836. To rely on Drew Lopezina's resonant notion of fusion, I read Apess echoing King Philip's still-relevant, still-cutting prophecy as a moment which "not only fuses the past to the present but also fuses issues of Native sovereignty and legalized bondage into one cause. . ."¹⁶ Here, again, linear temporality is disrupted, as Apess is showing it to be an inadequate metric for the advance (or, rather, the non-advance) of Indigenous rights.

Three years after delivering "Eulogy on King Philip," William Apess died in New York City of a cerebral brain hemorrhage.¹⁷ To conclude this discussion of both his

¹⁵ Apess, William, and Barry O'Connell. *On our own ground: the complete writings of William Apess, a Pequot*, 307.

¹⁶ Lopezina, Drew. "What to the American Indian is the Fourth of July? Moving Beyond Abolitionist Rhetoric in William Apess's Eulogy on King Philip," *American Literature*, Volume 82, Number 4, December 2010.

¹⁷ Konkle, Maureen. *Writing Indian Nations: Native Intellectuals and the Politics of Historiography, 1827-1863*. (UNC Press: Chapel Hill, 2004), 161.

person and project, I offer a poem from an Indigenous poet who has been deeply invested in disruption over the course of his career in American teaching and writing. Simon Ortiz, the Puebloan writer, opens his book *from Sand Creek* with the following poem:

This America
has been a burden
of steel and mad
death,
but, look now,
there are flowers
and new grass
and a spring wind
rising
from Sand Creek.¹⁸

Like Apess, Ortiz recognizes the connection between visibility and power, requesting that the reader of the poem “look now.” Having recalled America’s colonial past of “steel / and mad / death,” Ortiz directs his reader’s gaze towards a present moment which shows signs of hope in its “flowers / and new grass / and a spring wind /

¹⁸ Ortiz, Simon. *From Sand Creek*. (University of Arizona Press: Tuscon, 1981), 9.

rising.”¹⁹ Though unflinching in his exposure of racialized violence and systemic injustices, Ortiz is not without hope for future peace. Neither, judging from the final lines of “Eulogy on King Philip” was William Apess:

I wish you to understand that we are thankful for every favor; and you and I have to rejoice that we have not to answer for our fathers’ crimes; neither shall we do right to charge them one to another. We can only regret it, and flee from it; and from henceforth, let peace and righteousness be written upon our hearts and hands forever, is the wish of a poor Indian.²⁰

With respect to disruption, what is to be made of this moment in which an Indigenous man stands in front of an audience who benefited from the genocide and displacement of his ancestors and seeks to free that audience from their “fathers’ crimes;” seeks to implore them to “flee” from further violence; seeks to impart “peace and righteousness” onto their hearts? What work does this ending do in relation to the larger disruptive project of “Eulogy on King Philip”?

I submit here an interpretation that draws on a remark made by the late Toni Morrison. While discussing the massacre at Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church, Morrison was asked about the white supremacist murderer and the subsequent responses of the church members. Morrison said, “. . .the survivors and the family members who were killed in that church did not say of the killer ‘I want him dead’ — it was something grander and more humane. It was eloquent and elegant, the response of

¹⁹ Ortiz, Simon. *From Sand Creek*, 9.

²⁰ Apess, William, and Barry O’Connell. *On our own ground: the complete writings of William Apess, a Pequot*, 310.

forgiveness. We sometimes understand that generosity. . . as a kind of weakness, whereas I always thought that that was extreme strength.”²¹

This, then, is Apess’s final disruption—to share space with a room full of settlers, to gather them together in the collective pronoun “We,” and to wish upon them, not death, but “peace and righteousness.”

²¹ Conversation between Toni Morrison and Hilton Als, *The New Yorker Festival*, 2015. Selected excerpts printed in “Toni Morrison on Forgiveness, Segregation, and Why She’d Rather Be a Citizen Than a Taxpayer” by Lindsay Peoples, *The Cut*, October 5, 2015.

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The Eulogist

A Novel

“This whole room was nothing but men. Ern and Ern Jr. back at their regular table. A bunch of lawyers over by that window. There was about ten or so of them sitting here eating brisket. And then—poomph!—they were gone.”

Crystal Collins, Waitress at Buck’s BBQ No.
2 Interview by WCIV News 4 (May 16,
2032)

“For all the mysteries this rapture has generated, let us admit that it also provided us a pair of answers. Is there a god? Undoubtedly. Is this god a feminist? Indeed she is.”

“The Erasure Reframed: A Defense of Optimism at the End of the World”
Carmenza Delgado, Ph.D.
New Eden Quarterly Volume 1, Issue 2 (September 29, 2032)

“I know the results of the latest fertility trials have many of you concerned about the future. But let me encourage you—do not lose hope. Women didn’t survive the Erasure so that they could succumb to extinction. Together, we will overcome this

challenge. We will endure.”

