

## Be Good

ΚΑΠΑΝΔΡΙΤΙ

Alter jumps backwards through the channels on the living room TV. Forward up to fifty was nothing but static save for a single news program. On a hunch he presses the adjacent button and there behind 001 he strikes gold, Greek MTV, English CNN, Hellenic talk shows, a pilates exercise program that comes in blurry, and a channel called EXTRA with a timestamp in one corner and a red X in the other. It plays videos of women wearing scanty clothing and dancing with a disheartening lack of sex appeal. Each video cuts away before any of the good stuff, though the goodness of this stuff is open to debate. Editing thievery. He laughs, considers returning to MTV, but he lingers, and in Alter's mind the cylinders of memory begin to fire. A flickering rainbow of an image behind his eyes, a grainy video of a small and toned man clad in only laced-up work boots approaching a slender brunette. She seemed to like the way he held her body and her fingers tensed and loosened against the sheets. The sound was nearly muted. Alter thought they were having fun. So he watched, a boy of nearly five camped in his parents' bedroom watching an unfamiliar channel, unknowingly absorbing his most straightforward sexual lesson to date. He thinks it's ironic now, that a thought so painfully clear had for so long been relegated to his jungleland subconscious. The movie fascinated him, prodded a primal urge that he would not honestly consider for another decade.

The fear remains the same tonight as it did then: getting caught. Alter's dad inevitably came upstairs and shooed his son off to bed. He couldn't say which host, John or a member of John's family, would be more mortified to find him kneeling before the television like he was crouching beneath the Queen's sword. He wants to think John would actually be a little turned on, somehow, though by what? The same eight plasticized women gracing the screen in all these different outfits, rolling on satin sheets or through piles of feathers or strutting catwalks or

straddling a chair, thick blue eyeshadow with one nipple out and a shaved vagina and holding a telephone, one stubby photographer's idea of what's sexy to insomniac Greek men. That doesn't turn Alter on. This is a science project. He doesn't want John to get hot for this, he just wants to share the fascination. A blond with a forty-year-old face but the abs and ass of a body-building teenager pulls a cell phone out of her underwear. She makes a face that says, *Oh! It's you!*, and Alter thinks maybe it ought to be, why not? Would she understand any English? Maybe just a little Hebrew? *Oh! It's you!*

*It's never me*, he thinks. *When is it my turn*. A woman in a pink thong with ghastly dark eyes bids him goodnight, forcing a half-smile that rests on the fault line between cluelessness and truly knowing.

## BROOKLYN

A cycle of thoughts kicks into motion as Alter struggles with the stench of animal shit and piss and the low whines of at least a half-dozen caged pitbulls:

*If I could jump out that window, maybe I'd just die  
 Maybe it wouldn't even hurt so bad  
 Would it be better to land on a parked car  
 Turn around, open the window, just step out or take a graceful dive  
 Curl myself into a ball and smash through a cab windshield and be carried home*

"Drac's my pride, man, she's my everything, man," says Kenneth, stroking his monstrous dog, the only one in the apartment not chained up and caged but just as jittery as the rest. He looks at Alter, still considering a forty foot plummet on to Fulton Street, and hands him the joint. "Here."

"No thanks," Alter says.

"Just fucking smoke it, man." He does not sound angry, but instead pleading. Alter takes it and from the corner of his eye can see Kris' muscles relax as he stops fidgeting and twisting his meager dreadlocks. Harris is directly ahead of him, his attention fixed on the seven-year-old

boy sitting quietly on an unreclined futon. The futon and a side table, stacked with pipes, unlabeled clear baggies of weed and pills, and a crumpled sack of dog food, are the only pieces of furniture in the apartment. There are three rooms. One is filled with dog cages, another has a fridge and a hot plate, and Alter does not see a bathroom.

“Kenny why you call her Drac dude?” Kris asks.

“Because Dracula, man! Look at these fangs!” Kenneth laughs and grasps Drac’s face. With a hand over her eyes he pulls her face back to expose long, crooked canines and jagged brown incisors. He shakes her head with his palm and doesn’t stop until she snarls. When she turns in a flash to snap his lingering hand he proves himself superior and slaps her on the snout. She collapses straight down into a flattened position. Alter can see it is a meticulously trained one, seated with her belly to the ground, legs extended and head resting between her reddened paws. Everyone stares at Drac. Kenneth nudges her with a boot and she rises and skitters away.

