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# Troubadours of the Disaster

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TROUBADOURS OF THE DISASTER

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of English and Comparative Literature

San José State University

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Fine Arts

by

Peter Christian Carvalho

May 2016

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TROUBADOURS OF THE DISASTER

by

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SAN JOSÉ STATE UNIVERSITY

May 2016

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## ABSTRACT

### TROUBADOURS OF THE DISASTER

by Peter Carvalho

Following the death of his father, San Francisco-based music critic Manuel “Manny” Soares is sent by his editor to Amsterdam to find the next big thing in music. Manny hopes that the physical distance from his home will help him work through his father’s passing. Manny finds himself on a late-night flight to Schipol Airport. On a layover in Frankfurt, Manny manages to cause a small riot in the airport bar and escapes. Once he makes “groundfall” in Amsterdam as his editor, Ian, puts it, Manny is on the hunt. Globalization mixed with culture shock follow him as he navigates his way through the Dutch music scene. He cannot escape the feelings of loss, which evoke memories of his survival after the long-expected earthquake in the Bay Area (colloquially known as “The Big Shake”). Manny’s chance meeting with an attractive Dutch illustrator, Femke, who is a fan of an unknown Dutch band called “Some People I Know” move the plot forward to the climax. Along the way, Manny encounters a photographer with controversial artwork and a Dutch film professor who wants to erase his own image. Following the death of a vaunted Dutch astronaut, the novella’s climax sees Manny joining a crowd of Dutch mourners. Individually and collectively, they release hundreds of paper fire lanterns into the night sky in the final cathartic scene. Simultaneously, “Some People I Know” (who are with the mourners) begin to play their music of loss and longing prompting Manny to realize that he has found the next big thing music.

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Lastly, I would like to thank my wife, Sarah, for her constant support and unconditional belief that I can become the writer I want to be.

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## PREFACE

### TROUBADOURS OF THE DISASTER

by Peter Carvalho

The Portuguese word *saudade* and the Dutch word *gezellig* share the trait of being almost untranslatable. The mutability of meaning with each word is largely context-dependent and the emotional definitions exist on opposite ends of the spectrum. A broad definition of *gezellig* is a sense of familiarity, of feeling at home, while *saudade* carries a feeling of loss and melancholic longing.

Loss and longing are major themes in my near-future novella, “Troubadours of the Disaster.” It is through the viewpoint of my Portuguese-American protagonist, Manny Soares, that the themes are explored. Born in Half Moon Bay and now living in the City, Manny writes for an online culture website. Sent to Amsterdam with the challenge of finding the next big thing in music Manny hopes that a change of scenery will help him through his grieving. Lost in the Dutch landscape that is as much Starbucks and the Gap as it is bike bells and houseboats along the canals, Manny struggles with his identity. Although confused at the cultural juxtapositions, his training as a music journalist (he has a super-attenuated ear and an eye for observation) helps him puzzle out his surroundings.

While Manny contemplates the “clustered sculptural mass” of Lovelocks attached to a canal bridge he meets a young Dutch illustrator, Femke. Femke becomes Manny’s guide to finding the next big thing in music through her connections with the unknown Dutch band, “Some People I Know.”



Manny traverses the back alleyways and underground clubs of Amsterdam haunted by memories of his father; particularly painful are the memories of his father's final moments in the hospital and his father's last words to him. Connected to this fresh loss, Manny cannot help but remember his survival in the City following a devastating earthquake nicknamed "The Big Shake" several years previous.

Femke leads Manny to a meeting with an eccentric Dutch photographer named Konig. Konig lives in an artist's loft space above a courtyard filled with a homeless encampment. The residents of the encampment are followers of Konig. Konig's art is based on printing enormous images of the naked homeless onto sheets of cardboard. The photographer pays the homeless to sleep on the cardboard—in effect, asking the homeless to sleep on their own image. This process, Konig believes, imbues the photographic image with a deeper authenticity than mere portraiture.

Manny's exposure to eccentric people arises again when he finds himself in an underground club that screens vintage 16mm movies. After a minor mishap with a business card and a lit candle, he falls into an unwanted conversation with a Dutch academic who teaches film studies. Before Manny's very eyes, the Dutch academic appears to make the completely impossible move of disappearing into the movie screen. Seconds after this happens, Manny receives a text from Femke. He learns that an unknown object (possibly a rogue satellite) has obliterated the Chinese space station, Tiangong-3. Among the dead is the Dutch astronaut Jeltje van der Schip. Jeltje has become a national symbol to the Dutch, since she is the first female Dutch astronaut.

At the climax of the novella, Manny joins Femke and a mass of mourning Dutch in Konig's courtyard. As a show of communal loss and grieving, everyone releases hundreds of paper lanterns reminiscent of the fire lanterns released in the Yi Ping festival in Chiang Mai, Thailand. As Manny releases his lantern, his mind filled with a mixture of love, loss and grief; the band "Some People I Know" begin to play. Their music accompanies the ascent of the lanterns and Manny knows right then that he has found the next big thing in music in a back alley in Amsterdam.

Manny's personal loss allows me to explore a character grounded in psychological realism, while placing him against a backdrop of contemporary global culture allows me to comment on loss on a universal scale.

Because of the many examples of loss I portray, using a close third-person point of view conjoined with free indirect references place both Manny and the reader at a slight remove from the events. This purposeful choice shows the emotional distance Manny hopes to put between himself and his loss. On a larger scale, I am trying to show how mass media allows large-scale loss to be viewed, but not necessarily experienced. Although I am not attempting to portray any specific answer to how one should respond to a personal loss, I hope that readers will engage with Manny's character to follow him through to his cathartic moment.

A novel that strongly influences *Troubadours of the Disaster* is William Gibson's novel, *Pattern Recognition*. Reviewers and critics of Gibson's novels (and Gibson himself) frequently mention the influence of Thomas Pynchon in his work. With the

strong commentary on cultural commodification, underground societies and simulacrum, *Pattern Recognition* can be viewed as a sibling to *The Crying of Lot 49*.

Gibson's work is known for placing characters in global settings. In *Pattern Recognition* the protagonist, Cayce Pollard, finds herself traveling to London, Moscow and Tokyo. Gibson's ability to capture a character's sense of dislocation models a type of poetic prose that I hope to emulate in *Troubadours of the Disaster*. He opens his novel with:

Five hours' New York jet lag and Cayce Pollard wakes in Camden Town to the dire and ever-circling wolves of disrupted circadian rhythm. It is that flat and spectral non-hour, awash in limbic tides, brainstem stirring fitfully, flashing inappropriate reptilian demands for sex, food, sedation, all of the above, and none really an option now...She knows, now, absolutely, hearing the white noise that is London, that Damien's theory of jet lag is correct: that her mortal soul is leagues behind her, being reeled in on some ghostly umbilical...Souls can't move that quickly, and are left behind, and must be awaited, upon arrival, like lost luggage. (Gibson 1)

Pollard's relationship with her identity at the beginning of the novel clearly and quickly reveals that she has lost a vital part of herself. This frees up her character to evolve towards a particular type of "becoming" that reflects a deep basic change by the novel's end.

I have crafted a similar scene at the beginning of my novella to emphasize the theme of loss that pervades the novella, while adding a touch of black humor.

Halfway through his ten-hour flight to Frankfurt, the plane had gone into free fall. In a surreal moment, the ballpoint on the tray table that had he had been reaching for leapt into his hand. His seatmate, an enormous Samoan woman in a business suit, sucked in a great whooping breath that Manny mistook for further catastrophic mechanical failure. Instead of seeing his life flash before him, his focus locked onto the tray table instructions written in Spanish. He was disappointed that his final moments before the fuselage burst apart like a Christmas cracker, sending

terrified passengers, in-flight magazines and thin useless airline blankets into the lower stratosphere would be, “Sujetar el cinturón de seguridad mientras se está sentado.” But the plane finally leveled out, gaining its altitude back within seconds. The captain issued a heartfelt apology over the PA barely heard over the passengers’ chatter and residual sobbing.

The intersections of consumerism and monoculture that influence Gibson’s novel are based on elements of postmodern literary theory. The death of the original or inspired and a world made up of cheap copies and used concepts driven by consumerism intrigues me. In an interview with the *Paris Review* Gibson states, “We’ve arrived at a level of commodification that may have negated the concept of counterculture.” (Wallace-Wells) Postmodern culture has shifted perspective from the real world to an environment that relies heavily on models and maps. To quote Baudrillard: “The territory no longer precedes the map, nor does it survive it. It is nevertheless the map that precedes the territory—precession of simulacra—that engenders the territory.” (Baudrillard)

In *Pattern Recognition*, Cayce Pollard is a freelance “coolhunter” whose skill with recognizing the influence of products and their branding in the larger consumer sphere, demonstrates a clear knowledge of simulacrum. Her attenuation to brand influence is so deep that she has physical reactions to logos.

The following excerpt shows her reaction to the brand, Tommy Hilfiger:

My God, don’t they know? This stuff is simulacra of simulacra. A diluted tincture of Ralph Lauren, who himself diluted the glory days of Brooks Brothers, who themselves had stepped on the product of Jermyn Street and Savile Row, flavoring their ready-to-wear with liberal lashings of polo kit and regimental stripes... There must be some Tommy Hilfiger event horizon, beyond which it is impossible to be more derivative, more removed from the source, more devoid of soul. (Gibson 18)

The postmodernist theorist, Frederic Jameson refers to this type of name-dropping as “postmodern nominalism.” Jameson notes: “In this postmodern nominalism...the name must also express the new, and fashion: what is worn-out, old-fashioned, is only useful as a cultural marker.” (Jameson 5)

In the same manner, I have tried to examine the idea of “exhaustion of the image” in the scenes with the photographer, Konig and the Dutch film professor, Cornelius. While neither of the men reference Gibson’s analysis of mainstream fashion, they do both talk exclusively about the impact of the image in contemporary culture. I am not sure that I fully understand each man’s motivation for his actions. Konig believes that he can immortalize the self through photographic representation, but why he feels he can achieve this through his somewhat murky justification of his process remains a mystery to me. Perhaps it is my attempt to represent Baudrillard’s reversal of the signified and signifier as defined by semiotician, Ferdinand de Saussure.

With the film professor, Cornelius, I want to acknowledge the absolute saturation of media on global culture and behavior. From his point of view, the ease that our image can be captured with endless recording devices renders out much of the simplicity and amazement that the first movies created. It is this “exhaustion of the image” that he reacts against, believing that the early days of cinema were the most pure.

On the novella as an undervalued form in writing, author Ian McEwan states: “I believe the novella is the perfect form of prose fiction. It is the beautiful daughter of a rambling, bloated ill-shaven giant (but a giant who’s a genius on his best days). And this child is the means by which many first know our greatest writers...Voltaire, Tolstoy,

Joyce, Solzhenitsyn...Orwell, Steinbeck, Pynchon. And Melville, Lawrence, Munro.”  
(McEwan)

The novella is the correct narrative form for *Troubadours of the Disaster* for several reasons. In a novella, there is a unity of concept and economy of execution that I find aesthetically similar to what I am trying to achieve. While I am speaking to a much larger question of human needs and postmodern theory, the focus of the novella must remain on the human story. If I were to attempt a novel length work, I don't think that the material could be stretched to 30 to 40,000 words. Also, the exploration of simulacrum would be difficult to carry through without it becoming repetitious and, perhaps, diminishing the novella's thematic impact. The exploration of Manny and Femke's character development requires awareness of pacing that a short story does not allow. In addition, Konig and Cornelius are not represented as “complete” characters. Rather, they attempt to represent my understanding and expression of aspects of postmodern literary theory.

*Troubadours of the Disaster* allows me to explore many of the ideas and concepts that my graduate coursework exposed me to. It has been my desire to craft a narrative that poses questions about mass culture and media, while the narrative form follows the trope of a detective story or a *bildungsroman*.

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## **Mr. Bojangles**

The bike messenger with the tragus piercing who dropped off Manny's plane ticket at ten o'clock that night seemed to resent having to deliver the paper work to Manny's studio apartment in the Outer Richmond.

"Sign here and here," the courier sighed, handing Manny his deeply chewed Bic.

While Manny puzzled out the dense block of boilerplate set in five point type above the line for his signature, he could feel the courier taking a long pull on his modest lodgings. No doubt, opinions were being formed at the sight of Manny's Murphy Bed, the spindly thrift-store drink cart on which sat a manual typewriter with a ribbon of paper spooling from the carriage, his poster of Lester Bangs on the closet door with the wedge of throwing knife sunk deep into the late music journalist's solar plexus.

The austerity of Manny's place, combined with its fastidious upkeep, clearly confused the courier. The bike messenger's tats, piercing and clothing placed him solidly in the Mission crew. As Manny scanned the documents he could feel the messenger eyeing his collection of Edward Gorey memorabilia and dog's nose clustered on the slim mantel with equal parts envy and disgust.

"Okay, there you go," Manny said, handing back the courier's pen. As he handed the clipboard to the courier, he noticed how much his signature looked like his father's.

"Wait," he said, pulling the clipboard back.

*I'm dead.*

A brief tug-of-war ensued with both men pulling at the clipboard. The messenger won using a clever push-pull maneuver that pushed Manny back a step.



Manny's sudden step forward made the messenger hold up his clipboard in front of him as his eyes widened. It took all of Manny's willpower not to snatch the clipboard away so that he could get another look at his signature.

The scrawl of his cursive on the signature line jerked Manny from his studio in the Outer Richmond to Coelho's Funeral Home in Half Moon Bay three months prior.

The funeral home associate had sat behind the glossy expanse of her mahogany desk and posed the question to them, "Who will take the possession of the cremains?"

Cremains. It took Manny, his brother Luis and their mother a moment to decode the industry term for reducing Roberto Soares to a fraction of his living size—appropriate only for mourning purposes now—was a mashup of the words "cremation" and "remains." That was the final transition of Manny's father, owner of the commercial fishing boat *Bela Estrela*, divorcee who lived in an Airstream the color of a sun bleached beer can on ten acres of bluff overlooking the harbor, keeper of a thick black mustache that flanked his full lips and framed the blade of his nose—windburned and noble like a beacon for the men who fished the depths off Pillar Point—into his final form after returning from the fire.

Roberto Soares, soon-to-be occupant of a pressed tin shoebox. Six pounds of gray ash and bone "cremains" his final tenancy.

In his studio, the scream deep inside Manny, baffled and directionless, amorphous and hobbled, struggled to take form.

"Okay, then," the courier finally said. He tore off a hank of NCR from the sheaf of paperwork and handed the flimsy papers to Manny. The courier recited a brief

soliloquy in-line with his company's desire to clearly state their position with the binding legal nature of the documents that Manny had just signed and their desire to remain outside of any complaint that Manny might have with their affiliation with the airline carrier.

During this recitation that Manny looked more closely at his travel papers and realized that he flew to Amsterdam via LAX to Frankfurt, where he would have a brief layover until a domestic carrier dumped him off at Schipol. Total travel time, just under fifteen hours.

Ian, his editor. Spiteful, maybe?

Then the courier left, slamming the door hard enough that the Tibetan bells hung next to the door banged once against the wall before falling to the floor.

Manny's bells lay silent on the floor, but hornets swarmed inside his head.

*I'm dead.*

Manny tracked the sound of the courier's cleats ticking down the hallway in a steady rhythm. The muted burst of staccato tapping as the courier went down the entryway's steps reminded Manny of Mr. Bojangles' famous stair dance with Shirley Temple. That reminded him of the first time he saw the routine performed at the Sousa's place back in Half Moon Bay where he grew up until his parent's divorce and his mother's move to a tiny place in San Francisco's Chinatown. The locust tree outside of their one large window had faced Hang Ah Alley and had attracted a passel of hummingbirds that swooped and dove in pairs. Luis stayed in Half Moon Bay to work the nets on the *Estrela*. Manny knew that Luis palms were fissured with cracks that

sometimes bled around the beer bottles he cradled at Duarte's after the days catch had been caught and gutted.

Manny figured he got off easier. Luis did, too.

Although he had less than an hour before the car *slangFast* arrived to take him to SFO, Manny tugged a little harder on his memories of Half Moon Bay and of the strange exhilarating period of his adolescence that straddled the blurry wishes of his mother and father.

Right now, it was probably easier to make a lateral move into memory than to really think about the eeriness of how much his father's signature matched his own.

\*\*\*\*\*

That summer—the summer when an unexpected shoal of sardines had gathered past the surf line of the bay in a silvered mass visible with Google Earth, his last summer spent there—Manny had been a sullen thirteen year-old with aching joints. His mind raced with *The New Musical Express*. His father let him know over the phone that next season, he'd be expected to crew on the deck of the *Bela Estrella* with Luis. Manny wasn't so sure about that. Also, Luis would be in charge of Manny's topside education. Manny was sure about that. He'd swallow his own blood before letting Luis get to him. For now, however, he'd been tasked with watching the twin girls of his father's main buyer on Coastside, Mr. Sousa, whose wife had passed from cancer two seasons ago.

The Sousa's had a rambling farmhouse of weathered wood that hunkered down in a ring of skeletal cypress trees on a bluff overlooking the south end of the bay. When Manny turned off from the highway on his mountain bike and pedaled up the long dirt

drive—bunny hopping over the deep ruts from Mr. Sousa’s truck—he fought the headwinds that came screaming up the face of the bluffs. Despite the invisible force that threatened to push him into the naked stalks of Brussels Sprouts in the soon-to-be fallow fields flanking the dirt road, he bared his teeth into the wind and closed his eyes.

He saw himself riding the thermals over the harbor with the seagulls, whose shrill cries contrasted with the silent push of the whitecaps sloughing shoreward down below; he was in the waving patches of silver Beach Burr clinging to the low humped dunes; he was deep underwater offshore at the terminus of the Seal Cove Fault that ran ashore at Pillar Point Harbor where the *Estrella* launched seven days a week. Manny saw himself in the captain’s cabin alongside his father, who pulled hard on the hand-rolled cigarette that stank of the dank shag he kept in a tobacco pouch tucked into the waistband of his foul-weather pants. Behind them, the longlines of the *Estrella* trailed in the Pacific like the tendrils of a man o’ war.

Manny told his father how large the waves in front of them were.

“*Cão que ladra não morde,*” his father answered.

Manny laughed, agreeing that the waves’ bark was bigger than its bite.

And then Manny pulled up to the front of the Sousa’s farmhouse, popping up off the saddle of his mountain bike, shifting his weight over his back tire as he squeezed the brake levers. Calisto and Amelia were there with pans of chicken feed. The twins raised their heads simultaneously even as their skinny arms broadcasted the feed in a sweeping arc, which mirrored Manny’s approach. He slid into a dramatic dust-raising crescent that freaked out the poultry, sending them crashing into each other like atoms colliding and

then bouncing apart with a collective terrified clucking. The rooster's red combs shook with sawtooth fury.

Manny had begun to suspect that, more than anything, a sense of timing could impart even the most quotidian events with sparkling moments of aesthetic clarity.

The day that Manny met Mr. Bojangles, however, had been a dreary one at Coastside. The twins had been playing a listless game of Chinese checkers in front of the console television, neither one of them interested in moving their marbles on the colorful round board. Outside, the harbor was socked in by a low ceiling of slate that spat fat drops of rain at the sash windows. Bluff winds slammed against the house, sending a low, undulating whistling throughout the drafty rooms.

The local station's miniscule programming budget didn't allow for first-run movies, which left the youngsters of Coastside who were trapped inside on a rainy afternoon to puzzle out the plots of *Mildred Pierce* and *Whatever Happened to Baby Jane?*

Shirley Temple's oeuvre was on tap that week. Manny thumbed his latest edition of *The New Musical Express* for the nth time as *The Little Colonel's* lo-tech charm played out in front of him. He hadn't been paying attention, really; he was jacked into his CD player, his earbuds pulsing with his latest musical acquisition, the Pixies' *Surfer Rosa*.

