

TRIGGER WARNING

The alarm stabbed. TJ rolled over, flailed at his nightstand. A second stab. Stephanie's side empty. Her pillows on the floor. TJ sat up. Gone. She'd left. Another stab. Across the room on the bookcase, between her snow globes, he spied the blinking red lights. Damn. She'd moved the clock. Barefoot he crossed the room. Mid squawk he slapped the alarm off. Red blinking 6:15 mocked. He'd been dreaming. His father or Oberg, hooded, angry had been chasing him. He'd been running, heel bleeding. A dream because there'd been no pain. He'd grabbed a sheet of paper to staunch the bleeding or to defend himself. Absurd. He shivered. His heel itched. He rubbed at it with his big toe. He was glad to have been snatched out of the dream. 6:17. He'd said he wanted to get up early, get some work done. He stretched, searched for a note. Stephanie's boots, scarf, coat, purse, hat all gone. Gone without a word. Then he remembered. She'd moved the stupid clock to make sure he'd get up. Late last night an urgent text from her father. She'd have to leave first thing to help him decipher something, a formula maybe, he'd discovered in Oberg's hand. Would the haunting never end. TJ found pants, matching, clean socks under a chair. On the table, an empty wine bottle, a dish of something congealed, remains of last night's dinner, the place a mess. She'd said she'd help clean up. Fuck it. Fuck her, fuck him. He'd bolt, go to his office. He was behind, way behind. At his desk, he'd get one set of papers done before his first class, maybe two, if he hurried.

Hatted and gloved, under a pale winter sun, he snagged a cup of coffee, black. Juggled it and his briefcase crammed with ungraded papers, hustled on toward the subway. The sidewalk glittered. He swerved to avoid a smear of dog shit. His briefcase clipped his knee. A skateboarder in a T shirt whizzed by. Asshole. He'd never been that young, never'd wanted to be. In front of him, as if urging him to hurry, cigar shaped puffs of breath. He gulped a swig of coffee, choked. What was that saying about seeing your breath; the Weather? Age? Disease? If he caught up to the little, gray puffs, swallowed them, would he disappear. He opened his mouth. Did he want to disappear. Oberg had. He took another swig of coffee, hot but vile. He tossed it. Heard its thunk. His throat rasped.

Nine minutes before seven, the platform dank, crowded, the orange sign board blinking blindly next train three mins; following train, eleven mins, he was in luck. A city that never slept, never woke either. An express in the opposite direction thundered by. Two teens one hooded, the other in a leather

jacket at the edge of the platform, beyond the thick yellow line, kicked at each other. They spun and kicked. Brilliant. Where were their swords. TJ edged back. He had without doubt been that young. Now all he hoped was what ever the little shits were up to wouldn't delay his train. He wanted to shout at them, explain the rules of Oberg's game, Russian roulette. That would challenge their bravado. A cyclops eye of light charged at them out of the tunnel. The hooded one leaned out over the track, waved his arm like signaling for a cab. The other grabbed his shoulder. Push or pull? It would be over in a moment. Behind him a woman screamed. The train shuddered to a halt, the doors slid open he was shoved in behind the two teens. The car stank. He sneezed, could not reach into his pocket. The teens forced their way to the center of the car. The train lurched. TJ grabbed a strap. His briefcase wedged against his knee. In the ghastly light, at the far end of the car he glimpsed a tall, pale, angular face. Oberg. His heart clenched. He closed his eyes. Impossible. It would not be. He took a steadying breath, cracked his eyes open. Tall, pale, angular, unruly hair, unshaven, similar, very similar but not Oberg. Could not be. The train hurtled through the tunnel. The lights flickered, went out. Mutterings in the dark. The lights popped back on. Oberg's look alike was gone. TJ craned his neck. He spotted the teens, the others who'd boarded with him, but no tall, pale, angular figure.

On the twenty minute walk to campus he tried to shed the vision of Oberg. Bare branches, scruffy dead patches of grass, brown leaves clinging to shrubs, a scattering of sparrows, at every step, Oberg scoffed. 'You go buddy-boy. You do the good life, pied piper to the young, the impressionable, the gullible, leading them into the widening gyre. O yee willing to play the devil's hornpipe.' Fuck him. TJ wanted to lash out, to curse him, to weep. He'd been the coward.