Kenneth loves this animal better than the rest. As can be the case with love, however, a darkness is at the core of his affection, a charred despair, something he wants desperately to overcome and he figures Drac the pitbull will guide him. Again, as it sometimes happens, Drac doesn't seem to reciprocate. Alter thinks she seems frustrated and anxious. Unless restrained physically, she never sits still for longer than a few seconds. Her skin is mottled with fiery welts and bite marks. Her nose shines with slobber and snot. Despite Kenneth’s backwards ideas about pampering and preferential treatment, her ribs protrude, her coat's a mess.

"That's hilarious, man. Dog Dracula. That's really funny," says Kris, with a flat tone and full sincerity. Kris is easily Harris' worst drug dealer yet, not in terms of competency or drug quality, but due to a massive dearth of character. *The drugs are actually quite good*, but every

dealing between them brings to light a new addition to his personality. He is, in his most basic form, a living dartboard, across which dozens of traits have been scattered. So far, no bullseyes.

"Do you breed her?" Alter asks.

"Yeah man," says Kenneth. Alter picks up traces of a Caribbean accent. He admits to himself that it may have been imagined but nonetheless drifts back through the previous twenty minutes and applies the inflection to everything Kenneth has said. Suddenly Kenneth is not just of Barbadian descent but arrived in America four years ago stowed away in a boat's cargo hold, him and a half-dozen other frightened immigrants just looking to find their place somewhere in the greatest city in the world.

"Of course I do, she's beautiful man you see?" says Kenneth. He points a thick finger at her, to highlight her evident beauty.

"I see it," Alter says. *Maybe Trinidadian, or Tobagoan.*

"That fucking face, it's the best." *Some variety of Bahamian.*

"So Kenneth you think we –" Kris starts.

"I've been thinking about competitions you know, how to get Drac in to it, the circuit. Like, she could tear that shit up," Kenneth says, gesturing Vanna White-ly, dazed in the dog's presence.

*Gotta be at least a hundred Bahaman islands. At least, maybe more.*

"My neighbor enters his dog into those things all the time, I could get you his number," says Harris, who lives in an Upper West Side high rise with his parents. This neighbor owns a meticulously groomed greyhound. Alter hates the way it looks, narrow torso held on reedy legs like an ugly and unsound bridge.

"I would really appreciate that man," says Kenneth, a tone of true gratitude.

There's just the one tall building here, the hotel, [The Hilton](#). There's a shorter tallish building nearby. The mountains are the highest. From the top of the mountains the buildings all look short and they're all the same height, they're all so close together and everything's so narrow. It's hard to have any perspective from street-level. You have to climb to see it for real. Then you have to imagine it's all gone and it's just like it was two thousand years ago. That's all it takes, just a little mental flexing but it's not hard. Does that make sense? John seems well. I can't tell if he's mad at me though or if I'm mad at him because I've never been more tired and am not in control of myself right now. I'm happy to be here. His dad was there when he picked me up at the airport. -Alter

#### AΘHNA

Athens is a raw nerve of a city, thirty percent timeless white marble, seventy percent tightly packed tan and grey apartments painted up with Krylon. *How can this last?* is the question Alter asks John and John says essentially *It's made it this far*. The sun is setting, the streets are gold, and the sky is red-blue above Plaka.

“It'll stay alive the way every strange and unsustainable system does: stubbornness,” says John. “It'll just keep going until something incredibly drastic happens and even then how much can anything really change? We're not about to pull a full one-eighty even if maybe that's what we need. We have our habits. We love them. I speak for every Greek when I say the coffee is incredible, and I will not be giving up mid-day coffee breaks any time soon.”

“Closing in the middle of the day, or not even *opening*, for no apparent reason just seems crazy to me. Why even have a business if you won't run it?” Alter asks. John stops short in front of a narrow hole of a room, apparently a shop, though it lacks any outward notice of this. It's filled with yellowed magazines and newspapers. A scruffy graying man at a table in the back looks up above the edge of his paper and the rims of thin frames and nods and barks, “Γειασας.”

“Geia,” Alter says.

John immediately finds a stack of Greek-language *X-Men* issues to page through. “And I think it would be crazy to most Greeks that you work eight or nine hours straight every day and go home too tired and grumpy to do anything else.”