And then track seven, *Where is My Mind?*, started up.

The timing of the lead singer's high pitched wail followed by the haunting introductory chords of the acoustic guitar synced perfectly with Manny raising his head to see the toe-tapping of Shirley's butler gliding up and down the stairs. The tails of the

butler's tuxedo jacket were crow's wings fluttering behind him. Manny dropped his magazine, leaning forward with his elbows on his knees. Something was happening, something that teen Manny couldn't articulate. The song chugged along wailing with an emotion that thirteen year-old Manny had zero reference to, but the way the lead singer's phrasing matched the tuxedoed tapping of Mr. Bojangle's feet created an alchemy of music and image that came together seamlessly. Fucking life soundtrack, Manny had thought.

And he had been hooked.

\*\*\*\*\*

Whether he knew it or not, that moment became the bellwether that—fifteen years later—would result in his career as a music and lifestyle columnist with the online indie culture juggernaut *slangFast*. To boot, he had modest amount of celebrity currency from what Ian, his latest editor, referred to as “an idiosyncratic writing style.”

Manny's trip to the Low Country to suss out the next big thing in the Western Europe indie scene came at the behest of Ian, who was headquartered in the King's Road offices in London. They had an entire floor overlooking the former site of Vivienne Westwood's SEX boutique and live streaming webcams in their unisex bathrooms.

Ian was twenty-five and had a twining set of neck tattoos that wound around what Classy Freddie Blassie would've referred to as “a pencil-neck.”

Manny suspected that his economy seat on Delta to the Low Country may have had retaliatory shadings from of his gaffe at the Christmas Party when he inadvertently called out Ian's girlfriend Fiona on her short arms.

Manny's image of his mother rattling around her tiny Coastside house like the last pea in the can, however, or Luis running the *Estrela* out of the harbor with last night's debauch clinging to his clothes after a night of rolling for drinks at Duarte's left Manny feeling hollow.

Manny checked his passport, unsure if he was doing it to see if it had expired or to make sure that it was his face on the laminated page shimmering with security holograms.

A tiny picture of him stared back; his hair had grown back from his suedehead look from last year when he and Midori had spent the first weeks of fall along a short stretch of the Dalmatian Coast.

Had he folded time somehow so that his memories of their late afternoon lovemaking set to the thwacking thump of the Croatian laundress downstairs getting it on with a dirty hallway runner dove tailed with those defining moments outside his father's hospital room at Stanford nine months later? On the spectrum of sounds, where did Midori's moans fit as she dug her heels into the small of his back relative to the finality of his father's groans as Manny, Luis and their mother stood clutching each other in Stanford's hospital hallway?

The zenith of all roller coasters always ends in a sudden plunging slide. Could he go so fast that he caught up with himself from behind? If Manny tapped Manny on the shoulder, would the shock of looking into each other's eyes be enough to drop the both of them stone dead with the same freezing power of a gargoyle's glare?

Manny cracked open his laptop, made a few keystrokes, and then typed an email.

*Mama-*

*I'm leaving for Amsterdam in an hour for work. Should only be gone a few days since I'm on the company's dime—ha. My editor thinks that the next big thing in music might be coming out of there.*

*BTW-I ran into a cousin of dad's yesterday when I dropped by the Portugeuse Hall to pick up the rest of the folding chairs that we used for dad's service. Guy's name is Alfredo Silva—Fredo. Ring a bell? I have no idea how he recognized me. Guy was like eighty or something and had cataracts. He wanted to let you know how sorry he was to hear about dad's passing. Seemed a little miffed that he wasn't invited to the service.*

*He told me that he crewed on dad's boat for a little while in '73. I guess that would've been when dad had the Sofia that he ran out of Pillar Point, right? Not like I would've been there, because I was three. I only remember being onboard the Bela.*

*I'm sorry that I haven't been able to come and visit since the service.*

*I talked with Luis last week about settling dad's account at the harbor. He's going to handle it I just need to sign some paperwork. I could tell that he wanted me to come back to Half Moon Bay to work the nets with him and the boys. I told him that I hadn't cast a net or baited a hook in almost ten years and that four in the morning for me nowadays is when I'm getting back from a show or barely meeting a deadline for my column.*

*I guess he didn't like my answer because he started in on how much dad missed having his boys with him. I told him that since dad wasn't around anymore his point was*



*moot. Maybe I shouldn't have said that, but you know how he pushes. I think he was ticked off because he didn't know what "moot" means.*

*Anyway, I just wanted to let you know what was going on with me. I would've called, but my phone's been acting up lately.*

From the pocket of his jeans, Manny's phone chimed with a new text.

*Falar com você em breve, mama.*

*Manny*

He hit Send. He shut down his laptop, and stowed it in his messenger bag that sat next to the larval shape of his father's canvas duffel. He fished his phone from his pocket and thumbed his code as slipped his paperwork into the inside pocket of his leather jacket with his other hand.

It was a series of texts from his best friend.

Double's first text wished him *yāt louh seuhn fūng*, which, Manny recalled, meant *bon voyage* in Cantonese. Double's second text wished him well with his music column in Amsterdam. Double's third text suggested that Manny shove a tackle box up his ass, sideways, as well as a pail of golf balls, two ropes of Chinese sausage and—space permitting—a Pomeranian.

Manny laughed. Fucking Garret Chin. Fucking tubby bubble tea-drinking, mahjong playing, psychiatrist speaking, vintage clothes-wearing Double. Manny had tried to convince Double to join him, but no amount of wheedling could change his best friend's mind. Manny had the feeling that Double disapproved of his choice to leave the country for a week. Manny wasn't so sure he didn't agree with him.

Case in point: last night he'd been out with some of the younger staffers from the Valencia office and probably had too much to drink. They were at The Western Lands, one of the newer bars in the Mission with a Dead Frequency policy. Manny sensed the smugness of the patrons as they drank their size large whatever's pretending not care that using their cell phones resulted in immediate expulsion by Presuming Ed, the Land's hulking bouncer slash poet. Funny thing, though—there was always a line for the bathroom, the one place where you could have any privacy.

Manny's group clustered around their table thick with bottles and flickering votives. On a small raised stage behind them a combo set their gear up.

"It's not like I'm running away or anything," Manny said to Darla, the tiny junior web designer. Her black bangs were cut straight across like an exclamation. She wore leggings with cats screen printed onto them and a man's cashmere cardigan with little else on underneath.

Darla scooped her chair closer to Manny's.

"I don't mean to pry, but how did your father die, Manny?"

"Don't know. He had prostate cancer and decided to have it operated on instead of chemo or radiation. I guess he didn't like the idea of Watch and Wait. But that was dad, he treated his cancer like he treated his catch: anything that didn't belong on his hook got tossed back into the ocean. The operation went fine—"

"Oh, good."

"—but he died in recovery."

The shock on Darla's face seemed exaggerated by the sudden downward pull of her Clara Bow-painted lips.

"How did he die?"

Manny shook his head. He could feel the heat from Darla's thigh pressed against his.

"A mixture of institutional negligence and a surgeon's arrogance."

"During the autopsy," Manny said. "They found two liters of blood in his abdomen. Two liters. That's like one of those big plastic soda bottles from the store."

"Jesus. How is your mom doing?"

Manny pulled away a little from Darla, grabbed someone's half-drained beer and downed it.

"Mom's holding up."

He heard the utter shallowness of his words, hated himself for a moment, but pressed on.

"She tried to sue the hospital, but it's Stanford, right? They closed ranks. Most she got was an email saying that they would review their procedures."

"I'm so sorry, Manny," Darla said, laying her hand on his arm.

From behind him, the combo's sound check filled the Land's tiny space with the discordant shrill of a trumpet being run through effects pedals.

"Well, maybe this Amsterdam thing will help me to clear my head. I haven't been able to get my groove back since my dad died." Manny shook his head. "Does Ian really think that Holland's gonna break out with the next big thing—I mean, seriously—"

He raised his voice so that everyone at the table could hear.

“—we all know that the Amsterdam scene is DJs and weed. Am I right?”

The staffers echoed his sentiment with, “Word, hell’s yeah, and Manny’s preaching, yo.”

Manny hadn’t felt Darla’s hand as she took from his arm. He leaned forward, let Stu, the senior web designer, buy him another Sapphire and tonic and told everyone about the time he interviewed Balls Norman from The Wilhelm Scream. On the stage behind them, the combo’s kick drum began a thumping signature and the wail of the trumpet like hyenas caught in a wood chipper cut off any hope for conversation.

He and Darla kind of hooked up later that night, making out in the Land’s bathroom, but when he slipped his hand into her cardigan she pulled back.

Manny looked down at her, confused. She gave him a look full of pity and concern that gobsnacked him. When they left the bathroom a moment later, the line of people waiting outside gave them a round of applause that had Darla snatching her motorcycle jacket and helmet from the table and heading straight for the door. She gave Manny a minor wave at the door before she left.

And so he went home empty-handed that night with nothing on his hook but the beginnings of a hangover. He stood by the sink in his kitchenette and forced himself to methodically drink two liters of tap water before he flopped down onto his bed and fell hard asleep, his belly groaning and distended from the water.

Last night merged with today. Manny’s phone chimed with a new text.

It wasn't Double suggesting a new passel of items for insertion, but the car that *slangFast* had sent letting Manny know that their ETA was less than five minutes.

He sighed and did one last check of his gear stacked next to the front door. He smoothed the covers on his bed and lifted it back into the wall on its creaking hinges, installed shortly after the Great Quake leveled most of the City more than a hundred years ago.

Manny ran his fingers through his hair and looked around his studio apartment; right then, it resembled a prop piece from some forgotten television pilot that had run on a deep cable channel with a niche audience of less than fifty.

He checked his phone once more, not really thinking Darla would've texted him and hoping that Midori would've.

Maybe Amsterdam really would clear his head. Luis could take care of their mom in Manny's absence; after all, he'd only be gone a few days.

The sonorous call and response of the foghorns mounted on the south tower of the Bridge began. He pictured the black hulk of a container ship gliding silently in the dark under the weathered trusses of the main span. He heard the honking of the car that had come for him. Time to go.

His father's face rose up before him.

*Dad, remember that time when you were dead?*

He left, stepping over the Tibetan bells on the floor.

### **Aposematism**

Manny couldn't keep up with Donald, the self-proclaimed mercenary.

Donald's shot glass rang on the zinc expanse of Frankfurt's airport bar top just as the sting of Sapphire hit Manny's mouth. Manny grimaced both from the thought of having to buy another round and the shock of the vodka ripping into the raw meat of his lips. He could thank Delta for the latter.

Ten hours in the arid confines of the triple seven sucked the moisture from his sinuses and left his mouth a cracked and ruined mess. Manny had read that the humidity levels on an airplane hovered around twelve percent, about the same as the Sahara on a good day.

He'd ended up in FraPort's bar *cum* nightclub *Velocité* where he found a single stool at the crowded bar, which was good because he desperately needed a couple of shots of whatever to stop his hands from shaking. He didn't even notice Donald's bulk on the barstool next to him.

Halfway through his ten-hour flight to Frankfurt, the plane had gone into free fall. In a surreal moment, the ballpoint on the tray table that had he had been reaching for leapt into his hand. His seatmate, an enormous Samoan woman in a business suit, sucked in a great whooping breath that Manny mistook for further catastrophic mechanical failure. Instead of seeing his life flash before him, his focus locked onto the tray table instructions written in Spanish. He was disappointed that his final moments before the fuselage burst apart like a Christmas cracker, sending terrified passengers, in-flight magazines and thin useless airline blankets into the lower stratosphere would be, "*Sujetar el cinturón de seguridad mientras se está sentado.*" But the plane finally leveled out,

gaining its altitude back within seconds. The captain issued a heartfelt apology over the PA barely heard over the passenge chatter and residual sobbing.

All that and now this one.

Donald: a big mook showoff-type. Manny figured he was a solid two-twenty in a daily supplement and gym kind of way instead of it looking like natural tone. No, probably anabolic—Christ, his biceps were enormous. Packed into an English professor’s drag of corduroy, tweed and khaki, Manny wondered where Donald shopped to find an oxford to fit around his neck. Donald’s regimental tie alternated stripes of yellow and black.

“Another,” Donald said, sliding his shot glass along the bar top with a flick of his wrist so that it caromed off of Manny’s just as he set his down.

Declarative statement. Said with an accent Manny wouldn’t hear stateside; there was a Central European cadence to Donald’s barking style of communication. Donald pushed out the vibe, though, pure military. Manny had been around enough vets to know the strange field of awareness they projected. It was like standing under a power line with all that crackling energy around you, making the hairs on your arms stand. Manny had to get off an elevator once because the guy in front of him pushed that kind of field. He made Manny’s palms sweat.

Both of the shot glasses disappeared behind the bar where they crashed against more glasses. Three feet from them, the bartender set down a brace of umbrellaed hurricanes for a cluster of JAL flight attendants. He jerked his head around, flipping his

peroxided forelock against his high pale brow. In two strides he was in front of Manny and Donald.

“Gentlemen,” he started with devoid of any accent. He focused on the space in between them. “We here at *Velocité* want to ensure that your experience is pleasurable and without event. Your safe departure is our greatest concern.”

Manny dipped his head and stared at the dull luster of zinc. Someone had scratched “Fuk yu” into the metal with something sharp. Manny could feel Donald next to him tensing like the jaws of the world’s largest bear trap being cranked open.

“Thankfully for me, but not for you,” the bartender continued. “Is the fact that you’re sitting in one of three blinds spots that CCTV can’t see. I have five fully charged Wasps placed at unspecified intervals along the bar. I also have my soda gun. I’ll use the soda gun to hose you down right before you enjoy the snap crackle pop of my high-voltage beauties. The manufacturer strongly cautions against this.”

He whipped the bar towel from his shoulder and onto the bar top where it smacked against the complimentary bowl of wasabi peanuts sending several into Manny’s lap.

“So, what’ll it be?” The bartender said. He looked at Manny. “I assume it’s still on your tab?”

Manny didn’t raise his head, just held up his fingers in a half-assed peace sign. The bartender moved down the bar and began setting up the next round.

Donald chuckled and did a quick slap rub of Manny’s thigh that made him flinch.



“Jesus,” Manny said. He laughed trying to shift his barstool, but a cadre of German businessmen trying to get their drink orders in prevented him. Behind Donald, the wall of flat panels flickered with news feeds and football scores.

Donald had the hoodoo, and he was all hair-trigger. Manny knew that underneath the big-lug-goes-Mr. Chips outfit, his unwanted drinking partner could open a rooster tail of blood at his throat quicker than he could say, “Babaganoush.” Manny imagined collapsing onto the bar top of *Velocité* full of limbo-people like himself and like Donald, the self-proclaimed mercenary.

Manny hadn’t even reached Schipol yet, and already he’d been huckstered into an unwinnable drinking contest. Every time Donald had finished a shot he blew his breath out like a horse at the trough. Their conversation had been limited by Donald’s heavy accent and the thumping recursive beat of the music blasting from the overhead speakers.

“You like?” Donald had bellowed at Manny, jerking his thumb upwards.

“What, the ceiling?”

“No, you like the German Techno?”

Manny cringed, less from the fumes of vodka pouring out of Donald than the unholy alliance of those two words. Manny’s opinion of German Techno had caused him many lines of wasted column space and had, in fact, almost cost him his job on more than one occasion.

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“What is it with you and German Techno?” His editors would ask.

And Manny would tell them.

Manny began with the low-hanging fruit: the genesis of techno had its origin story in the hard urban landscape of Detroit in the mid-80s. Manny continued with the Belleville three: Juan Atkins, Derrick May and Kevin Saunderson and their individual and collective contributions. He elaborated on the synthesizers, particularly the Roland TR-909—a first-generation synthesizer that these pioneers used to pull a completely new sound from its circuitry. Paired with the steady uncompromising beat of drum machines, the Belleville three opened up new sonic vistas of the future evocative of cold robotic sex and high-octane drugs. Contrary to mainstream belief, techno in Detroit had little to do with the declining auto industry and White Flight and more to do with the youth of the underground club scene; it was about loft parties where the color barrier was nil. So what if your dad just got promoted to foreman on the GM line, just keep the beats pumping and the MDMA coursing through your young veins.

At this point, Manny would transition to the influence of *Kraftwerk*, that seminal band from Düsseldorf whose '75 release, *Autobahn* provided the Ur-framework for the Bellville Three's subsequent and evolving output. A decade may have passed between the release and its impact on Western shores, but it took hold with the same tenacity as black mold in an Eight Mile apartment. Bounce back to Germany in '89, focusing on the fall of the Wall and the sudden joyful freedom of German youths. It was the kids from the East that pushed for a harder sound beyond the rock-based tastes of their Western counterparts. It was all-night parties in clapped out power stations and underground bunkers covered with Wildstyle graffiti. No more Stasi listening to the lives of others from the next room or peeking up from under the lid of the toilet bowl.

By now his editor would be fidgeting with whatever had been their hands clearly regretting having asked such an open-ended question.

Once, one of his editors, locked in the throes of gestational diabetes, actually tested her blood sugar right in front of him in a desperate attempt to divorce herself from his unsolicited Teutonic music history lesson. She had milked a bead of blood from her index finger that had splashed onto her bleached veneer desktop devoid of anything save a curvaceous glass bottle of MexiCoke.

Manny dug the tension.

It didn't help that his spoken delivery made it clear that he gave the abridged version and that, given the chance, he could expound on the topic with the same doggedness of a trainspotter running down the minutiae of their favorite rolling stock.

At a certain point, Manny could tell that his words had taken on a crushing conversational weight. He imagined the slow, grinding pressure of a glacier creeping across granite, leaving behind a glassy blinding face like a mirror reflecting the sun.

Manny would let it ride for one more beat, teasing out the current state of German Techno and how the 90s German techno producer "Papa" Sven Vath cross-pollinated his beats with the Ibiza foam-party scene spawning yet another head to the unrelenting Hydra of German Techno.

And then it happened.

His editor would look at Manny and say, "Enough."

And Manny would answer, "Exactly."

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Enough. Manny reflected on the word. The wall of flat panels behind Donald switched from news feeds and football matches to a collage of changing images that flashed and strobed to the beat of the German Techno. Manny thought it impossible that the volume could get any louder. The combination of alcohol, incipient jet-lag and this crazy Eastern Bloc bullshitter spilling out his third-world escapades made him feel like slaps to his face—not hard enough to hurt, but delivered with a quick-fire cadence that was hard to ignore.

“No,” Manny said, finally answering Donald. “I  *fucking* hate German Techno.”

Donald nodded, jerking his shoulders up and down in rhythm with the music.

“Yes, German Techno is bloody good,” he said.

“A zip gun,” Donald started. “A zip gun is pure improv. Necessary only a barrel and a chamber. For example, when I worked in the Peshawar last summer, many men make them. It is like an art. You can purchase .22 rimfire at open markets where they have baskets full of ammo. Kalash and knockoffs, too. For a hundred rupees you may get your Kalash engraved with anything you want: your name, Allah Akbar, naked womans, anything.”

The vodka shots were really ramping up on Manny. He had to put his hands on his thighs to make sure that he was still anchored to his barstool. Strategically, it was in his best interest to amscray out of there, walk straight to his gate and park it next to a family of Swedish tourists. He’d offer them his empty shot glass and the father would hold his hand up and politely say, “*Nej tack.*” Manny would be cool with that. Even though he didn’t speak Swedish he knew the universal sign for “No thanks.” Manny

cursed himself for not using the tactic when he first sat down at the bar and Donald turned to him asking, “Bro, do you like games?”