President of The United States Jennifer Hunt
Special Address (December 3,
2032)

Last Call at Bad Lou's

I was at Bad Lou's when I got the call. It was just after midnight. Aside from Layla, who was perched on her stool behind the bar, I was the only woman in the place.

"V!" Layla said, extending the receiver of Lou's landline towards my corner booth. "Phone's for you."

I thought about who might require my conversation at 12:07 A. M. on a Tuesday night. The answer should have been easy—no one.

"Who is it?" I said.

Layla covered the receiver with her palm and whispered, "How should I know? Weird voice, though. Sounds like a robot."

A robot? Not a bad line. But I didn't know any robots. I hardly knew any humans. Hence my nightly tenure at a shithole like Lou's.

For these reasons and a dozen more, I said nothing and slugged the better half of my whiskey. Then I told Layla to take a message.

"I'm a bartender," she replied. "Not a secretary. Take your own message."

She set the receiver on the bar, climbed back onto her stool, and picked up the paperback she had been working on for several days. She smacked a kiss in the direction of my corner then began reading her book.

For a moment, I leaned back and closed my eyes. A blues song thumped in muted swerves from Layla's radio. Rain drummed steady on the roof. Otherwise, the room was quiet. Since the Erasure, Bad Lou's was always quiet.

Then I walked over to the bar, grabbed the phone, and hung it up.

"What's the matter, V?" Layla said. "Not in the mood to talk?"

"No," I said and returned to my booth. "I'm in the mood to drink."

When the phone rang the second time, my gut said something strange was underway.

"V!" Layla called. "Same caller."

I slid out of my booth and approached the bar. I took the phone from Layla but kept the mouthpiece covered.

"Did she say what she wants?" I whispered.

"Yeah, V," Layla said, slowly scratching her temple with a middle-finger meant for me. "She wants to talk to you."

Like most nights, Layla was wearing a black t-shirt tucked into black jeans, which themselves were tucked into black boots. She had gathered her long brown hair into a ponytail and rolled the sleeves of the t-shirt over her shoulders to brandish the swirling run of sailor-style tattoos that ran from her knuckles to her neck. Layla was wild and

beautiful and brutal in her loyalty to the regular patrons of Bad Lou's. She was also the closest thing in Charleston I had to a friend.

I gave Layla a middle finger in return then picked up the phone. I started to say "Hello?", but before I could, a voice began to speak. It was the strangest voice I had ever heard.

"Compatibility," the voice said. "I want to get that out of the way up front. The reason I am calling you has nothing to do with money or politics or anything else you might suspect. It is, plain and simple, compatibility. I have a job and I believe that you're the perfect fit, V."

Standing there at the bar, I barely processed these statements. The truth is, the voice itself had disoriented me. When I say that the voice was strange, what I mean is that it was low and bloodless and, in the purest sense of the term, monotone. The voice was so monotone it hardly sounded human. As Layla had warned me, it sounded like a robot that had been programmed to replicate speech.

"Excuse me?" I said. "Who is this?"

"Pleasantries will be exchanged at the interview," said the voice. "For now, please exit the property, advance northwest on Kalurah, take a left on Baywood, and report to the alley behind the old market. You'll find a car waiting for you there."

"Hold on," I said. "Report to the alley? What are you talking about?"

"Further details will be provided at the interview. For now, please arrange to be at the alley by no later than 12:15 A.M."

At this, I checked the clock behind the bar. It was 12:09. I covered the mouthpiece and whispered to Layla, “Are you messing with me?”

Layla glanced up from her book with the dazed look of someone who has been deeply lost in the world of the text. She propped the book on her thigh and, completely serious, said, “What’s that?”

“This call,” I said. “Is it some kind of joke?”

Layla shook her head and, before I could say anything else, the voice returned.

“That’s 12:15 A.M.,” it said. “And not a minute later.”

“What happens at 12:15?” I asked.

“Further details will be provided at the interview,” repeated the voice. “But I warn you—whatever you do, do not be late.”

There was something about this warning, delivered as it was in its mechanical drone, that made me feel like I was being watched. Since Layla had returned to her book, I placed the phone on the bar and approached the window that looked out onto the street.

Outside, wind swept the rain across all the abandoned cars and boarded-up storefronts. The streets weren’t streets—they were black pools pocked and rippled by the drizzle. A block down Broad there were two windows lit up with television blue. Otherwise, everything surrounding Bad Lou’s was typically dark and, as far as I could tell, innocuous.

“Listen,” I said. “Who is this?”

“The alley. 12:15.”

