

Holler

**"The wicked people have annexed
The verses on the good;
A roaring drunkard sports the text
Teetotal Tommy should!"**

"The Levelled Graveyard" by Thomas Hardy

Deke Brooke didn't really want to miss the train to Paris, as long as he nearly missed the train. That would rattle his mom. He checked the time on his new Samsung, a birthday gift from his dad. Twenty minutes remained until the train left St. Pancras. A smoke was what he needed, as well as his space. He failed French class once as a freshman, so screw the French. With Wiz Khalifa's "We Dem Boyz" blasting sublime through his red Beats headphones, he couldn't hear the station announcements. The aroma of roasted beans forced him to smack his lips: the hotel coffee that morning was piss. He scanned for an exit sign: a quick pop out, then back. If only he had something . . . a little stronger.

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

It was the fourth day of a twelve-day trip through Europe and already he felt the drag on his freedom. He needed a fix because one mother was worse enough, but 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. Spotting the sunlight of the way out, he reached for his cigarettes, but his back pocket was empty; he spun around on his unlaced Timberlands and spotted the Mayfair pack on the glossy terminal floor, fifty feet away.

Three twenty-year old guys, smirking, materialized and approached him from Costa Coffee. They had been studying him. One guy in silver aviator sunglasses wore a black collarless shirt and summer-weight black sports jacket; his hair was slicked back as a lock of curly hair dangled in the midst of his forehead. The tallest, in a lime green Che Guevara t-shirt and brown jacket, walked in sync with the Aviator. The short guy with a white shirt that read “House Music” carried a green Harrod’s shopping bag. After picking up the pack of cigs, Deke stepped back and said without hearing himself, cocking an attitude, “Wuz ‘sup?”

He considered ducking into the safety of Thomas Pink, a high end men’s clothing retailer, but House Music blocked his retreat. “Wut you do’in wit me fags, eh?”

Che yanked the cord from Deke’s ear. “Can’t you hear?” ‘Holla, holla’ rang loud from the song.

“Hey guys,” Deke whined.

“Holla holla, get Ebola!” rapped House Music as he plucked the cigs from Deke’s hand, opened the pack, and offered the fags to his mates. Deke ducked between the two, and ran through the terminal, looking for someplace safe. Those guys were trouble. When they took his cigs and yanked his cord, he should have punched the fuckers in the face, but he just took it like a queer. Deke felt dizzy. The station was alive with competing sounds: train announcements, languages odd and loud and fast, and luggage wheels ba-thump, ba-thump, ba-thump on the glossy floor. The Eurostar entrance was just over there - so close, really, he thought. A yell for help would work. A cop stand was not too far away. Security in Europe – such things existed now tenfold, right? But that would show weakness. Then he chuckled. He had this. It was just a ribbing. For shits and giggles, like what he did in school.

“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.”

Deke entered through a double door with yellow rubber flaps, thinking he would hide for a few minutes. He found himself in a dim hallway. Gray concrete on either side. An industrial hallway. Two locked doors, one left, and one right, further up, all lights off. Just dull, yellow bulbs overhead. He turned to leave, but the doors swooshed open, and they formed a wave in front of him. Guevara poked a cigarette into Deke's trembling mouth. House Music's face was a long, pointed nose and a protruding forehead with a receding hairline. Several silver stud earrings lined the curve of his ear. Che grabbed the lighter and reminded his mate that it was *illegal* to smoke indoors. Didn't he hear The Man? Che held the flame close to Deke's face, and stared at the chill in Deke's eye. Then he told Deke: "So if you need the old nic-fit, you'd better chew." Meanwhile, the leader coolly glanced around, silent, looking for CCTV or station employees, acting the whole time as if they were chums. The Aviator jerked his head toward the exit. What seemed like the brown handle of a knife appeared inside his leather jacket.

Deke chewed nervously, sickened. He wanted to vomit. The guys flanked Deke on either side as the leader walked behind him. The 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 inquired about all that rubbish with the mirrors. The gang had seen him, they said, "swaggering through St. Pancras," pulling his pants over his red plaid boxers while weighty silver chains swung across his pants. His cheeks still contained baby fat, and his big, black eyes bulged from sunken sockets. A white DC baseball cap, worn sideways, covered his light blonde

bangs. A maintenance crew were 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 take in the full dimension of his persona. House Music laughed when he recounted how much time the kid took “repositioning his hat” in the mirror. The Chinese tattoo on the underneath of his 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 singing to himself, “Go, go, Rocket.”