Manny watched helplessly now as Donald crushed a pink tablet with the bottom his shot glass. Donald pinched the powder between his thumb and forefinger and dashed it into his drink like a chef with a pinch of salt flavoring soup. The vodka’s surface boiled before disappearing into his mouth.

Instantaneous effect on Donald’s pupils. They slammed into full dilation so quickly, Manny swore he could hear the whoosh.

Donald flew dark now.

“No more borders,” he bellowed, inches from Manny’s face. “Whole world collapsing onto itself, becoming big event horizon. No nations, no countries, only Internet and social media. We see all of it all of the time. Image is premium. You think infrastructure makes for good country, good for political debate and harmony of citizenry? Bollocks. More vitality in Mogadishu and Mali than in pretty suburbs. We deal now in the currency of loss.” He jabbed his finger into Manny’s forehead. “If you want catch little fish, you stay in shallow water. You want catch big fish, you got to go deeper.”

Donald smeared out the words like he was wiping dog muck from the bottom of his shoe.

“Your American director David Lynch, he says this.”

Donald smirked. He snicked a plastic lighter to the cigarette that appeared between his lips like a bad film splice.

For Manny, all levels dropped to zero. 120 BPM of techno stalled in mid-thump. The wall of flat panels behind Donald froze on the image of a drone's cross hairs locked onto a convoy somewhere. Rendered in the grayscale palette of thermal imaging, the convoy's engines pulsed pure white.

"Assassination Porn" Double would've called it, sucking tapioca balls through a fat, clear straw.

Manny wished Double was there, clamping his paw down over his forearm. But Double was several time zones behind him, probably slapping down Mah Jhongg tiles in some restaurant backroom in Chinatown.

Caught in the vacuum of his helpless cultural rage and something darker that rose up in him with black manta shapes, Manny took his last shot, puffed out his cheeks and sprayed a cloud of atomized vodka at Donald's face.

The orange fireball ignited by the flame of his lighter engulfed Donald's head before going out. The look on Donald's face bereft of eyebrows terrified Manny. It was like a piece of pissed off archaic statuary from a stone altar had come to life.

Donald looped a city block of fist at Manny's face. Somehow Manny ducked and Donald's blow crashed into the side of a German businessman's head. That fellow slammed sideways into someone else who cursed explosively in French. Suddenly, the air around Manny was full of swinging elbows and fists. He pushed hard against the bar feeling his barstool tilt backwards as he began to fall. Just in time too. Donald launched himself from his sitting position and flew in front of Manny missing him by mere inches. Manny's hair blew back as if a freight train were screaming past him. Sliding off his

barstool and into the forest of gabardine legs and polished wingtips, he saw the bartender's hand dipping below the bar before reappearing with the striped yellow and black stinger of his Wasp. The bartender gripped his soda gun in his other hand. Manny knew that the Wasp was consumer-grade riot protection gear resembling a meter-long cattle prod kitbashed with a bullpup assault rifle. They sold them on QVC. He had heard that it was easy to download plans to boost the amperage to a near-lethal dose.

Before knees began slamming into his sides, the last thing Manny saw was the bartender jabbing the business end of his Wasp into the seething mass of bodies that he doused with his soda gun. Carried over the sound of gutted growls, shouting and breaking glass Manny clearly heard the bartender say, "Time, gentlemen" then air stank of ozone and popped and cracked with blue sparks.

On the floor, Manny army-crawled on his belly, pushing his father's duffel in front of him. Someone's shoe nailed his eye socket, bringing pain and a burst of light. Dimly he could hear klaxons shrilling amidst the chaos of people pushing out the front of *Velocité* and onto the concourse. Somehow Manny found himself on his feet outside the bar as he fled the tide of people surging by him. Someone almost knocked him over as they shoved past. As Manny regained his balance, he saw a phalanx of FraPort's *Polizei* heading toward him, riot shields in front of them and the barbs on the long poles of their police-grade Hornets arcing hungrily. Manny broke to the right just in time, mentally repeating, "*Obrigado, Obrigado.*" As the crush of people fled the bar, Manny did a double take as the person who slammed into him looked back and gave him a browless wink.

Donald, the self-proclaimed mercenary.

People dove out of the way as the *Polizei* thundered down the concourse one-way and Donald the other.

The rough beast was loose and sprinting toward Bethlehem to be born. He was dressed in corduroy, tweed and khaki.

### **Swimming Lessons**

Like it or not, arriving in Amsterdam with a black eye gave Manny a new view on his image. As soon as he deplaned at Schipol he'd taken off his Wayfarers that he'd worn the entire flight from Frankfurt. Mothers with children pulled their little ones closer to their sides as he passed them. Some of them openly looked him up and down with interested smiles. At the baggage carousel, a few Donald-looking types in track suits stared at him with pale unblinking eyes. The kid with the pomaded coif and Mission Critical t-shirt who served him his coffee at Starbucks asked what weight class he fought in. "Weight class?" asked Manny, confused. "You know, MMA?" Manny smiled and took his coffee.

Which left Manny to wonder who exactly he was at that moment drinking chain coffee that tasted better than what he got back home in an airport full of strangers that, undoubtedly, he would never see again. And what the hell was that thing back at FraPort? Jesus, like something from a bad action movie getting all Puff the Magic Dragon—in the 'Nam sense—with Donald's head. That couldn't have been legal, could it? The black bolus of rage that rose up in him like coal gas from a deep untapped pocket of his psyche troubled him. Like that thing with the bike courier back home.



The anger had begun after his dad's service, manifesting itself when he yelled at Luis after catching him drinking from a flask behind the dumpster of the Portuguese Hall before the service. "Be cool, *maninho*," Luis had told him quietly, but with a deep casual menace. Manny left him, shaking his head and swinging his rosary beads against the wall of the building so hard that the string broke, sending the plastic beads pinging off the side of the dumpster.

Walking down the crowded concourse at Schipol, Manny stepped aside to let a luggage trolley piled high with Luis Vuitton suitcases pass. Focus, he decided, was needed. Single frequency focus. No dropping into the Brown cafés for one of those cone shaped spliffs while the hypnotic drone of dub played in the background. Not only was he here to do a job, but to show Ian that there was a job to do.

From here on out, it was Mission Critical.

His phone vibrated in his pocket. Manny fished it out and saw that the driver *slangFast* had sent was looking for him, at least that was what Manny deciphered from the driver's mangled text.

"Whr RU Mangold? I wtng 4 20 minute. At big SCHIPOL sign undr xit Schipol. Come now pls. CU."

Manny couldn't call the driver for clarification since he had no number so he texted back his best answer, "OK" and let Schipol's black and yellow wayfinding signs lead him to what he hoped was the exit from the airport.

The driver was waiting outside of Schipol's exit holding a handmade sign that looked as if it had been written with red lipstick. The morning air was crisp, but devoid

of the humidity that Manny had become accustomed to living in the City. Manny noticed that the driver rotated at the hips like a lawn sprinkler so that “Mangold” was given maximum exposure to the stream of travellers exiting the airport. Manny walked right up and stood in front of him. The driver pretended not to see him and continued his rotation looking over Manny’s shoulders. This went on for a few seconds. It must’ve have been the black eye. Manny took a deep breath.

“Hi,” he said. “I’m Mangold. You can call me Manny.”

The driver’s demeanor abruptly changed. A huge smile cracked his dark face, revealing a row of beautifully straight white teeth. He stuck his handmade sign under his arm and shook Manny’s hand with both of his.

“And I am Muhamed Ali, Manny.

Manny liked Muhamed Ali immediately and let him take his duffel from his shoulder. Manny insisted on holding the handmade sign asking if he could have it as a keepsake for his first trip to Amsterdam. The driver found that hilarious and the two walked to the black Mercedes at the curb side by side.

Manny rode shotgun, sinking into the leather passenger seat that smelled of saddle soap and something vaguely floral. He let the scenery unfold before him, making mental notes that might help with his column. Midori had called him a “wide receiver” for his freakish ability to take in a huge array of detail in a short amount of time. And it was true. Manny’s fanbase constantly left comments on his page on *slangFast’s* site to the effect that his writing was like going to a movie, but without the shitty trailers, popcorn on the floor and people answering their cell phones.

Muhamed Ali talked the entire time telling him about his home country of Eritrea, a country that Manny had a vague sense of its location. North Africa, wasn't it? He fiddled with the knobs of the radio, trying to get a station that wasn't playing techno.

"Is your family still there?" he asked, leaning back as Madonna's "Holiday" came on.

Muhamed Ali tapped the steering wheel with long tapered fingers.

"No," he said. "They died when their boat sank. They were trying to get to from Misrata to Lampedusa with many others. Someone on the boat lit fire to a t-shirt to try to get the Italian's attention. The ship caught fire and everyone moved to one side of the ship making it tip over. My uncle and niece survived—they have been in a refugee camp in Lampedusa for several years now. My mother and father and little brother drowned in sight of the shore. Sometimes I search the YouTube videos to see if I can find them maybe holding onto the boat or in the ocean."

Muhammed Ali shook his head.

"The Dutch people have been very kind to me even if it is not in their nature to show kindness to all of us who have arrived."

He shrugged.

"I am happy that I can drive S-class. I have an apartment in Delft with several of my countrymen. Have you ever seen a windmill, Manny? I did not see one until I have come here two years ago. They go 'round and 'round sucking all the water out so that Dutch people can live on the land that was once under the ocean. I hope that the land does not sink back into the ocean while I am living here. I do not know how to swim."

Six lanes of Dutch highway stretched out in front of them, articulated lorries flying by rocked the Mercedes in their wake.

Manny didn't say anything to Muhamed Ali for the rest of the ride.

### **Cross-Purposes**

Manny spent his first full day in Amsterdam hunkered down in the Jordaan at a café that played Roots music. Armed with continuous Noisettes laden with much sugar, Manny met with the contacts that Ian had emailed him. Some of them were A&R people from Dutch labels that had been selling a high number of units in the Western European market. A few were respected bloggers sharing their perspective on the local scene. All of them had the common goal of getting into bed with *slangFast*. Most of the A&R people were male, most of them were tall and they were all good-looking.

Manny found it hard to concentrate, hoping for them to slip up, anything to taint that clean perfection. Is that what the burden of beauty was like? To create a dissonance with the rabble every time you honked laughter, tugged at your crotch or spoke unawares that a plus-size booger lurked in your nostril in full view of the world? Jesus, the pressure, the expectations.

But again, Manny's shiner carried an unspoken weight of bad-assness that trumped the natural beauty around him. He found the men deprecating, prone to break eye contact with him every time a cyclist passed by the café's floor to ceiling windows. None of the men asked how he had acquired the black eye, but Manny could feel the question skating the surface of the conversation. The women asked him straight away, "Did you get into a fight?"

Manny just laughed and said, “I’m a writer, not a fighter” and continued with the conversation. That seemed to unbalance them. Manny learned very quickly that Dutch women knew shit-all about flirting.

The last person who Manny met, a young woman named Anneke, pressed him about his eye so much that he began to take a Scheherzade-ish pleasure in not answering her questions. She had the fresh-faced look of a Topanga canyon free spirit from the 60s in Uggs and wash-softened skinny jeans. Finally, she clapped her Moleskine shut, snapped the elastic band around the cover and stood up.

“Fine. It was a pleasure to meet you, Manuel. I will circle back with Ian at the Home Office about you.”

“It’s Manuel,” he said smiling. He lowered his demi tasse. “I’m not an instruction guide.”

She pursed her lips, either unable to understand his comment or unable to craft an appropriate rejoinder. The spray of freckles on her cheeks darkened.

“By the way, your black eye makes you look like a low person,” she said, turning and leaving the café.

Manny carefully set his cup on the table answering to no one in particular, “Touché.”

He was left to pay for her *koffie* and untouched croissant. As he tossed some Euros onto the plastic tray he watched the flat panel mounted on the wall above the hissing espresso machines. Some kind of news story about one of the space stations—a brief shot of the earth’s blue curvature through a porthole aboard the station, then a close

up of a female astronaut whose blonde ponytail floated behind her head in a curved comma. A burst of cheers and whistling erupted from the baristas and the patrons nearest the flat panel.

Manny thought it looked peaceful up there far from the ambient sounds of life in Amsterdam. Would it be far enough away, though, for him to lose himself in the white-noise hiss inside the pressurized modules on the space station? To just curl up in zero-g and be held in its carefully engineered embrace? Manny heard that gravity and inertia colluded to keep the space station in a state where it constantly fell while remaining the same distance from the earth.

No, not the type of craft Manny wanted to be trapped in. Ocean waves slamming onto the bluffs or the coughing boom of a good roller crashing onto the shore would be better. Something terrestrial. Maybe he'd look into getting out to the ocean if he had the time; he'd never seen the North Sea.

Manny threw his messenger bag over his shoulder, took Anekke's pastry and headed out into the afternoon.

Outside, he consulted the map on his phone to see where he was and if he had any more appointments that afternoon. The phone told him that he was at the Café Lowietje at the corner of Goudsbloemstraat and Goudsbloemdwarstraat. The sheer amount of consonants and vowels made him glad that almost everyone in Amsterdam spoke English.

He ended up in semi-Flaneur mode, taking in the scene at street-level, sending out his feelers that always seemed to pick up on the details that he ended up writing about.

Later, he found himself on a corner on Leidsestraat, the long street that started at Amsterdam's outermost canal and terminated at the city's *Universiteitsbibliotheek*, which, according to his phone's translation software, meant "university library."

Dutch was a Lego language, words stacking upon words.

Apparently, Leidsestraat was the popular and populist destination for shopping and seethed with people. Most of them were tourists like Manny. He stood alone on the sidewalk next to the Onitsuka Tiger store, catching glimpses of himself in the shop's window that displayed tier upon tier of colorful sneakers lit by the pinpoint glare of halogens suspended on wires.

In the middle of the street the trams passed each other with the cheek-to-cheek brush of a lover's almost kiss. Bicycle bells trilled as Dutch mothers pedaled their clunky *Omafiets* while chubby pink fists poked from baby seats.

And what was that heading toward Manny, parting the afternoon crowd like a Russian icebreaker plowing through the undulating floes of tourist-flesh?

In two loping strides, the cross dresser passed Manny with purpose punctuated by the crack of her patent leather heels on the sidewalk. Easily six five, she wore a leather bustier, a bitsy g-string and pair of fishnets. The mandatory feather boa tickled her Adam's apple. A clutch of smiling Asian tourists did a triple double-take as she swept by them. Manny had a quick flash of Ichabod Crane features under heavy foundation, of eyes nearly hidden under the giraffe-length eyelashes drooping from the weight of mascara. Her crown was a bleached blonde wig bouncing with curls.

Manny chuckled. So this was the Holland of liberty and tolerance? He thought of the lower Haight back home, of the Castro on Halloween when things were really hopping. The wimpoled mass of the Sisters of Perpetual Indulgence flying down the street on roller skates.

Was here really so different from there?

The cross dresser moved up the street with an easy roll of her narrow hips.

Just before the crowd merged back together, Manny did his own double take.

Peeking out from her G-string and dangling from her bottom was a string of hot-rod red anal beads. They swung in counterpoint like a tail every time her stilettos smacked the sidewalk.

Suddenly Manny's studio apartment—his Murphy Bed and good old Lester Bangs—lost their points of reference that had provided him with an unrecognized but necessary emotional anchor. Beholding the cross-dresser took him straight into the unfamiliar rhythm of an Amsterdam afternoon that might've been typical for her, but represented a new stream of reality for him, absent his father's presence. Not that Manny would've needed him there to understand the metronome swing of the cross dresser's sex toy. They might've laughed about it together, though.

In Manny's mind he saw another bad film splice as the tranny's hipshot swagger down the street cut to his mother's frantic dishtowel waving over Malasadas on fire in her kitchen in Half Moon Bay. Orange flames licked the sides of her lard-filled Dutch oven on the stovetop. It was a hypothetical domestic disaster that he was powerless to prevent. Combined with the image of Luis standing on her porch, his back to the combusting



kitchen, staring at the pockmarked back field with its holes and shattered stumps, ripped away the veneer from Manny's tourist-trade persona. He could see the beer can curled in Luis' hand. That level of detail in his mind's eye made him cringe.

Was this his family's story?

On Leidsestraat, something like vertigo washed over Manny pushing him back against the shop window. He barely felt the plate glass window flexing under his weight.

*Where are you right now, Dad?*

A tapping sound from behind made him turn around and squint through the glass. A young girl on the other side with a nametag hanging from a neck lanyard shooed him away from the window with a fluttering of her hands. Her fingers were tipped by long chartreuse nails curved like a set of woodworker's gouges.

So he went.

### **Divvy**

That evening, Manny hunched over his laptop in his hotel room giving Ian a Sitrep. Ian's neck tattoos were a deeper shade of indigo on Skype.

The remains of Manny's per diem dinner sat next to him on a wooden tray congealing under the room's A/C. He'd hardly touched his *fritjes*, putting all of the mayonnaise on his *doner kabap* instead. He'd washed the entire mess down with the skunky taste of three Stellas.

The rumbling from his nether regions reminded him that Dutch plumbing likely differed from the reliable suction of U.S. made.

"I heard that you made positive groundfall in Amsterdam, Manny," Ian said.

Ian made no mention of Manny's black eye. Manny had made sure to move the floor lamp to the other side of his room and had draped his red bandana over the shade. Judging by Ian's setting he was still at work. Manny often wondered how the rest of *slangFast's* suite was decorated because Ian's office had a Swedish sauna theme going on.

"Yeah, I met all of your contacts; they're an interesting and tall bunch."

"Bang on, Manny. The Dutch, they're a tall lot. Something to do with a better diet and bit of natural selection. How's the hotel? I hear it's discreet."

"Um, it's fine," Manny had no idea what Ian meant by "discreet" and chalked it up as another one of his lateral comments. Manny always thought there should be a tube of paint called, "Opaque Ian" to be used when one wanted to apply ambiguity to the conversation.

"I'm not so sure about the next thing coming out of Amsterdam, Ian. I mean there's definitely good stuff—by that I mean not DJs or techno—but most of it sounds like what you get back home. My home, I mean. I'll know better after I check out the leads your people gave me, but... You know that since The Big Shake in '19, the City's been *the* place for new music. The Gerhard Richters, Faultine, Mission Critical—they all came from the places that were hit the hardest, you know?" Manny shifted in his chair. "After the quake, we didn't have power for weeks. That's why you had so much acoustic instrumentation—no place to plug in. Mission Critical had those two Nationals, a horn line and a basic drum kit. Mission Critical was able to do a little more with amps 'cause they had access to a few Jennys and a solar set up. But the thing is, all of these groups

were mobile, dig? They'd go from block to block or different neighborhoods with their gear in these homemade rickshaws that they towed behind their bikes. They were like the troubadours of the disaster. I was there. Word of mouth only since the cell networks hadn't come back online. They gigged everywhere that wasn't full of debris or FEMA, singing about what went down in their hood. They drew *crowds*. No one hassled them, no one."

Ian was leaning so close to his webcam that his eyes and nose appeared enormous. He scribbled something on a notepad without looking.

"Brilliant," he muttered. He looked like a five year-old at Christmas.

"My point is the Dutch scene is tame. I don't know..." Manny reached for another beer, popping the top off with his keyring. He thought about Muhamed Ali.

"Maybe if all of the dykes disappeared or something."

Ian leaned back and looked to the side for a moment.

"Well," he said. "That's the fun bit for you, innit?"

