

CRANK!

SCIENCE FICTION • FANTASY

NUMBER 5

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\$4.00

\$3.50/Canada

52



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Issue No. 5

Summer 1995

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CRANK! is published quarterly by Broken Mirrors Press, Inc., P.O. Box 380473, Cambridge, MA 02238. Cover price is \$4 per copy. Subscription price is \$12 for four issues. Subscriptions outside the US are \$18. CRANK! is distributed nationally by IPD (1-800-999-1170), and Fine Print (1-800-874-7082), and also by Desert Moon Periodicals in the Southwest (1-505-474-6311) "I, Iscariot" © 1995 Michael Bishop. "Receding Horizon" © 1995 Jonathan Lethem and Carter Scholz. "Hamisch In Avalon" © 1994 Eliot Fintushel. "The Man Who Fell" © 1994 Jim Marino.

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I, Iscariot

Michael Bishop

When evening comes, he arrives with the twelve. And as they reclined at table and were eating, Jesus said, "So help me, one of you eating with me is going to turn me in."

They began to fret and to say to him one after another, "I'm not the one, am I?"

But he said to them, "It's one of the twelve, the one who is dipping into the bowl with me. The son of Adam departs just as the scriptures predict, but damn the one responsible for turning me in. It would be better for that man had he never been born!"

– Mark 14:17-21

And right away, while he was still speaking, Judas, one of the twelve, shows up and with him a crowd, dispatched by the ranking priests and the scholars and the elders, wielding swords and clubs. Now the one who was to turn him in had arranged a signal with them, saying, "The one I'm going to kiss is the one you want. Arrest him and escort him safely away!" And right away he arrives, comes up to him, and says, "Rabbi," and kissed him.

And they seized him and held him fast....

– Mark 14:43-46[♥]

Before sunset, in a field where potters dig clay for their vessels, the dead man

[♥] Robert J. Miller, ed. *The Complete Gospels: Annotated Scholars Version*. Revised & Expanded Ed. (San Francisco: Polebridge Press [HarperCollins], 1994), p. 47, p. 48.

twists beneath hundreds of rose-purple blossoms. Otherwise the tree's branches gleam naked, and the field stands empty of either weed or shrub.

Four men in dirty tunics and split sandals creep into view and spot the hanged man. Even if they had not seen him, their arrival downwind would have betrayed his presence, a strange mix of flower scent and meaty bloat. One of the men covers his mouth and nose with a sleeve.

The bladed man in the lead says, The women were right. He pauses a moment before adding, He's got to come down before sunset, or he'll pollute the field.

A stocky man with wiry knucklehair and eyebrows makes a show of gagging. Already has, he says. The bastard done it a night back, Cephas. Can't you smell him?

Still, says Cephas. We have to take him down.

Why? He's gone to Sheol, to everlasting shadow and dust, and the field's already defiled.

Because if it was you, Thaddaeus, you'd want the same.

It isn't me, even if we shared a name.

The four men argue. Then, silently, they cross the field single-file, like soldiers separated from their army in a hostile land. The sun, ever dropping, flattens and runs, reddening even further the potter's field that the tree already spectacularly brightens.

None of the men has a knife to cut the rope. Two nights ago Cephas had a sword, but lost it. He regrets its loss because none of the others wants to untie the noose that has strangled their former colleague. Thaddaeus, the stocky man, turns his face away, but leans into the bole of the redbud with all his might, pushing the tree into the bruised glow spreading outward from the west.

A taller man with callused hands and a beard like flaming straw helps him. Cephas leaps and grabs the bough supporting the hanged man. His weight draws the limb down. The stench of decay nearly overwhelms him, and he cries, John! Andrew!

Cephas' brother, Andrew, lifts the dead man's swollen feet and walks him out horizontal to the ground.

The rope, already rotten and fraying, snaps. The corpse pitches headfirst to the clay, twisting so that upon impact its abdomen bursts and an iridescent snake of bowel gushes out.

What a rank bugger! says Thaddaeus.

John, the tall man with the flaming beard, stands back from the corpse and recites,

When he is judged, let him be found guilty.