This strikes Alter as a shitty thing to say, due mostly to the basic truth of it. His mood goes black. “Why don’t we just go home,” he says.

“Soon, we’re almost there,” John says. He’s reading a thirty-year-old translation that could only further the impenetrability of the X-Men’s ’80s adventures, printed in glorious black-and-white on coarse newsprint. Orange shadows are overlaid on the odd pages. Alter flips through a magazine that looks like porn on the outside but is full of crossword puzzles, toy ads, classifieds, and single-panel comics. The comics are chunky and crude and their subjects seem to range from vague double entendres to flat-out sexual harassment. All the women have poofy hair and enormous buoys strapped tightly to their chests, and the captions end with exclamation points. The only two settings are “the office” and “home.” In the office, men wear ties; at home, their ties are loose. Dust clouds fly from every page of every book Alter rubs the grime between his fingertips.

“I need to leave,” says Alter.

“Just a sec, this is a good one,” John says. He looks up and Alter is gone. “Jesus come on I’m just reading!”

Next to the doorway, stooped against the wall, Alter hyperventilates with his head in his lap.

“What the fuck? We’re almost home, what’s the matter all of a sudden?”

“Yeah ‘all of a sudden’ sure,” Alter pants between breaths. “Sure out of nowhere right.”

“What’s —”

“I think I need to leave.”

“Seriously, we’re fifteen minutes from the apartment. We’re only a few blocks from Syntagma, you know where that is right? In relation –”

“I think I need to leave Athens,” Alter says.

John jumbles sighs and consonants and settles on, “No no you can’t do that, you can’t do that.”

“Why not! I can do whatever I want, and I want to be happy and this isn’t it.” Alter sees that this revelation has snuck up on John, a tractor trailer in his little VW Golf’s blindspot. It makes him cry. Alter winces at the sound and hurries toward the apartment. A few times he makes a wrong turn but John follows him anyway, not speaking. It’s a prideful reunion when John arrives back on Solomou and Alter is sitting on the steps of his building.

“I think I’m just hungry,” Alter says. He shakes his head like he’s trying to shake the frustration from his hair. He hates to admit that he is having a hard time, that the questions of the relationship and the worries and the new alphabet and language weigh him down. He wants to be adaptable and honest and romantic, but when John goes to work Alter spends the day alone at home and he picks fights when John returns home. Alter feels guilt. “I’m sorry,” he says. “I don’t know why this is so hard.”

“It’s okay,” says John. “It’s okay if you’re tired. You’re still jet lagged and we haven’t been eating right. Come on, I’ll make lunch.” John touches Alter on the head and steps into the foyer. “Something with rice and celery and peppers...” His voice vanishes into the building.

With the dead stare of non-understanding fixed over his smooth face Alter enjoys another sip of ouzo and sinks an inch or so deeper into his sour temper. It is marked with notes of frustration, cold jokes and foreign ironies, the occasional pounded table and much chin rubbing. He floats above the conversation like wood atop a lake, *or maybe that's the other way around.*

John seems to be handling himself well, not that Alter can be sure. The syllables just muck around in his ears. Greek sounds a bit like every language to him, flashes of grade school French and Spanish and his compulsory knowledge of Hebrew, but all garbled together so he can't read anybody's tone. The course the conversation has taken since its inception two hours ago is a mystery to him.

It had been political in nature, and graciously English in tongue. The particulars were hard to follow, he didn't know the characters or the settings, but he had seen firsthand the public's reaction to the Parliament's actions, so he could at least nod along.

As talk turned more heated, lapses into Greek became more frequent. And now? Who knows. He is tipsy and exhausted in a new and total way, but rather enjoying John's verbal sparring with his father and aunt and his aunt's older friend, who keeps pouring the drinks. Grandma dozes in a rocking chair nearly inside the fireplace.

John spits and grumbles. Fists fall to the table. A disingenuous smile flashes pearly amidst prematurely graying stubble. Alter doesn't care for the wire-brush of John's beard, and though John knows this, he decided nonetheless to keep it. "Just a few days. I'll shave as soon as we get back to Athens," he said. His father, Giorgios, said he looked stronger with it. "I swear we became better friends when I started growing facial hair."