"But a deadline's a deadline, isn't it? Fun, maybe. I guess I still don't get why I'm here. You know the blogosphere is where it's at as much as I do. I mean that's pretty much what drives *slangFast*. Bands don't relate to A&R much anymore, it's the *vox populi* that's driving this thing. You could've had any one of your people on the ground here look into this. Why me?"

Ian was silent for a moment before holding up two fingers.

"Two reasons. One, *CrossFade*."

"*Cross* what?"

“*CrossFade*, it’s software that we acquired from a start-up down the road from you—back home, that is—a place called Mountain’s View. Anyway, it’s one of those Big Data type programs, you know, sifting through all of the social media sights, checking out whose listening to what.”

“That’s nothing new.”

“True, but this program takes into account global current events alongside musical trends. That’s oversimplifying things by a large factor. One of the founders is a sociologist from Stanford with a keen sense of how music—in our case music from the indie scene—is borne out of current events. You know as well as I do that punk equals the Thatcher Years; you have Reggae and the poverty of Trenchtown; Crimean Metal has the Ukraine situation. Full stop.”

“Software programs can’t be programmed for taste, Ian. Social consciousness ranks a close second.”

“No, but the programs can handle more factors simultaneously to see patterns and make predictions. Trending, pattern recognition. Most modern aggregating software is based on the same algorithms nowadays, which brings me to reason number two: the ghost in the machine. To borrow from old world appraiser’s slang Manny, you’re a *Divvy* That is, one who divines. One who not only sees the wave long before it hits the shore, but can tell if it’s worth riding. Your intuition has a high and verifiable success rate.”

Manny didn’t say anything.

“I’m going to tell you something—our work with *CrossFade* isn’t recent.”

“No?”

“No. We acquired them two years ago. I was fresh out of uni with a computer science degree and a secondary in journalism. Like you, I loved music. Loved it. My thesis advisor had been a roadie with The Temple Bells and fully supported my dissertation, which as it turns out, was pretty close to what the programmers at *CrossFade* were developing. So he gave me a name at *slangFast*. *slangFast* scooped me up and introduced me to the programmers from *crossFade*.” Ian shook his head. “Never seen such a sorry looking lot. Those horrid sports sandals with wool socks and t-shirts. Like they were at a bloody beach luau.”

Manny let that one pass.

“Straightaway, I saw the potential and the opportunity to test the program out. So I started seeing who was top-rated at *slangFast*. Word of mouth only, no “Likes” or page hits. I wanted my data clean and untainted. Two names kept cropping up: Momo Case and Manuel Soares.”

Momo—Midori’s nickname and her byline with *slangFast*. Were they really that close? Manny always considered her the better writer. Momo—current whereabouts unknown. The scuttlebutt at the office hinting at everything from her communing with the alien-looking plant life in Socotra to an apprenticeship with a Kyudo master in Kagoshima. Manny hadn’t received the briefest of postcards from her.

“The program kept suggesting two places for a spike: San Francisco and Kyiv,” Ian continued. “For some reason, Ottawa kept popping up, but I figured that was an outlier. Funny thing, though, there was an oil pipeline fire a few months later that

torched an entire town close to Ottawa. They said that the smoke plume was visible from one of the space stations up in orbit, that Chinese one, I think. Bar band in Ottawa had a minor hit on the CBC. So, between San Francisco and Kyiv I figured that there was high probability that The Big Shake from the year before would result in...something. I just wasn't sure what that something might be. Kyiv, maybe not so much. I thought that the Ukrainian mindset had adapted itself to conflict. So I waited."

"Waited?"

"Yes, and believe me the , from above to make a move was intense. But it paid off when you reviewed Mission Critical's show at the retrofitted Fillmore a month later. The MCs never had to look back after that, Manny. Never. Whole subgenres influenced by their sound sprang up after they launched."

"Shoot," Manny said.

Ian tore the sheet of paper from the notepad he'd been scribbling on. He held it up to his webcam. Written in Ian's block capitals: "Troubadours of the Disaster."

"You can do this, Manny," Ian said. He consulted a huge stainless steel watch on his thin wrist. "I've got to ring off now, Fiona's made reservations at Nobu's or some poncey bistro. Looking forward to our next chat. God, I'm dying for a proper fry up, something bad for my health. Oh, that reminds me—"

"What's that?"

"Anneke asked me for your number. Shall I give it to her?"

"Um."

"Like I said, Manny 'discreet.'"

## Lovelocks

Manny didn't realize that Amsterdam's latitude made eight o'clock at night appear as dusk. That was fine with him. His conversation with Ian left him unsettled, so he decided on a head-clearing walk along the canals. Manny was used to a certain degree of ass-kissing from the junior staffers, and while it was true that Ian wasn't much older than them, Manny knew he wasn't lying. Could Manny attribute his "Divvy" status for this certainty? He wasn't so sure after his Exercise in Bad Judgement with Donald at FraPort. Still, Manny's column about Mission Critical's Fillmore show elevated *slangFast's* rating above the multitude of similar sites. He didn't pay for one drink for months after his column posted. The head of online music at *NME*, Toby Aziz—the Toby Aziz—sent Manny a cast bronze dog's nose and muzzle stuck onto a small marble pedestal. The engraved plaque on the pedestal read, "You've got a nose for this." The ridiculousness of the tchotchke wasn't lost on Manny, but some nights when he was on deadline and the words were mired in his back brain he'd take his nose down from the mantel and give it a rub.

Manny grabbed a paper map of Amsterdam from the hotel's front desk before he left for his walk. The front desk clerk, a short young man with a unibrow and an Ajax jersey patiently explained to a group of Scotsmen that while cannabis *was* legal, you couldn't smoke it openly on the streets. "You wee daft ponce," the largest of the group said. "We did nae come here for the windmills." Manny left quickly. Outside of his hotel, a group of tourists trained their cameras on a second-story windowbox full of tulips. The simultaneous strobing of their flashes blinded Manny causing him to stumble

across the street narrowly avoiding being run over by several cyclists. Their Dutch curses counterpointed the trilling of their bike bells.

Manny figured he'd do recon on the clubs that he'd be checking out over the next few days, maybe drop into a café for a spot of people watching.

In the end he switched over to full-Flaneur mode. He knew that the weird barnacles formed by his recent experiences were rapidly accreting on his mind forming a mass with their own puzzling weight and drag. Better to keep moving hoping that forward motion might shake off some of the bigger chunks. Better to let his overworked forebrain have the night off and let the reptile below decks take the helm. And so he started walking.

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Popskull Pete, a blogger from New York, was the one that taught Manny the fine art of the Flaneur last year when Manny was in Williamsburg on business.

“What exactly is a flanner, Pete? It sounds like a crepe or something.”

They had been standing on the middle span of the Williamsburg Bridge on a stifling late summer afternoon looking down at the green-hued East River. Behind them marched a line of people in sturdy walking shoes, sunhats and those extendable walking poles that Manny had seen hikers using at Land's End. Despite the crushing heat and humidity, Popskull Pete and Manny wore jeans and leather jackets. They had professional aesthetics to uphold.

“Flaneur—Le Flaneur—it's French. The noun form means a ‘stroller’ or ‘saunterer.’ These folks,” Popskull said, jerking his thumb over his shoulder. “Are one



form of the Flaneur. They're the Shorewalkers. Organized walking group. They have their own website and everything. Not my scene at all. And please, call me Popskull."

"Okay, Popskull, you were saying." Manny flicked a bottle cap from the bridge's railing tracking its fall down into the river.

"The idea of the gentleman stroller came out of nineteenth-century French literary culture—"

"Please, tell me more."

"Don't be naughty. I did my thesis on this. I'll have you know, part of my thesis ended up in *The Paris Review*. I'll top line it for you, though. So this German philosopher Walter Benjamin, he took some of the works of Baudelaire, the *Les Fleur du Mal* specifically, spent some time with them and came up with, what I think is, a pretty incisive description of modernism *vis a vis* the model of the Flaneur. To quote Benjamin: 'The Flaneur was a figure of the modern artist-poet, a figure keenly aware of the bustle of modern life, an amateur detective and investigator of the city, but also a sign of the alienation of the city and of capitalism.'"

Popskull let his discourse sink in with Manny.

"So like a combination artist and social critic? It kind of describes what we do, I mean as writers, right?" Manny shook his head. "I wonder sometimes that maybe I'm giving it up too easily for our audience, you know? There's always someone leaving bitchy comments on my page saying I'm guilty of taking the authentic and spoon-feeding it to the masses. Like it was their own tight little secret scene until I came along."

‘Cultural commodification’ someone called it. Portland’s bloggers are super shitty that way.”

“Huh,” Popskull said. “They’re my biggest audience.” He licked the edge of his rolling paper, snapped his Zippo open, touched the stubby flame to his hand rolled’s tip and took a seriously long drag. He blew twin dragony plumes of Drum smoke from his nostrils that matched the curved flourishes of his handlebar moustache. He looked contemplatively down at the river before turning to Manny.

“Okay, let’s Flaneur.”

Popskull took Manny by the elbow, turning him the opposite direction of the line of Shorewalkers and began walking.

“The trick,” he said. “Is to not think about where you’re going, but to let your intuition guide your feet. It doesn’t matter where you let your feet guide you, because eventually, you’ll get to where you need to be. Corny as shit, right? Stinks of patchouli mixed with falsity, veggie burritos and unwashed feet, right? But it’s true, Manny. Just focus on your breathing. I prefer the three-part breath to help me un-focus. You ever do yoga, Manny?”

“Yeah, my girlfriend got me into it. Midori’s a regular pretzel.”

“Good, she’s smart.” Popskull stopped, faced Manny and put both of his hands on his shoulders. “Okay, I want you to take several steady three-part breaths. Remember to start with the stomach and, what—?”

“It’d be a lot easier for me if you took your hands off of my shoulders.”

“Oh, right.” Popskull dropped his hands.

Manny began his breathing. He pushed out his stomach, feeling the air moving upwards, expanding his ribcage. He held the breath for a moment before slowly exhaling through his nostrils. He did this three times.

“Okay then,” he said.

They spent the rest of the afternoon moving through Williamsburg, then Bushwick, ending up in Bedford Stuyvesant towards evening along a brownstone-lined street of mature trees and people chatting on stoops. They hadn’t spoken the entire time. It wasn’t until they stopped that Manny realized that his breathing had been steady and even since they left the Williamsburg Bridge, despite the humidity and Popskull’s quad-burning pace. He looked around feeling a sense of deep calm. He couldn’t wait to tell Midori about this.

He smiled at Popskull.

“Is this where we need to be?”

Popskull looked around, a little surprised.

“Man, I really need some Pho,” he said, reaching for his phone.

“Are we going to a place around the corner or something?”

“In Bed Stu? Nah, fuck it. Let’s get an Uber. Best Pho’s back in Williamsburg, everybody knows that.”

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By his count, Manny Flaneured through several Amsterdam neighborhoods and over at least five canals with unpronounceable names before he felt compelled to stop at a canal whose funky steel and wood drawbridge was the victim of Lovelocks. The heavy

chains used to pull up the short bridge that spanned the canal were covered with clusters of padlocks. Manny had heard of this social phenomena—the declaration of undying love as represented by attaching a padlock to some fixed object (usually a bridge or fence) and then flinging the key into the water—but he'd never actually seen it until now. He'd heard it was a touristy thing to do. He moved in for a closer look, nonetheless.

Reaching to a height of almost ten feet, the bridge's chain disappeared in the multitude of padlocks clinging to the links. The limited amount of useable chain meant that people clipped their locks onto the hasps of the other locks, resulting in a chunky sculptural mass that reminded Manny of the mussels that grew on ropes at aquaculture farms in Half Moon Bay.

Most of the locks were engraved with two names and the date that the symbolic declaration of love happened. The light coming from the gas lamp-look streetlights behind him was enough for Manny to see that Heike & Thomas declared on 23.04.15. For a few more Euros—no doubt—they had opted for a pair of interlocking hearts with their initials. Precious. Mi and Mi had no declaration date. Manny figured that they had the best chance for success—why jinx a relationship by assigning such a specific marker? After the breakup how depressing would it be to think about your love act rusting on some shitty drawbridge in Amsterdam while you moped about your dingy flat in Reykjavik mooning over that perfect month, day and year when the possibilities seemed boundless? Ralf + Elke declared on 31.10.18. Manny wondered if they were in costume when they snicked their Lovelock onto another Lovelock.

Someone tapped his shoulder.

He turned around. A young woman stood there, an unlit cigarette caught at the edge of her lips, making the universal gesture for “do you have a light?” He gave her an easy smile taking in her artist’s drag: dyed hair, trainers, banded leggings. He couldn’t tell what color her eyes were, since her back was to the streetlamps. Cloaked in a surplus parka tailored and crafted from some dark stiff material plus the portfolio slung over her narrow shoulder she seemed all angles.

Although he didn’t smoke, he pulled out a cheap plastic lighter he’d bought at a Tabac to break a five Euro note. The lighter was orange and circled with a pattern of windmills. He flicked the wheel and she leaned in, looking up at him. Clever little bird features. Manny was pretty sure her eyes were green. Then the flame was out and her face blended back into the dusk shadows. The tip of her cigarette glowed.

“¿Está usted de España?” she asked.

“I’m sorry?”

“Oh, American. I thought maybe you were from Spain.”

Manny paused then said slowly, “*Ik ben wel degene die Manny.*” He’d taught himself two Dutch phrases earlier that afternoon.

“You just said, ‘I am the one called the Manny.’ You sound like a child when you speak my language. I hope your English is better than your Dutch or else it will make having *koffie* together a bit tricky.”

Nonplussed, Manny tried out his second phrase.

“*Mijn luchtkussenboot zit vol paling.*”

The young woman laughed, holding her hand in front of her mouth.

“My *hovercraft* is full of *eels*? This is ridiculous. I am Femke.” She didn’t hold her hand out or anything, just stood there waiting for Manny to answer.

“Hello, Femke, I’m Manny.”

“Yes, so you have said.”

He tilted his head toward the Lovelocks.

“You know eventually the weight of all this love will collapse the drawbridge.”

She shrugged.

“I will tell you a story about that.” She pointed behind her. “There is a café that I like to go to.”

She spoke with a very light accent. Manny looked over her shoulder and saw the warm yellow glow of a café that faced the canal with a scattering of small tables out front filled with customers. A row of bicycles were chained to the railing canal side.

*Koffie* with an artsy-type with Debbie Harry cheekbones who snuffed out her cigarette into an Altoids tin that she’d pulled from one her parka’s pockets? Caught in a moment of indecision that wasn’t like him, Manny hesitated.

“Don’t worry,” Femke said, pocketing the tin. “If I don’t like what I see, I’ll throw you back.”

“*Koffie* sounds good,” Manny said, taking one last look at the Lovelocks. “I’m Portuguese by the way, not Spanish.”

### ***Koffie and Cognac***

Manny had to self-check himself at the café so that he didn’t comment on how sickly atmospheric the whole setup was: Django and the Hot Club played in the

background, young bohemian-looking Dutch blended seamlessly with the Belle Epoque light fixtures and the thick fug of clove smoke had Manny seeking lower elevations.

After the server had placed their *koffie's* at their tiny round table and Femke had poured three tubes of sugar into her mug, she asked Manny, "Bar fight or self-inflicted?"

"Bar fight."

"And the other person or persons?"

Manny saw the orange fireball engulfing Donald's head, the bartender with his Wasp, Donald's wink to him during their violent departure from FraPort.

"Singed, but operational."

Femke took out her packet of cigarettes and her Altoids tin despite the white and green Heineken ashtray placed in the center of their table. She lit her cigarette with a lighter just like Manny's.

"So you had one all along? What would you have done if I didn't have a light?"

"I would have pushed you into the canal from behind and then jumped in and saved you."

"That's a pretty risky gambit. Doesn't 'Hello, what's your name?' work here?"

"Boring," she said, tapping her ash into the Heineken ashtray. "So what is a handsome dark eyed, dark haired man who looks like he could be either a musician or footballer doing roaming our streets at night? Perhaps you were on your way to our infamous Red Light District? Single, lonely American man. You were only minutes away from the girls behind the windows, you know?"

“As I matter of fact I was in the middle of a good Flaneur. I needed to clear my head because my editor seems to think I can predict the future of certain kinds of music.” Manny shook his head, rotating his coffee mug on the table. “That sounds totally ridiculous, doesn’t it? Like I have some kind of superpower, I guess. I write about music for *slangFast*, that’s why I’m in Amsterdam. My editor thinks that indie music’s next big thing will happen here.”

Femke laughed. “The next big thing? Everyone knows that the Dutch music scene sucks.” She shook her head and ground her cigarette out in the ashtray. “All that techno.” She opened the Altoids tin and dropped the squashed butt where, Manny saw, it joined several others. He didn’t say anything. Femke snapped the lid of the tin shut and smiled at him. “A good pointless stroll is helpful, very *gezellig*, yes? I do the same thing, but on my bicycle. I once started riding and ended up at Zandvoort—the ocean—I would have pedaled right into the water if I had not run into a barrier first. See, I still have the scar.”

And then she was pulling her hair away from her forehead, moving her face right up to Manny’s close enough for a kiss. He could see a thin pale scar that ran from her temple and back into her hairline. The magenta of her dyed hair was beginning to grow out and her roots were light brown. Her eyes were, in fact, very green and variegated like the unsettled ocean back home before a squall. As she leaned back he could see a small horizontal scar above her collarbone about an inch in length. He forced himself not to look any lower than her collarbone. Manny’s palm sweated a little and his shifted in his seat.



“Thankfully, I was able to stop the flow with my t-shirt. I wrapped it around my head like a pirate and pedaled back home. I joked with my boyfriend that all that blood permanently stained my hair.”

“Boyfriend?”

“I am using the term loosely, I suppose.”

Manny sensed something more in her answer, the way it was given so casually.

Casual or not, the creeping realization that he was veering off-course from his commitment to keep focused made him take a slow, deliberate pull on his *koffie*. Could reverse psychology be applied to his current situation of being chatted up by a very attractive Dutch woman? His direct experience with Dutch women was limited to Anekke from *slangFast*. Anekke had come off as pissy and rude, but asked Ian for Manny’s number; Femke’s forward attitude qualified as flirtatious from Manny’s experience, yet she just told him she had a boyfriend. Meaning what, exactly? Were the Dutch into that? Wasn’t everybody? Manny wasn’t into being a back door man, having experienced dicey situations in the past. Jesus, that time he’d shivered on a fire escape in the Mission until his lover’s boyfriend left to get a pack of cigarettes. Caught pneumonia and a sense of shame, the fever and Z-pack regimen providing the perfect reinforcement for his object lesson.

“So, you were going to tell me about the Lovelocks?”

“Yes, I was. I did say that.”

Femke signaled for the server.

“Een cognac, alstublieft,” she said to him.

If Manny didn't think too much about Femke's intentions or his own, he found that he was enjoying himself. Around them, couples carried on intimate conversations, groups of friends argued good naturedly, clinking their glasses together. Outside, he noticed, a light rain had begun to fall, softening the outlines of the canal house's gabled facades. His surroundings had the familiar comforts of back home, but with the allure of the foreign setting.

Creeping in from the periphery of his enjoyment, though, was the knowledge that he was leaving much untended that, he supposed, needed looking after. How long could he play-act his role as Manny the music sleuth on the job in Amsterdam, given his marching orders by his minder, Ian, the pasty Brit? Like a watered down Graham Greene plot.

The server set a small snifter of brandy in front of Femke and said something to her in Dutch, putting his hands on his hips. Femke laughed, pointing to Manny and then herself, answering the server in Dutch also. Manny thought he understood the context and interpreted the conversation as: "Girl, you're in here every week with a new man." "No, we're not together. He's an American who looks like a Spaniard, but is actually Portuguese." "Let me know if it doesn't work out, he's cute."