And let his prayer become sin.
Let his days be few,
And let another take his office.♥

Selah, says Andrew. What now?

Nothing, says Cephas, half-snarling. A day late, he's down from his tree. Let the dogs and vultures take him.

Thaddaeus begins to weep: a strange, indeed, a discomfiting sight in so powerful-looking a man. I wish we could trade this body for the other, he manages. I wish we

knew where the other body lay, says John. But we don't, and there's an end to it.

Cephas nudges the fallen corpse with a toe. Then the four men stalk single-file back across the field toward the city, warily inspecting the landscape's shadows for bountyhunters and informants. They skulk totally out of view. All that remains, framing their vanishment, is the crimson-tinted mother-of-pearl face of a computer monitor.

A day or two after the event inspiring this dramatization, some women start calling the field Akel Dama, or Blood Acre, and the name sticks, like wet clay to an amphora taking watery form on a potter's wheel.

Two thousand years later, the faux-event's resuscitants, including the hanged man himself, gather in a twilight space at once measurable with a carpenter's tape and so depthfully vast that it mirrors the world. The farther you go into this space the more detail and dimension it acquires.

In fact, its whiteness exfoliates into rainforests, cities, amphitheatres, palaces, and halls, almost as if you have run through a series of nested realities to this false courtroom at the shifting center.

The resuscitants – electronic simulacra, with reconstituted memories of their bodily lives – dispose themselves about the space, primarily on its edges. They will emerge into view at any legitimate call, then soliloquize, testify, and/or enact as the proceedings demand.

How do you plead?

Please. In what matter?

That of the Messiah's betrayal to the Judean authorities.

♥ Psalm 109:7-8 in *The Wesley Bible: New King James Version* (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, Inc., 1990), p. 869. See also Acts 1:16-20.

Yes. Of course. I handed him over.

Guilty, then.

But I didn't understand what I was doing. I never realized they'd haul him away for judgment and nailing.

Come, Mr. Iscariot. Do better.

Help us recognize him, they said. We know him by the commotion he's made, but his face remains unfamiliar to most Jerusalemites, even to some who've heard him preach, for they heard him from a distance. With these and similar arguments they cajoled me.

And so the kiss of betrayal?

The kiss of identification. No more. The others slander me because it turns the eye from how cravenly they fled, like chickens in a hawk's over-soaring shadow.

And now you rat them out in turn.

I say the truth, even if Pilate himself pretends not to recognize it.

So how do you plead?

Of leading the Judeans to him, guilty. Of betraying him, innocent. Altogether innocent.

Resuscitants appear in period dress. They look anomalously time-elided, extras in a pre-Lucan costume drama. But with them in modern attire appear the e-clones of some celebs as familiar to a latter-day netist as Brando or Heston to any longtime film buff.

The prosecution team, for example, includes e-clones for Avery Stills, Rebecca Mormile, and Henry Albornoz, while the even more famous defense team features dopplegangers for Wendy Grice, Hirofumi Satoh, and Dakota Browning. The Chief Justice of the United States Supreme Court – an e-clone of Paul Ogilvie – presides.

Either simultaneous or delayed cable feeds serve the computerphobic. In fact, television broadcasts garner such prodigious ratings that the major entertainment networks have preempted nearly all regular programming for gavel-to-gavel coverage of what aficionados early on christened the Trial of the Millennium. (CBS, predictably, calls its own focus on the virtually self-propagating proceedings Eye on Iscariot.)

Jury members, who never appear onscreen, vary widely in age, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status. They do have one odd quality in common: In offline negotiations preceding the trial, both defense and prosecution agreed that to qualify for duty these e-entities must manifest as religion-neutral or -indifferent. Both sides, it seems, feared any juror with a theological or a rationalist axe to grind and thus decided to exclude such specimens.

Do you swear to tell the truth, the whole truth, and nothing but the truth, so help you God?

My Yes is Yes, and my No, No.

You won't take the oath?

Yeshua taught that oaths echo like wind in the mouths of scoundrels. I'm not a scoundrel.

The Avery Stills e-clone rises. I object, he says. Your Honor, this is a blatant evasion.