“That was quite a performance,” House Music said of the mirror routine. “Those rings are legit gangster!”

“The fresh tats,” Che said, grabbing Deke’s arm. “What do they mean?”

“I...I... need to get to my train, guys,” Deke mumbled, his teeth stained and dotted with shards of raw tobacco. “I’m an American. My mom is on that train, and my tour group.”

House Music laughed. A tattoo of a purple dragon climbed around his neck. “Listen to him!” said the tall one. Che had “Death is Certain” tattooed across his upper back. “Where yer from?”

“From New Jersey,” stammered Deke.

“Holla holla, Yanks don’t swalla!”

Deke bit hard on his lip, his knapsack clutched tightly, checked House Music against the wall in a move that would have impressed his hockey-crazed dad, and spat the raw tobacco at Che Guereva. He burst through the door and sprinted like a busted drug deal. He ran. All at once, he ran, hopelessly, frantically, dropping his I-V, his Samsung. His white cap flew off.

Immediately, Deke struck a passerby who fell to floor. With a quick glance behind, Deke restored his balance without hearing the “well pardon me” and sprinted through the brightly lit terminus, with its grand, refurbished, and glittering single span windowed-roof and gray girders, for the exit, 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. His tongue patrolled his mouth for remnants of tobacco. 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” and felt a chill. Deke lost his footing and fell madly on his belly. His chin hit the ground. He wiped away the blood. A lady in a red skirt was exiting Neal’s Yard Remedies and walked around him. 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. In a deteriorating jog, he followed the sign for Midland Road and Way out.

“Attention passengers. The 9:53 Thameslink for Orpington is now boarding on Platform 1...”

Outside, the wind on Midland Road channeled through the streets. It was a dry wind, hot. Deke doubled over, panting heavily, never having run 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. It was then he grabbed for his Samsung. It was gone – those boys were gone, and probably soon the train. Gone too – that money his mom had given him was stuck inside the flap on his phone, along with a debit card and his fucking school ID. Amazon had delivered the brown leather smart wallet case, one of several gifts from his dad who lived across country in Denver. He

looked right. Then left. Then right. Spinning around, dazed and panicked. His mom had his passport in another leather case, and she was now speeding towards the English Channel and the place she had always complained to his dad about wanting to visit, Paris.

***“Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. Welcome aboard the Eurostar to Paris. My name is Eduardo. Please stow oversized luggage at the entrance of the coach. All backpacks and small and medium sized suitcases should be placed above your seats. Please make sure you remain in your correct seats. If you would like something to eat, a buffet is available in Coach #6 and #13. Thank you.*”**

“Deke!”

“Hullo,” the voice said. “Hullo. Hullo.”

“Deke, is that you?” the woman asked from her seat in Standard class. His face accompanied the cell number, a picture when he was ten in his blue baseball uniform. But that wasn’t his voice. “Are you on the train?”

“Are you Mrs. Brooke?”

“Deke, not this is not funny,” the woman said. “You know I’m not a missus”

“It seems as if Deke has lost his phone,” the sinister voice said. “We don’t know where he is. We were ‘aving a nice tête-à-tête over smokes, and then he buggered off. Got spooked! And puff! Vanished! Vamoosed! Vaporized! Right by Costa Coffee.”

“Who are you? Where is my boy?”

“I’m locally known by many names,” the voice said. “Pleased to meet you.”

“Where is my boy?”

“Like I said, I dunno. We were sharing a pack of Mayfairs, but then he spat the tobac rudely all back in our gullivers. He said he had a train to catch. I dunno if he made the train. Are you on the train? Excuse me. Are you aboard the train witout your son?”

By this time Geoffrey Snow, the tour director for ETA Tours, hovered over Dolores

Brooke with his passenger manifest. He appeared a mingled worried with gross annoyance. He was British, young, with blonde hair, so he remained calm and polite. Dolores gazed at the passing concrete terrain of Southeast London, the seat next to her empty, unable to digest that every second she was further from her son. She cursed herself silently for all the times she wished he would simply vanish. All of us are madmen in our thoughts, she once heard said. Problems with her son were not new. But the problems were local. Local parents. Local school officials. Local cops. “Is there a problem?” Geoffrey asked. “With your son’s whereabouts?”

