

Fool, Foil, Capital

Break the glass, from perch to pane – break it on demand and break it in surplus, break it with relish and break it on sight, or else in the mezzo another one might. This is my mantra, therefore my seed; I take the metal with me when I go, burnish it underneath a thick leather jacket with folds and valleys that intercalate the panting breath, and pluck and prim the gossamer of the mobile corpus. Tonight – it’s a car which draws my wrath. Tomorrow it might be a corner store, or a bar, or a seedy church, or maybe a home. I don’t know why I do it, or why even I can. I am a student of love (of love of knowledge, of the *techne* and the *telos*; of the uproarious *eros* (oh how that one gets me); of the trumpeting *agape*; of big, remarkable loves for the just and the righteous; of smaller, sweatier, tingling loves too, between you and I and her and them and all), and I’m a family man. Yet I go out into the night with crowbar in hand after the wife and the kids and the regal Dalmatian are tucked and slumbering, and I break the glass and take what’s mine by the application of labor. I mix and Marx my hand with the fruit of someone else’s employ, and I extract my lecherous paw grasping a thing now transformed – not physically, not chemically, not in the arrangement of its atoms or its color or its shape, but in its *geist*. The breakage, the rummaging, the TAKING of what the whim and the fingers want – these things make those treasures MINE. I haven’t been caught yet. I don’t think they’ll ever get me. I’m smart about what I do, I really am.

I go in mostly black, from boot to breast, but I change it up often enough that the cameras – more the hapless gremlins behind them – think they’re staring at different, but similarly treacherous, little thieving men. It’s not even particularly often that I find myself scowling down the barrel of a lurid lens, but I take precautions all the same. Sometimes I even put twist in my gait here and there – a limp in my step for good measure one night, a manic skip and lift the next:

The grander the venue, the more layered the ruse. To cover my hair (what's left of it) – that's the other key I think. I draw this cavernous mask over the last ragged scraps and filaments of white, which have evaded the organic depilation, which seem intent still on clawing themselves away from the crown of my scalp (if this was two hundred years ago, Old Geronimo himself wouldn't have wanted to cull from me the emblem of his victory; that's how sad my thwarted head is).

Sometimes I need a good warm hum in my gut and haze in my head to go at it. Not too much, just enough – just *so*, just to that heavenly threshold where the creative element is left intact, but the analytical instrument is dulled, so no rational obstacle stands in the way of raw poetry, of the perfectly senseless intrusion, the romantic excision. I'll stop at the lowliest, most neon-stricken little liquor shop I can find, snatch up something cheap and with a suspiciously throaty Eastern European name which peals like that of a war criminal. The clerk –he'll be generically pockmarked, proudly single-browed, vaguely Oriental, with ears that one imagines ringing red all day, every day, such that they seem susceptible to bursting at any time – will take my money and hand over my medicine. He hates it himself, knows how awful it is, the silent respect is there. Down the stuff goes with a grimace, and when the flinch has left my mug and the bitterness my tongue, I rise a better man.

Behold! Tonight the stage of my newest percussive opera –it's a moon-silver Peugeot with Venus-lifted curves and a lewd, dripping-with-drool purr to match (though I can't hear it obviously, the thing's parked and evacuated and hibernating, and it's half past three in the morning – I just know that it *purrs*). I've never really had a fetish for these thunderous machines, like other guys do, like those guys who need to supplement their feral (secretly diminutive, hush hush) manhood with clinking and croaking metal parts which grind together to produce the puppetry of virile motion. All the same, this thing looks damn fine. And damn is it out of place.

This street – the darkest, most torrid end of 123rd, a ways off of Lex – is, to my best judgment, empty. The place reeks of dreamless slumber, and there’s an absolutely looming dullness above and around me, what with the pancaked, gray-faced habitations, the putridly steaming rooftops, the sprung and coiling fire escapes like jet-black mantises. More than that, it’s dark. There aren’t a lot of places that are really dark in this city, so I’ll usually have to do a bit of prowling before I find a spot and a mark that suit my fancy. This time I’ve strayed far from home (the lair, the trove), cozy and family-red on 168th.

There’s just one small problem – the windows on this thing, this stupendous monument to vanity and excess, are tinted a deep obsidian black. They’re outright abyssal, and even when I cup my hands around my eyes and press my guise flat against them I haven’t the faintest glimmer of insight. This isn’t how I do things – precision is my name and prudence my epithet. I like to see my prize, my treasure, my newest thing adored, before I cross the threshold and make my claim; to sunder a partition without knowledge of what lies on the other side is to relinquish the art of the whole thing. What more am I than a sniveling corner crook if I make my entrance with an empty head – the eyes will dart frantically, from corner to corner, piece to piece, inelegantly, embarrassingly, and I’ll have lost all control. But this Peugeot – my god, this thing’s absolutely perfect – calls to me with a different siren song. Intrusion is destruction. Destruction is what I want. Transparency; to see into the life of the other, the privileged, the self-made, the godly. O what mortal dare ride in such a perfect thing, so close an approximation of the divine? And what minutiae does such a man gather around himself?

