

Holler

Deke Brooks, the American, never wanted to see that eyelid again. With a moment to escape, he dropped his cigarettes, and by the time he reached down, that wet rag of an eye was upon him. His earbuds were yanked from his ear as the beats escaped from the swaying cord into St. Pancras.

“I don’t have your money,” Deke said.

The cigs were plucked from his hand, and carefully and slowly, opened. Deke knew the dirty fingernails from an exchange two days ago.

“What you want . . . I can get it from my mom,” Deke said.

There was no response.

“On the train . . . over there . . . for Paris.”

The hands played with the cigarettes.

“I can just go . . .”

The man with the cigarettes and the droopy eyelid in the green Che Guevara shirt silenced Deke with a deliberately placed cig. He told Deke that it was *illegal* to smoke indoors. “For a nic-fit, you’d better chew.”

“We are sorry to announce that the 9:31 East Midland Train service to Sheffield has been cancelled. We are sorry for the delay this will cause to your journey.”

“The money, I can . . .”

He jerked his head toward the exit. “Let’s go!” What seemed like the brown handle of a knife appeared inside his leather jacket.

Deke broke free from the guy with the messed up nose and the droopy eyelid with the face studs who looked like he huffed every chemical in his garage. He imagined punching that good eye but he ran through the train announcements, the languages odd and loud and fast, and the luggage wheels ba-thumping, ba-thumping, ba-thumping on the glossy floor. The Eurostar entrance was over there, so close, really. Not too far away, a cop stand. What kept him from shouting for help? What force kept his arms at locked at his side, unwilling to reach out? Then he chuckled. This was just shits and giggles, right? Like what he did in school.

Deke slipped through a double door with yellow rubber flaps, wheezing hard. Asthma. Fucking asthma. He hunched over in a dim, industrial hallway. On either side, gray concrete. Two locked doors, one left, and one right, further up, the lights off. He leaned against the wall. He was safe. Fucked, yes, but there were other trains. His mom would have her panties in a bunch, but it would pass, as it did, and all would be the same again: a deafening silence, a truce of unspoken resentments. Wasn't it stupid, he thought, when some thug rolled up in a car in some movie and told someone to get in, and the idiot always gets in, knowing they're headed to some dump or some river, and he's going to get whacked. Why not just run? Run fast. Get shot in the back. Or give one final death blow. He chuckled, thinking this trip was like that: "Let's take a trip, Deke," his mother said. "Get in, you're with *me* now."

"For the safety of all our customers, please remember that smoking is not allowed in the station."

Deke had wanted a quick smoke break, one more moment alone. He didn't really want to miss the train, as long as he nearly missed the train. It had been the fourth day of a twelve-day trip through Europe, a real drag on his freedom. One mother was worse enough, but now there

was a whole bus of mothers and fathers and church lady freaks from Our Lady of Sorrow Perpetual, or whatever his mom's new church was called, poppin' holy spirits from rainbow-colored travel containers. Deke slumped against the wall until his baggy jeans met the white tiled floor. No one was around. He felt for his phone. It was gone. His earbuds. Wallet. Gone. His chest was tight. He wished he had brought his inhaler, retro-fitted with something stronger, yes, that would be nice: a quick hit or two that would envelope the pain in a gaseous utopia.

He closed his eyes to a New Jersey summer afternoon; off-road mountain biking on Blueberry Hill; making ramps; capturing the jumps on video; baking around a campfire, sitting on old tires, watching the sparks; pissing on the fire; the wet twigs and leaves sending out smoke. For Deke, there was no destination. No time frames. No schedule. No dreams. Just what he wanted to do for that day, for that night. He remembered this one time, he was passed out from a mixture of tequila and weed, and his friends tied him to a chaise-lounge with leather belts, stripped him to his boxers, and left him in the woods. Messed-up assholes thought it was funny. His English teacher said that pot smoking made kids okay with boredom. It was his only honors class, and Deke didn't know any of the kids who had big plans for college and careers who his friends called pixies. How he got in the class was some colossal mistake. He got an A the year before in middle school for doing absolutely nothing except writing a poem about a tape dispenser, and they pushed him up. "For the challenge."

"If you're bored, get out and do something, be something," his English teacher said. "But I guess it's easier to light up and sit back and giggle at nothing, right?" He failed the class. His friends teased him for being a "try-hard."