Joke or no joke, I was beginning to resent the way this stranger had disrupted the atmosphere of Bad Lou's. It's true that Lou's did not look like much—just a one-room dive in a forgotten corner of Charleston. But to me, Lou's was something more. It was part of a world that I built in order to live a certain kind of life. A world which was, by design, narrow. A world that had just enough capacity for working until work was over, drinking until Lou's shut down, crashing at my flat, and doing it all again in the morning. It was not a world built to accommodate late-night job offers.

“12:15?” I said. “What'll happen if I get there at 12:16? Is the world as we know it going to end?”

Having said this, I waited for an answer. While waiting, I glanced at Layla. On Layla's left forearm, there was a black-and-red galleon setting sail above the words 'Homeward Bound.' On the other forearm she had a mermaid that matched the ship in color and style, except that the words beneath the mermaid were 'Hold Fast.' My personal favorite was the blue-grey dagger whose hilt curled around the right side of her neck and whose blade ran across her collar bone before disappearing into her left breast. A small puddle of blood splashed on the skin above her heart.

I must have sat there studying Layla's tattoos for close to ten seconds, and the entire time I did, I could hear the voice breathing into the receiver. When, finally, the voice spoke, it said, “Do not be late.”

“Who is—”

The connection had gone dead.

I hung up the phone and checked the clock. It was 12:10. If I had wanted to, I could have left Bad Lou's at a light jog and arrived at the alley behind the old market by 12:15. I was split. Part of me wanted to dismiss it all as a bad joke. The other part wanted to report to the alley and get some answers. The digits on the clock behind the bar rolled over to 12:11. If I was going to make it to the alley by 12:15, I would need to leave immediately.

It was Layla who settled the issue. Without saying anything, she hopped off her stool, poured two shots of whiskey, and joined me at the bar.

"Someone messing with you, V?" she said. "You look confused."

When I nodded, she handed me one of the shots and kept one for herself. Then she smiled and raised her shot towards me.

"To Tokyo," she said.

I clinked my glass against hers and we threw back the bourbon in unison. The shot felt good going down, but I had absolutely no idea what she meant by mentioning Tokyo.

"Why Tokyo?" I asked. "What does that mean?"

"I forgot," Layla said. "You don't watch the news."

This was true. I had not watched the news in over a year, since, as far as I could tell, the news no longer had anything true or useful to report. It was only recently that I had come around to this attitude. Three years back, the news delivered the headline that would forever remain a headline—that, on May 16th, for no reason that anyone

could explain, four-and-half billion men vanished into thin air. Every man on Earth is gone, every woman is still here, and no one can account for either fact—that, by my definition, was true and useful news.

Later that summer, our second big headline arrived. We learned that whatever force was responsible for the mass disappearance of male bodies (President Hunt had, by then, deemed this event “The Erasure”) was also to blame for global infertility. Because despite the best scientists in the world aiming their collective expertise at conception, not a single woman on the planet could get pregnant.

Like everyone else, I watched the news in those days because I wanted to know what had happened and what we intended to do about it. When it became clear that no one—not the scientists, not the politicians, not a single one of the “experts” brought on by the networks to provide reassurance to the public—had any actual answers, I tuned out.

As always, Layla was gracious in addressing my disengagement.

“Tokyo,” she said. “As in those scientists from Tokyo who think they have a pregnancy. Climb out from under your rock, V. It’s all anyone’s been talking about since they announced it this morning.”

Layla poured two more shots, either out of further celebration for the scientists or out of pity for my ignorance. I accepted her hospitality and, because I enjoyed seeing Layla hopeful, I drank again to Tokyo.

I bracketed the urge to remind her that before these scientists from Tokyo claimed to have secured the future of our species, it was a group of scientists from Berlin who had the answer. And before Berlin, it was Berkeley. Sometime after the fifth or sixth group of experts had come up short, I learned not to hold my breath with respect to salvation plans. Though all other aspects of our world without men were flourishing, the reproduction piece was fucked.

“So?” Layla said. “Who was that on the phone?”

“A lunatic,” I said. “Or a liar. Couldn’t tell which.”

“Why? What did she say?”

“Something about an interview.”

“That’s weird. Don’t you already have a job?”

I did have a job and a good one at that. I worked as the head of a private security detail for Mrs. Sonya Klam-Keating, an heiress who was locally and, in some regards, internationally famous. Mrs. Klam-Keating was already a billionaire before the Erasure, but when her father and the entire board of directors disappeared, she inherited his entire pharmaceutical empire. In providing her with security, I worked six days a week, often up to eighty hours, and straight through most holidays. It was grueling, often thankless work, but I was good at what I did, and I liked the singularity involved in watching over one very important client.

“She probably had me confused with someone else,” I said and looked up at the clock, which now read 12:13.

“To confusion,” Layla said and filled both our glasses again.

We did another shot and, because it was laying on the bar between us, I asked Layla about her book. She handed it to me and I examined it. It was an old and worn-out copy of Fyodor Dostoevsky’s *The Brothers Karamazov*.