Alter pouted. John kissed him in the doorway and his cheeks burned with the friction.



Raised chiefly by his mother, everything John does, from grocery shopping to furniture assembly, carries a motherly air. In the presence of his father's family, many of his most aggressive and bullish tendencies come alive. A formidable match for Alter's blinding whiteness, half-Jewish and -English, steeped in queerness and generations of Americanism.

Two days down, out of four to be spent on the Ethelios family farm. This excursion is close to the end of Alter's trip, which annoys him in a way that also makes him feel shameful. As with the nation that surrounds it, he cannot deny the farm's blatant beauty and subtle charm: the plot of land somewhere out in the Attica countryside, tucked off beyond a dirt road that was itself hidden from plain view, hard even for John to find. Two gates stand guard, as well as dogs and sheep, plus one pig and a cow.

Speedy is the one animal both friendly to Alter and allowed to roam the house; the rest are either staunchly wary or put away for the night, caged to compel beauty rest. Alter wonders if the dog was kept free at John's request. The pup drops his meaty face into Alter's lap. White fur flies as Alter rubs from head to tail. Ozodis, a former champion and looming shadow, observes from the corner, fighting sleep in favor of observation.

The week's sunny days included nearly seventy-degree highs, an apparently normal and anticipated late-February occurrence. The nights sank back into the frigid thirties. The purchase of wool gloves and four pairs of heavy socks had been Alter's first order of business. What he'd packed was not strong enough. The wind bit through all his fabrics. Even tonight, inside and toasty warm, he feels he can't shake the chill.

#### ATHENS

Alter was surprised to see how similar John's Athens apartment was to his New York one. Thin walls dividing small rooms painted white so many times over, modern-looking appliances, the

activity of a youthful neighborhood broadcasted from the street. The zero-dollar pricetag is the greatest difference: John's father offered to pay for his boy to live in Athens, if he would actually do it. After years of spending only summers and holidays abroad, he'd taken well to citizenry the past four months.

He still didn't sleep well, though. Alter recalled his erratic and jerky sleep pattern and now it was worse than it had ever been in New York. He didn't sleep like a man who relished the act; it was just something for him to do when there was no energy left for anything else. His nights of late had been lousy with tossing, thrown covers, kicking legs, and trips to the bathroom.

Alter knew because at night, if he wasn't crushed flat beneath an immovable mass of slumber, he was overwhelmed by wakefulness. Several people had warned that he would need to fight the urge to pass out immediately upon arrival in order to outsmart jet lag, but he was no fighter. He accepts that he fucked up, is doomed to another week of grogginess and ill-timed naps, and knows it will pass. John's fitfulness, however, worries Alter, and as a stray arm lands across his face, he resolves to fix it.

They kiss goodbye and make dinner plans and John leaves for work after lunch. Alter consults a map to make sure he understands where he is and plots a rough route based upon the street names he recognizes, though it isn't until he sees the neon lime-peel ΦΑΡΜΑΚΕΙΟ signs that he truly determines where to go. They all look the same, fronted by pristine plate glass and welcoming advertisements for hair gels or phone providers, but no two are laid out alike or share shelf arrangement techniques. One seems to offer only beauty supplies for women, plus an array of shampoos; two blocks away on Didotou, Alter walks into a pharmacy that exclusively stocks toiletries and bath items. He respects the amount of care people put into their bathing ritual here. *Everyone likes nice hair*, he thinks.

“Geia,” he says.

“Γεια,” the cashier says.

“English?” says Alter. The man nods his head and hunches his shoulders. “Do you know where I could find a more general pharmacy?” He hunches some more. “Like, less specialized?”

The man pulls a purple shampoo bottle from the wall beside him and says, “You don’t need this?”

“No, *όχι*, I need like, vitamins and pills. For your head,” he says, pointing at his head.

Alter encounters luxury clothing stores, a half dozen full cafes, stray dogs stationed in front of supermarkets and pastry shops, bored clubs and restaurants waiting out the work week, and after three more pharmacy stops: a rack of vitamins. He uses a basic understanding of uppercase Greek letters to find a melatonin supplement, but by the time he’s back in the cold sunlight he fears the gift won’t be enough or won’t feel “right” and sets off in the direction of a tea shop he knows is away from the mountain and towards the Acropolis. Alter wonders if John could ever rest soundly enough that he could leave without him noticing. Guilt hits him harder, feeling a little more like betrayal of John’s love and generosity, and he walks faster, slapping his feet on the pavement and avoiding eyes.

