

Committee in Expiry

San Francisco

2024

November was always busy. Heat waves rolled in when they were not expected and never wanted, and brain studies proved people were consistently dumber in heat.

"Hey, but is that really true, though? I mean it makes sense that would be the case. But is it *true* true, though?"

The van pulled into the carport, a beige, baby blue retirement home in burnt tileworks.

Alex grinned. The sounds of boot straps and the plastic of their utility belts clacking. "I don't know, Chris. I'm not a real academic. I just played one on TV, see – I've already told this story."

Chris had come to expect anecdotes, but never to appreciate them. The work had always loomed. The season was nearly over – twinkles of the cold setting in at evenings, and perhaps people would be sharper, less impulsive after the holidays. But also January 1st loomed. The world had changed for the better. Voters had finally made a sensible decision. Chris, Alex, the whole team wondered how they would live now that their mandate would evaporate with a new administration.

Couldn't it be strictly conversation about weather? And not vapid attempts to retain camaraderie? Chris remembered working in retail, years ago. Sort of. Who remembers retail besides the position it held in life's timeline? Just that one gives their body over to standing and paychecks for drinking, to people angry at what they couldn't change. Chris knew this job too would fade into blunt vestiges of who and what they'd seen as time wore them into nubs, and all that remained was the echo of distant feelings.

The instant the van door opened, they could hear the screaming inside the apartment.

"Well. Cheer up, Chris," Alex's hand on a shoulder, patting. "It will be cold again. Then you can get back to your hot toddies somewhere else."

Chris turned to look. Just Alex's wink, a flare of blonde eyebrows in the pale pock scarred face. It was so terrible the way co-workers were the most familiar and vulgar strangers in life, collections of one-liners and gestures gummed into images that never felt safe.

Fingers to the front door—it was already open. The screaming only got louder as the door creaked open. Dark inside the home except the sunlight cutting through the entryway from the windows beside. Light edged over the floor — white carpet, a coffee table, wicker chairs, wooden radio, and thick, dark blood pooling in the right corner of the room. Just beside the razor bright sunlight was the dark shape of a Lay-Z-Boy, and a sacklike somebody slumped over.

And as Chris recognized the somebody as *the dead*, the screaming became a long pierce. Not even the attempt to mouth the raging amble anymore.

Chris and Alex had been on the team the longest. The very first moment was always the hardest. As though the victim — 'the victim,' as was written in the official reporting nomenclature — knew suddenly that the horror was shared among strangers, no longer alone with their — with their, whatever the feeling. Chris had never found a way to accept these people. Could understand crimes of passion, but not accept the passionate ones. This was a government job. Everyone had debts to pay.

Chris stepped into the room, one hand in the air, forward, open palmed, sensing the air with snake fingers. The other hand was on their taser.

To the left—the second Lay-Z-Boy—they all saw her there, gripping the arm rests. And she was just O for a mouth, glasses hanging by their chain, still in her blood sprayed night gown.

And there, the O took shape: "body — my body — this is my body, my body is my own — this is my body, my body is my own goddamn it, this is my body, *my body is my own body godddamn it—*"

There were two parts to this which followed the script. Chris eased forward, began reciting the rhetorical shield: "How do you feel now? Where are you now? Do you know what time it is now? How would you like me to address you now? Do you know where we are now? Do you know who the president is now?" Of course, Chris could hardly repeat that line without *eight fucking years of sourness*. But repeated it because it was still November. "Do you know who the president is *now*?"

The scream eased – she'd run out of breath. And Chris knelt before her, hand in slow motion. The woman must have been 75, must have spit fire all her life. But even this was too much. To release that fire all at once. To exert the passion of ache on someone else without restraint, begging somehow to blow it out. Blow them away.

And then more statements from the script "It's not your fault. You're the victim. It's not your fault. You're the victim. It's not your fault. You're the victim." The hand finally coming to the woman's chest.

This sense of confusion. Welling up. All of it. Her eyes were locked to some point beside the chair, out of sight.

Chris held the hand there, nodded to Alex. Could feel Alex moving, beside the chair, hand down. Glancing aside – the glint of the light. It was easy to make out the chrome barrel of the .45. The murder weapon. Maybe a weapon she'd had from her long-passed partner.

The woman took Chris by the wrist and pulled, knives for eyes. And the breathing returned then, shallow. "What I feel is my goddamnn own. What I feel is my goddamnn own."