I break the glass (on the front passenger’s side), from paint to pane – I’ve broken it in great surplus (there’s never really any demand, not with the fair money I make, not with the fair money the wife makes), and oh how I’ve broken it with relish. One chesty blow is all it takes,

and there's no alarm either. The hermetic chamber opens itself up to me with grace, with decent poise, and I dive into pitch black headfirst.

With the first sweep of the sightless fingers, there's just nothing in here. I wallow across taut leather – it's got a pulsating veneer to it, and what little light there is just echoes away and paints a delicate screen across the way. Every inch of sex-swept real estate is hospital-clean. I've got trouble metabolizing this kind of vacancy, you know – to my sensibility the nothingness smarts like a barren womb, a still birth (I knew this was a mistake, by god I knew it). The glove compartment! There's got to be something inside that cove of marvelous secrecy, something bright and characteristic to give me my fix. I take the plunge, and I've got my hands on something (some things), I just don't quite know what—

But all of a sudden I'm staring through the beams of a pearly gateway – no, more a wretched halogenated portico – that's leapt from the parched corner of the avenue and now onto my hunched form. I can't unbend myself with any degree of innocence or grace; there's glass caught on my jacket, my torso is fully buried (all the way up to the crux of the navel) inside this thing, and I've got both hands tucked solidly into the deepest recess of the glove compartment, rummaging, lifting, erring, panicking, and as I turn my head to face doom through the rear window I'm confronted by –*Christ*, what a fucking terror – a *face* of all heart-stopping things, an ashen and preposterously contorted *face* barely two feet from mine. It's *inside* the goddamned vehicle.

My heart surges up to my throat, then past, into my mouth, and I cry out instinctively but the cold first of shock is lodged so deep past my teeth that I barely manage a gurgle. The chemical response is staggering: every joint calcified, every muscle rendered inert, every gland wilted, and here I notice my mind dripping with all sorts of unmentionable survival imperatives. There's a

goddamned man inside this car, and he didn't so much as *ahem* at my bellowing encroachment (what sort of steely-eyed fiend takes such a thing so coolly in stride?). So now I find myself confronted by two simultaneous monsters: there's the hand of the law (these headlights are from a cop car, I'm sure of it) and now I've got to deal with this statuesque maniac whose pupils are digging a bloody trench in what remains of my sanity.

His face – at first I suspect that it's dead, what with the terrible paleness and the frozen stillness and all, but the eyes fixate upon mine with such intensity that I can almost taste the tang of petrified steel on my tongue, almost feel a cold barrel solidly wedged between my teeth. Shriill fear takes me, and I sway backwards and forwards through the graceless gloom.

Actually...

This guy is pathetic. He's coiled shamelessly in the cavernous backseat, with his elbows tucked all the way into his groin and his knees drawn up to his chest, and his hands are clasped between them almost in prayer, locked and very slightly splayed, with the index fingers loitering just barely between his lips so he can scrape back and forward at the nails with foppishly bared teeth. Eyes are flushed and wide, wide open. He's backlit by the headlights of this approaching car (please, lord, don't let it be a cop car), and his silhouette is nearly grand, foreboding, except there's enough light bouncing off the inside of the front windshield and rear view mirror to sift his face out of the darkness. And in that face – that geisha-pale, morbidly sagging, week-plus-unshaven Yule marble of a face –there's only raw, ossified terror. I mean, this man is scared shitless, that's what keeps his mouth frozen shut.

All the while this hellish white glow is descending upon me, and my options are dissolving by the quarter-second. I'm certain that this guy (whoever the hell he is) is going to jump out and holler, is going to break this fantastic non-reputation I've meticulously crafted for myself, is

going to give me up to the men with tyrannical badges. The prowling machine presses on, and advances, and advances further still, and now my mind is tossed up into an irrational tempest. A last desperate flourish: I grate myself free of shattered crystal, flick the lock open, throw out the door, and plant myself in the passenger's seat with daft conviction, like some begrudged foreign dignitary depositing a hand onto the shoulder of the President – it's a vacuous, utterly meaningless gesture, which engenders little more than eye-narrowing wariness, a final dressing of the injured dignity – and then I slam the thing shut.