They'd met in their last year of hi-school, two life times ago, at one of those ego boosting, resume polishing debate camps. First morning at breakfast, a round faced, long haired girl sat opposite. A lanky, wild haired boy straddled the seat next to her, juttied his chin out, said, as if an invitation to duel, "Meet Stephanie." Like she'd given birth to him, Stephanie beamed with pride, pulled her hair to the side, jerked her thumb, "He's Oberg." Oberg said, "I'm studying Japanese." Stephanie smiled, "He already knows Greek and Latin." Oberg said, "Yeh, Homer's much better in the original. Japanese isn't for the linguistics. It's for understanding World War Two." His dad had been killed at Iwo Jima. All through breakfast, TJ wondered how full of shit he, they were. That night in front of a roaring fire, Oberg, back against a post, legs straight out, the Loeb Classic Odyssey open on his lap, Steph sitting side saddle by him, chanted sections in Greek. A circle formed around them. Homer as perhaps it had been originally, stirred them all. Over the week TJ learned Oberg knew all about the Sophists and the origins of debate in the Athenian polis. He'd read all of Dostoevsky. TJ's favorite author. He spoke German and had read Kafka in German, another of TJ's favorites. He went off on the word, *verkehr*,

did TJ remember it, remember where it occurred at the end of *The Judgement*. TJ nodded and at the same time shook his head. Listening to Oberg was like that, it made him wonder what universe he was in. Verkehr meant traffic and sexual intercourse. It was untranslatable. He should remember that next time he read *The Judgement*. Oberg's real interest, his first love was maths. Thinking it was a lisp or an affectation, TJ almost laughed. Oberg was skeptical about college, had not applied. Steph's father, a Princeton maths professor, said he should skip college and just get his Ph.D. in linear algebra.

At the top of the steps to Huntley Hall, TJ paused. Puffs of breath hovered in front of him. He wanted to confront Oberg, to humiliate him. He waited for Oberg to open the bronze clad doors. 'Go ahead you shit,' He grinned, 'go ahead. You can't can you. Can't do it or do it again. Fuck you.' He shouldered his way through into the stale, florescent light.

"You be early." Mo leaning on his dry mop, saluted him. "You done cracked dawn. You going for the best crumbs."

"Yeh, and all you gotta do is keep the crumbs off the stairs."

"Yes, sir. Yes, young master. You be saying so." He laughed.

"Me." TJ raised his briefcase, "Master of the Universe."

"Not yet. Not yet young master, not even master of the Uni." Mo's laugh followed him up the stairs.

Light leaked from under his office door. Damn and double damn. Could bubbly Renee, first year T.A. already be there. She never arrived before ten. Had she slept there. She'd never shut up. He wouldn't get a thing done. He cracked the door open, heard, "what if he ..." winced. Renee glanced up, glasses magnified her eyes. It made him feel like he was in a fish bowl. Her cheeks were pink. "Good morning to you." Her black curls bounced. "You're here awfully early. Anything special? Are you O.K.?"

"You're the early one." She was too well put together, hair, make-up, lipstick to have spent the night. TJ swept two styrofoam cups, one with lipstick, off his desk. "I'm fine. Just fine. Thank you. Need to get a ton of work done. Sorry if you were recording."

Renee blushed. Had she been talking out loud. Her mother would laugh at her. A small framed photo of her parents stood on a corner of her desk. She shook her head. "Did I say do it? I just don't want him to do it here. I'm worrying"

Boundaries. What the hell, boundaries were a good thing, a necessity in so cramped a space. He'd forget the coffee cups especially if it would quiet Renee. He'd carped enough about that sort of thing. He opened his briefcase. Papers, like a multi scaled beast slithered out, covered his desk, surrounded the glass globe Steph had given him.

Renee swiveled to face him, crossed her legs. “Did you see Dean Swiegart's memo?”

“In four years I've not read one f-ing Swiegart memo.” An Oberg worthy response. On the phone once, Oberg had howled at him. 'If you want to tell me something do it to my face.' King of contradictions, Oberg himself wrote obsessively to him, to others: notes, letters, postcards, self confessional haiku, koans all handwritten, all inscrutable even after you mastered his crabbed script. Steph had saved hundreds of them. TJ glanced down. The anxiety on Renee's face registered. He relented. He had to bury Oberg. She didn't deserve him, nobody did. He gentled his voice, “What was on the good dean's mind?”

Renee pushed her glasses up. “It was about trigger warnings.” Her red finger nails made air quotes. “It included examples and explanations and a stark reminder that everyone must be more sensitive like more conscious of what a trigger warning might be. What might upset?”