Two older ladies on the ETA Tour, Eleanor and Marian, sat behind Dolores. They knew her as Dee Dee, and not at all well. Dee Dee was a beautiful woman in her fifties with short salt and pepper hair, cut and styled by someone named Pierre, perhaps, in a boutique on the Eastside of town. The church was on the Westside of town. Dee Dee had bronzed skin that looked natural enough with eyes redrawn in distinct, severe, and sharp eyeliner. She wore maroon lipstick. Marian wondered how long it took for her to get ready in the morning. She personified “high maintenance,” a promise, perhaps, to withstand the calamities of life. Sitting behind Dee Dee was like walking into an Ulta store: at first, a pleasant jolt, but then the jolt hobo-ed on clothes and seeped into skin while desensitizing the nose. But still she seemed nice enough, sincere in a prickly, fumbling way. Dee Dee was new to the church. During an early church gathering, Dee Dee said she was “reconnecting” with her faith. The new Pope encouraged her, in spite of her divorce and the lack of an annulment. Eleanor was a lector at the 4pm Saturday mass, and Marian was there too, almost every day for morning mass, and Dee Dee had shown up once with her son Deke for a Saturday Mitzvah to make sandwiches. Dee Dee took forever to make one sandwich, having a problem with the feisty jelly, and she seemed to fidget with the correct amount. And Deke made one sandwich, ate another sandwich, and sat in the corner of the

basement church, peeling off his name tag and texting on his Samsung. Dee Dee took an hour to make a bag of sandwiches for the poor in Camden, New Jersey for St. Joseph's Pro-Cathedral and she didn't really say much to the others standing at the round table, except to apologize for her "lackluster skill" at sandwich making. Of course there was talk when the mother and son left, and Eleanor thought it was a good effort to show up at ten in the morning. When they saw Dee Dee and her son at the organizational meeting for the European Adventures Trip, Marian said she didn't know how such a trip would last two weeks if they couldn't handle an hour.

Dee Dee's eyes were moistened. The tears streaked her make-up. A drop dripped from her chin. She tried to dry them, but it only smudged her eyes. She couldn't look at her reflection in the train's window. Geoffrey Snow stooped to eye level to talk to her. "Your son, Ms. Brooke, is not on the train, I gather."

Dee Dee nodded. She muttered he lost his phone. Someone called her with his phone with a deep British accent. He said they were smoking. And then he ran off. Now her son was alone in London. She showed Geoffrey the passport. She sniffed the new leather. "It was a present from his dad," she said. "He lives in Denver."

Geoffrey Snow assured her that they would find his son. He would call the London office. No need to worry, really. He would show up. Alive, yes, of course, alive. Who dies of such things nowadays? This is real life. Not some Liam Neeson flick. Then Dee Dee told him that he didn't know her son. "He does not know how to take care of himself," she said. "He's my only boy."

Marian leaned over the seat and whispered, "God will help him, I hope."

Dee Dee cried suddenly, uncontrollably. "I've tried. God, I've tried. I brought him to church, but he said he doesn't believe in God." She wanted to confess that he blamed her, but she

dabbed her eyes and stared at the picture of her little boy on the phone. Geoffrey Snow tried calling the number, but there was no answer. Geoffrey was a polished professional tour director. He had seen everything: he was concerned, but he left with the phone and said he would do everything to track down Deke and get him aboard the next train for Paris. The Eurostar passed through a tunnel, having just left St. Pancras, single bright white lights blurring together as one, then a sudden green. A burst of brilliant sunlight followed. It was beautiful day. A trip she always wanted to take. “It’s not like he’s a baby,” Geoffrey said. “He has brains in his head, right?”

Eleanor said that she would be shocked if God was so insecure and petty to take disbelief into consideration. “If that was the case, God would have abandoned us many years ago.” Geoffrey leaned over to Eleanor and whispered, “Listen, I’m not religious at all, but whatever clout you have,” and then he pointed up, “would be immensely beneficial.”

“Ladies and gentleman. We are stopping for (indecipherable). There is (indecipherable) ahead. It will just be a moment. Thank you. Merci.