The simulacrum of Chief Justice Ogilvie ignores him. By what would you agree to swear, Mr. Iscariot?

I won't swear, either as oath or profanation. None of us does. Probity cloaks any follower who takes to heart Yeshua's teachings.

Objection, says the Stills e-clone.

Why?

Your Honor, Mr. Iscariot stresses an apostolic association he stands accused of betraying. Letting him sidestep the oath is like granting him permission to lie.

Relax, Mr. Stills. What prevents any sworn testator from lying?

Your Honor, the issue isn't

Address the question, please.

One's personal integrity. Or one's fear of one's god. The figure shrugs and sits back down.

Take the stand, Judge Ogilvie tells Iscariot.♥

The trial programmers and the electronic infrastructure supporting them begin to merchandise Iscariot. T-shirts; plastic cups; toy lambs; stenciled tunics; foam-soled sandals; Betrayal™ playing cards, board games, and computer games; two-faced silver coins (in laminated rolls of thirty); vials of a puttylike substance jocularly identified as spikenard; a set of porcelain plates depicting not only Iscariot, but Lucifer, Lancelot, Iago, Benedict Arnold, and Vidkun Quisling; flowering Judas seed catalogues; intricately carven tillboxes; flexible plastic figurines of Iscariot, Brutus, and Cassius writhing in the triple mouths of Satan. . . .

"The soul that suffers most," explained my Guide,

♥ From here on, we drop the cumbersome neologism *e-clone* and its various situational corrolaries; however, every proper name in this transcript implies it.

“is Judas Iscariot, he who kicks his legs
On the fiery chin and has his head inside...”[♥]

Not to mention covers on *Newsweek*, *Time*, *U.S. News & World Report*, *New Yorker*, *GQ*, *Wired*, *Rolling Stone*, *Esquire*, *Mother Jones*, *TV Guide*, *Atlantic Monthly*, *Redbook*, *Byte*, *Christianity Today*, *People*, *Omni*, *Sassy*, *Psychology Today*, *Science Fiction Age*, *St. Andrew's Messenger*, *TriQuarterly*, *Outland*, *Apostically Yours*, *Playboy*, *Hebrew Studies*, *Paris Review*, *Century*, *Science News*, *Trial Lawyer*, *Modern Horticulturist*, and *Crank!* (to list a provocative representative sample).

Favorite T-shirts designs include silkscreened portraits of Iscariot scolding Mary about the spikenard, filching from the disciples' moneybox, dipping bread in the Upper Room, kissing an already savvy Yeshua in the Garden of Gethsemane, scattering his bloodmoney in the Temple, standing selfconsciously naked in a YMCA lockerroom, driving an antique Edsel, propositioning the First Lady, chug-a-lugging a Coca-Cola, stealing home in a game between the Angels and the A's, eating a Pizza Hut calzone, and twisting slowly from a redbed tree in the potter's field known as Akel Dama.

The most popular T-shirt slogans include

I, ISCARIOT
EYE ON ISCARIOT
I³ = ISCARIOT IS INNOCENT
I = ISCARIOT, I = IMPENITENT
I SCARE IN A RIOT ... HOW ABOUT YOU?
ISCARIOT HAPPENS
DOESN'T ISCARIOT MEAN SNAIL?
A KISS IS STILL A KISS
HANG OUT WITH JUDAS, A REAL BREAKNECK GUY
JUDAS, JUDAS, JUDAS ... THERE'S SOMETHING ABOUT THAT NAME
IF HE HADN'T SQUEALED, HOW WOULD WE HAVE HEALED?
12 - 11 = ISCARIOT
AN APOSTLE AMOK SET SALVATION'S CLOCK
WHAT, ME BETRAY?
GET A GOOD PRICE FOR YOUR SOUL
IF YOU LUV YEHUDDAH, YODEL!

[♥] John Ciardi, trans., *The Inferno* by Dante Alighieri (New York: Mentor Books, 1954), Canto XXXIII, vv. 61-63.

BASE, VILE, LOW, MEAN, SICK & NASTY!!!
ISCARIOT, BOOTH, & OSWALD: HITMEN OF THE MILLENNIUM
and under the name ISCARIOT:

Caiaphas
Is an ass,
Pilate
Is all apeeve.
Upon my word,
I love the LORD ...
Till late
Come Friday eve.