Knowing virtually nothing about Fyodor Dostoevsky or what his writing might offer to a bartender in Charleston, I asked her if it was any good.

“It’s not bad,” she said. “But the real story is how I found it.”

I listened with genuine curiosity as Layla told me how she had come across the book. She had stolen it while exploring an abandoned Catholic church down on Broad Street.

“I go out walking almost everyday,” she said. “I walk down to Market Street. I walk to the Battery. Just last week I went across the Ravenel Bridge and back. I love how my mind feels when I’m walking.”

“Don’t pretend you’re out there for the exercise,” I said and winked at her.

“You’re a thief. Now tell me more about your spoils.”

Layla laughed then told me about the sites she explored during her walks through the city, in addition to the items she recovered—a painted mandolin from a deserted antique store on Queen Street; an entire crate of Fuji teacups from a shed that used be a potter’s workshop; and, most recently, the Dostoevsky.

“I know what the President said about looting,” she said. “It’s just that I don’t work until the evening. And I get so bored during the day. And ever since the Erasure, the whole city feels to me like a museum. What about you?”

“What about me?” I replied, having failed to follow Layla’s thought.

“Where do you like to go?” she said. “For fun, I mean.”

The honest answer to this question was “Nowhere.” Just like the answer to the question “Who do you go out with?” was “No one.” Though I was friendly with the two associates who worked with me as part of Mrs. Klam-Keating’s detail, and though I knew the names of several other regulars at Bad Lou’s, the truth about me was that, outside of work and the bar, I was completely and truly alone.

“You do have fun, don’t you?” Layla said.

“Of course,” I said, since I was not about to tell Layla about my narrow world theory.

Instead, to spare her the embarrassment, I took a sip of whiskey and opted for a simple fiction. “I’m a moviegoer,” I said.

The words had barely left my mouth before Layla burst out laughing.

“Bullshit,” she said, slapping the paperback down to punctuate her point.

“What? You don’t believe me?”

“Not for a second. I know how it is with you.”

I said nothing but flashed my palms as a gesture of innocence. Layla leaned across the bar and, less than a foot from my face, tapped her finger against the corner of her eye.

“I see you, V,” she said. “You think you’re hiding, but I see you. You know what your problem is?”

“What’s that?” I said.

“You’re too good at being alone.”

Having said this, Layla fixed her elbows on the bar and rested her chin on her palms in a way that made her look like a little girl. She leaned towards me and stared directly in my eyes, as if we were sisters or old friends with a long history of sharing secrets. There was something in this look that was playful but something else that was immensely sad. I started to ask if she was okay, but before I could, she continued.

“What I want to know,” she said, “is your secret. Can you tell me that? Can you tell me how you deal with the loneliness?”

It was rare, though not unheard of, for our talk to assume this level of intimacy. A typical night in Bad Lou’s meant Layla at the bar and me at my booth, where typical conversation was long stretches of silence punctuated by small bursts of pleasantries. But on occasion, if it got late, and if her pouring hand got heavy, we might touch on something real.

“I don’t know,” I said. “To tell you the truth, I kept to myself even before the Erasure.”

I looked down for a moment and, when I looked back up, Layla had covered her face with her hands. She was crying. I reached out and put my hand on her shoulder. I asked her if she was okay.

“I’m sorry,” Layla said, pushing herself back from the bar and drying her tears. “It’s just that I’ve had a hard week. Today was my dad’s birthday and I can’t stop thinking about him. He’s been gone for five years, but I still have dreams about him, you know?”

I was never worth much as a shoulder to cry on, but for Layla I didn’t mind trying. But before I could say anything, the phone began to ring.

“It’s probably that asshole,” she said. “Why don’t I unplug the phone?”

I looked up at the clock. It was 12:16. Here again, with no reason to care, I found myself curious about what would happen if I picked up the phone.

“Hold on,” I told Layla. “Let me take this.”

She shrugged and picked up her book.

“Suit yourself,” she said and hopped back onto her stool.

I lifted the receiver and said, “Hello?”

“The mistake was mine,” said the same voice as before. “I misjudged you. I assumed that you would recognize the sound of an emergency when you heard it. But you didn’t.”

“Listen,” I said. “I don’t know who you are, or what angle you’re working, but this is pointless. It’s not funny and, frankly, it’s starting to annoy me. Had you done your homework on me, you would know that I don’t respond to these kind of games.”

“Like I said,” the voice continued. “The mistake was mine. Even still, I warned you not to be late. And, having heard my warning, you decided to disregard it. And for this decision, there must be a consequence.”

I picked up the cradle and walked down the bar as far as the cord would allow. I lowered my voice to a whisper.

“Are you threatening me?” I said.