“I'm a walking trigger warning.” TJ couldn't help himself. Boundaries evolved into mind fuck prisons.

“Don't do that. You can't just like laugh it off.” Renee turned sideways. “It's a serious problem.”

TJ repressed for whom.

“Dean Swiegart's memo gave examples, many, like real life specific examples. You must have a copy. It included a long list; violence, threats, sexuality, race, ethnicity, nationality, religion, especially matters of deep theological belief. He stressed the recent case in Art History.”

“Yeh, clueless, showing a Black Jesus with an erection beaten bloody.” Oberg had had a bloody Jesus tattooed on his back minus the erection. TJ had challenged him, 'for Christ's sake why there. You can't see it.'

'It's not for me, stupid. How crazy would that be. It's for the undertakers, the clods who prepare the body. I want them to know. To understand.'

What? TJ had felt like screaming, What? Understand what? He still felt like screaming.

“Stop. Stop it.” Renee's words clanged.

Had he shouted? He cringed.

“You know he lost his job over it.”

TJ nodded, sat at his desk. “Yes, he did.” Last month the campus had been roiled. Everyone had a loud, obnoxious opinion. There were no Black Jews. He wasn't circumcised so not a Jew. He wasn't Black because his mother was a virgin. It was a hoax. Of course he was Black look at its size. TJ shrugged, “But what are you so worried about?” He did not suppress “You're not going to show some stick in the eye art are you?” He began to stack the papers in piles. “Why don't you open the blinds? It feels like a tomb in here.”

Renee ignored him. “I've got this student. He's”

'This student' in that tone meant troubled. TJ turned away. With Renee he doubted it was sexual and didn't give a shit, might even be good for her. All students were troubled. He let Renee's voice drift.

The September after debate camp, he'd bumped into Oberg at the 96th st station. Oberg, a black scarf looped once around his neck the ends trailing down to his boot tops looked up from a book, it turned out to be Kierkegaard, said, 'In a hurry?' TJ didn't understand what he meant. Oberg said, 'Let's walk down to the navel of the universe.' It was more command than suggestion. Again TJ didn't understand. When he did, he demurred. He wasn't going to Times Square. He'd just paid his fare.

Oberg shrugged. 'Fuck your fare. Next time jump the turn-style like ordinary folks do. We'll explore.' With no better reason, TJ followed and without apparent irony Oberg began declaiming about free will. How at every moment you had to exert your will. That or lose it. Otherwise you'd never know you were alive. Each, every moment was a fork in the road. If you will, a turning away from death. Think of Oedipus at that crossroad.' TJ remembered stopping in the middle of the sidewalk, by then they were outside Zabar's. He broke in, 'My will. I'll buy you a bagel.' Oberg had looked down at him. 'Free to me?' They both laughed. They were friends. The rest of the morning Oberg lectured on Kierkegaard. TJ's forfeiting his subway fare figured in somehow, buying his freedom to choose life over death. Always a choice. Suicide should never be a spur of the moment thing.' TJ never did quite grasp it. Later, on his own, he tried to read *Either Or*.

“Neither that or the other, I've organized the semester around soliloquies.” Renee's rising voice intruded. “Like all the ones in Shakespeare but others, of course, lots of others. Did you have any idea. There's a book on the subject, very handy.”

TJ knew he'd missed a lot but what was clearest was how stressed she was. He stood, edged by her knees, opened the blinds.

Renee had set an African Violet on the sill. Sunlight flooded the small room, illumined the portrait of Kafka over his desk. Sparrows scattered in waves from the tree outside the window.

“It's just one of the ways I've tried to improve the course.” Renee's voice sailed on. “And of course, from hundreds of soliloquies and monologues, he had to choose.” Again her red fingernails made air quotes, “*How all occasions do inform against me*. That's the one Terrence chose to do.”

TJ was glad to hear a name. It helped anchor him.

Renee shook her phone “And he's insisted on seeing me this morning to rehearse it.”

To TJ rehearse sounded like grade school.

“Normally such an insistence wouldn't bother me but like with all of his other ideations on the

same subject, all his fixations on death, changing the laws, secret suicide societies, killing oneself, the eternal peace of the after life, every time he speaks in class, every time. It's gotten so bad. Last week when he started in the class actually hissed at him. I was appalled.” Her hands fluttered came to rest in her lap. “I didn't know what to do.” She looked down, shook her phone.

TJ plunged into his morning experience on the train platform. The two teens playing their own version of Russian roulette.