Chris and Alex shared another cigarette with sundown and the fog rolling in to greet them.

"What will you do once it's over?" Chris asked.

"I think when-if-when I leave the city, it's got to be for the country."

A gentle laugh. "And you think you're cut out for rural life?"

"Oh. It's just different life. I've always imagined this was a way out. You know. To the hills. To the desert. Somewhere where the sun actually matters," Alex gestured toward the foggy ocean, "I want the sun to tell me the time, not people to tell me the time."

Chris wondered about arid places and hills, but also about elephants. "Do you think we will even feel better in a place like that? Like, *feel better?*"

"Yeah man. I know a guy, see. Hey – I know a couple of guys. They've got this place in the woods, you know? They're growing things, they're catching rainwater. They've got a green house. Lots of artists and actors and shit live there. The city used to be good. They built this stage there and people there and from town act and sing and read and shit, it's great man."

Chris had shared this sentiment before. Had come to the city a believer in community, that there were still 'their people.' The in-betweeners, the

aliens in bodies and minds in transition, identities in flux. It just felt like some tide had receded. Like the true expanse of space had been revealed by suction, giving a meeting place defined with caverns and sudden drops and wells. That they had moved to define new lives, learned to love alien creatures luminous and nameless. But now, the larger world was swelling back in again in red tides, rushing back to send them all reeling, losing ground, clambering over one another to find footing again, unaware of who they were trampling back into the ocean. The bubble had popped. San Francisco had drowned. And who was left? And what was left?

Chris had loved the city before. The ebb and flow of inundation and suffocation and technology and society and rage. Even *agreeing* with peers had become dangerous since 2016. Nobody could be trusted – especially not with their language, the most weaponized facsimile of culture.

Chris had fled the conversation even before taking the loathsome government job. It had been survival for years already. Education paid enough to share a hallway in the city with seven others and twice as many bicycles – Chris was an anxious person. Crowded spaces weren't an option. Had always assumed a partner would wander into life to share – likewise, nothing lasted. Got cock from apps, sometimes got pussy, and the interactions remained only transactional despite their volume. Remained in the cheap, dim in-law alone without partner after their ex, and with few friends. Howling in the morning, wailing at night. Chris wasn't a messianic programmer or a sublime designer or a holy disrupter or even a common DJ. Everyone had debts to pay. Literally *all* of Chris' peers owed at least forty thousand dollars to education, worked two jobs, paid down debt thirteen dollars at a time for degrees meant to help describe the world stage shit show and the past a little better, yet still felt they belonged nowhere and understood almost nothing.

So. Debts to pay. The administration would expunge everything for a job which only cost the dignity that already evaporated eight years ago. Deescalating rage in legalized 'crimes of passion' with a fucking super-script that always worked, crafted by the deplorable, academic elites the Republicans and the American Exceptionalists detested. The Right knew it could always employ detestable, intelligent deplorables since they had too much debt to remain conscientious, and depression spared nobody, ever. And neither did alcohol. And neither did rage.

In their years together, Chris and Alex and their team had mostly seen angry men weeping over bodies of once lovers, once sons, once brothers, fathers, and grandfathers. Sometimes they saw angry women with wild eyes and

blood to the elbow, and some disruptor or designer with bruised knuckles sliced to confetti on their kitchen floor. They saw a DJ in a Market Street bar bathroom, laughing and crying and his guts spilling. They saw storied others with straight razors and bathtubs with bodies and blood and blood and blood. The committee in expiry had de-escalated everything on the spectrum of violence by making murderers victims. Some 'victims' they related to more than others. None of them they came to accept.

Alex kept rambling about leaving the city, about some deconstructed place in the hills or the desert or the woods, and Chris could only feel contrary, could only smoke fast and light a second and third and rage. Do you get it? Our generation was doomed to be in-betweeners, conceived in the fat and fluoride of the 1980s. You never felt you belonged anywhere – why would you feel you belong there? You could never hold the space for yourself here – how would you find the way to hold it there? You tried hard to stay in the family here – you were isolated, you withdrew, you fell into a well of feeling so fucking deep in earth that the world above was a pinprick, and the sun and the moon and the city all blended into the same unreachable, unearned point. A single star as beyond reach as 40,000. Praying to God the well didn't fill with ocean water from the rising tide before you climbed back out.