“Absolutely not. A threat, by definition, leverages a potential future outcome against a present set of circumstances. What I am talking about is a consequence that has already been applied. For failing to report to the alley by 12:15 A.M., you have been officially relieved from your duties as head of security for Mrs. Klam-Keating. Don’t bother contacting Mrs. Klam-Keating, as she has known for some time now that this was a possibility.”

Although the voice continued speaking, I set the phone down on the bar and stepped away from its tinny hum. I am not easily shaken and, in a certain sense, was not shaken by the absurd idea that a stranger could arrange for my termination. And yet, for some reason, neither could I completely dismiss what was happening as random, prankish, or inconsequential. The voice, for all its absurdity, commanded a strange sense of authority.

This ambivalence left me in the difficult position of having to weigh one speculation against another without a single fact against which to test things. If the caller was lying, then it was foolish (possibly even dangerous) to comply with any of their demands. Under this interpretation, my next move would be to hang up the phone, leave Bad Lou's, warn Layla to do the same, and sort things out with Mrs. Klam-Keating in the morning. On the other hand, if the caller was telling the truth, if she actually possessed the power to manipulate my life, then continued resistance would only result in more 'consequences.'

After a while, even though I had no idea what I intended to do, I walked back to the bar. I picked up the receiver and said, "You still there?"

"I am," said the voice.

"Then you listen to me," I said. "If you want me to stay on this phone for another second, start making sense. Why are you calling me? You apparently have some kind of security problem, but there are hundreds of specialists. Why me? Why now?"

"There is not a simple answer to this question," the voice said. "But if you don't mind me highlighting several key events from your personal history, I can attempt an answer."

"Highlight away," I said. "But the minute you start in on compatibility or consequences, I'm done."

After a brief pause, the voice continued.

“2003,” it said. “That was the year a drunk driver struck the vehicle carrying you, your mother, and your father. Both your parents were dead on impact. You were found fifty feet from the car, unconscious at the foot of an oak tree. You had scratch on your left temple but were otherwise unharmed. You were five.”

The voice paused after saying this, as if I might have something to add. But I had nothing to add. The fact of my parents' death was not a secret and, as such, proved little in terms of my caller's authority. It was, as far as I was concerned, another set of facts that resided on the other side of the ice.

“2005,” the voice continued. “With your parents gone, you had moved in with your grandmother, who was your only living relative. But just as it seemed like life was regaining some sense of stability, you came home from school one afternoon and discovered your grandmother on the kitchen floor. Heart attack. She'd been dead for several hours by the time you found her.”

Again the voice paused and again I said nothing. Did it feel strange that a complete stranger would call my bar in the middle of the night and arrange the major tragedies of my life in some deranged attempt to talk me into an interview for a as-yet-unspecified job? Of course it did. But did it anger me in the way that it might have angered other people? Strangely enough, it didn't.

“Should I continue?” the voice said.

I released a completely authentic yawn into the phone.

“Do whatever you want,” I said. “When I’m ready for another drink, I’m hanging up.”

“2005 to 2015 were particularly active years. You lived in three different foster homes, got kicked out of four different schools, and did two stints in a juvenile detention center—once for vandalism and once for larceny. And yet, throughout it all, your grades were superb and your test scores were off the charts. According to our records, any adult who worked with you during this time came to two conclusions. One, that you were one of the most naturally gifted individuals they had ever worked with. And two, that despite performing well across all subjects, you shunned all forms of human connection. You refused to make friends, you refused to join organizations or play sports, and whenever anyone attempted to form a relationship with you, you immediately pushed them away. You were, to use their terminology, a misanthrope.”

“Alone then, alone now” I said. “I get it. What’s your point?”

“My point,” the voice said. “Is that I have a job which requires both of your skill sets. Not only do I need an elite security specialist, but I need someone who has mastered isolation. I need someone who is willing to leave everything behind and never come back. This job is unlike anything you have ever heard of, I assure you.”

At this, I had no choice but to laugh. And I laughed directly into the receiver in order for this person, whoever she was, to hear how little I thought of her plan.

“That’s your pitch?” I said. “You need someone who’s dead to the world and I’m the most qualified ghost around? That can’t be what you meant by ‘compatibility.’”

“It is not as simple as that,” the voice said. “But because our time is short, yes, that is essentially what I meant. And, having thoroughly reviewed your files, I stand by my assessment. I think that you are the perfect person for this job, V. And if you would only meet me for an interview, I could tell you more. I am confident that once you hear about our—”

“No,” I said. “I think I’ve heard enough.”

I said this and hung up. After returning the phone to Layla, I told her I would have one more drink before leaving. When she asked about the call, I told her the truth—that it was a very strange conversation but that I couldn’t think about it anymore until the morning.

“It’s funny,” Layla said, handing me a bottle of beer. “I thought that something strange might happen to you.”