So in the woods Deke woke up to no one, except the happy birds. He was unable to scratch the bites. He called out, but no one answered. His clothes hung from a branch. He felt his

phone in his back pocket. But he couldn't reach it. He wiggled, straining the leather belts. After fifteen minutes of rocking, one of the legs collapsed, and he fell backwards, his head a halo of pine needles and leaves. He soon gained enough room to free his hand. But the humiliation didn't end: in black Sharpie ran the words: "Son" was on his forehead. "Of" was on his nose. And "a whore" was on his chin. A large dick was etched on his back, with a small black dot, like a pimple. A pimple on a dick, how useless. Good buddies, right? The type of friends who wouldn't show their ugly mugs at his funeral after he OD on something friendly for the weekend. With his naked knees snuggled tight against his chest, alone for the longest time, he squeezed himself like a wet rag and cried.

Deke felt lousy that his mom had been frantic for two days he went "missing," but he didn't know what to say except "sorry." Two days he spent trying to erase his new face, moving from the basement of one friend to another. He cut school and didn't bother with the essay. He stole some clothes to toughen his image. There was no way he could return home with *that* on his face and face his mother. So it didn't surprise him, really, when his mother said she wanted to attend church for some vague reason of "getting her life on a better course."

"Doesn't it seem *ironic* to believe in magical fairies to help deal with reality?" he said.

"I've made some poor decisions," she said to Deke, who would have added "many," the first, of course, he thought was her divorce from his father whom he rarely saw anymore. The man formerly known as father retreated to Colorado and started over. He didn't even know if he was pissed off or not about the divorce. It was like being let go from a job you neither liked nor disliked. It was just an inconvenience. But it would have been much better for Deke if he spotted his mom and dad doing the nasty rather than the guy she blew on the sofa. He peeked down the stairs, and what kid wants to see that? Why did she wonder that her son never wanted to get close

to any of the guys she dated? Each guy was a torn scab that never healed. She was so caught up in her life that she never considered the trauma of yet another person being ripped from his life, over and over. This one guy got him into camping for a few months, hikes and all, and then: suddenly, he was gone. Had no say in the matter. So he just shut down to protect himself. It was not all that conscious. He refused to see “someone.” He gave the bald counselor dude at school some lip service, but he wasn’t serious. Was it out of spite, like his mom suggested? He looked up the word, and examined all the synonyms. Did he want to hurt his mother? The next morning he said, “Yeah, mom. It’s spite.” But that wasn’t the worse. No, that wasn’t the worse. And sitting there on the cold tile in the train terminal, his breathing recovering, those thoughts weighed on him like some cartoon anvil on his head. “I could’ve passed English,” he said to himself. “Did I fail to spite myself?”

Deke was thinking all of this, caught at the crossroads of drowsiness and wakefulness. The chemicals from his “vacation” were still percolating in his system. He slept horribly the night before with a mother who not only snored but gibbered in her sleep. Did a guilty conscience rattle her? It was probably the first time they shared sleeping arrangements since his days with a bottle of formula and the bassinet with the circus clown mobile. Just then the double door with yellow rubber flaps swung pen, hitting Deke on his foot. It would have smashed his toes, but he wore steel-toed Timberlands. “You can never be too careful with your feet,” his dad once told him. “A lawnmower once almost took off my toes.”

A short guy in a gray work jacket stepped into the dark hallway. Underneath the jacket, a white shirt that read “House Music.” His face was a long, pointed nose and a protruding forehead with a receding hairline. Several silver stud earrings lined the curve of his ear. Deke scrambled to

his feet, more embarrassed than scared. The short guy covered his mouth in his jacket and spoke into the jacket. “Confirmed. We have an intruder in Block 23.”

“Listen,” Deke said. “I needed to find a place to hide.”

The short guy continued into what seemed to be a concealed phone. “Affirmative. Intruder seems to be a male. U.S. variety. East Coast. Caucasian. Very caucasian. Chalky milky caucasian. Fifteen or sixteen. Weight: 8.5 stone. Without boots or bling and rings, 8 stone. Rather scrawny. 5’5 1/2’ or 5’6’ on a good day.”

“Listen, help me,” Deke said. “Just call someone.”

“I am someone,” the short guy in the House Music shirt said.

“Do you work here?” Deke asked. “At the train station.”