But Chris mentioned none of this. How much of this was the way the world really was for their generation, and how much of the was a hyperbolic expression of stratified grief? Debt to pay, forever debt to pay.

"Yeah. Yeah, Alex. Totally. I think you're right. Yeah, we should leave tech city. Yeah, we should go somewhere new. You know things will be different. You know we will feel better in a new place."

Did you know that other generations are one hundred percent sure that piss-blasted millennials are destroying the entire fucking planet over a craft brew? Chris read all about it – they knew *all of it*. Because they were to blame for the collapse, felt it in their bones, and accepted this.

Millennials are killing buffalo wings. Millennials are killing napkins, killing straws, killing reservoir glasses. Millennials killed Hooters and killed Hoses and killed strip clubs, killed the dollar bill, killed Mike Tyson and their own grandparents and typhoid fevered music. Millennials killed music, generally speaking. Millennials reinvented toast but killed cereal, generally speaking. Millennials killed homeownership. Millennials killed ownership, millennials killed credit, millennials killed the credits

for the movies by demanding more movie, then staying home - not staying in a house they couldn't afford, but in a *home* they couldn't afford, laughing about it with rapier swiped smiles. Millennials soaked pronouns in acid and then massacred family values. Millennials killed stereotypes, millennials killed binoculars, millennials killed pay-as-you-go with pay-to-win, and killed Monopoly with polyamory, and killed bullshit with rebranding. Millennials will eat ass on a first date over a craft beer, but will never eat McDonalds - *ever again*. Eating ass is how millennials killed McDonalds and killed marriage. Millennials then killed bath bombs and bars of soap.

Chris wondered how millennials could ever wash their hands now without bars of soap. How would their wash their hands of anything?

This was the comic relief news article Chris read on the second-to-last day of work with the committee in expiry.

They entered the 2nd story Ingleside apartment, and immediately were greeted with the scent of lilies. A spacious one bedroom, a golden shag carpet. It was adorned with framed portraits of The Reverend Mother, the Rosetta mission, Buddha, Chun Li, David Bowie. Five hundred CDs and one hundred LPs and a TV and a stereo and hints of lavender bar soap and omelets and Cinnamon Toast Crunch.

A youthful man approaching 40, paling olive skin and slicked black hair and a crooked face and an old fashioned charcoal three piece, crying while laughing, sat cradling an AR-15 in the windowsill. A thousand manuscript papers blowing from the open window, and this man just crying laughing as the sun set into the Pacific.

Chris moved forward with fingers outstretched towards the man, Alex and team fanning to either side.

Immediately, though, exchanging glances, they saw there was no corpse, no body, just the man alone with his rifle.

The man locked eyes with Chris, still with the laughing crying.

Nobody knew what to do. Someone had lied to the police, or the police had lied. Chris began to recite the script. And the first, only time, their voice wavered, never having deescalated *this* scene. "How do you feel now? Where are you now? Do you know what time it is now?"

The man's voice was raw from acid and cigarettes. "How do I feel? Where are we? Just the shape of years of wonder. The shape of time. And wonder that this shape could be filled by the help of my friends, or a lover, or one hundred lovers. One hundred lovers crying tears in rain. That the void could

have a shield in its own shape. That the void could find me a compass." He spit into open air in the room. "But *that god damn knowing* I'd always feel this way. The knowing it would never end until *I said so*. The knowing no achievement would be enough, and nobody could help me feel enough. But then—" The soliloquy paused. The man shook the rifle. The man shook his face. "If I could only find the time again, in the cool parts, like shallow water, where I felt *just okay*. A *breeze*, or something like distraction. It was always with people long gone. With my exes lost to lives that don't make myths from happenstance like I do. People moving on, beings moving, always moving on, and I in this—" and slowing again, voice heavy, downcast eyes, he began to cry—"a spiral. I hate this. I could commit nothing to the world besides dropping and hoping, or letting slip and giving up, or ebbing and giving in." It was a smile, then. Almost a shrug. Almost a laugh. A tightening grip. A slowly squeezing finger. "Yeah. This is giving in."

Chris felt the heat, the pull. "But," and trying to find the script again. "Matthew - Don't. But. Don't it. Don't it. Don't it. Where are you now? Do you know what time it is now?"