The server left. Femke lit another cigarette and swirled the brandy in her snifter.

"I dated a guy from Germany a while back, Ernst. I know, totally *verboden*, yes? Many Dutch strongly dislike the Germans, the war you know, but whatever." She lowered her voice and tucked her chin back. "'*Guten tag*—I am Ernst Himmel and I work for major satellite communications company *von München*. We have exclusive

Saudi government contract. You know the problem *mit* you Dutch?” She rolled her eyes. “You know, *that* kind of German.”

Manny smiled.

“We dated only a few months, but he became obsessed with the Lovelocks. I told him that only tourists and teenagers did that kind of thing, but he was very stubborn. He went to one of those shops and had a lock made for us. For him, really. The lock was red and had both our names, except that he spelled mine wrong and was too cheap to buy another one. He made such a big deal about it.” Femke drank from her snifter, sucking in air through her pursed lips. “You know, we Dutch have a reputation for directness that many foreigners mistake for rudeness. But I could not tell Ernst that I did not love him. It was strange for me, you know?” She paused. “He was not particularly kind and not a very kind lover.”

“Was he funny?” Manny’s question sounded flat the moment he said it.

“How many German comedians have you ever heard of, Manny? Seriously.”

“Good point.”

“So on the night that he attached the lock to Staalmeestersbrug I asked if I could throw the key into the Groenburgwal. That seemed to satisfy him. When it came time for me to throw the key into the canal, I palmed it and threw in a small rock I had secretly picked up on the walk to the bridge.”

“Why?”

“I did not like the idea of Ernst claiming what was not his to claim, yes?”

Manny thought about that. Perhaps modern dating was to blame. The past few years in the City, he caught the edge of some kind desperation of from his peers that they need to either be in a relationship, no matter how tenuous, or be actively pursuing the ideal of blanket picnics at the Presidio or shopping for wine glasses in Hayes Valley. Maybe the girlfriend would wear her boyfriend's Peterbilt baseball cap on the weekends as they perused the sunchokes and kale at the Embarcadero's farmer's market. Manny didn't even want to think about the matching swallow tattoos.

The Big Shake had killed plenty and displaced even more. You could feel the uncertainty of tomorrow for months following the constant aftershocks. Some amount of normalcy had returned two years on, though. In the absence of bare knuckle survival was he partly responsible for the vacuity he espied around him in the City? *slangFast* existed in the rarefied space of websites that heavily influenced culture. But what did that mean? Was going to a Mission Critical show just another cultural qualifier for admittance to an in-group of aesthetes with some amount of disposable income? He hoped not.

"Perhaps that tells you what kind of girlfriend material I am," Femke said. She polished off the rest of her cognac. "Well, that evening after we had sex, leaving me sore I admit, I fell asleep. Ernst woke me up by shoving me off the bed. 'What the fuck is this?' he said. He was holding up the key that I had palmed. He must have gone through the pockets of my parka when I was asleep. I was terrified. He worked at a satellite communications company, but he was big like a rugby player."

"What did you do?"

“I was too startled at first. He started to yell all kinds of crazy shit at me, you know? We were at the hotel he stayed at when he was here on business. I started putting on my clothes and he came at me. I do not know why I did this, but I threw glass of water from the nightstand onto him and grabbed the floor lamp that was next to me.”

Manny thought of the bartender’s Wasp.

“I held the floor lamp in front of me and screamed at him, ‘Come on then you bastard!’ I was shaking. I was so angry.”

“Did you give him a taste?”

Femke looked puzzled.

“A taste?”

“Of the lamp?”

“No. I wanted to. I felt like I was two people right then. I was Femke, but I was someone else that would have killed him with the lamp. And I would have. Does electricity even work that way?” She shook her head, rolling the snifter between her palms. “I really wanted to, Manny.” She looked at him, holding his eyes.

Manny couldn’t answer.

“I locked myself in the bathroom and got dressed. I had my cell, but how much help would that be? When I came out, Ernst was gone. The key for the Lovelock was on the nightstand with a five Euro note. Like I was a whore or something.”

Manny looked down at his mug.

“The next morning, I went to the bridge and took the lock off.”

“What did you do with it?”

Femke reached into the pocket of her parka and pulled out a ring of keys, which she set on the table. A red anodized aluminum lock was hooked onto the ring along with a bunch of keys. Manny turned the lock over and saw engraved on the face, “Ernst + Famke 28.06.17.”

“Is the date significant?”

Femke laughed, pocketing the key ring.

“A bit of cosmic irony that I am sure Ernst was not aware of when he chose that date to go to the bridge.” She turned and signaled the server.

“What’s that?”

The server brought over the small plastic tray with their bill and set it on the table. Manny reached into his pocket.

“The Treaty of Versailles,” she said.

“Good one. Why keep the lock? This guy sounds...”

“I do not know. It would be poetic to say something like I keep it to remember bad choices. Maybe I think that his spelling my name incorrectly said something about how he saw me. The image of me, or something.”

She checked her watch as he puzzled over his palm full of Euro coins.

“Please, may I pay?” he asked.

“No, you will not,” she answered. “I pay for myself. I must go now. I have to finish a few more of my illustrations.” Femke leaned over and plucked several coins from Manny’s palm and dropped them onto the tray before added hers. “I enjoyed our talk even though I did all the talking. We can take the tram back to your hotel.”

“And then what?”

“And then you go to bed and I go back to my flat. I want to make sure that you do not lose yourself or are waylaid.” She picked up her portfolio. “You do not look too street smart, Manny. You are a long way from home. I could have had your wallet like that. If you want, we can meet again tomorrow. I will introduce you to Some People I Know.”

“Who are they?”

“Some People I Know.”

“And they are?”

“Some People I Know—ah yes, they are friends of mine who are in a band. Konig must make the introduction first. They are very particular people. Perhaps they can help with what you are looking for.”

They both stood. For Manny it felt like the movements of a first date: the patting down of pockets for keys, the checking of phones for texts. Femke did none of that; she just stood there watching him.

Outside the air had a rich dampness that settled over Manny. Like home, but with some sharp metallic edge from the canal. The sense of dislocation that Manny had been mostly unaware of all day began to announce itself with every cyclist that passed by them.

Back home the vigilance needed to cross the street downtown without colliding with a bike messenger left most pedestrians keyed up and anxious. The problem had gotten so bad that a street campaign called “Check Your Six” was put into place,

although with little noticeable effect. Midday on Market Street looked to anyone who wasn't a local like a city full of pedestrian paranoiacs. Manny figured it was all the constant head jerking right, left and behind. At least it pulled people from the tunnel vision they had with their phone's screens.

But here, bike traffic moved in a steady organized stream along the wide bike lanes.

As they walked to the tram, Femke told him about her latest contract with a Dutch political magazine.

"Most of my work is watercolor and pen and ink," she said, patting her portfolio like a small but loyal pet. "This contract is about the leaders of the caliphate in the east. I am showing them entwined in the beard of Mohammad. Like they are struggling to stay afloat in a sea black of hair."

They continued on in silence. Manny's attention appeared to be drawn from the conversation by the streetlights bouncing off of the rain-slick cobbles, the flow of cyclists pedaling by them or the passing tram whose brightly lit carriages clattered down the tracks in the middle of the street. A bit more of the night's warmth seemed to diminish as the glow of the tram's windows receded around a corner.

"Aren't you worried about, like, repercussions?"

"What is this word? Do you mean am I worried that I might be killed for my satire? No. I do not think about it. They are just drawings—images. Images do not kill, ideas kill.



“After this,” Femke said. “I have a commission with Opel for their new line of electric cars. I was just in Prague working with their creative team for a commercial. I never knew about Craft Services. Amazing. All that money for *snacks*.”

After a short walk, they ended up standing on the platform for the next tram at Nieuwmarkt. Manny managed to purchase his ticket from the vending machine without Femke’s assistance. On the tram, she said nothing to Manny. The carriage was full and Manny was surprised to see the group of Scotsmen from his hotel sitting in a squint-eyed row across from him. Their eyes were beet red and none of them looked like they were enjoying themselves. Windmills might have been a better choice after all.

Manny turned to Femke.

“Your boyfriend won’t mind? I mean about tomorrow.”

He made “I mean about tomorrow” sound like they were choosing a wedding cake and guest favors. If he could’ve blacked his other eye right then he would’ve.

She shook her head. “He is in Turkmenistan, photographing some Americans from Harvard. They are making a documentary about the Silk Road gas pipeline to China.”

“Well,” Manny said. “As long his name isn’t Donald.”

“No, it is Niels. Who is Donald?”

Manny waved his hand. “Forget it.”

Two stops later Femke stood up, which was his cue to follow suit. The Scotsmen hoisted themselves up from their seats. Mr. Bigmouth, the one who dressed down the front desk man at Manny’s hotel, goggled at his fellow passengers. Manny felt fortunate

not to be sharing Mr. Bigmouth's viewpoint of Moray eels slithering through the carriage as the Scotsman treaded with the care of a minesweeper, oblivious to the gallery of implacable stares from his fellow passengers.

Femke walked Manny to the front of the Hotel Hestia, gave him three air-kisses alternating his cheeks and said, "Good night, Captain America. I enjoyed your company. I am glad I did not push you into the canal. It was too cold for a swim."

Manny wondered if the Dutch weren't far behind the Germans when it came to a sense of humor.

Then, gone.

As he pulled himself up the hotel's steeply angled staircase, he wondered why he let Femke unburden herself to him. Unburden was too strong of a word. She didn't sound like a victim. Just interesting. He held his hand against his hotel room door's lockplate, toying with the idea that Femke worked for Ian. Ugh, so baroque. And so unlikely.

The door's lock clicked and he stepped into his room wiping his palm on his jeans.

In his room, he fumbled the contents of his pockets onto the nightstand. The jet lag made his legs feel as if they were concrete pilings. Wallet, phone, keys and coins. And the orange plastic lighter that he had bought at the Tabac, the twin of Femke's? He gave himself a frisking more thorough than a two a.m. drug bust in the 'Loin. Nothing.

He'd just had *koffie* with a bona fide Dutch pickpocket.

Manny's head hit the duvet on his narrow bed, overcome with a combo of jet-lag and a large side of surprise.

### **Bomb Squad Van Gogh**

The next morning, Manny panicked, realizing he had no way of contacting Femke. No cell, no address, *nada*. If he could make his lighter speak to her, he would've. He decided to let her fingersmithing go without mention, but he still moved his wallet from his back pocket to his front.

Without means of contacting Femke, he convinced himself that the law of attraction's cosmic magnetism would provide for him. He stood outside of his hotel with wet hair in the light Dutch showers, munching on a piece of incredibly dense brown bread layered with three kinds of cold cuts. The Dutch, he realized, were hardcore into pale grey slices of indeterminate meats served with cheese. In the downstairs breakfast room of his hotel he had noticed that Mr. Bigmouth was conspicuously absent. He hoped the eels had haunted his dreams.

That morning, Manny had sent a cautiously worded email to Ian that he'd made a contact outside of *slangFast* that sounded promising. Nothing concrete, however, just a small tug on his personal dowsing rod. The moment he'd sent the email he regretted it, realizing the potential for innuendo and double entendre—the two staples of British humor.

Twenty minutes of watching the morning unfold in front of his hotel left him feeling anxious. The tourists zigzagged by him, tracing perilous courses down the sidewalk frowning over the creased panels of their city maps.

He was on the verge of going back to the café from last night when the tram across the street arrived, disgorging a flotilla of business-types who spread out at the tram's departure.

Femke stood there, smoking. Her hair appeared even more magenta in the morning light. She walked across the street, perfectly timing the bicycles that shot past her.

“Hello, Manny. Did you sleep well?” She asked in a way that made it clear that his answer wasn't necessarily relevant. Not in a mean way, but in a deeply uninterested way that had him thinking that her mind was elsewhere.

Because the rain hadn't let up and Vondelpark was, as Femke put it, “a bloody wet mess” they walked to the Van Gogh Museum instead, which happened to be around the corner from his room at the hotel.

“After this, I will take you to Konig's studio. Right now he is riding his bike over cardboard.”

Manny decided to let Femke's cryptic statement pass. He had been more and more amenable to just letting things unfold around him since his conversation with Ian. That morning as he had brushed his teeth in front of the bathroom's mirror (hung several inches below what he considered a standard and functional height), he saw that his black eye had faded to a delightful jaundiced yellow crescent. It stretched from tear duct to temple.

As for Van Gogh, Manny had never been into the Dutch painter, ear loss notwithstanding.

His frame of reference to Van Gogh's works had been the cheap reproductions on coffee mugs and mouse pads that the vendors of Fisherman's Wharf or of Chinatown hawked from their storefronts. One of Double's uncles owned a shop at Grant at Sacramento filled from floor to ceiling with a dizzying array of crap tchotchkes from Shenzhen, China's mother of all crap manufacturing centers. As bored teenagers, Double and Manny haunted the cramped aisles marveling over glossy jade figurines, resin-cast dragons the color of *char siu* and tacky black and red mandarin caps with long plaited queues of faux hair sewn onto the backs. Joss sticks constantly burned layering the shop with striations of pewter-colored smoke that rose from the display floor all the way up to the shadows of the high ceiling. Manny suspected that the smoke up there dated back to when Uncle Wei first opened up shop in the late 60s.

Uncle Wei had been a frustrated painter who produced canvas after canvas of Van Gogh's "Sunflowers" from a small easel he had set up in his stock room. Surrounded by the teetering boxes of his products and a dozen or more feral cats uttering plaintive yowls and oozing toxoplasmosis, Uncle Wei leaned in close to his easel, the hair from the moles on his chin brushing the canvas. He signed his paintings "Van Wei." Manny had found this gesture deeply moving.

When he had finished each painting, Uncle Wei hung the canvas on the wall across from his rotting roll top desk heavy with ledger books and the chipped lacquered frames of dozens of abaci.

Manny wondered if even now, years after Uncle Wei's death and his business taken over by his son, Winston, the wall of Van Gogh's still hung in the back of the

Golden Dragon Gift Emporium. To Manny, those paintings were an anchor driven into the riverbed of time that carried the fast flowing movement of life in Chinatown. Time that washed through the streets and alleys taking with it successive waves of immigrants, parking tickets and rotting produce. The red firecracker wrappers after Chinese New Years clogged the gutters like the mythical flesh of the snarling Foo dogs at the Chinatown gates. As a teenager, Manny had walked those dawn streets with Double, passing endless Parliaments between them.

Manny's chance to see Van Gogh's paintings was hampered by a bomb threat.

Femke and Manny stood behind the police barricades with a knot of gawkers watching as the bomb disposal robot trundled across the street on rubberized tank treads, its long articulated arm thrust forward in a jousting position. Neither Manny nor Femke cared to film the drama unlike the people around them who recorded the scene from behind the screens of their cell phones held at eye-level. A few provided play-by-play commentary. From underneath a pop-up tent to the left of them, a member of the bomb disposal unit sat on a folding camp chair peering into her monitor with a gamer's intensity. She flicked the stubby joystick on the control unit slung around her neck speaking quietly into her boom microphone headset. Her teammates stood around her dressed in a camo pattern unfamiliar to Manny. Their index fingers lay flush along the receivers of their assault rifles. They looked bored.

"How do you think this will end for Van Gogh?" Manny asked.

Femke pondered for a moment before answering.

“It depends. If this is an attack on his Blue Period, than he is well fucked. Too depressing. Too full of *weltschmerz*.”

The robot negotiated a curb while the onlookers swiveled their heads from the robot’s operator to the robot as if they were watching a tennis match. It was too much for Manny.

“Can we kill time somewhere else?” Manny said. “The tension.”

It turned that they didn’t need to, since Femke’s cell began to ring. Manny recognized her ringtone as the first track of Mission Critical’s debut album, *P-Waves*. Femke carried on an animated discussion in Dutch loud enough that the bomb squad took interest. Concerned, Manny led Femke away from the barricades with his hand on her elbow, looking over his shoulder at the soldiers. Finally, Femke’s conversation ended with her punching the face of her phone with her thumb in disgust.

“*Rukker!* That Konig can be very difficult. I told him I was smoking every day like he asked. My chest is sore.”

“So why don’t you stop smoking? Shit’ll kill you. Eventually.”

Femke looked at him like he was a crazy person.

“Come,” she said. “The tram has arrived and Konig told me he has a flat. So now he has time to talk to us.”

On the tram ride, Femke explained that Konig was a photographer interested in capturing the patina of the homeless. Manny wasn’t sure what the patina part meant. The syntax of her sentence left him wondering what he was in for.

His view on the homeless had been given a basic paradigm shift since The Big Shake had left portions of the City temporarily or permanently uninhabitable. He carried with him images of tent cities spread out across Crissy Field and Golden Gate Park. He had even inked a tattoo on his forearm, “GGP Zone 8” the appellation of his transitory neighborhood in the Park. He remembered trading a carton of American Spirits and two rolls of bum wad for an hour with the tattoo rig that ran off of a car battery.

An outsider unfamiliar with his housing situation might think that the colorful blisters of taut nylon were part of a music festival with all of the people milling about, smoking and shaking hands with complete strangers. A closer look, however, revealed large-scale PTSD, the sound of brittle laughter and more than a few choked sobs coming from the tents. For weeks, an enormous smoke plume spread over the City like a cobra’s hood until a series of strong coastal winds pushed the smoke inland. There seemed to be a collective mood shift with the plume’s departure as if the omen of loss had been shifted elsewhere.

In the outer Sunset, there were those people who’d moved into the empty carriages of the N Judah after clearing away the dead snakes of the overhead power lines. They had blacked out the windows of the carriages with tarpaper and set up jury-rigged solar panels mounted in scavenged window frames.

Urban lore suggested that a group of food truck owners merged with some electricians from the IBEW Local 6 over a homebrew pilsner that later became a staple in the City, The Big Shake Blonde. A week later, the chefs and electricians had a



functioning soup kitchen serving a Portugeuse bean soup to the survivors that Manny would have never admitted was better than his mom's.

His mom. Manny was jerked back into the rumbling of the tram crossing a canal and the soft tones of conversations carried out in every language but English. His mother's email lurked, unopened, in his Inbox for a few days now.

Outside the tram's windows, the rain came down heavier, peppering the canal's surface. The surface became a moving tapestry of concentric circles expanding outwards and merging into each other. Could he peel off a section of the surface in one long, delicate strip? If he held that strip up to the grey Dutch light, what would he see, the spreading circles of people in his life? And where would he be on that ever-changing strip? Probably on the opposite end from his mom's heavy drop with Ian and Femke's own set of overlapping circles running interference for him.

The tram stopped, and a group of elderly Asians wearing matching Gore-Tex rain suits the color of raw onions clambered aboard.

"Is Konig in that band?" Manny asked Femke.

"No, but he is their manager, whatever that means. He says that they have outgrown the pub and courtyard scene; they can have a bigger audience, he says." Femke held her hand up, closing her thumb and index finger together. "They are this close to becoming something else. Something bigger than themselves. I have several variations of cover art for when this happens because it will. I just know."

"Why do you like them so much?"

Femke smiled and slammed her fist into her palm.

“They have their own frequency. Something different from the bands you write about, Mission Critical being the exception.”

“Wait, what? What’s wrong with the bands I write about? Do you even *know* what I write?”

“You are easy to find on the Web, Manny. All of those columns, all of those pictures. I think that you have let a certain amount of equanimity into your writing that I wonder reflects what you really think. Or perhaps this is perfectly in line with Americans. Like a well-composed shop window.”