“Sure, it’s my terr-or-tory.”

Deke echoed the words “terror” without saying them. The short guy then mimicked static with his mouth. “Come again,” he said. “I can’t hear you.”

What was going on, Deke asked. The short guy mumbled something about an undercover officer to “thwart terrorist activity in the City of London.” He narrowed his eyes and said in all sincerity, “We ‘ave to look out for all suspicious activity. And you, my lad, look ‘ighly suspicious. An unsavory char-ic-a-ture.”

“I’m an American,” Deke said. “I missed my train. Some thug was threatening me.”

“May I see your passport?”

His mom had it. Quite unfortunate, yes. Yes. The short guy asked for name, address, social security number, address while in London . . . Deke made a move through the double doors, but the door was blocked. Something kept the door from swinging. So he grabbed the door. And there he was: the droopy eyelid guy, smiling, playing with the Mayfair pack of cigarettes.

“We wanted to return this.”

House Music laughed.

Che pushed Deke back through the doors and crumbled a cigarette. He shoved the tobacco into Deke’s mouth, worried he would start getting the DT’s. “I could stick the shit into your ass for faster absorption,” Che said. “But why would I want to violate you in that way? Do I look as queer as a nine pound note?”

House Music laughed again. He mumbled something about this one tart who soaked her tampon in vodka and then went from zero to crazy in thirty seconds. “Folks do all kinds of shit to fuck themselves up. So many running from themselves.”

Deke chewed nervously, sickened. He wanted to vomit. The guys flanked Deke. Che’s thick hands massaged his shoulder, hurting the collarbone. He felt something hard against his butt, the barrel of a gun or a . . . House Music asked Deke if he knew anything about Pinocchio or Oliver Twist. It was odd, sure, but Deke muttered only something about a long, long nose that only made House laugh. “I’ve seen you ain’t been that attentive in school, son,” he said. “Perhaps that’s why you are in this sudden state of a predicament.”

Che said that Critic was coming.

“You stiffed us, right?” House said. “And so we spotted you this morning at the Charles Dickens Inn in Bayswater, and then just followed the coach.” He said he had seen him swaggering through St. Pancras, pulling his pants over his red plaid boxers while silver chains swung across his pants. A white DC baseball cap, worn sideways, had covered his heavy black bangs. A maintenance crew was transporting toilet mirrors on a blue trolley. They had stopped for a rest and a coffee. Passing the movable wall of mirrors, Deke had paused to look at himself. Che laughed when he recounted how much time Deke took “repositioning his hat” in the mirror.

“It was like you were preparing backstage for a performance!” The Chinese tattoo on the underneath of Deke’s right arm was still pink and raw: the symbols of Ambition, Eternity, and Destiny. He had examined the fresh trauma of those fresh tattoos in the mirror, rubbing the symbol for Destiny as if to polish for good luck. To him, the tat looked like a house. Before the trip, he purchased two skull rings with red rubies. He had flashed two finger scissors, a reverse V, into the mirror, with rapping to himself.

“Those are some fresh tats. What do they mean?”

“What?”

“They don’t look right on you, I mean. Who you tryin’ to be, eh?”

“I . . . I . . . need to get to my train,” Deke mumbled, his teeth stained and dotted with shards of raw tobacco.

“Where yer from?”

“From . . . New . . . Jersey,” Deke said.

“Holla holla, Yanks don’t swalla!”

Deke bit hard on his lip, his knapsack clutched tightly, and spat the raw tobacco at Che and sprinted through the double doors with the yellow flaps like a busted drug deal. He ran, all at once, hopelessly, frantically. His white cap blew off. Immediately, Deke struck a passerby who fell to floor. A quick glance behind, Deke restored his balance without hearing “well pardon me” and ran for the exit through the brightly lit terminus, with its grand, refurbished, and glittering single span windowed-roof and gray girders, past the ginger-laced Yo! Sushi!, the Excess Baggage Company, and WH SMITH, anxious with thoughts of being pushed down and bent over and his baggy jeans stripped down over his knees, his hair pulled back hard, unable to breath as his teeth clenched a dirty bandana. He cut through the barricades of travelers, those huddled

around digital timetables, leaped over luggage and darted around dead trolleys. He spat out bits of raw tobacco as he ran, now feeling winded, the wind against his face drying the tears. He passed a kiosk with the *Evening Standard* with the headline, “Body found in South Lambeth.” He yelled, “Watch out, lady!” But Deke lost his footing and fell on his belly. His chains clinked on the floor as he sprawled on the white letters of “SUCC” from a large, blue sign on the floor, wishing “HAVE A SUCCESSFUL JOURNEY” to all passengers. He wiped away the blood from his chin. A lady in a red skirt was exiting Neal’s Yard Remedies. He followed the sign for Way Out.