Cellophane stillness for at least a full thirty seconds. All I hear is the sad, slow crunch of tires against loose pavement. This grumbling harpy – she chatters out a deathly hymn as she rolls along: *crack, crick, crack/Love and then oblivion*. Song grows louder and more menacing with each passing moment, and the wretched halo of light that accompanies its procession becomes more offensive too, until finally this monster is passing us by, barely a foot and a half removed, and I can make out the four least desirable letters in the English language, in their least desirable order, creeping discernibly across my gaze:

N – Y – P – D

My bowels are screeching now. They tell me to run, just as my squandered reason tells me to sit and stay the course, to play the game till it's up, to bear the masquerade to its conclusion. Good God I'm done for, I know it now. The wife will be shaken from her clueless slumber by the ghastliest of phone calls, and on the other end a grimy-gruff growl will break the news that'll break her; she'll sit there for a while under sickening orange lamplight, legs dangling over the bedside, one hand over her mouth, the other pressing down on her reeling heart, wondering why O why and how O how her love, her protector, her keeper, could have betrayed her so, could have thrown it all away so masterfully; then the kids – they'll rise with glorious unknowing in

their eyes and laughter on their lips, as they always do, only to face the abrupt perturbations of their father's treachery. All of this will happen (has pretty much happened already), and now I ready myself for the flashlight and the shouting and the cuffs...

But the cop car just slides on by, without the slightest hitch or deceleration, like some foal-faced angel drifting past lost spirits. And this guy frozen at my back is still mute. My God, what force (what farce?) – what terrible vice holds these two simultaneous monsters at bay, muzzles them? Can't be my goddamned luck; hasn't ever served me before. And yet this before my very eyes... As quickly as she comes, the Law removes herself from this street, leaving me to stare into receding gems of ruby-red, floating all the way to the next corner and then at last around it, until pointed disaster becomes random happenstance, and then my paws begin to quake uncontrollably.

Hideous relief. My deliverance is so clean, so cloudless, that I can barely swallow it. The hand of justice stayed, the laws of the universe suspended in my favor – is it really just luck then, my mortal enemy turned ally? Is it a roll of the dice that saves me? Surely no. I mean, it's got to be none other than the will of God (maybe the will of the Devil rings truer here). But now in search of the *why* I've lost sight of the *what* –

'Please,' this nauseating voice suddenly whimpers from behind me, *'Please. Spare a few cents.'*

I start, then cringe weirdly. Now this strangeness – one monster has passed me by and the other turns out to be a mewling cub. But before I can even shift my weight...

Again it comes, vaguely feline, mostly dead: *'I-I haven't eaten in three days man. Please, man. God Bless if ya do. A burger. Glass o' water. Please, man.'*

For fuck's sake, the very texture of this man's simpering speech sends a tick through me. I don't know why, but it's a tick of disgust, a tick of pity, and it chews away at a piece of me both corporeal and not so. The next emaciated plea will send me over the edge. I draw my flip phone from my right jacket pocket and use it to paint the interior of this godly Peugeot turquoise – I've got to see him for what he is, I've just got to; morbid curiosity is piqued to ascension. So now I twist myself round towards my host with hands still trembling and point my makeshift torch downwards first, with great reservation, to illuminate his feet, and then I track steadily upwards.

This man, the demigod who sleeps in a Peugeot – he's a lost soul for sure.

Inch by inch the form is revealed: leather Oxfords, slacks, belt, all a deep funeral – no, more banker – black; a dandyish dress shirt that I surmise used to be the most celestial white, which now finds itself afflicted by a jaundiced yellow tinge, with the top two buttons undone and several more missing along its length; a fully orthogonal, barrel-chested suit jacket that's started to fray flamboyantly at the pockets and seams. Components, all, of the great clown costume of our time. And my, how far this clown must have fallen. It's one of those done-ups that says both too much and too little about a person, if you know what I mean. A portmanteau of terrible misdeeds, purchases, professions, pageantries.

Here's a man who has, for sure, tasted well the tinctures of wealth and leisure – also a man who has lost himself within these things, has found in their distillations only compound misery, has surrendered entire swathes of his soul to artifices that he once hoped would make him whole. I almost pity him (I definitely would, were I not now possessed of a gnawing envy for what he once must have basked in).

'Please,' He mews once more, *'Help a fella out. Look at me. Just look at me man, do I look like a loser to you? I just need some help ...'*

The last bit trails off sadly, sorely, and I see that the concession of need claws at something deep and clotted in this guy. There's a noticeable skittering of raw Brooklyn twang to his syntax too; it's an intrinsically proud twang, a cadence of some majesty, except it's dulled almost into the void by prideless content. I take all this into account, alongside the fact that this man is living inside of a car that's at least one mortgage steep, as I formulate my brooding letdown.