He sliced eyes through Chris like a ravenous snake. "Oh. Please. You know what fucking time it is now. And you know where you are now."

When January 1st had finally come, Chris voided sobriety at 6:33 PM drinking Jaded Ladies at The Royal Cuckoo, their favorite bar surely missed. A red-lit bastion with faded paintings of dead jazz musicians with pinpricks for eyes watched down from the ceiling. Glassy staring marbles of taxidermied busts, gazelle, blowfish, macaques. The bartender wore suspenders and bowler hat and tattoos of manatee, and was so thin. An organist and black dressed singer played, angelic voices and numb faces. *She got a black dress on, for a thousand dollars, she wail and she moan.*

A handful of neighborhood regulars at that hour, four or five dotting the bar. A couple of others on the rotting dark corner loveseat beside leather armchairs, drinking and restraining too loud laughing.

Sobriety had merely been insurance against the spiteful trade of government work, of Passion Workers, rather than a lifestyle. Chris wondered if they would cry sitting in the bar alone with the second and third and fourth Jaded Lady.

This wasn't mourning the city having changed—yes, the DJs and disrupters and designers and programmers, the trash of their art littering sidewalks. It was ten years since any of that was sad. Maybe more so Chris

was mourning the end of dreaming. And accepting that life really could just be drinking to hide feelings. That life could just be any of forty ways to make desire and feeling all dumb in versions of dopamine. And do work. And persist. As plaintive as the rumination was to Chris, it was nonetheless the rumination that fueled a lifetime of sorrow.

The entire bar turned to the couple in the corner—the first partner slapped the second hard across the face, knocking them into the wicker chair and to the floor.

But the two partners only grew strong in laughter, “sorry—so sorry—so sorry. Namaste motherfuckers,” the second partner laughed before jumping up, hugging the first partner, guzzling what remained of the cocktail.

Chris, too, was able to laugh. Finally. Chris studied the pair as best they could in the dim light.

Both partners in dark, fitted articles. They swooned, drunk love at their necks and sides and thighs. The first partner wore a tight jumpsuit with flared capris, knee high boots, spiked collar and fedora. The second partner wore Han Solo pants, a fiery pompadour, an open black vest, tattoos across chest and breasts and ribs. One tattoo in particular.

It was challenging to make it out. But, squinting, swirling circus letters, color, art nouveau: *This is a curated body of violence.*

Just look at that. Take it all in. This is a curated body of violence.

Chris wasn't sure if it was laughing or crying. How many years had they spent working? Crafting an identity? Finding a purpose? All that was left were a hundred Jaded Ladies – alcohol – pain, laughter, certainty, and *alcohol*, and *alcohol*, and *alcohol*, and each body of curated violence.

Alex hadn't been wrong about running to the woods with the strays and the carneys – Chris wanted to say something in a text message right then, but had learned to never, ever send a drunk text. Alex hadn't been wrong, nor had the couple at the bar slapping each other to the floor. God forbid – but nor had the woman in the blood sprayed nightgown howling and howling after gunning down some scum from the Lay-Z-Boy. What about the writer alone in the tower with his rifle? How many others had not been wrong?

The city and nobody else had ever stopped howling. There were only ways to conduct it that nobody found yet, to find the space to howl together, to howl *on time*, to howl *in sync* in the worst and most beautiful ways, to not rip each other to confetti. This is a curated body of violence.

Chris came back to the moment again. And the first partner approached with wild eyes and a grin.

"Hello, and thank you," Chris laughed and cried and laughed.

"Honestly. What's your fucking problem, dude?"

An ingrained response. "Don't call me dude."

The eyes flaring with white all around. "Excuse me? Well why the fuck shouldn't I?"

"It was just - your tattoo - and thank you so much - " they laughed and cried again. "And that's not who I am."

The second partner grabbed Chris by the collar, front and center - the bartender, the musicians, the locals. This is a curated body of violence.

The next moment - Chris remembered being hauled outside, finally cold again, finally sharp again, and the ringing in the skull, the first bell, the second, the third, of being pummeled hard by restless fists.

But then the diligence. The training. The work. All of it returning.

Chris pushed away, sat up, spit blood to the sidewalk, held out two fingers to sense the air, and hissed through a broken jaw. "How do you feel now? Where are you now? Do you know what time it is now? How would you like me to address you now? Do you know where we are now?"