Outside, the wind on Midland Road channeled through the streets. It was a dry wind, hot. Deke doubled over, panting heavily, never having ran so hard, not even that time when the police raided that house party, his pants baggy with weed, a water bong stuffed down his pants. Instinctively, he grabbed for his iPhone. But it was gone, of course – those boys were gone, and probably soon the train. He looked right. Then left. Then right. Spinning around, dazed and panicked. His mom speeding towards the English Channel. Did she even notice he was missing? Was she chatting up the tour director?

RADIATORS MADE TO ORDER and BOOK CASE’S MADE TO ORDER.

That’s what Devin read outside the terminal of St. Pancras as he walked without a plan along Midland Road. Somehow that didn’t look right. Cases is a plural noun, right? He knew enough grammar to know that. What idiots! If I was so smart, he thought, why did I just fill in bubbles on tests and draw cartoon figures on essays? His English teacher one day asked him for a walk and chat. In the crowded hallway, the teacher asked him to recall the Poe story “The

Black Cat.” He reminded Deke that narrator did things knowing it was wrong and evil, but did them anyway - just to vex himself, thinking he wasn’t worth goodness. “Is that you, Deke?” Deke just shrugged, mumbled, “I don’t know,” and went back to the classroom with his head down and hoodie on, cursing everyone who was trying to “fix him.”

The long, brown brick building was called HOPE in wide, white letters. It was closed. Who would find hope with idiots, anyway? He looked for a safe place: first, keep calm, and then find help: a sign nearby advertised the The British Library and the Magna Carta. A #46 red bus for St. Bartholomew's Hospital zoomed by. Multi-colored taxis advertising Ryanair and Vodafone waited by the station. He gazed along the A5202. A girl on a red bike would help him. He thought of circling around the station. What was the time, anyway? At the black and white striped poles for pedestrian crossings he was almost grazed for gazing the wrong way. Geoffrey Snow the tour director had said something about it being Napoleon’s fault for the way the British drove on the left. “When in doubt, blame the French,” he said.

The day was brilliantly blue. Without his phone he felt naked. He thought of asking someone for help. He wasn’t one for asking anything from anyone. A frenzied mind is not a logical mind. Somehow he needed to call his mother, but he didn’t know her number. It was all programmed in his phone. He spotted several saviors: a woman in the navy business suit from the Francis Crick Institute, an older man with a bandana coming out from PHS Teacrate truck, the three turbaned guys standing idly outside the entrance for The Royal Veterinary Institute. He continued walking. In a window, Deke stared at his reflection. What did those guys mean about rubbish in the mirror? Acting tough? Deke kicked a litter bin and slammed the soft side of his hand against a brick wall. He dabbed at his chin and saw the blood. It was ridiculous, he thought, the way he allowed those guys to mess with him. I will rip off their dicks and shove them up

their sphincter. “If I see them again . . .”

Across the street Deke spotted two elaborate iron gates. The burial ground was open. His anger evaporated as he stepped through the threshold. He spotted a painted sign for NO CYCLING. Up a few steps he rested on the Burdett-Coutts Memorial Sundial. He traced the sun through the mature trees. The shadow fell at eleven o’clock. The train had already departed. He slumped against the copper-green, wrought iron fence, on the cold cobblestone path. He would wait, return, and ask for help. The only name he knew from the travel company was Geoffrey Snow. He had tossed his free travel bag in the trash.

But then he saw House Music and Che along Midland Road. Within easy sight from the street, Deke scampered around the fenced sundial, and hurried toward St. Pancras Old Church, a church with a small Norman nave and clock tower. It rang out the exact time: eleven. A sign read: The Church is Open. He was hoping to find a friendly caretaker, but the vestry and nave were empty. And so he sat. A few rows of chestnut-brown, spindled chairs, four on each side of the aisle lined with royal blue carpet. He gazed at the SOS signs to save the church from sinking on decaying drains. The plan was to raise £350,000. There was no martyred Jesus, no three dimensional Crucified Jesus hanging above the altar. Just a medieval portrait of Jesus on the Cross and one dazzling, gilded sun, ablaze with lightning bolts and squiggles and fresh cut red and white flowers in small, crystal vases along the wall. It was eerily quiet. He liked the peace, the stillness, the damp-earth of the place.