He arrives in Syntagma Square amid a growing crowd of dissenting students, middle-aged, and elderly folks facing down the shielded black-clad police force. Most look to just be standing and talking good naturedly, deathly serious at heart yet not opposed to an occasional smile or hug. There is a sense among the gathering that, in ways both universal and specific to the Hellenic people, this is important. A huge banner strung between light poles, obscuring the face of the Parliament, includes smaller English text below the Greek that reads

*ALL OF US WE ARE GREEKS  
MERKEL / SARKOZY ARE FREAKS*

Alter doesn't understand how they are involved. *Is it a comeback? International "staircase wit"? Wouldn't they be Greeks, too, then? Are they freaks in spite of their Greekdom, or because of it?*

On either side of the square, wide as a city block, a line of riot cops steps leisurely inward to wipe the crowd off the street like a sponge. It will take a half-hour for them to meet in the middle. The pace ensures intimidation. Alter's head swivels back and forth in search of an unpoliced exit. A heavysset and heavily bearded man smacks a hand on Alter's back. "You have nothing to worry about!" he says. His eyes are wide and roguish and watery, his jacket too wimpy for this brisk afternoon.

"I'm alright," Alter says.

"Do not be nervous! We only want to live comfortably in the place we love. We want peace like they do," he says. "The police are for show, they are making a picture. They bully us. You've seen this?"

"They look like they're dressed for a war."

The man coughs out a laugh. "They act this way on purpose! People outside Greece see this and believe them – when they act to extremes others wonder what we are doing that requires such force from the police." He gestures at the approaching black waves. Behind him four small men with kerchiefs over their mouths are walking in a crouch toward the cops. They stand and launch chunks of wood, stone, and marble. A loudspeaker amplifies Greek commands but they're beaten back by rebellious chants and frustrated noise. The man mutters, "*Όχι όχι πάλι,*" as he turns to slither through the crowd, cutting a path that Alter follows.

Hollow *FWOP FWOP FWOPs* are followed by gasps and outcry. Jackets and t-shirts become makeshift masks as tear gas spills out into the air. Alter gets a lungful of an acrid cloud before he can pull up his collar. Leaky eyes and shallow breaths don't keep him from following the big man away from the square, but only when he's a few hundred meters free does he realize he's lost sight of him, and the tea shop is somewhere in the other direction.

12 Apr

Hi, how are you? It's been a while, sorry for that. How are things going over there? A little calmer? I just wanted to drop in and say hey. I just got a dog and I was thinking about all the strays downtown, and the farm and Speedy. This dog reminds me of Ozo. She's a different breed but sorta the same color. She's been sick but I think when she's better she could be just as tough. I'll send you a picture. If you have a chance, let me know how you're doing. How's work? -Alter

ΚΑΠΑΝΔΡΑΠΙΤΙ

Speedy whimpers into Alter's cold thigh. The men and woman at the table all turn towards Alter – so shocked by the attention that he briefly fears he's going to faint – and laugh.

“Let's sit by the fire,” Giorgios calls out. John sits by Alter. Their thighs touch. Speedy sits at his side. The discourse does not cease but Alter can see it's taken a new shape, is more pliable and open to suggestion and joyful sounds, and soon it breaks back into English.

Stelios is a friend of Giorgios' sister. He wears a green satin jacket with twin white Pomeranians embroidered on the back. Four black sequins stand in for eyes. The jacket is huge but hugs his shoulders, ready to pop over his biceps. His burly frame tapers at its extremities, his ankles are thin and his hands are china-delicate. He's been watching Alter. At a lull in the political talk Stelios reaches for a coffee table book open to a page of overlapping photos of small smiling dogs.

“Awl-tare, you like dogs?”

“Sure,” he says, “of course.” He rests a palm on Speedy’s head as proof. Stelios nods, a beckon for more. “Speedy is really beautiful. How old is he, two or three years?” asks Alter, sizing up the dog.

“Six months.”