This was an odd comment to make and I looked at Layla’s face to see if she was being serious. She absolutely was.

“Why do you say that?” I asked.

“Because,” she said. “I had a dream about you the other night.”

I hesitated before responding to this. The look in Layla’s eyes told me two things. One—that whatever happened in the dream had a bad end. And two—that she was the kind of person who believed that dreams were connected to life, that they could explain something that had happened or even predict the future. Most nights I would’ve found an out, but with the aftermath of the call still hanging in the air, I welcomed the distraction.

“I love hearing about dreams,” I said. “Tell me about it.”

“Okay,” she said. “But I’ll warn you now, it was a weird one.”

“My favorite kind,” I said and started in on my beer as Layla began the story of her dream.

“It was you in the dream,” she said. “But also not you, if that makes any sense. It was you, except that you were a little girl. So was I. We were sisters, I think.”

“That’s nice,” I said. “Doesn’t sound too weird to me.”

“Wait for it,” Layla said. “It’ll get there.”

I took another sip of beer and, for some reason, watched the phone. Layla was still describing her dream, and I was still listening, but I had the feeling that, any minute now, the phone would ring, and the voice would return.

“We were playing together outside my childhood home,” Layla said. “Which was this little clapboard house up in Greenville. It was yellow and falling apart, just like it was when I actually lived there. And in the dream, we were two little girls playing underneath this big magnolia in the front of the house. And we were happy.”

Layla looked me directly in the eyes while telling her story. I looked directly back, though I had no idea where the story was going, or what she thought it signified about our relationship.

“We were getting along fine until something caught your eye. It was one of those big old Cadillacs you used to see all over the place. Big and shiny and some kind of color between black and purple. The color of iced plums, you know? Anyway, this

Cadillac was coming real slow up the road that ran past my house. And I told you to forget about it. I told you let's keep playing.”

Layla paused here, as if this particular detail was of special significance. She took a sip from the glass of water that she kept behind the bar. Then she continued.

“But Cadillac kept getting closer. Until eventually it stopped at the end of my driveway. It just parked there for a minute, engine still running, but no one getting out. Then the driver's window rolled down. And even though the window was rolled down, you couldn't see who was driving. I kept telling you to forget about it. But you had your eye on that car. And you stood up and said to me—”

Layla stopped when the phone rang. She looked at me, then at the phone, then back at me. She repeated her earlier recommendation to unplug the phone. For reasons I have never been able to explain, I disregarded this idea. I picked up the receiver. I said nothing and waited for the voice to fill my ear.

“Sixty seconds,” the voice said. “No more and no less. If after sixty seconds, you remain uninterested in an interview, I will advise Mrs. Klam-Keating to rehire you, and I will never contact you again. Your life, such as you know it, will carry on as before. Do we have a deal?”

I looked at my watch. The second hand was five clicks away from the twelve. For each of these five seconds I thought about hanging up the phone. I smiled at Layla and gave the signal for "This will only take a moment." She winked at me then returned to her stool and lowered herself back into the world of *The Brothers Karamazov*.

When the second hand swept over the twelve, I stopped thinking and said, “Deal.”

The voice began talking immediately.

“To begin with,” it said. “I apologize if my theory offended you. I realize that knowing the facts of someone’s life is not the same as knowing who someone is. It was not my intention to offend you, only to show you that I have been studying you for a long time, V. And I truly believe that you and I were meant to work together.”

I looked down at the second hand, which had just passed over the four.

“How sentimental of you,” I said. “But I already have a job.”

“May I share something with you?” the voice continued. “It is only a single fact, but I think you will find its implications rather impressive.”

“It’s your minute,” I said, still watching the second hand’s advance. “You’re at thirty seconds, by the way.”

“Thank you,” the voice said. “The fact is this—what you’ve been told about the Erasure is a lie.”

“A conspiracy theory?” I said. “Sorry, but I’m not biting.”

I looked down at my watch. The second hand was sweeping around the eight.

“You were told the story,” the voice continued. “That all men disappeared in the Erasure. And, like everyone else, you believed this story.”

There was a seriousness in the voice now that demanded absolute respect. I opened my mouth to speak, but nothing came out. I was still staring at my watch, but the

peripheral of Bad Lou's was set to a light swivel. What the voice said next felt didn't just shock me—it felt like a fist squeezing around my heart.

“The truth is,” it said. “There was a remnant. One man who survived the Erasure. And we have him.”

I looked at my watch. There were seven seconds left. I had at least a dozen questions, but the one that came out first was “Who is we?”

At this, the voice attempted something like a laugh. It was a horrible staccato bleat, like a low note on a piano being repeatedly tapped to no clear rhythm.

“Did I not say that when I first called you?” the voice said. “I apologize. I really am quite bad at this kind of thing. I am calling on behalf of President Jennifer Hunt.”