“What did you do?” Renee was appalled.

Her vehemence surprised him. “Nothing. What could”

“Intervene, stop them, ask for help, counsel them.” Through her round lenses, she stared at him, “Use your phone.”

Renee was not diverted. Relating the incident had been a mistake. Stupid. She was horrified. He did not explain he'd spent a life time, Oberg's life time, intervening. He'd tried. He'd failed. They'd walked three and more times a week. In all kinds of weather, all over the city. He'd find notes, letters, poems telling him where and when to meet. Oberg was, all at the same time, father, brother and professor to him. He'd had to balance him against his classes, his studying, his part time job, his life. Sometimes he slipped. He'd even failed at getting his name straight. When he asked what's your real name, your whole name, the answers varied: Oberg, No need, Why, Call me what you will. TJ called him asshole for a month. Was Oberg his first or last name. Oberg laughed 'since when were people made twice with two names. First one at birth, second one at death. Just call me,' he twirled one end of his scarf and made a little bow, 'Dying.' They both laughed.

Early on, their second or third walk, Oberg ranting about men thinking asexually, women thinking with their wombs, TJ asked after Stephanie. 'How was she?' Oberg said, 'She's yours. She's a virgin. Her womb's had no thoughts.' A year and a half later, it was Stephanie who unravelled Oberg's anagram. Putting her finger on TJ's lips, she whispered 'Don't ever tell I told you but his real name is Oscar Bertram Granlison. It's on his birth certificate. His mother's last name is Ollericon or something like that.' Steph had never seen it written. No one seemed to know his father's name. The army had no record. Weird or not, it was one of his reasons for studying Japanese.

Renee looked at her phone. “What time do you have?”

“Five to nine.” Damn. He'd never get even one set done before his class. “What time is Terence, the troubled, coming?”

Renee shook her phone again. “9:30,” she whined. “I don't know. My stupid phone has failed. He said 9:30. He might be early. He is sometimes to class. I see him like lounging against the wall outside of class. It's weird, creepy.”

She was really worked up. He'd try the library. He started to cram his papers back in his briefcase.

“Oh, no. Don't go. Please. It would be so much better if you would stay. I'll be quiet. You can get your work done.” She stared at her phone. “It's just right now I'm worried about starting the whole Hamlet unit. All that to be or not. The not and the trigger”

“Kids who talk about it, never really do it.” TJ said. He flinched, knew it was a lie. His heel throbbed. He was only trying to help. It felt like his heel was bleeding. He wanted to toe his shoe off. He slid back into his dream. He couldn't run any faster. His breath came in rapid puffs. They were in a dungeon. He recognized Steph. It was her father's basement in New Jersey. Elena, Ringold, Owen, others he could not see. A party. A party Oberg had called. He was late, late to his own party. The music stopped. Oberg appeared his scarf morphed into a hood. 'Welcome to Plato's cave.' He sounded like a teacher. TJ loved it. 'We're going to part the shadows, separate them from substance, forever.' From under his hood, a revolver appeared. There were screams. Oberg pointed, pulled the trigger. One click. Nothing. Ringing silence. 'Don't piss yourselves. No panic. No slaves here. You're all free.' A bullet showed in his fingers, sleek and fat. Oberg fed it in a chamber, spun the cartridge, licked his finger, pointed. 'Courage. We live in fear. Courage despoils fear.' He held the gun by its barrel. 'Anyone.' He turned in the center of his circle, gun pointed down. 'One chance in six. Odds overwhelmingly in your favor.' In the dream some of the kids melted away. That had happened in the basement, too. There'd been a shuffle toward the stairs. TJ stamped on the office floor, tried to chase the pain out of his heel. Years ago they really had played Oberg's game, Russian roulette in Steph's father's basement. Oberg had offered the gun to Steph. She'd put her hands behind her back. Oberg said, 'No. No. Not for you. For me. Point the gun at me, pull the trigger. No harm. It takes more courage to live than to die.’ Steph edged as far back as she could. TJ saw she was crying. Oberg shook his head, sank to one knee in front of her. “I shouldn't have. Shouldn't have asked you. You have more courage than I do. Always will.” He stood, raised the gun, made a little bow, put the barrel to his temple.

A knock rattled the glass panel in the office door.

Renee voice leapt. “He's early.”

TJ turned to face the door, “Come in.”

The door cracked open. Mo peered in, located Renee. “Dean Swiegart's been trying to reach you. Urgent.”