“Wow, he’s so big for a puppy –”

“He is a special dog, ένα Ελληνική ποιμενικός but unlike others, I think in under one year he will be a champion, he will be ready. He is not ready yet. He is still a baby, just this morning he was still pissing on the floor inside. More training, more training. Sophia does not agree with me, but she does not have to.” He is pointing at John’s aunt, who is smiling. “It is the nature of these sorts of games, she does not need to worry about *my* dogs. She has enough of her own to think about. This farm, it is a crazy one, you notice by now. Sheep and a goat and many dogs and cats and that *μαλάκα* pig.”

“Do not talk about little Porky like that,” says Sophia.

“What will you do with a pig! There is no use, you just wanted a new pet. Like there is nothing else worth worrying about here, the dogs’ health, the house upkeep –”

“I take care of myself.”

Stelios turns to Alter. “Often her husband, John’s *θείος*, is not here, he works all over the world doing his business, Sophia must keep this large land on her own, must watch her mother on her own, before Karolos moved out she was raising of her son, and top of all this she raises many wonderful dogs for nearly twenty years, you see the medals, the trophies, you can see she is one of the best.” Sophia does not argue the praise or the account of her trials.

Giorgios rustles at the suggestion that he does not provide equal care and support for his mother. John had explained to Alter this was basically true, though both were better than their

youngest sibling, Giánnis, for whom John was named. John was living with his uncle in New York when he and Alter met. Giánnis took a markedly hands-off approach to family, atypical for Greeks and resulting in a great rift in the clan. Alter visited him before leaving for his trip.

“I was often spoken to like I was lesser. Being made to feel low was meant to shame me into becoming great, but I only felt disrespected. You cannot live under a cloud of disrespect. You cannot build your empire on a foundation of it,” Giánnis told him. “I’ve seen the sides of my family, as any person has of his own. I can’t predict what side you’ll see, because they won’t know who you really are. Unless you can force John to come out of the closet to them.” Alter blushed. John said none of his relatives knew. “You may well receive the full tour of personalities. Please, let me know how it goes.”

Grandmother wakes and returns to her knitting. Stelios flips through the book in his lap, page after page of running bichons, smiling corgis, curious toy poodles, luxurious spitzes, all presented glamorously and with stats on average height, weight, exercise needs, and food preferences. “And all of this is not even to mention the Albanians,” he says. He closes the book. The cover reads *A Breeder’s Guide to Small Dogs, 1987-1996*.

“Óxi Stelios, no more with the Albanians,” says Georgios.

“What now about the Albanians?” asks John.

“Another robbery last week –” says Stelios.

“Seven kilometers away!” says Giorgios.

“They should not be allowed to do these things.”

“There is no evidence that they have done it! It easily could have been Greeks. People are in panic, losing jobs and food. People are in crisis.”

“What do you know about crisis?” Stelios asks.

“What do you know about Albanians?” John says.

Alter feels sludgy. Before he saw Athens he had seen neither a riot nor an Albanian. He closes his eyes and pushes just a half-inch closer into John. Giagia’s needles click through the silence. She speaks in Greek, and everyone nods. Stelios and Giorgios continue arguing.

“What did she say?” Alter whispers to John.

“Most things are unknown by most people,” John translates.

“What does that mean?”

John shrugs.

“Do you think we’re in danger, with the Albanians?” Alter says. As he’s spent most of his short-ish life avoiding situations in which he could be shot or robbed, the idea upsets him.

“Or anyone?”

“Maybe. This area is more remote, so I guess it could be more open to that kind of thing,” John says. Alter thinks about a Greek countryside with Old West lawlessness, Greek cowboys, saloons that only serve clear anise liquors. John looks at his watch. He promised Alter the night before that they would have some time alone tonight, before they had to retire to separate beds again.

“It’s getting late, γιαγιά, do you want me to take you to bed?” he asks his grandmother. She bats his hand away and he makes a sound like he wants to argue. Alter is fading and the scarf she’s been knitting is sixteen inches longer than it’d been an hour ago. When he wakes, he is under a blanket on the couch and alone in the room. The scarf and the beginnings, just the neck, of a small sweater sit by the fire, still cracking and moaning. He hears Speedy trotting through the kitchen and bumping into cabinets but he hopes it’s John, that John had just woken up for some water and was coming right back to sit with or spoon him, that John would be



nearby. He knows he is alone. He rolls his aching head off the couch and on to the floor. Speedy comes by to lick his face and place a paw on his chest.