“Listen, that’s not entirely—”

“This is our stop.”

Manny had to hustle to make it off the tram behind Femke, who managed to push past the Asian tourists, light a cigarette and send a text to, presumably, Konig, before her feet hit the pavement.

Femke didn’t mind the rain. Manny decided it didn’t bother him either. Walking behind her, his hands shoved into his pockets and his leather jacket’s collar popped, he mentally crafted any number of responses to Femke’s unsolicited comments. But, really. His bronze dog’s nose back home had been rubbed of the black patina, exposing a raw bronze glow in his studio’s afternoon sunlight. Manny thought it very possible that the lighthouse warning from his dog’s nose pushed him to Amsterdam.

The neighborhood a few blocks from the tram line smacked of artists, fifth-generation electric cars with mismatched tires, bumpers and back windows spackled with Dutch equivalents to the liberal slogans back home. Band fliers distracted at eye-level

and were on every available surface made of wood. They crossed a corner where a sprung mattress leaned against a brick wall. Someone had spray-painted “Sweet Dreams Mr Sandman” on the mattress in jagged black capitals.

The rain let up to a fine mist, leaving the earlier rain to gurgle down drainpipes and drip from the stone edifices. They turned a few corners, moving away from the main drag and into an alleyway crowded with the flotsam of garbage mixed with the odd lawn chair or pink flamingo. All that was missing, Manny thought, was the piss-smell and the cry of gulls circling overhead scoping out the garbage scene and he could be back in the City.

What Manny felt right then wasn't in the same bed with nostalgia, but was definitely in the same room with nostalgia watching it with a deep sense of puzzlement.

“Adjustment Disorder,” Double would've called it, followed by his signature wheezy laugh.

Ahead of Manny, Femke chuffed out a locomotive's trail of smoke behind her as she moved up the alley in a way that suggested that she had navigated through the narrow space before.

And then the alley opened up in front of them, revealing a courtyard crowded with people, tents and livestock.

Manny stopped to let the scene wash over him. What was this place that looked like a homeless encampment that had crashed into a Renaissance Fair after rear-ending Burning Man? Maybe it was the brick walls of the courtyard that were soot stained from oil drum fires. Lord knows what they were burning because the air stank of

petrochemicals. Particulates spiraled upwards in lacy ribbons through the network of laundry lines, block and tackle rigging and ad hoc electrical cables spliced into the city's grid. A pair of bleating goats scuttled past him, dropping fresh pellets. A young boy with a crop in his hand followed them in an oversized Mission Critical t-shirt. Manny saw that the cobblestones under his feet were strewn with hay. To his left, a yurt (that surely could not have been made out of animal hides) stood with the flaps pulled open. Inside, a dreadlocked young woman in a stained bodice sat at a table and pulled a length of string through the binding of a book. There was a row of similar books on the table in front of her along with scraps of leather that lay next some kind of crescent-shaped knife. Her partner appeared from the shadows handing her a steaming bowl and a pair of chopsticks. Manny's attention was pulled away from the bookmaker's tiny workshop by the droning sound of a musical instrument to his right followed by a trill of pipes and the out of place pulse of a synthesizer.

The group of musicians who had begun to play had the feral look of urban cats. Manny marveled at the whole set up from their instruments to their clothing—they were pure pastiche. It was hard for him to pin down their look to any trend current or past, ditto their sound, but what he heard before Femke took him by the elbow sounded unlike anything he'd come across. Something haunting and lost lurked in the melodies. Was this what Ian meant? As he turned to follow Femke, the young woman playing the hurdy gurdy looked up at him and smiled. Her incisors had been filed down to points.

They crossed the courtyard. More than one person greeted Femke in Dutch. She shook many of their hands. It wasn't until she had finished shaking the hand of a skinny

woman who looked like a ballerina fallen on hard times that Manny saw the flash of a Euro note being passed before it disappeared into the tatty pocket of the ballerina's Chesterfield.

Around them, people were cooking any manner of beast on iron braziers and those NGO biomass cookstoves made of tin that burned everything from cow dung to corncobs.

After The Big Shake, FEMA had distributed them so that people wouldn't resort to cutting down the trees in the Park for fuel. The stoves' presence in the courtyard brought Manny back to the smell of wood smoke in the cracked urban dawn of the post-quake City. He remembered fucking a random woman from the Bison Paddocks in the shattered remains of the Botanical Garden's Arboretum while arabesques of fog swirled around them. Their desperate pumping amid the blooms of fuchsias growing around the twisted rib cage splines of wood from the collapsed structure acknowledged no other impulse than the fact that they were alive while scores of others weren't.

"How does the city let someplace like this exist?" Manny asked Femke. He stared at a wagon trundling by them made from rusted pipes and supermarket trolley wheels. The man pulling the wagon wore a close-fitting leather cap that covered his ears and an enormous knitted sweater that hung below his knees made from, what looked like, steel wool.

Manny shook his head in disbelief.

"That kid with the goats looks like he was about five going on fifty. And those barrel fires must be kicking out ten types of cancer."

“The City Council has stopped enforcing these *verloor zones* after they realized that they were not really dangerous. The people who live here monitor themselves very well. They are the displaced poor.”

Manny thought of Muhamed Ali standing on a dyke in Delft nervously watching the rotating sails of a windmill. The Eritrean had lost his family to the ongoing global diaspora that sent countless refugees to distant shores. His own experiences as a disaster survivor gave him some sense of displacement: the long queues for basic services, picking the short match and having to be the one to fetch jugs of water from the water trucks. But here in the courtyard—what was it that felt so different he wondered.

“Where does this Konig live? Out here in the courtyard?” Manny asked.

“No,” Femke answered pointing upwards toward where they were heading.

Filling the entire face of one side of the courtyard wall, someone had flyposted an enormous black and white image of a woman’s face inside an astronaut’s helmet. A bank of windows ran across her eyes like one of those black censor bars. Manny recognized something about the slope of her eyebrows and the slant of her cheekbones, though.

“Who is that, she looks familiar?”

“That?” Femke smiled. “That’s Jeltje van der Schip. Our first female astronaut. She has been part of the Tiangong-3 space station’s crew for several months now. We are very proud of her.” Femke pointed to the crowd of people in the courtyard. “She has become something like a saint. From what I understand after talking to some of them, Jeltje watches over them. They have adapted the literal to the metaphorical. I suppose it suits their needs.”

Jeltje van der Schip, the Dutch national hero, the floating woman from the café in the Jordaan. Manny couldn't see her ponytail floating behind her, but her cheekbones were unmistakable. Now he understood the clapping and whistling at the café when her image appeared on the newscast.

Manny noticed how many people in the courtyard wore the same image of Jeltje screen-printed onto t-shirts. He even saw a few tattoos of her inked onto scrawny biceps. He hadn't heard anything on the American news about Jeltje, but then again the news when he left had been pushing the hacking attempts by terrorists into power grids and weather satellites. Airplanes had become less of a target after the airlines created firewalls for their fly-by-wire software following those Airbus attacks last year. Manny still remembered the footage from someone's cell phone of that Lufthansa blossoming into a sunflower explosion of aviation fuel and vaporized passengers as it impacted in a farmer's field in Stuttgart. For an eyeblink, the farmer had become a minor celebrity for his rescue attempts.

But really, Manny thought, what was there to rescue?

They reached a short set of concrete steps painted gold with a blurry jacquard pattern in day-glo purple. An enormous oak door that looked to Manny like an after-market install stood firmly shut. Femke never slowed her pace as she skipped up the steps, the heavy door seeming to glide smoothly open before she touched the doorknob. Manny noticed some kind of royal-looking crest painted on the stoop executed with an amateur's hand.

From the courtyard behind them, the trio finished their first number to scattered applause and the chorus of throaty bleats. Sounded like the goats dug them, Manny thought.

It occurred to him as he followed Femke over the threshold that he was placing a huge amount of trust in her to a.) follow through on the band thing, and b.) not lead him into a trap where his organs would be harvested for debauched Russian oligarchs. Blind trust, he decided, had much to do with the outcome of his quest.

A crone's voice piped, "Smile—smile—smile!" from in front of them even as the heavy oak door slammed shut, leaving them in the semi-darkness of the building's foyer.

Because Femke didn't have an immediate threat response Manny unclenched his fists followed by his ass cheeks. Curious, he looked around her.

Femke said something in Dutch to a huddled wrinkled woman swathed in a cocoon of sleeping bags shiny with dirt. The woman answered around a mouth collapsed inwards like the face of a softening Jack-O-Lantern. Underneath the sleeping bags was a large sheet of cardboard. The woman let the sleeping bags fall away from her face, revealing an orange wig. Instead of having a comic effect, the woman with her wig transmitted something terribly broken to Manny that went beyond the probability of mental illness. As Manny and Femke passed her, the woman pushed her wig forward like a sailor on shore leave tipping his cap. She winked at Manny. Manny blushed and looked away.

Femke pushed the button for the elevator while she did a deep curtsy to the woman, pulling at the hem of an imaginary dress and bowing her head. Then she shook



her finger at the woman, smiling. Whatever the admonition, the woman rocked back and forth with silent laughter. That seemed to satisfy Femke who said nothing to Manny as the chipped metal doors of the elevator slid apart and they stepped in.

### **Konig's View**

To Manny's surprise, the elevator's tiny interior was draped in faded purple velvet trimmed with gold piping. It took him a moment to realize that the drapery had the look of a repurposed movie theater curtain. When the elevator doors shut in front of them he took a startled step back. With great care, someone had tiled the doors with those peel and stick squares of mirrors. Manny and Femke's reflections stared back at them as the elevator rose. Well, at least Femke's did. Where Manny's face would have been a mirror was broken off leaving behind a single jagged island of silver in the empty square's center. All Manny saw of himself was part of his mouth and his jawline up to his earlobe.

"That Konig," Femke said. "He is very deep into image." Then the elevator thunked to a stop and the doors opened, cutting off their reflections.

To Manny, Konig's loftspace looked like a theater set for an unproduced play. There was that feeling of a space begging for props. Giant drooping plants in blue and white porcelain pots the size of beer kegs stood next to a series of cast iron fluted columns reaching up into the shadowed trusses. Shoji screens sectioned off the live/work areas. Photo tripods were scattered around the space like stacked muskets. A couple of Georgian settees flanked by bronze geese stuck in a frozen waddle sat near Konig's workspace.

And Konig.

The photographer's bulk was perched on a tall stool placed behind an enormous light table strewn with negatives, loupes, lenses and a couple of ravaged SLRs. He didn't bother to get up as they approached him, just took a pen from one pocket of his photographer's vest and moved it to another.

"What did Wilhemina say to you when you came in?" he called to them as they crossed the scarred wooden planks. To Manny, it looked as if someone had flailed every square inch of the floor with a handful of chain.

Femke didn't answer so Manny finally said, "She's the one with the ginger wig, right?"

Konig nodded.

"She says what she always says, Konig." Femke said, setting down her bag on the light table. She walked around the light table to him and gave him three alternating air-kisses. "You should know."

"Yes," Konig answered accepting the Altoids tin that Femke handed him. "My Queenie is nothing if not predictable."

Konig peeked inside Femke's tin and then set it on the light table, satisfied.

Uncertain of what was expected of him or how he should act, Manny held his hand out. Konig reached over and shook it.

"Femke tells me that you are looking for the next big thing in music here in Amsterdam."

Spoken by someone else, Manny's mission verged on ridiculous. He had to believe, though. Had to because coming home with an empty net wasn't an option for him. It wasn't just Ian's expectation that Manny produce, but also his own expectation to pull some meaning from his assignment. In the past few days he had begun to realize that, while his current location was in Amsterdam, a very large part of him was back at Stanford hospital caught at the roller coaster's pinnacle a moment before its inescapable descent. If he could just manage to gain some control over here, to pull off another Mission Critical type paradigm shift than perhaps, he thought, he could hold the roller coaster's cars at a moment of equilibrium in his mind where Roberto Soares lay in his hospital bed neither alive nor dead. It occurred to him that the connection between his success in Amsterdam and his (probable) avoidance of his father's death bore a very tenuous relationship.

*Dad, where are you now?*

Manny forced himself to answer Konig in an even tone.

"I hope to. Though, quite frankly, I'm not sure if I'm where I need to be."

Konig held his hands out, palms up.

"Here you are."

Manny sincerely hoped that Konig's comment ended there and was not an invitation into successive waves of pithy sentiments.

"Why don't you show Manny your work while I fix your flat," Femke said.

Konig nodded and heaved himself from his stool that creaked with relief as he stood. "I would be curious, Manny, to see what you think of my people." He led Femke

and Manny to another part of the loft space that had been hidden by the rice paper wall of the shoji screens. On the other side of the screens the loft space was bare, but the walls were hung with church-door sized sheets of cardboard.

“What in the world...” Manny started. He couldn’t finish the sentence as he moved closer to the rows of cardboard.

Each of the sheets of cardboard had the photograph of a naked person printed onto them. Shot in the grainy black and white style of the punk show fliers of his youth, Manny immediately recognized the inherent roughness of the medium. The portraits loomed over him to a height of about eight feet. Giant naked titans stared straight at the camera, every inch of their bodies a study in chiaroscuro. The cardboard, he saw, had the same weathered texture of the broken down produce boxes in Chinatown alleys.

Wilhelmina had been sleeping on a sheet of cardboard like these.

Manny stopped to look at a portrait of a young woman who bared her teeth at the camera’s glass eye. Her unshaven pubis was a tangled mass of hair between her thighs; her incisors were sharp points. The musician with the hurdy gurdy.

Manny scanned the portraits along the walls. There was the goat boy, chest stuck out and wearing only a class picture grin. He held his crop in one hand. And there was the bookmaker whose drooping knit snood and thick dreadlocks made it appear that her three-quarters profile been grafted with an octopus. Hoops of stainless steel pierced and pulled down on her nipples. Countless others lined the walls. Were they all the people down below in the courtyard, Manny wondered.

“I do all of the work myself,” Konig said.

Manny turned away from the portraits, knowing that he would turn right back in a moment.

Konig stood by Femke, who squatted down next to an upturned purple beach cruiser. Femke already had the tire off the bike and was peeling the oversized tire from the rim. Manny saw that the floor of the loftspace near the cruiser was covered with more cardboard sheets with people printed onto them. Is this what Femke had been talking about when she had said Konig was riding his bike over cardboard?

“In the beginning, my process was quite different, you see?” Konig said.

Manny didn't answer.

“I source my cardboard sheets from the same suppliers that make the boxes for washers and stoves for appliance companies like Smeg. One side of the cardboard is white and the other is brown. The first set of portraits I did was in Utrecht when I was at university. I built my own developing trays to hold the cardboard. After I printed the portraits onto the white sides, I let them dry on blankets that I spread out on my studio's floor. Then I spent a several hours each day for one week riding my Schwinn over them.”

Femke pulled the inner tube from the cruiser's tire like she was eviscerating an eel. Manny turned back to the portraits.

“I listened to jazz on my hi-fi and made figure eights over the cardboard. By the week's end, the stiff cardboard had softened beautifully. After that I gave the portraits a strong soaking in coffee grounds and four and half kilos of loose leaf Lapsang Souchong.”

“Trying to keep the people in the portraits up all night?” Manny asked.

“No. The combination of the coffee grounds and tea leaves created a patina that made the cardboard look very old.”

Patina, Manny thought—a surface treatment for a cheap tchotchke like his dog’s nose or the image of a homeless person printed on a sheet of cardboard.

“I admit,” Konig said. “That I was quite taken by the overall effect of the portraits when I had finished the first set. I didn’t have an agent like I do now. She lives in Lucerne with her family in her ancestral villa. She bought my entire first set, you know? But back then, I knew no one. I brought my book to every gallery in Utrecht until finally a curator at a new space agreed to show the work.”

Manny turned away from the portraits again. Femke was scraping the inner tube with the little metal disc that roughed up the rubber. Konig stood over his portraits.

“What was the response?” Manny asked.

Konig shook his head.

“Overwhelmingly bad. I can remember every bad review to the word. The criticism that bothered me the most came from an artist friend whom I respected very much. She called the work ‘a focused study in inauthenticity.’ She said that almost forty years ago. She’s been gone for almost half of that time. But I still remember.”

Manny had worked his way to the last wall.

“So I made a very difficult decision.”

“Which was?”

“I chose to turn the cardboard over and use the brown side.”

Manny stopped and turned around. Konig had his hands clasped behind him as he nudged one of the portraits with the toe of his boot.

“The brown side?”

“Yes. The tone was much warmer, much closer to the color of living human flesh. The white background laid my people out onto the mortician’s slab too soon. It came to me then that I wanted to celebrate and immortalize instead of document.”

Manny leaned close to a portrait of an older man with a carny’s build. The cardboard was creased, splotted and stained. A streak of brown slashed across the portrait to the lower edge. He reached out to touch the impastoed surface.

“So I let the people have their portraits to live and sleep on with the understanding that I would take them back after several months.”

Manny’s finger hesitated. He became aware of a pungent smell coming from the cardboard.

“This isn’t coffee grounds?”

“If authenticity was missing, than what could be more authentic than the recording of a person’s life through the surface they lived on? Body oils, feces, food stains, menstrual blood, bits of poetry, cigarette burns.”

Manny straightened.

“You mean that these people were sleeping on giant images of themselves?”

“Exactly,” Konig said from next to Manny. Manny jumped. How had such a big man moved so quickly?

“Did you pay them at least?”

“A little, not much. They seemed less interested in the money than something more valuable.”

“What could be more valuable than the ability to buy food, maybe a hotel for the night?”

“To be immortalized, to be remembered. Isn’t that many of us want? To believe that after we are gone that something of us should remain in the world. Proof positive that we existed if only for a short time. Very few of these people will ever escape the cycle of homelessness. On a very basic level they understood what I was trying to do. Some hated me for it, but many stood for me.”

Manny tried to chase down the logic, but was hung up on what he felt was a deeply exploitative art form.

“I had my studio here in the Jordaan for about six months. I was photographing homeless people from all over Amsterdam and Haarlem. I kept scrupulous records of when I distributed the cardboard portraits so that I could go back in a few months to pick them up. Many times the people had moved on or had lost interest. That was okay, though.”

From behind them came the sound of a bicycle pump.

“The first homeless showed up in this courtyard a year to the day that I started my project. They had heard about my portraits.” Konig surveyed his work. “That was five years and countless portraits ago.”

Manny thought about the courtyard homeless. They put off a vibe of contentment unlike the very noticeable anger and frustration that he had experienced living in the



relief camps. Maybe, he thought, the difference was that they had staked turf in a new home while everyone in the relief camps in the City wanted to get back home even if there was no home to go back to.

“Okay,” Manny said. “Maybe I get the authenticity part—the desire to live forever in an image. Isn’t that what photography is about? In part, I mean. Maybe some of your people will end up in a museum where everyone will have a chance to see them after buying their entrance ticket. But in the end, aren’t you profiting off of both their homelessness and their hopelessness?”

“I think you think that I have a string of buyers lining up for my works. You don’t understand the resilience my people have. I’m more discriminating than to seek purely financial gains. Much of the earnings from the sales go to local relief groups that I’ve vetted to my own sensibilities. Some of it trickles down to the courtyard I suppose.”

Femke pedaled by them on the cruiser, arms held out to her sides like a tightrope walker.

“I am not sure that Manny buys what you are selling, Konig.”

Manny wondered how he would feel if a portrait of his father hung with the others. Or what if he placed the small metal container of his father’s cremains in front of his father’s own larger than life portrait? Which one was his father? Both? None? Manny shook his head.

“We deal now in the currency of loss,” he said.

Konig stared at him.