'This...this is *your* car isn't it?' I croon with some caution.

But he goes on as if he hasn't heard, '*Look man, I don't know you, but I kept my mouth shut when the pigs rolled by... All I ask... Please, sir. Please. Let me put some food in my belly.*'

Our gazes collide terribly, and in the trashy glow of this ancient Nokia I get a real good, real tasty, real diuretic look at him. The eyes that plunge way, way deep past the brow line such that white becomes grey and grey becomes stinking tar. The beard that's started to infringe on the grotto of the mouth, with great bristling tumors of swirling grey. The thin, flat cheeks and paradoxical hook nose. It's a face that's just escaped handsome and is now settling on a grittier, slimier broadcast. Trans National it says. Look upon me in frightful thrall it says.

'What in God's name happened to you?' I whine – what a spent joke, what a fat farce.

His hands, fully ensconced and constricted between his knees, relinquish their remaining color, and he starts to bob back and forth like some sullen, engorged buoy in rough seas. '*Life, the tables, Modaf, blow – the fuck does it matter. My firm. They'll take me back. I know they will, shit. But right now I need some help, I need a bump, please sir, please, fuckin' please, please.*'

I look from him to the seats of this opulent machine, then back, then to the faultless front panel, then back, then to steering wheel groaning with fat leather and child-bearing curves, then back, then to the front windshield, all spotless, spotless, and then finally back.

‘Well for start,’ I hiss at last, pressing the issue, “why the hell don’t you sell this goddamn thing?”

- Brow and beard furrow alarmingly –

‘You know, pawn off your shoes, your suit, your belt too. You’ve got enough here to put you somewhere halfway-decent for at least a year—‘

- He unfurls his legs and tips himself forwards -

‘Just fucking sell the stuff...’

- Well shit, now I see I’ve plucked the sour chord.

‘*The Stuff*,’ He snarls, and pauses for a good five seconds (there’s such violence, such possession, such esteem all of a sudden in this teetering silence), ‘*The STUFF is MINE.*’

He’s drawn himself up to within half a foot of my face, and without warning he’s powerful and I’m powerless, and I want him to calm down but before I can say anything he rattles on—

‘I BOUGHT it, I EARNED it, I MADE it my own with this GOD mouth and this GOD brain of mine. It’s nobody else’s – it won’t ever be. It’s fuckin’ MINE.’

‘Please, man, I didn’t mean anything by it, I’m just sayi—‘

‘Do you know who you’re talking to?’ That awful Brooklyn plunk... *‘You know who the fuck you’re talking to?’*

‘No, I suppose I don’t...’

In the following ravine of understanding he inspects me, and I him; between us a lifetime of pilfered and lost capital, of the soul and the faculties atop the machines and the greenery. Then the breakage in our firmament.

‘Look, I’m done. If you won’t help yourself it’s no use how much cash I throw at you.’

At this he recoils, and I spin round to grope at the door—

'Hey. HEY! The fuck are you?—'

—I'm scrabbling helplessly for the handle.

'Fucking LOOK at me —'

—Jesus I need to get the hell out of here.

'You worthless, self-righteous piece of shit—'

—All of a sudden this guy's hands are around my neck,

'YOU ROACH-SUCKING FUCK—'

My god, it all goes on you, when you're starved of air, that's true. It's all gone on me at least. They'll tell you that it's excruciating, that it's nothing at all like going to sleep – untrue, by and by. After the first ten seconds or so the thrashing panic gives way to this odd, anesthetized tickle, like it isn't so bad after all, but at the same time it's the worst thing that could ever happen. Heaving, heaving. All this time, as I go, the guy, the man, the demigod is screaming bloody hell – some hazy diatribe about how much of a God he is, how he's worth a hundred of me, about how after he's done with me he'll strip *me* down and sell *me* for scraps, and on and on. I taste the crushing of my windpipe, can't allay it, and now as my field of temporal vision flounders, gilds itself in black (the wife and kids are already half a world away), my immutable eye (that one's still wide open) sees two different scenes playing out, one Spielberg one Scorsese: the first has me breaking this vice, wrenching the crowbar out from under my jacket, smashing his nose in with it, then spilling, sputtering out onto the sidewalk and towards the corner, reeling myself out to apogee by the post of the street sign, slingshotting away down the avenue at maximum velocity; the second has me drinking darkness by the vessel of this guy's knotted talons.

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