The guest bedrooms are downstairs. Alter walks into John's and lies down behind him, draping one arm overtop and forcing the other under the pillow. It's up too high and he knows in the morning he'll have a sore shoulder but for now he rustles the skin below John's brain stem with his nose and feels fine. Just before sunup Ozodis lets out a few angry barks. A moment of stillness collapses under rising noise from all the yard's inhabitants, goat neighs and vicious growls from more dogs than Alter knew were out there. John sits up and pulls off the covers. They hear yelling in the yard. Alter is awake enough to tell that John is not exactly pleased to find him in his bed but he catches a reprieve as the voices give way to a gun shot and a dog's cry. The yelling is now distinctly Greek, and John leaves through a backdoor in the bedroom. The shouting turns to shrieks. Through the door Alter sees Aunt Sophia and John huddled over a furry, shadowy mass; the grunts and heavy-breathed calls of a foot chase grow fainter; more footsteps in the house, all over up above.

*Does he need my help?* The fresh washed sheets come up over his head, and he tucks them around his body and lies still.

MIPOOKAYN

The joint, either the same or a new one, returns to Alter. His head and his hands feel heavy, but his thoughts sharpen. "So what's up with the dogs in the cages," he says.

"They're champions in training dude," Kenneth says after taking a long drag from a different joint. "They're dangerous you know? I can't just let 'em roam."

"How many are in there," Alter says.

"I don't know like seven or eight?"

“You don’t even know?”

“The fuck does it matter to you! My dogs my problem.” With three stomps and a slam the door is shut, the problem hidden from view. Kris sees that Harris has developed a frightened face and becomes acutely aware he is the only one with a grasp on the true purpose of their visit.

“So do you think I could get that eighth now, if you’re ready?” asks Kris.

“Yeah and then you should get out of here,” Kenneth says, sifting through bags on the table. Alter feels bold.

“Let me buy a dog,” he says. “I’ll buy a dog from you, let me see them.” Alter moves toward the room. Kenneth puts a large brown palm into Alter’s chest.

“Alter,” Kris warns.

“Nah they’re not...” Kenneth hesitates. Alter exploits the pause.

“Come on you want to make money right? Why would you have them and keep them like that if you weren’t gonna sell them and get paid? Otherwise you’d let ‘em out right?”

“I take ‘em out all the time man.”

“Just let me pay you for a dog.”

The little boy whimpers and Harris sits next to him and holds his shoulder.

“Don’t you want them to be happy!” Alter yells.

“I don’t know man I don’t fucking care!” Kenneth yells.

“I’ll pay you, Kenneth.” Alter pulls out all the cash in his pocket, over two hundred dollars in tip money. “Give me a dog.” He makes a move toward Kenneth, putting the bills in his face like a weapon. Kenneth stares at them. He looks at Harris, consoling the child, and looks at Alter, trying to console himself.

“Whatever. Fine.”

After Kenneth takes the money, Drac lunges and closes a few incisors around the edge of Alter's hand. He yelps and pulls away. Kris laughs as Kenneth drags the pitbull into the dog room by the neck.

"Don't laugh at me," Alter says.

"Is it bleeding?" asks Harris.

He holds his thumb and forefinger to the light like he's looking for a watermark.

"What the fuck is the matter with you? You're stupid. Never in the history of marijuana has buying weed been this hard," says Kris

"I don't think there's blood."

Kenneth reemerges holding a medium sized chocolate pit with crusty eyes and a dripping pink snout. He sets it down on Alter's feet.

"Here. Get out."

"Do you have a leash I can have?"

"Fuck no.... Fifty dollars extra."

"I'm out of money."

"Then go!"

Alter scoops the dog and it doesn't resist. "How old is..."

"She. It's a girl. She's one." Kenneth's fingers flinch, then curl to a fist that he jams into a jacket pocket. The dog licks Alter's bitten hand.

"Thanks," says Alter.

"Yeah," says Kenneth. "Be good."

"Can I still..." Kris says.

"*Fuck no!* Get out!" says Kenneth.

They shuffle together to the A train.

“What was that?” Kris says to himself.

“What are you going to call her?” asks Harris. Alter has a few ideas. “Where do you have space for a puppy?”

“I’ll figure something out.” She turns her head closer and drools all over his shirt.