“Yes, Manny,” he said. His eyes wandered over the rows of giant portraits. “I suppose that loss is now the coin of the realm. Femke, thank you for repairing my bicycle.”

Manny and Femke left Konig at his light table, squinting through his loupe at a sheet of negatives. The photographer said a few things in Dutch to Femke. He didn't bother to shake Manny's hand.

Outside in the courtyard, Manny stared at all the people as if trying to see if he recognized any of them in the portraits upstairs. Femke wove through the crowd, her hands deep in her parka's pockets. Neither of them had spoke on the elevator ride down, nor had commented on Wilhemina's absence from the foyer. Even her cardboard sheet was gone.

It frustrated Manny that whole exchange upstairs made no mention of Some People I Know. He figured that since Femke was his in with the band's manager, he'd take her lead. What was he going to report back to Ian? Manny didn't want to admit to himself that he was beginning to feel desperate.

As they walked across the courtyard, Manny looked back to the giant portrait of Jeltje. At the bank of windows, Konig waved once at Manny before disappearing back into the studio's shadows.

The group of musicians were gone replaced by a cartful of pumpkins that a vendor was carefully laying out on a plastic tarp.

“So, do I get to meet the mystery band now?” Manny asked Femke. “I’m not sure how that whole thing with Konig just went down, but I have to report back to my editor. I’ve already blown off my contacts here.”

They passed from the courtyard and back into the narrow alleyway.

“Seriously, do I get an intro or what? When’s their next show?”

Femke stopped, turned to him and said, “You already saw them back in the courtyard.” She continued down the alley kicking aside a semi-deflated soccer ball that looked like an oversized seed pod. “And Konig is okay with you.”

### **Pulling Stumps**

Femke left Manny in front of his hotel, handing him her business card this time.

“I have more work to do and cannot stay with you today.

“What am I supposed to do about the band? I can’t sit on my thumb for much longer.”

“Why would you sit on your thumb?”

“No it means—forget it. Listen: I appreciate you taking me to Konig’s weird setup. I suppose he’s interesting in a…” Manny flapped his hand next to his head.

“Actually, no, I don’t like him.”

The rain had stopped, revealing a Dutch sky filled with overlapping bands of clouds with salmon-colored edges. Stock-photo gorgeous was Manny’s distracted impression.

“I agree with you,” Femke said. She cocked her head to the side and poached out her lower lip. “But he is in the middle of something—”

“You mean *above* something.”

She laughed at that.

“Remember,” she said. “Without that courtyard Some People I Know would not exist. And my stumbling across them had everything to do with taking a left turn instead of a right on my bicycle into an unfamiliar neighborhood.”

She shrugged.

“Or, maybe it was a right turn. I doubt Konig is central to the courtyards, though—likely he is just another expression of something larger. And, yes, he is not very likeable.”

Femke’s tram pulled up across the street.

“Just look what he did to Wilhelmina,” she said, looking both ways before she stepped off the curb.

Ginger wig, Manny recalled, the broken woman in Konig’s foyer who slept on her enormous image.

“Which was?” Manny called to Femke as she crossed the street.

“He eventually broke her,” she said over her shoulder. “His noble muse.”

Before he could ask her anything more, Femke had boarded the tram. He barely made out her hair as a magenta blob through the tram’s windows as the carriages clattered away.

After she left, Manny stood there just watching the clouds scutter across the sky; the weight of his wet leather jacket seemed to carry the emotional weight of Konig’s portraits and Femke’s parting words. Was he reacting against the sheer number and scale

of portraits or the way Konig presented the raw vulnerability of the courtyard homeless? There was a fine line between art and commerce that Konig straddled that Manny wondered mirrored his own struggles with the reality of his profession. A profession reliant on disposable income, right? Of some kind of in-group knowledge that carried a narrow currency in the proper circles. It wasn't like his existence back home didn't matter anymore, but some of the basic underpinnings that kept him banging the keys of his Underwood were past the wobbly stage. The entire premise of his profession sounded shaky when held up against the push for basic survival.

In his hotel room, Manny cracked his laptop open.

He drafted an email to Ian outlining what he thought was the salient portions of his afternoon's recon. He re-read his email, self-conscious of the way he expressed his goal of uncovering the next big thing in music. How could he explain to Ian the feelings that washed over him in the courtyard? And where did his own loss fit into the larger tapestry that wove itself around him with every passing day since his father's death?

And woven into those images was the knowledge that the feral kids music was borne from the experiences of loss and longing. He had seen it happen once before in the ruins of the Mission. There was no recreation in the music, just a basic expression of need played out in the harmonies of survival. Sharpened teeth, body filth, the droning buzz of the hurdy gurdy, the pulsing chords of a synth manufactured ten years before he was even born—the feral kid's histories were zeroed-out through circumstances forever beyond their control.

No music could be further from the heavy production value of two weeks in a top-line Dogpatch studio, and no music could sound more honest.

“Existential Angst,” Double would’ve called it, pushing the frames of his vintage Gargoyles up on his almost bridgeless nose.

Manny sent the email to Ian anyway, unsure of the response, but hoping that Ian would tease out a deeper meaning for him. He did not bother to open his mother’s email.

Instead, he saw himself standing in his mother’s back field with Luis below him.

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Following their father’s death, their mother had decided that the dozen or so tree stumps on her property had to go. “One of the ladies at the hall told me that they were an invasive species,” she had said to the surprise of the brothers, who had never heard her express few thoughts outside of her kitchen and the Portuguese Hall in town. Neither Manny nor Luis bothered to argue with her about the unlikely possibility of the decades old stumps suddenly coming back to life. Manny remembered holding the felling axe above his head, the bit’s keen edge paper thin, sharpened with a whetstone he found in the carport. Luis had looked up at him, smiling. Around them, the stumps of a dozen stumps smoldered into ash, saturated by fuel oil and set alight by one of Luis’ hand rolleds several weeks ago.

“You going to swing on me or what?” Luis had asked, looking up at Manny. That Manny hesitated caused Luis to let go of the heavy stump that he had been straining to hold so that Manny could get a clear shot on the last stubborn root lodged in the dirt. The axe landed squarely on the thickest part of the root and cleaved the gnarled wood so

cleanly that the bit's passing seemed merely a whisper. Luis had fallen back, his hands held in front of him for the first time that Manny could ever recall. There was no sense of victory for Manny, only the dull realization that Roberto Soares wasn't there yelling, "*Pare com isso agora!*" at them, breaking them up.

When they dragged themselves from their mother's back field that evening they left it pockmarked with dark rings of dirt circling the stump's holes. Manny pretended that neither of them was thinking about freshly dug graves. Or of the skeletal fingers of the stumps thrusting broken roots in all directions.

Their mother was there on the back porch with a clean dishtowel, covering a plate of piping hot malasadas that they knew would be dusted with *açúcar mascavo*. "You boys work so well together," she had said.

Neither of them replied. They each took a malasada and ate them on opposite ends of the porch. They could hear the distant barking of the sea lions that had taken over a portion of Pillar Point's breakwater. Occasionally, fights broke out from the overcrowding sending the sea lions' heavy bodies crashing into each other. Sometimes, the concrete of the breakwater was glossy with their blood.

### **Vinegar Syndrome**

Manny had stayed in his hotel room the rest of the afternoon using the cellophane-wrapped remote to flick through channel after channel of European television. He caught the end of *The Shining* dubbed in Dutch, a little bit of a French lifestyle show filmed in the lavender fields in Provence and half a second of a music channel playing German Techno. He slept for an hour or so with his open laptop next to him on the bed with the

screen's face in black mirror mode. Manny hadn't touched the keys since he'd fired off his email to Ian.

The gurgle hiss from the toilet in the bathroom suffering its own case of indigestion finally galvanized Manny to get his ass off the bed and grab some early-evening air.

Manny didn't see any cross dressers on Leidsestraat as he made his way back to the café that Femke took him to last night. Not that he was looking or anything. Walking down the street alive with the sound of tram bells, bike bells, and, as if not wanting to be left out, the deep peal of a nearby set of church bells, Manny supposed that there might be a chance that this band thing could fall through.

Not to mention that whatever possibility he thought he had of escaping his situation back home had spiraled upwards and out of his sight like the ribbons of black smoke in Konig's courtyard. It troubled him that a strong undercurrent of defeatism had exerted an unseen yet powerful force on him, which was a very un-Mannyish mindset. It troubled him too that the harder he pushed on his mission to find the next big thing in music in Amsterdam, the more his father's death surfaced. It made him think of—as a harbor kid spending hours at the boat docks—pressing down on a ball-shaped trawl float in the water only to have it shoot back up with double the force. He had knocked out a front tooth that way when he was eight. Dumb surprise had been followed by pain as he just sat there on the dock's edge bleeding down his chin while a constellation of stars swam across his vision. Luis had laughed and laughed.



Stepping aside to let a young Dutch mother with a stroller pass by, Manny struggled with the realization that, with his father's death, he'd passed dumb surprise and was now heading for pain.

Still, he refused the siren call of the spliff despite passing Brown café after Brown café. The escapism that cannabis offered wasn't a good idea for him right now. That and, technically, he was on the company's dime. He had, after all, professional work ethics to uphold. Black leather jacket, jeans and a clear mind. Ready for input and maximized for output. Manny had written enough columns about musicians who died early from the *mélange* of illegal substances injected, snorted, smoked, or inhaled that he'd been able to have a separate category on his web page titled, "The 27 Club." But his column was about other people and written with a journalist's remove. Not so with Roberto Soares.

He considered that the geographic distance from his birthplace in Half Moon Bay might have something to do with his coping. Following his father's death, he was aware of a persistent feeling that his mother and Luis were aware of Manny's routine up in the City. It wasn't paranoia, was it? Maybe it was a little, he thought; that uncomfortable sensation of their eyes on him, watching and judging him as he worked the keys of his Underwood, or made ramen on his hotplate, or gobbled *slangFast's* latest female intern on his Murphy bed.

He hadn't abandoned his family, had he? Left them behind to find their own way through a post-Roberto Soares landscape?

“Survivor’s Guilt,” Double would’ve called it, giving the fat white laces of his vintage trainers a miniscule tweak toward whatever standards he had for their aesthetic perfection.

But what had he survived?

His cell chimed from his pocket. He fished his phone out and swiped the screen with his thumb.

It was a very brief text from Ian.

*Brilliant, Manny. Thanks for the pic. Courtyard looks like a Mad Max set.*

*Leaving it to you to suss out the particulars. Can you get audio?*

Maybe, Manny thought, if I see them again. Maybe he could convince the feral kids to change their band name to something else too. He considered himself pretty canny when it came to band names and Some People I Know smacked of Tuesday night bar bands. He could see their name scrawled on the bathroom wall of a one of the more dingy bars in the Haight blending in with the visual noise of competing band names, declarations of love, declarations of hate, that weird Lovecraft octopus-thing that showed up in practically every bathroom in the City.

But did it really matter, he thought, what they called themselves? The little he heard of Some People I Know, the more he thought of watching Mission Critical’s dusk debut in front of the giant La Calavera Catrina mural in the Mission. People had thrown marigolds down in front of the colorful painting that had somehow survived undamaged and had placed prayer candles around the band as they tuned up. The small crowd that had gathered to hear the eight musicians play soon swelled to a rapt mass. He was at the

front watching Diego, one of the guitarists, finger pick the nickel-plated strings on his National. When Manny turned to face the crowd behind him, he remembered the impact of seeing a starfield of eyes shimmering against the darkening night.

Later in the post-gig dawn at his relief camp in the Park, he hunkered down at a folding table and wrote his column in longhand by the glow of a hissing propane lantern. He captured the layered emotions that flowed from the band to the crowd and from the crowd to the band. And the sound of the City trying to heal itself. They were all conduits that night, he realized.

How far had he come in since then?

Upon arriving at the Femke's café, which was called *de Meetup*, he saw that an event was being set up inside. The window shades had been drawn tight. Weird. He considered walking around until he found another place to get coffee, maybe that place in the Jordaan where he'd met the A&R people. Undecided, he poked his head in. The café looked completely different tonight. The coziness and conviviality replaced now with very dim lighting and red candles on the tables. Curious, Manny stepped inside.

"Hello, Femke's American friend."

The voice from the darkness made Manny jump. As his eyes adjusted, he made out the face of the young man who had served them their *koffies*.

"You're here for the show," he said. "That's wonderful."

“Oh hey, hi. Um, no. Just wanted to get a coffee.” The tables were rearranged to accommodate a movie projector set up in the middle of the café. “Or something. What’s going on tonight?”

The server handed Manny a flier and gestured with his arm, inviting Manny to sit. “Vintage media,” the server said.

Manny noticed that the server’s smart black apron and white shirt had been replaced with what looked like an old style movie usher’s jacket. The double row of buttons marching down his chest gleamed in the shadows like cats’ eyes. Manny thought of Konig’s purple draped elevator. Of those squares of mirrors reflecting everything but his face.

The server turned to the next set of people coming into the café.

So Manny sat.

“Vintage media,” he said to the red candle flickering on the table in front of him.

Manny regarded the movie projector set up in the middle of the room, at the film spool’s ridiculous Mickey Mouse ears. An Indian woman wearing a backpacker’s headlamp fed the film through the meanderings of the projector’s innards with a surgeon’s care. A plus-sized movie screen dominated the wall opposite the projector and was flanked by a pair of respectable-looking speakers.

Manny sighed and held the flier closer to the candle. *Club Lamprey Cinema Presents: Vinegar Syndrome-A Celebration of Educational and Documentary!! 16mm films!*

Manny looked around at the people or, he supposed, the audience around him.

From what he could make out they were Dutch-style *otakus*—both women and men. Deep geeks obsessed with old films. Like the guy with a typhoon crop of white hair sitting alone at the table next to him. Manny watched him peel the label from his beer bottle with the care of a taxidermist flaying a chipmunk. Manny sighed again. Popskull Pete from New York was into this kind of thing, movies not chipmunks. Manny understood some of the aesthetic, which, to him, came across as self-consciously nostalgic.

Most of the writers in *slangFast's* San Francisco office played vinyl through tube amps. Anti-digital audiophiles to the last. Manny endured the drinking sessions with his colleagues because most of them had cute girlfriends that they paid little attention to. Those guys pushed the analog versus digital argument to ridiculous heights, always one upping each other over arcane aspects of their obsession, instantly pulling up facts and figures on their cell phones that they shoved in the face of naysayers. Behavior like that, Manny concluded, gave birth to the Dead Frequency policy that so many bars back home implemented and for which he was grateful.

Manny took another look around. The Indian woman had finished with her threading. She clicked off her headlamp, becoming another indistinct silhouette moving carefully through the dark room. Leaving, he thought, sounded appealing, but his own company right now felt marginally better than watching old films in the darkness of a Dutch café.

He ended up ordering a beer instead of a coffee. While he waited, he squinted at Femke's business card as he thumbed her cell number into his phone so that he could text

her. Holding her card right up to the candle for a better look, he texted with his thumb, focusing on the bright rectangle of his phone's screen. He heard several tsks from the shadows and ignored them.

*"At your café."* He texted. *"They are showing old movies. The man next to me looks like Albert Einstein. I am drinking beer. Come join me. Man—"*

Flames licked the edge of Femke's business card. He had held it too close to the candle.

"Shit—" he said.

The white haired man leaned over and doused the flames by pouring his beer over the card and all over Manny's hand. The candle sputtered from the drops of beer, but stayed lit.

Just then, the server appeared from the shadows, set down Manny's beer, plucked the dripping business card from his hand and wiped the table down with his towel. He didn't say a word before leaving or before Manny could say anything.

"You don't belong here," the white haired man said to Manny who flicked his hand to the side of his table, trying to get some of the beer off.

"What?" Manny said, distracted and irritated. "There's no cover charge. The guy at the door..." He looked around the darkness. He took his fresh beer and gave it to the white haired man. "Thanks for the help."

The white haired man pulled his chair closer to Manny's. Didn't bother to get up from his chair or anything, just made a series of jerks with his hand gripped on the chair's

front edge. Manny immediately thought of his run-in with Donald at FraPort a million years ago.

“Boss, I’m not—”

“No,” the white haired man said. “I mean that I am unsure you will enjoy what you see here tonight.”

At first, Manny felt sweat popping up between his shoulder blades. Then he was just annoyed.

“Why? I thought it was old films. Like what they used to show in grade school last century, right? It’s not...” he looked around and whispered, “...sexual...is it? Making the fuck and like that?”

By the candle’s twitching flame, Manny could see the confusion and embarrassment on the other man’s face. Good, he thought, let him share the awkwardness.

The white haired man sat back in his chair, silenced.

After a moment, he regained his composure and leaned into the candlelight again.

“I am sorry. I think I have been misunderstood.”

“Not likely.”

The white haired man considered for a moment, and then pressed on.

“I am a professor at the University of Amsterdam. I teach film studies there. My name is Cornelius. Please, may I?”

“Can I have my beer back?”

Cornelius passed Manny's beer back to him. Manny took a long pull on the bottle.

"So what's this Vinegar Syndrome?" Manny said, holding the flier up.

"A forgotten term from the fledgling days of cinema. Applied to the use of cellulose-based film stock. Cellulose acetate, actually. When stored in metal canisters the film breaks down over time. The chemical reaction gives off a sharp vinegar smell. Once the reaction starts it never stops. It feeds on itself and speeds up over time until the emulsion turns to dust in the can."

Manny understood the speed part.

Since he had left home, he felt the inevitable clutch of gravity threatening to disrupt the mental equilibrium of his roller coaster. Eventually a little whoops and a push would start the fall. His mind framed his feelings into poetic analogy, but the barbed phrase "dust in the can" dug hard into him. Like a lead sinker dropped into the water, those four words pulled him deeper into hidden currents.

Manny had never asked his mother where his father was kept.

His silence encouraged Cornelius to continue.

"I have come to these shows since they started," Cornelius said. "They show all kinds of movies here. Some are good, others not so much. My favorites are the ones from cinema's infancy. Melies, the Lumiere brothers. My favorites are the brother's 50-second reels. You know, Auguste and Louis sent their cameramen all over the world to film 'Actualités' documenting the quotidian and the exotic. For example, the souk in



Algiers, street scenes in Budapest and rice farmers in Japan. Auguste and Louis raced to record the memories of the world.”

Cornelius leaned closer. Manny felt a familiar shift in the man’s demeanor. He had seen it happen in his interviews—that hyped passionate intensity of someone ramping up for a major knowledge dump. He imagined pulling out and popping open a tiny parasol to shield him from the approaching word storm.

“Look at any old film,” Cornelius said. “I mean really old. That few people were aware of the power of the Cinematograph to capture images precluded them from looking at the Lumiere’s invention with nothing less than curiosity. Perhaps they regarded the camera as just another curious invention from distant shores where they had heard of such wondrous things. They were not afraid of the power of the image yet.”

Truth existed in those words, Manny realized. What had Donald said, “Image is premium,” right? Unless you lived beneath a rock in the deepest shadow of the world’s largest subterranean bridge, your image had been immortalized countless times. Captured by cell phones, tablets and security cameras nested in about every nook and cranny of a modern city, Manny wondered where and on which servers the countless iterations of his image lived. An unanswerable and pointless question, really.

Manny knew that his last image of his father lived in darkness in the sealed metal box holding his cremains. That was the image Manny both feared and dreamt of bringing into the light.

“Extensive research evidence indicates that media violence can contribute to aggressive behavior, desensitization to violence, nightmares, and fear of being harmed.”

Manny replayed the moment of the fireball engulfing Donald's head. Flames erased eyebrows and, given enough time and intensity, erased the fleshy wholeness of a human to cremains unable to be reconstituted, no matter how many tears fell onto the gray pile.