It was ironic that he should find peace in such a place. Deke considered organized religion a racket to part the stupid people from their money. Organized religion is just a larger, older cult with better marketing. He never denied the existence of an overlord-sort-of-being, but he didn’t trust the shysters and the hucksters who peddled the word of God. In English class, he

once had to speak before the class on a soap box about whether the post-modern idea that good and evil is relative. But there on the floor, he summoned words in the shadowy shape of a prayer about his brother. He never knew this brother. No one knew this brother. Perhaps an “overlord” knew his brother. Deke read about the brother in his mother’s diary. When she was out on one of her dates, alone as his own babysitter, at the age of ten, he slipped into her bedroom and read. It was awful, he knew. He had no business there, but she was so gone, locked away in her “Eat, Pray, Love’ world, a horrible movie he saw by accident, the world she wanted when she asked his dad to leave, he wanted to find some semblance of fact, beyond the lies of the glamour and the gyms. She had secretly aborted a pregnancy a year before she divorced his dad. He read about what she thought about Deke, whether or not she would have been happier if she aborted Deke too. Deke closed the diary, the truth giving him nothing but misery. A brother would have been preferable to the stony silence of the house, the boredom, the tedium, the awkward silences at dinner.

Then one night at dinner, Deke told his mom that he knew about the abortion. It was an awful scene. Shouts and screams and Deke running out of the house, walking around the neighborhood for hours. And then calling his dad in Colorado, desperately wanting to join him. But there was no room there, either. By then, he had another son, and another soon on the way.

And that’s when Deke told his dad the news.

The words of the prayer, not formal, of course, just thoughts sent outward for assistance, were interrupted by footsteps on the brick.

A man in aviator sunglasses glasses appeared in the doorway, as confident as General MacArthur. He crossed himself in benediction. “Your mum must be worried, mate,” he said. Che and House Music appeared behind him. They kneeled. “I can’t offer you the Body of Jesus,

but I have a digestive,” the man in the aviator glasses said. “A cookie, right? I’m not sure what magical powers I have to transform it, but if you believe, what harm does it do, right?”

“I don’t believe in that shit anyway,” Deke snapped. “Who are you? What? Are there three of you now?”

“Yes, and I’m The Critic,” he said. “You heard I was coming, right? And these, are my accompanying angels.” He laughed. “Has my appearance been foreshadowed? Predicted? Foretold? Prophesied? Prognasticated? How especially adroit the English language is, eh? Wait. Let me say that better. The English language is especially adroit. So many synonyms. What adjective do you prefer? Come, then let us step outside. There are some interesting graves out here.”

The Critic scrolled through Deke’s phone. Where did they find his phone? Deke backed up, and tripped over a protruding root. As Che and House Music followed behind, he told Deke that he had passed by this church many times, but never knew of its “august” history. It once contained the remains of Mary Wollstonecraft – the mother of Mary Shelley, the author of Frankenstein. “And William Franklin, the bastard son of your own Ben Franklin,” the Critic said. They marched quietly to the tree that was known as The Hardy Tree, surrounded by gray tomb stones, piled single file like a partially opened fan. The Critic said: “Check out this verse:

‘We late-lamented, resting here,
Are mixed to human jam,
And each to each exclaims in fear,
‘I know not which I am!’

“This is some fucked up shit right here,” Che said. “Fucking spooky.”

“I know not which I am,” the Critic repeated slowly. “I know not which I am.”

The Critic said that it was from a Thomas Hardy poem. The famous British writer had

been a contractor and they had to dig up graves for a train line, and they just stacked the graves single file in a heap. “Wikipedia makes us so smart, so fast, right?”

“I must ‘ave missed ‘ardy while at ‘Ogsford,” House Music said, laughing.

“I thought that Pancras was like the pancreas. In our gut?”

“That’s not?”

“Shit, would you want a part of London called Liver or Kidney or Spleen?”

“Have you been to fucking Barking? Now that’s Bladder!”