Outside the terminal, Deke Brooks walked along Midland Road without a plan. He looked for a safe place: first, be safe, and then find help: a sign 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. Further along he read: RADIATORS MADE TO ORDER and BOOK CASE’S MADE TO ORDER. Somehow that didn’t look right. The long, brown brick building was called HOPE in wide, white letters. It was closed. He gazed along the A5202. A girl on a red bike would help him. He thought of circling around the station, maybe finding a way back, and on the train. He didn’t know the time. He stopped at the black and white striped poles for pedestrian crossings and was almost grazed for

gazing the wrong way into traffic. Geoffrey Snow had said something about it being Napoleon's fault for the way the British drove on the left. "When it doubt, blame the French," he said.

The day was brilliantly blue. Without his phone he felt naked. He thought of asking someone along the street 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. 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. Deke stared at his reflection by a passing window. What did those guys mean about rubbish in the mirror? Acting tough? Deke kicked a litterbin 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 intimidate. 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 with gilded decorations. The gates to the ancient burial grounds were open. It looked safe enough. He stepped through the threshold, across 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 and considered his options. He would wait, return, and ask for help. The only name he knew from the company was Geoffrey Snow. He didn't know the travel company, even though the name was on his free travel bag that he had tossed in the trash. But maybe the name would be on the passenger list, and the train company would have the travel company. Maybe he could also find his phone.

But then he saw the three guys along Midland Road. Deke was alone in the park, within easy sight from the street, and so 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, until he heard the footsteps on the brick.

“You mum is worried, mate,” The Aviator said as he crossed himself in benediction. Che and House Music kneeled in faux devotedness. “I can’t offer you the Body of Jesus, but I have a digestive. 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.

“Then let us step outside then, mate. There are some interesting graves out here.”

Ladies and gentleman, please use your mobile phone with consideration. If we can be of any help please do not hesitate to talk to us as we walk through the cabin.

Geoffrey Snow assured her that all the calls had been made: the ETA office, the Metropolitan police, Eurostar security, the police at St. Pancras. “All the bulletins have been pointed,” he said, holding her hand in the snack bar. He nibbled a Cadbury bar and swirled around lukewarm coffee. Dolores was finishing her second vodka and OJ, clinking around the

ice cubes.

“Maybe he doesn’t want to be found,” Dolores said. “Maybe he just wanted to vanish.”

“It would make for an interesting drama, sure,” Geoffrey said. “But naive American chaps just don’t simply wander off into London off the grid, so to speak, without capital.” Geoffrey assured her it was just about the jones for a smoke. He had seen him outside the Charles Dickens Inn, sneaking a smoke. Then he lost his phone, panicked. “And now he’s finding out what to do.”

Dolores said she didn’t know he was smoking. He had been late for the bus, as well as the breakfast buffet, for the past three mornings. He was also late in Stratford-upon-Avon, and it wasn’t for pondering the bust of Shakespeare and the mysterious request for the second best bed to be willed to his wife. An afternoon at The White Swan with too many generous pints with two older, local gents thoroughly embarrassed Dolores who had to bear her son’s intoxication in the back seat of the bus where he told of the old men’s stories. “It was worth all those rounds,” he said. “All those rounds to meet real Brits.”

Deke didn’t consider Geoffrey Snow a real Brit. Deke claimed he was just part of the Disney attraction. The sights, Westminster Abbey, Buckingham Palace, Windsor Castle, just like Disney or Universal Studios. “We could have saved a lot of money, mom,” Deke said. He also told his mom to stop flirting so obnoxiously with Geoffrey. “You’re an embarrassment,” he said. “He’s twenty years younger than you are.” As punishment for his behaviour in Stratford, she said he would spend the day in Paris confined to the hotel as punishment, but Deke just snickered and “Yeah, right. No way you could enforce *that* without staying herself. And that would be punishment for you, condemned with her only child.” She was a martyr to motherhood without the saintly devotion. The faith was gone. It was now only the motions of motherdom. It was like

the time she tried to punish him for his language by washing his mouth out with soap. Deke grabbed a bar of Dove and chomped on the bar like a tender sirloin. “See, mom. It doesn’t work! Nothing you do works.”

Dolores’ phone remained on the table. She waited for the phone, expecting the ring tone: some rap song that she hated, but Deke wanted that as his theme song. But she also dreaded the call: it could be from that other: the one with the calm, sinister voice that seemed so familiar. Perhaps it was from the movies. A dirty, sensuous, British accent. The train stopped momentarily. She studied the train signals outside the windows: Nf 5134/1125. A metallic yellow arrowhead darted into a field of deep blue. She wondered what it all meant. Someone had to know. There had been no further calls. It had been an hour.