I said nothing because, unless I was going to call this stranger a lunatic or an out-and-out liar, there was nothing to say. There was only silence in which to process everything that had just been said. I closed my eyes and attempted just this—I attempted to process the idea of a man surviving the Erasure. Then I attempted to process the connection between this man's survival and our current fertility predicament. I had barely begun to consider these possibilities when the voice returned.

“My time is up,” it said. “So I am going to ask you one last time, V. Will you please consider meeting with me for an interview?”

I didn't pause, and I didn't think. I just opened my mouth and spoke.

“Okay,” I said.

“Tomorrow morning,” the voice replied. “Eight o’clock sharp. We’ll send a car to your home. I’m begging you, V, be ready when that car comes. There will not be another chance.”

The call was disconnected. I hung up the phone. I looked at Layla and was only half-certain that I had just had a conversation about the last man on Earth. My face must have reflected this because when Layla looked up from *The Brothers Karamazov*, she said, “You okay?”

“I honestly don’t know,” I said. “I think so, but I don’t know.”

And for a moment, we both stood there and said nothing and looked outside to where the rain had begun to fall harder. I was suddenly and thoroughly exhausted. I wanted nothing more than to go home and fall asleep. I could not possibly tell Layla about the conversation I had just had, and neither could I sit there and pretend that I hadn’t had it.

“It’s getting late,” I told Layla. “I think I’m going to call it a night.”

I went back to my booth and grabbed my purse. I pulled out a bill that would have covered my whiskeys twice over and slipped the money to Layla. She smiled and tucked the bills into her jeans.

“You’re alright, V,” she said.

“You’re not bad yourself, Layla,” I replied. “Have a good night.”

I turned to leave, but before I could, Layla spoke up.

“Wait,” she said. “Don’t you want to hear the end of my dream?”

I pretended that I was curious when, in reality, I already knew how the dream ended. Just like I knew that tomorrow's interview would be a door into a new world and that, in all likelihood, I would never come back to Bad Lou's and never see Layla again. But because I lacked the words for any of this, I returned to the bar, smiled at Layla, and said, "How does the dream end?"

"So the Cadillac pulls up. And its window rolls down. And a hand comes out. It's a weird hand. Long fingers and kind of muscular and with skin the color of milk. And the fingers of this hand start curling in on themselves. It's beckoning the both of us to leave our place beneath the tree and come out to the road. Then—"

Layla stopped and looked at me with true sadness.

"What?" I said. "What is it?"

"It's stupid," Layla said, looking down out of embarrassment. "It's just a dream, you know?"

"Say it," I said. "Tell me how it ends."

"I begged you not to go. Because I knew, in the dream, that if you went out to that car, I would never see you again. So I begged you not to go."

"And then?"

"Then you left," Layla said. "And you got into the car, and the car drove away, and I was left there—alone beneath the tree, watching you disappear down that road."

Because Layla's hands were flat against the bar, I slipped mine into hers and gave them a light squeeze.

“It was just a dream, Layla,” I said. “I’m going to run now, but I’ll see you tomorrow, okay?”

“Thanks, V,” she said and, triggered by the old instinct, she looked down the bar to see if any other customers needed help.

But like most nights since the Erasure, there was no one there but us.

I walked out into the rain and, on the long walk to my flat, did not once look back.

Dramatics

When I got back to my flat, I had visitors.

“Hands up, V,” said a voice I had never heard.

It was too dark to make out faces, but there were three bodies standing in the middle of my flat, at least two of which had pistols pointed directly at me. Though I had a Smith & Wesson on my hip and a Glock smallboy on my ankle, I could not have accessed either before taking shots. I had no choice but to lift both hands above my head and walk slowly into the room.

“That’s it,” the voice said. “Nice and slow.”

When I got close enough, one of the women approached me. After a thorough body search, she relieved me of both guns. This woman was massive and muscular and, judging from the speed and efficiency of her search, a trained professional. She wore street clothes, but she had on a black half-mask which covered everything beneath her eyes. Having seized my weapons, she walked over to the kitchen table, lay them down, and returned to her original position beside the other two.

“Now,” the shot-caller said. “Get down on your knees.”

This I could not comply with. For one, if they had wanted to kill me, they would’ve done so already. They needed something from me, even if I didn’t know what that something was, and this need required me to be alive and alert. For two, after everything I had just gone through at Bad Lou’s, my patience for smoke and mirrors had run out.

“Tell you what,” I said. “How about we sit at the table? I’ll fix us up some whiskies and we can talk this over like adults.”

“On. Your. Knees,” said the voice. “Now.”

“Not one for whiskey, huh? How about sweet tea?”