“Who was the bloke named Pancras?”

The Critic, still reading, said he was some fourteen year old Roman orphan who was beheaded for failing to renounce Christ in the 3rd Century.

“That’s a crazy ass thing to die for,” Che said. “I’d give up me own mum before they lop of me head.” House Music punched Che and said something about his mum giving it up.

“But at least he stood for something,” Deke said suddenly. “His name lives on forever.”

The Critic was impressed. “And so shines a ray of light from the darkness!”

The Critic held the phone in front of him, contemplating its existence. He said that the knowledge of the world and of God was contained on this thing. “The whole of the known universe!” he exclaimed. “Every college and book and language, mates, right here. And what do we care about?”

“Lesbian porn.”

“That’s right!” Che said. “Who wants dicks in porn flicks?”

“Listen, what do you want?” Deke said, no longer feigning toughness. “Take the phone. Take everything. That’s payment. Not cash, no. But payment. Paid in full.”

The Critic said that the whole of the British educational system is rigged against the poor.

“We weep over *Oliver Twist*, right? But we don’t give a cod’s wallop of the poor.” He said he was poor, his father was poor, and his grandfathers were always poor. Irish. Working stiff. Good lads, but poor. “But we all pay a tax to help the rich kids not pay for college,” The Critic said. “I’ve read more books than ten rich wankers together, but because I didn’t get a piece of parchment, some dried lamb’s bladder, I’ve been consigned to the streets. Which may ‘elp my literary aspirations, as who wouldn’t want to read what I’ve been through, eh? Talk about ethos!”

“Just let me go!” Deke said.

“It’s like following the White Rabbit. You know all about the White Rabbit?”

“That’s called an *allusion*,” Che said.

“And it’s also a simile,” House Music said.

“Deke, my friend, besides upsetting the balance of economics, you also ‘ave offended my aesthetic sensibilities. Just because I’m a highly literate undesirable without the street creed of a diploma doesn’t make me unaware of metaphor. I *know* who I am. You, me, we both polish our image, right? In another life, in another time, from another family, I’d be an artist. And not some cum splatterer on canvas, mind you. A real artist. da Vinci, man. Rembrandt. Perhaps even James fucking Joyce. Eternal stuff, man. Stuff that outlives us all. I call myself The Critic. I pass judgement. I raise my pen, my finger, my voice, and all shudder. Art, you see, when extraordinary, is always good for three reasons. Integrity, execution, and vision. But bad art is limitless in its badness. That’s why bad reviews are better to read than good reviews. Villains are richer source material, right?”

“He’s a softy, this one,” Che said.

“I don’t want trouble.”

“You’re dressed for it, son,” the leader said. “You advertise trouble.” The Critic held

Deke's hand and examined the skull rings. "You desire a bit of th' devil, 'ave you? If you don't want buyers, be careful what you're selling, right? And we always judge a book by its cover, now don't we? If you don't want to appear a racist, don't wear a white sheet over your head." The Critic twisted the rings off Deke's finger like a screw and pocketed the rings. "W'at you selling, mate? 'I know not which I am.' That's the worst thing of all."

Che Guevara placed his beat-up black leather boots up against Deke's Timberlands.

"First you can take off your boots," Che said. "They look like my size."

Deke hesitated, trembling, wanting to scream; House Music reached into his pocket where he had seen something hard. It looked like a cigar case. The word CUBA was in red letters. House Music squirted himself with cologne and then squirted some at Che, who shoved him. Che poised with the end of his lit cigarette, as if to press the red-hot end into Deke's neck, but then Che merely took a drag. Deke surrendered his Timberlands. House Music opened his Harrod's bag. Che said he could also take off the hooded shirt and the chains. The Critic said it was all about the "the redistribution of wealth." Deke was now wearing nothing but jeans, red plaid boxers, and white socks, but soon the jeans were gone too, placed in the bag. Deke collapsed in humiliation on the green grass. His bare chest, with two or three scraggly hairs, heaved as he tried to catch his breath. He curled up in a fetal position and wept.

Che pulled out a copy of Karl Marx's *Communist Manifesto* from his jacket pocket; what Deke thought was the handle of a knife was just a large, stiff brown bookmark with a gold tassel. He tossed the book to the Critic who closed his eyes as if in prayer and held the book to his head.