ONLINE LOGOMACHY (I)

Isn't it unusual for a defendant to testify on his own behalf at the opening of a trial?

This is an electronic simulation.

Maybe so. But ordinarily the prosecution would have to build its case, wouldn't it? That way the defense would have substantive arguments to rebut.

Other circumstances prevail here.

How so?

The prosecution, so to speak, has already had more than two thousand years to build its case.

In the court of public opinion?

Right. Exhibit A, for example, has been floating around almost since the beginning of the movement.

Exhibit A?

The Christian scriptures. The New Testament, specifically the 13th chapter of John.

Why John? Why that chapter?

John Boy's the only evangelist who has Jesus unequivocally finger Iscariot as the betrayer.

No way. All four gospels so identify him.

As the bringer of the kiss. Beyond that, though, it's all hearsay, innuendo, defamation, even false witness.

At which point a participant in the discussion types in the following passage:

... And as they were eating, he said, "So help me, one of you is going to turn me in." And they were very upset, and each one said to

him in turn, "I'm not the one, am I, Master?" In response he said, "The one who dips his hand in the bowl with me – that's who's going to turn me in! ... It would be better for that man had he never been born!"

Judas, who was to turn him in, responded, "You can't mean me, can you Rabbi?"

He says to him, "You said it."♥

Matthew 26:21-25

That pretty much brings it down to Judas, doesn't it? He dipped his hand in the bowl with Jesus.

Exactly. And Jesus turns his direct question right back on him.

Hey, they all dipped their hands in the bowl with him. It was a communal Passover meal. And Jesus may have turned every disciple's question back on him. The guy had a canny Socratic streak, Hebraic version thereof.

So why's Judas get whomped for special censure?

That damn kiss. In the fallout from the crucifixion, poor Iscariot catches a shitload of retroactive stigmatization. A classic case of scapegoating.

Yeah. Also note that the genuinely guilty disciple had a heavy stake in laying the blame on someone else, and Judas, whom Jesus sent out for some purpose, wasn't around to defend himself.

Neither that evening nor the next day – when his despair at the Rabbi's death and his eleven false friends' lies caused him to go out and hang himself.

You're saying that a disciple, or disciples, scapegoated Iscariot in the same way that Caiaphas and his pals scapegoated Christ?

Sure. Why not? If you're a believer, Judas may have died for your sins just as profoundly as Jesus did.

One big difference.

I'll bite. Go on.

Iscariot had the rope in his own hands.

Right. But if you want to get into the metaphysics of omnipotence, we could argue that point too.

Go back to that remark about a genuinely guilty disciple. If not Judas, who? Peter? Levi? John?

Maybe Iscariot was no more guilty than any of the rest of the disciples. On the other hand, maybe one of them wanted to protect his own ass.

Because John pulls the trigger on Judas, in that unlucky chapter 13,

♥ *The Complete Gospels*, p. 107.

expect Dakota Browning to go after his e-clone in a withering cross.

Fireworx, spiderfolk. *Fireworx!*

Hey, anybody want to trade a Grand Unified Theory tee with a silk-screened lower intestinal tract on it for an I, ISCARIOT jobbie?

Get outta here....

Hirofumi Satoh stands next to the witness box so that he can lend Iscariot emotional support and survey the courtroom (including its unseen spectators and the differently invisible netists peering in on the proceedings). Although of less than average height by his own era's standards, Satoh makes Judas, despite his beard, appear small and childlike. The elegant box in which Iscariot sits visibly downsizes him, too.

Describe your individual relationship with the Rabbi, Satoh says. He speaks with the accentless facility of a trained news anchor.

Good. Quite good.

Do you think he liked you?

Of course. He liked everyone. This open-souled regard for everyone was the main burden of his tidings.

Do you think he esteemed you over others?

He called me to discipleship. He allowed me into the inner circle of the twelve.

And how did he esteem you within that inner circle?

As highly, or nearly as highly, as any other. Once he said that we twelve would sit on twelve thrones in judgment on the twelve tribes of Israel.