In a language I could not make out, the shot-caller grunted something to the hulk who had patted me down. After receiving the order, this beast of a woman holstered her weapon and approached me again. She nearly got her cinderblock hand on my shoulder. I say nearly because, before she could close the distance between us, I snapped a

open-palm jab to her trachea. I didn't strike her hard enough to break anything, but I did get her good enough to drop her to her knees. Once downed, the woman gasped for air but still attempted a last-ditch double-leg takedown. She might've succeeded, if I hadn't put my elbow into her temple.

I hadn't clocked someone like that since serving my tours in Afghanistan, and the unpleasant thud of the woman's body hitting the floor reminded me why I got out of the military and into private security. I took no pleasure in hurting people. And yet, when an offer of sweet tea is met with violence, you move past the point where pacifism is viable.

"Now," I said to the remaining two women. "Anyone interested in civil discourse?"

Again the voice spoke in the foreign language, this time to her other partner. Though I could not understand the words, I knew the directive was to attack.

Had this second woman approached me straight on, I would've thrown another jab to the throat (an old favorite of mine due to its high success rate)—that or possibly a snap kick to the solar plexus. Only she didn't approach me straight on. Moving at a speed much quicker than the previous woman, she lunged forward while drifting right, causing me to pivot into a defensive stance. I lowered myself, expecting some combination of strikes, but instead, as if powered by some invisible torque, she sprung through the darkness and attempted a flying knee to my head. She had moved too quickly for me to block with my hands and, had I not fallen back at the final moment, she would've

knocked me out cold. Lucky for me, her knee only cracked my chin, which put me on my back and hurt like hell, but at least left me fully conscious.

From there the fight went to the ground. She attempted to mount me and I let her. Had she bothered to do any research on me, she would've known that, by the time I left the Marines, I was a third-degree black belt in Jiu-Jitsu. While on top of me, she managed a few punches, one of which caught me square on the left eye. But once I sunk a double-lapel grip and smothered her carotid arteries, she went from fighting to gasping, gasping to convulsing, and eventually convulsing to limp.

When I got to my feet, I turned to face the shot-caller, who I assumed was either ready to accept my offer of conversation or kill me where I stood. But when I looked in the place where she had been, there was nothing. The room was dark and my orbital socket was beginning to throb. I spun around and, in some sense, knew what I would find—it was the dim glint of a barrel, one that was leveled directly at my face.

“Impressive,” she said and pressed the pistol against my forehead. “Now get on your knees.”

This time I listened. Once I was kneeling, she drew my arms behind my back and bound them in handcuffs. Like the other two women, she was strong and clearly no stranger to physical violence. As if the cuffs weren't enough, she fastened my ankles with several zip-ties. Then she crouched down as if to study me. Although the room was dark and the half-mask covered her lower face, there was enough light to see her eyes. They were the violent blue eyes of an absolute lunatic.

“If there is one thing that I hate,” she said and reached into a bag at her feet and removed a thick black strap that had a bulky electronic box attached to it. “It’s dramatics.”

True to this statement, her voice had the cold, unwavering crawl of someone who was bored and unhappy and bottomlessly tired. The accent, which I could not place anymore than the language she had used with her partners, sounded to my ear like Eastern European.

“I inherited this hatred from my father,” she continued. “Who was a large man with a short temper, and who had a tendency to interrupt people by saying, ‘Cut the bullshit and get to the point.’ People resented him for this impatience, but I loved him for it.”

The woman paused in order to fasten the black strap around my midsection. I knew from my time in the military that this was a high-grade stun belt—a favorite tool in the realm of electrical torture which will, at the click of a trigger, send thousands of volts through the subject’s body, effectively frying their organs. Long term effects include seizures, heart irregularities, and, in rare cases, cardiac failure. Short term effects include a delightful sensation that a fellow soldier once described as “getting stabbed by knives made of fire.”

Having tightened the strap and activated the electronic box, she removed from her pocket a control device. The device had a red button which I knew to be the stun belt’s trigger.

“Like my father,” she said, placing her thumb atop the red button. “I loathe everything that gets in the way of the point.”

I considered highlighting the irony of an anti-dramatist donning a black mask and talking about her father while winding up for torture. Instead, though, I said, “What’s the point?”

“The point, V,” she said. “Is that you have a piece of information that I want. I want it and I’m going to hurt you until you give it to me.”

I opened my mouth to respond, but her finger had already hit the trigger. It was too late to brace for the pain because the pain (hardly done justice by my friend’s fire-knife metaphor) was already flooding through my body, beginning with my kidney, surging outwards through my core, and not stopping until every last nerve ending inside of me was miserable.

For about three or four seconds, it was pure hell. Hell for my muscles, hell for my bones, hell for my skin and my teeth and my eyes. For those initial seconds, it was hell for every molecule in my body—then I closed my eyes and, as I had been trained to, I went to Room 22.

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