"Let me ask the book a question: 'What should our friend learn from this?' Then he opened randomly and read:

The cheap prices of commodities are the 'eavy artillery with which it forces the barbarians' intensely obstinate 'atred of foreigners to capitulate. It compels all nations, on pain of extinction, to adopt the bourgeois mode of production; it compels 'em to introduce what it calls *civil-i-sation* into their midst."

"If I were a professor, I'd ask you to interpret this passage to your current situation," The Critic said. "But this is not an intellectual pursuit. We have a whole bag of civilization here in this Harrod's bag. Cheers, mate."

Deke's mom had warned when he was just a boy going into the NJ Turnpike rest stop. Sex traders would kidnap him. After all, there was no dad to guide him to urinate. He was too old for the women's room. Now he imagined these boy brokers would sell his patsy white ass to ass-bandits who would stuff coke down his ass and snort it out with a rolled-up fiver. Deke stood shaking, pleading, "No, no, please don't."

"Get a 'old of yerself, son," The Critic said. "I'm sure your bourgeois American mummy and daddy will replace everything."

"It's just my mom. I don't see my dad much."

"Like Lucier, so goes the fate of all the world," The Critic peered at the ground and kicked a stone. He kicked a few more stones. "Kicked out of heaven! Kicked out of Eden, we spite heaven. But what can poor sinners like us do, right? We ain't prepared fi-nan-ci-al-ly to receive expensive counseling. We're the flotsam and jetsam of modern society. Are we cut from the same nappy, you and me?"

"D-D-Deke."

"Odd name, innit, Deke?"

“It was the name of my dad’s fraternity.”

“Well, I guess that’s better than Alpha and Omega. You see, Deke, I’ve learned that ev’ry experience can lead to a greater awareness of Self. Capital S there. Self. Selfhood. Maybe you can learn something. Good from the bad, you see. I saw you actin’ thug, and you just seemed so . . . pathetic. No, you’re not really one of us.”

Che had been taking pictures of Deke in his underwear with Deke’s phone. He asked The Critic if he should send pictures to all his contacts. The Critic asked why, and Che said to embarrass the smartass little thief who stole their drugs. Deke hollered, a deep roar, lasting for several seconds, a roar that burned his throat. The Critic reached out for the phone and tossed it on the ground to Deke, though trembling, quickly scrambled to cover his chest with the phone. Just then an old caretaker with a shock of white hair shouted from the church. Another siren wailed down Midland. The caretaker moved toward them, and The Critic threw the red ruby rings like craps-dice towards Deke.

Deke stammered words staccato-like, intending, simply, to mean, “Why?”

“Dunno,” The Critic yelled back. “Bored, suppose. Summoned by some Higher Power. Perhaps I’ll come back and pray for our eternal souls.” Then, in what seemed like an afterthought. “I was never huge supporter of Apple products. Proprietary garbage, that.”

Deke kissed the tattoo that reminded him of home. He spotted the red rubies in the dirt like rolling snake eyes. What had once seen so powerful now seemed so pathetic. In his hands, in so short of time, the Critic had transformed the rings. Now they seemed just cheap costume jewelry. A theater prop. Something cheap made in China. He covered the rings in dirt. The three hooligans vanished among the mature trees, the graves, and the rolling green fields and flowers. Deke collapsed, his will spent, and the caretaker gave him a sip of water from his plastic bottle of

Avian. “Can you send a message to my mom?” Deke asked the man. He said it was under ‘mom.’ “Tell her I’m okay. Tell her Ducky is fine. She’ll know what that means. It was my nickname as a kid.”

“You’re still a kid,” the caretaker said.

Deke provided a slow, measured account of what happened. The caretaker listened, then said he would call the police. There was a bathroom if he wanted privacy to dress. And freshen up. It had been an ordeal all right. He would brew a needed fix: camomile tea. “It will ‘elp soothe the nerves.” The phone returned and the message sent, Deke scanned through the photos on his phone, seeing himself anew, the lanky figure, the scraggly hairs, the knobbly knees, the tousled hair. Why hadn’t they texted the photos? Why was he so reluctant to delete? He thought of that stupid English class and the stool and the rants they needed to do every week, and boy would he like to have another chance to prove himself with those honors kids.

The caretaker said he would find him some clothes from the donations inside. Did the style even matter? “They just need to cover me up, I guess.”