Bonjour mesdames et messieurs. Il ya un problème de commutation de l'avant. Il doit être juste quelques minutes. Merci pour votre patience.

The Aviator scrolled through Deke’s phone, engrossed. He 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 Aviator said. He then pointed to what was known as The Hardy Tree. They marched quietly to the tree that was surrounded by gray tombstones, piled single file like a partially opened fan. “Check out these lyrics:

‘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.”

The Aviator said that it was from a Thomas Hardy poem. He was a contractor and they had to dig up graves for a train line, and they just stacked the graves single file in a heap.

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

“I kind’sa always thought that Pancras was like the pancreas, right? 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 Aviator, 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.

The Aviator 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?”

“Porn.”

“Porn and cat videos!”

“Listen, wut do you want?” Deke said, no longer feigning toughness.

The Aviator spoke. “You ‘ave offended my aesthetic sensibilities. Just because I prefer to be unemployable doesn’t make me a brainless thug. I’ve been published, I ‘ave. 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. Eternal stuff, man. Stuff that outlives us all.

Actually I'm what you call a critic. I call myself The Critic. Art, you see, when extraordinary, is always good for three reasons. Integrity, execution, and vision. But bad art is limitless in its badness."

"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 got a bit of th' devil in you, '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?" 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."

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 letter. House Music squirted himself with cologne and then squirted some 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 straggly hairs, heaved as he tried to catch his breath. He curled up in a fetal position and cried.

The Critic 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. The Critic 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.”

His 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 help him urinate. He was too old for the woman’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. No dad. He split.”

“Too bad.” The Critic peered at the ground and kicked a stone. He kicked a few more stones. “Ours too, the lousy sperm-doning pricks. But what can poor lads do, right? We ain’t prepared fi-nan-ci-al-ly to receive expensive counseling. We’re the flotsam and jetsam of modern society. We’re cut from the same diaper, eh...”

“D-D-Deke.”

“Odd name, innit, Deke?”

“My friends call me Rocket.”

“Rocket? What kinda of a name is that? Are you Rocket Man? Ziggy Stardust and all?”

Trips to the moon?”

“No, I’m just fast. Like a rocket.”

“Well, then you see, Rocket, 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.”

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 rich bastard. 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, who 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. A different sound. One of those European sounds, like from the movies. Like an ambulance. The caretaker moved toward them, and The Critic threw the red ruby rings like craps towards Deke, and then grabbed the bag from House Music and then lobbed it towards Deke. It landed like a horseshoe thud. “You may be needing those . . . Rocket,” The Critic said. “Dunno.”

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, right?”

Deke kissed the tattoo that reminded him of home. No paradise, for sure, but not this hell. 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. Something cheap made in China. He covered the rings in dirt. The punks 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 said. 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 straggly hairs, the knobbly knees, the tousled hair. Why hadn’t they texted the photos? Why was he so reluctant to delete? Deke asked if he could donate his clothes. “Or maybe I could bury them.”

The caretaker laughed. “You want to stay naked?”

“I saw a Thomas Pink at St. Pancras,” he said with a sly smirk.

Deke held his finger on the delete button. He asked if there were any new clothes in the church. The caretaker, named Herb, with that odd, silent h, said he had some clothes he wears when he gardens. Deke smiled. It was a fair bargain.

Mesdames et messieurs, s'il vous plaît être conscient de votre environnement . S'il vous plaît signaler toute activité suspecte. Je vous remercie.

Eleanor and Marian stood as sentinels by the bathroom. They had heard the sounds and were concerned. Dee Dee was sick, yes, from the drinks, from the fear, that was obvious, but now came the sobs. Eleanor knocked, and inquired. But Dee Dee didn’t respond. Eleanor had

been married, but she had no children. Her husband Dominick had died last year. Marian was never married and had no children. She lived alone and played piano and loved her cats and planned to retire from waitressing. She was 68.

“Whatever happens, you’ll be okay,” Eleanor said through the door. Geoffrey Snow passed by and they all looked at each other, acknowledging the truth. When the door opened, Dee Dee did not look herself. The makeup was gone. Her hair, unstyled, free, luxurious. As she reached out for Marian’s hand, her phone rang to that song she hated. A message from Ducky. It was Deke. He was safe. Eleanor reached out Dee Dee’s hand. The three of them, a silent trinity, formed a steeple with their heads.