Around them, people quietly sat themselves at the remaining tables. There was that pre-movie hush of expectancy just like what Manny felt when the house lights dimmed at a show right before a band took to the stage.

Cornelius took his turn to sigh.

"If innocence ever existed in film before editing turned it all to fiction..."

Manny didn't follow his point, didn't really want to, in fact. Asking for clarification surely welcomed further overwrought explanations similar to his own German Techno torture rap that he gave to his editors.

He saw his father waving to him from the stern deck of the *Estrella*.

"Meaning what?" he asked himself out loud.

"That I am fairly sure," Cornelius answered, pointing to the movie projector. "I would like to pass through the screen and into the film. I will have the satisfaction of knowing where I will be until my image peels away from the film with the smell of vinegar."

As if on cue, the movie projector shuddered to life. A clean cone of light was thrown onto the movie screen, then the familiar ratcheting of film sliding through sprockets. The movie began and Cornelius stood up. Manny tensed, ready for anything. Cornelius looked down at Manny. Why the apologetic half-smile? Manny watched him

walk toward the movie screen, ignoring the shouts in Dutch that followed him. Then Cornelius disappeared behind the movie screen. He never looked back.

Manny shifted forward on his chair staring at the screen whose surface moved with suggested life.

A city scene in the slow era of horse and buggy transport began. Vendor's carts piled high with everything stood in front of storefronts, arresting the ebb and flow of yesteryear foot traffic. And the people. More than Manny would have imagined, walking between the buggies and carriages, spilling from the sidewalks, flocking around the carts. The film's age softened detail rendering the multitude of expressions into moving grains of pepper.

The movie screen began to shudder and ripple like a sail under buffeting winds. Ridiculous, Manny thought, anger rising in him at Cornelius' theatrics. It crossed his mind that he might have fallen victim to a very specific type of Dutch performance art. The light from the projector's lens flared brighter. Several people nearest the rattling machine turned their heads away. The film jumped in the sprockets, the street scene went cockeyed and the black edges of the film showed. The intensity of the projector's light blew out the detail of the images until the pedestrians became overexposed ghosts, moving in and out of the frame.

Then the film ceased its stuttering. The light from the projector dimmed back to normal. On the movie screen, the people continued their daily perambulations. Almost all of the men, Manny noticed, wore bowler hats. The ladies held the hems of their heavy skirts with gloved hands, their faces obscured by schooner-sized hats.

Manny waited for Cornelius to appear from behind the movie screen with a sheepish grin. Something. Instead, Manny's mouth dropped at the sight of a crop of white hair on the movie screen. It bobbed amid the black sea of bowlers and moved down the street scene like an errant pale ship.

Then, gone.

Outraged, Manny stood up. He marched straight toward the screen followed by more Dutch curses. Behind the movie screen, he found the door he expected. He grabbed the doorknob and pushed, prepared to see Cornelius standing there, laughing. The door only opened a few inches then stopped. Manny reached in and fumbled his hand for the light switch. Found it, clicked it on. From behind him, he barely registered the swell of raised voices, a cry and a sharp wail. He closed his eyes from the sudden brightness of the house lights being turned on. When he opened them he saw that there was nothing behind the door but a shallow closet filled with brooms, a mop bucket and cleaning rags exhaling an ammonia tang.

No Cornelius.

Manny popped out from behind the screen.

"Alright, asshats," he barked, addressing the audience who, to his surprise, were all standing. "Do you think you can just—"

They ignored him, chattering to each other in Dutch, their focus shifted from the movie screen to their cell phones and tablets. Some of them were crying. Manny grabbed a passing server by her arm.

"What's going on?"

Manny's cell chimed in his pocket. He pulled it out with his other hand and thumbed the screen.

On the verge of tears the server said, "Tiangong-3's been destroyed."

"What, that space station?"

Manny read Femke's text, which matched exactly what the server said next.

"Jeltje's dead."

### **Red Threshold**

On Femke's wall mounted flat panel, Manny watched shaky citizen-journalist footage of brilliant orange and green trails streaking across the dawn sky. Off camera exclamations and gasps accompanied the flaring trails, which reminded Manny of the light from the haywire movie projector at the café he had just left. Cornelius had disappeared into the light. And now Jeltje van der Schip, the astronaut saint that watched over Konig's people, had become part of the light too. Manny felt that his information tray definitely was definitely jammed by the confluence of two nearly improbable events.

Femke sat on her couch in her bra and panties. She had answered her door like that when he showed up at her flat less than ten minutes after she'd texted him the directions. Zero flirting factor on her make up-free face. Her magenta hair was still shower wet and looked like a fluorescent animal's pelt. He had followed her inside her flat aware of the unfamiliarity of being in a stranger's space, but registering the sameness of her flat with the endless number of places that he had been to in his life. The smear of white foam on the back of her calf made him think that she must've been in the middle of shaving her legs. Caught unawares, he thought. And wasn't that how

many tragedies played out? The banality that afflicts a large portion of life suddenly challenged by the upheaval of one's routine. He had been in the process of hanging his Tibetan bells in his studio apartment when Luis had called telling him to get to the hospital right away.

"Is that—" he had said to Femke, pointing at the images on the flat panel as he sat down on a small couch covered with a quilt.

Femke had nodded, drawing her knees up to her chin and hugging her legs.

"The debris trail could be hundreds of miles long," she had said.

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The third time Manny asked what the Dutch newscasters were saying, Femke switched to an English version of France 24. The newscaster kept shuffling her papers, stumbling over her lines as the freshness of the tragedy unfolded. A press conference with the European Space Agency was moments away, she assured. The Chinese government still hadn't released an official statement.

Manny understood the information vacuum the newscaster labored under, remembering the mad months following his father's death. He had gone with his mother to every meeting with Stanford Hospital's Ombudsman, each encounter ending with her questions returned to her politely unanswered, but bookended with, "I'm sorry for your loss, Mrs. Soares." And then the frank and eventual discussion with their family lawyer in his hamster cage of a law office in Half Moon Bay.

"You might want to consider how long you want to pursue this, Sophia." Mr. Machado had said.

So they had left the lawerly funk of wet paper and rotting carpet saturated by the Coastside damp. His mother had almost slipped on Mr. Machado's papers strewn on the floor as she navigated around the stacks of legal proceedings bound with fibrous red twine. Manny had wanted to rip the twine from the stacks and hurl handfuls of paper to create a snowstorm of white filling the office. And maybe, just maybe, a legal precedent would fall into his hand providing a snowflake's singularity that could answer all of their questions. Would the answer have melted in his hand as he and his mother struggled through the legalese set in five-point type he had wondered.

Femke told Manny to help himself to the bread, butter and *Hagelslag* in the kitchen while she dressed. Manny spread softened butter across a slice of bread with a knife he'd pulled from a kitchen drawer. It wasn't until he'd ripped open the box of chocolate sprinkles and shook them onto his bread that he realized that he had no fucking clue what *Hagelslag* was. He assumed *Hagelslag* meant chocolate sprinkles because there was a picture on the box of a piece of white bread dressed similarly to what he had just made.

Amid all of his Amsterdam experiences, standing in a stranger's kitchen sprinkling chocolate Jimmies onto a piece of bread baked, packaged and shipped from who knows where filled him anguish and despair.

"Manny, are you all right?"

Femke stood there briskly rubbing her hair with a towel watching him. She wore her banded leggings and a tight white t-shirt with the sleeves cut off and a huge screen print of Jeltje's face inside her spacesuit's helmet.

“No,” Manny answered. Something cracked and shifted inside of him with the stately weight of a glacier calving into icy waters. He said, “My father is dead, my mother is gutted and I feel adrift. Also—as stupid as this sounds—I know that the next big thing in music is here in Amsterdam. And,” he said, shaking his head. “I believe I saw a Dutch man disappear into a movie screen.”

Femke didn’t answer. She looked at him, slowly rubbing her hair with the towel, and then she stopped. She came to him, placing her towel on the counter. Without a word she slipped her arms under his leather jacket, encircled him with her arms and put her head against his chest. Surprised as he was with her sudden shift from aloofness, Manny noticed the compact tightness of her muscles pressing against his sides. Like being hugged by a sapling. He put his arms around her and rested his chin on her shoulder, staring at her pink-tinged towel crumpled on the counter.

When she spoke, her voice was muffled and Manny could feel the heat from her breath against his chest.

“It is very easy to lose people these days.”

She stepped back from him and looked down at her t-shirt.

“Why won’t you help us?” she asked Jeltje’s image on her t-shirt, imitating Manny’s American accent. “We can’t figure it out ourselves. I’m a music super hero not omniscient. I don’t know what to do. My friend doesn’t either.”

Manny laughed a little.

From the other room, they heard the newscaster announce that the ESA was ready. Femke sighed.



“This is a very sad day for the Dutch people. Come, let us see what they have to say.” She grabbed her towel from the counter. “And bring your *Hagelslag*.”

This is what they learned: At five-thirty GMT, the orbital space station, Tiangong-3 (which meant *Heavenly Palace 3* in Chinese), had been obliterated by an unconfirmed object variously reported as a rogue meteor from the Kuiper Belt, a Nepalese GPS satellite and an untracked piece of space junk the size of a refrigerator. It wasn't until a posting on a terrorist website claiming responsibility that the ESA confirmed that the Nepalese satellite's orbital software had been hacked. With just a few lines of code changed, the six-ton mass altered its course barreling at the peaceful floating world of Tiangong-3. The station's crew had been in the core module taping an interview for a children's educational channel when the satellite went through the module's aluminum shell, the layers of Kevlar and ceramic fabric with the ease of a soda can punching through a wet paper towel. Of course, the ESA didn't say it that way, but Manny imagined the scene of terror and confusion.

With great regret the Chinese National Space Administration finally admitted that the full compliment of international crewmembers had been lost. The satellite's impact was so sudden and catastrophic that the crew, dressed only in their flight shorts and polos, had no time to get into their pressure suits. The cold and hostile environment of space, Manny thought, must have felt so absolutely final to the crew members as they were sucked from the safety of the station.

The ESA official reported, “It was too late for a Red Threshold notice—that is—a notice for the crew to retreat to the safety of the escape vehicle *Shenzou*, which means—

meant—‘Magic Boat.’ They were to have stayed in the *Shenzou* with the hatches closed.” “Until when?” asked a reporter from off camera. The ESA official took a deep breath. She was about Manny’s age with a streak of white in her black hair like a quartz vein. Behind her, a montage of file footage featuring the station’s crew played on a flat panel the size of one of Konig’s portraits. “Until the danger of collision passed,” she said. “Or if there was positive contact.” Then a roar of questions and camera shutters *shooshing* like the metallic wings of clockwork birds taking flight.

### **Rising Stars**

Manny and Femke sat on her tiny couch watching the news coverage. In the second hour of France 24’s coverage new footage emerged of Tiangong’s doom. Captured by an amateur astronomer in Sitka with a 10-inch reflector telescope in his backyard, the footage showed the space station immediately after being hit by the satellite. In a strange case of serendipity the man who captured the footage, Ralf Vandenberg, came from the Netherlands. A Jeltje fan, the former nuclear engineer was interviewed live on Skype reacting to the terrorist act.

“I am become Death, destroyer of worlds,” said po faced Ralf. France 24’s newscaster stumbled over his apparent non-sequiter.

Manny felt a little queasy at Ralf’s footage of the space station slowly spinning like a crushed dragonfly on black water.

Since the tragedy very much qualified as a terrorist attack, he wondered if there might be a knock on Ralf’s door in Sitka announcing the arrival of American intelligence. Even if the agents took the SD card from Ralf’s camera and yanked the hard drive from

his computer, they couldn't erase his memory of the tragedy could they? Manny thought of Cornelius' impromptu cinema lesson and the Lumiere's race to capture the memories of the world. It bothered him that Cornelius, Konig and Donald, in their own way, spoke of an unsettling kind of truth. God, imagine being stuck in an elevator with those three—one in a tinfoil hat, one astride a purple beach cruiser and one in five-point restraints.

Perhaps they had a similar prescience to his, he thought. Manny knew that Some People I Know were the next big thing that *crossFade* had predicted. What was his entry point though? Stuck there in Femke's flat amid a national tragedy he figured that he'd have to be quite the asshole to ask, "You have to take me to Some People I Know."

He turned to Femke who was texting furiously while snatching glances at the news. Her green eyes and magenta hair combined with her flicking, jerking head movements reminded him again of her general bird-like set up. What was he doing here, he thought.

"You have to take me to Some People I Know," he said.

To his surprise she answered, "Yes, of course."

"Wait, when?"

"Very soon we will go to Konig's."

"Again? Why, is that where the band is?"

"Yes, they will be there. And many people saying goodbye to Jeltje. I have been texting with Konig. Everyone in the courtyard is helping to make the lanterns."

"Lanterns?"

“To send up to Jeltje. Have you ever been to Thailand, Manny? Chiang Mai? They fill the sky with lanterns at the Yi Ping festival. They are simple things of paper and bamboo, like a very small hot-air balloon. When the lanterns begin to float upwards it is like watching thousands of glowing jellyfish rising to the heavens. I saw this when I travelled there last year.”

“No, I haven’t seen that.”

“My step mother had died from a *Beroerte*—a stroke—two months prior. We were very close. I guess I needed to get far away from home, so I went to Thailand. On the day that she died, we had argued. It was over something stupid, a guy that I was dating. I remember leaving my father’s flat thinking that my stepmother was an unreasonable cow. An hour later, my brother texted me that she had collapsed over her *koffie* at a café she liked to go to. She fancied the pastries there because the baker was French.”

“I’m sorry—not about the French baker, I mean, I’m sorry for your loss.”

“I know and thank you. It was very difficult for my family to lose her. She was our anchor. You see, I stopped you on the bridge because I saw how you looked staring those ridiculous locks.”

“How did I look?”

“Sad. Lost. I saw my face in yours. What did you say at Konig’s, ‘We deal now in the currency of loss?’ Yes, this is true. I almost did not stop even though I had gone to the bridge to throw my lock into the canal. I thought maybe it was better to leave you alone with your sadness.”

“Maybe,” Manny said. “But I’m glad you stopped.”

“Yes, well. Perhaps circumstance plus sadness equals connections with others nowadays. Perhaps we are all people of trauma.”

Manny thought about that. He was about to answer when Femke’s phone chimed with a new text.

“Ah, yes,” she said looking at her phone’s screen. “It is beginning. We must go to Konig’s now.”

Femke left the flat panel playing as the Prime Minister of the Netherlands addressed the empty room.

“Today, the Netherlands has become the victim of Islam...”

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Dutch shock, Manny observed on the tram ride to Konig’s, wasn’t so different than good old American. Lots of wide staring eyes focused on the middle distance of nowhere. Ragged sobs caught and stifled with fists over mouths. The carriage seemed to transmit a low-frequency throb of mourning that only increased with each stop of the tram. Was everybody headed to Konig’s courtyard, Manny wondered.

Manny couldn’t stop watching a boy, maybe seven or eight years old, who clutched his hands to his chest. One hand was wrapped around the other like he was applying direct pressure to a cut on the back of his hand, which was kind of weird since the little guy had a pretty serene expression. As Manny watched, the boy released the death grip on his other hand. Carefully, he peeled a piece of white paper the size of a business card away from the back of his hand. Smiling, he held his hand up to his father showing him the temporary tattoo he’d applied—Jeltje’s face, which to Manny was

becoming something iconic beyond simple commodification. The boy's distracted father gave his son a tired smile, reaching down to give his earlobe a quick caress before returning to his thoughts.

Manny stared at the legs of the passengers remembering the last moments he had with his father at the hospital. Fragmentary and non-linear, his memories came to him as fleeting images spliced at random points during the short time it took for his father to die.

Seeing his father's motionless body on the hospital bed, head turned to the side, a small red pearl of blood at his throat from the trauma team's frantic injection of something. Clutching his mother and Luis in the corridor, watching the hospital staff who had stopped working at the arrival of the crash cart and the trauma team. Holding a cup full of ice chips that he'd been feeding his father, mind reeling from his father's final whispered words to him, "I'm dead." Hearing a male voice from the trauma team repeating to his father, "Mr. Soares can you hear me?" followed by a groan that should never have come from his father. Realizing that the intubation tube taped to his dead father's mouth was a horrible deep-sea diving apparatus designed for immersion in the unknown waters of resuscitation.

There were so many images that hurt, Manny thought. But a Red Threshold retreat could never last for long. Eventually, he realized, you had to rise up from the depths to pull in new air.

Stepping off the brightly lit tram and into the night, they found themselves at the head of the column of passengers. Femke and Manny led the way from the tram to Konig's courtyard followed by the swelling sound of footfalls and hushed voices. He

turned around once, shocked at the long queue of people behind him patiently taking his lead. On the corner where the mattress had leaned against the brick wall a department store mannequin spray-painted silver was propped up. Someone had placed an oversized goldfish bowl over the mannequin's head.

As he led the crowd into the alley, Manny could see the orange flickering glow of the oil drum fires bouncing off of the brickwork at the far end. There was an electric thrum from ahead whose invisible energy became the medium that surrounded them as they approached the courtyard. Manny found himself smiling and actually tapping his thighs with his hands as if to a beat that only he could hear. He looked over at Femke who wore a similar expression. And now he felt the rush of pure excitement that always hit him moments before a band took to the stage in venues as big as a stadium and as small as The Western Lands. He remembered his night with Mission Critical and of those pure moments immersed in sound and fellowship with the survivors of The Big Shake. The crowd that had stood amid the wreckage of the Mission, that had climbed atop cars flattened by chunks of rebar-skewered concrete, that had hoisted children onto their shoulders or had gently moved the injured to the front for a better view, whether by luck or foresight, had made it out alive somehow. Femke said that it was easy to lose people nowadays. She was right.

*I'm alive, Manny thought. My father will never captain his ship again, will never cast a net, will never become a second older than when his time was cut short in a hospital bed at Stanford. My father only exists as my memories now.*

“Catharsis,” Double would've called it, nodding solemnly.

From ahead of them, the music began. Pushed from the womb-like confines of the courtyard and through the narrow alley, a haunting repeated melody of simple chords pulled from a slightly de-tuned guitar washed over them. Then the pulse of the synth laying down a steady bass line. And finally, the insect drone of the hurdy gurdy adding alien notes that made the hairs on Manny's neck rise like heliotropes following the sun.

He'd done it—he'd found the next big thing in music in a homeless encampment at the end of an alley in Amsterdam.

Of course Some People I Know would need to change their name to something befitting their birth. He'd make sure Konig heard it from him. After that, Manny would text Ian the title of his upcoming column for *slangFast*. Ian would understand the four simple words that spoke of a highly unpredictable modern life with its own unknowable speed and momentum.

Troubadours of the Disaster.

They were almost to the courtyard now. Shadows cast from firelight danced and shifted on the alley's walls almost in time to the music. It was years ago that Mr. Bojangles and the *The Pixies* set the hook in Manny, but since then he'd let the pull of music guide his instincts through so many uncharted waters. In his mind, Manny saw the sea of faces in the courtyard and the glowing warmth of the round paper lanterns held in grieving hands. He saw himself with the others releasing their lanterns into the night sky. They would rise higher and higher above the courtyard toward the hard clear stars. He hoped the lanterns would float upwards and upwards passing out of the earth's atmosphere, past whatever wreckage of Tiangong was still locked in earth's orbit and



beyond. Would they reach Jeltje van der Schip, Muhamed Ali's family, his father? With every step down the alley, he moved closer to the music.

*Adeus, pai, he thought. I'll always love you.*

Manny wanted to get to Konig's courtyard, but he wanted it to take forever.