Yes, Satoh says. Matthew recorded the saying.

He added that we would receive a hundredfold blessing and inherit eternal life. Why would Yeshua have said such a thing to a betrayer?

Objection, says Henry Albornoz from the prosecution's table. The witness wants us to engage in bootless speculation.

Judge Ogilvie looks at Albornoz. Ordinarily, counsel may object only to opposition counsel's inappropriate tactics, not the testimony of a witness.

But this is

Basic stuff, Mr. Albornoz.

Albornoz shakes his head.

Satoh turns to Judas as if no interruption has occurred: So you had a satisfactory, even an exemplary, relationship with the Rabbi?

I did.

What of your dealings with the other chosen eleven?

Iscariot hesitates. Then he says, Good. No trouble. Not really.

A little trouble, maybe? If so, Mr. Iscariot, you now have both occasion

and cause to tell us.

Iscariot's posture – head down, shoulders slumped, hands on knees – suggests his ambivalence. An unseen spectator coughs. Satoh lays a hand on the edge of the witness box. Eventually, Iscariot looks up. He begins to talk, a quaver in his voice and a longdistance stare in his eyes. The stare, pursued into closeup, opens out into a rocky desert landscape....

JUDAS

In my home village of Kerioth, just beyond the Jordan in Decapolis, I heard of Yeshua at the very beginning of his ministry. In only a few months' time, he had numerous followers, some of whom had come to him from as far away as Beersheba in Idumea. In comparison, my journey to him seemed easy.

At this time, he'd chosen only four or five of the twelve he later appointed fully. But in synagogue after synagogue around the Sea of Galilee, I heard him speak in parables; saw him heal the sick and cast blaspheming demons out of possessed unfortunates.

In Capernaum, I helped the friends of a paralytic remove some rooftiles and lower him on his mat into a crowded house where Yeshua had gone to preach. Looking down, I see that man struggle to his feet, seize his bed, and stride into the night to the chorusing alleluias of his friends and maybe half the thunderstruck throng.

A day later, following Yeshua about the lake, I separated myself from the crowd and happened upon him and his first five disciples encamped in brushwood lean-tos beside the sea: James and John, the sons of Zebedee, whom he called Boanerges, or Thunder Brothers; two more brothers, Simon Peter and Andrew; and Levi, the son of Alphaeus, a toll collector whom the others at first resented as a professional leech.

What about you? Yeshua asked me when I sat down unbidden at their cooking fire. What do you do?

I told him (and, of course, the others, who had begun to eyeball me through the flickering shadows) that I worked metal, making knives, pitchforks, and tilling instruments. I showed him the knife I carried as an example of my workmanship. He hefted it admiringly on one palm. He even set the edge of my knife to the heel of his hand, producing a thin beaded crimson line more black than red in the firelight. Then he smiled and asked me my name, and the blood on his hand – nor did I imagine this – vanished.

Too giddy to marvel, I said, Judas of Kerioth.

Ah, said Simon Peter, whom Yeshua already sometimes called Cephas, then we'll call you Iscariot.

But why? I asked him.

He presumptuously combines Kerioth and sicarius, Yeshua said.

Sicarius? I said.

It's Latin for dagger man or assassin. Maybe Cephas thinks you have Zealot written across your forehead.

I said, I make knives, but I avoid politics. The kingdoms of this world fall to ruin. I seek the everlasting, Rabbi.

Well said. You wish to follow me?

I want nothing else.

Then give me consent to disarm you.

I didn't understand, but Yeshua correctly read in me total surrender to whatever he purposed. Indeed, so reading me, he flung my knife, blade over haft, into the soft tarnished pewter of Yam Kinneret, the Galilean Sea. Yeshua's five not quite disciples laughed. Me? I felt no loss at the sinking of my knife, only joy, a heady exhilaration at my unexpected welcome among these men.

Looking back, I note a grisly joke: the one who named me dagger man carried a sword into the Garden of Gethsemane and struck off the ear of Malchus, the high priest's slave. He did so just as a platoon of Roman soldiers and some of the priestly constabulary laid hands on Yeshua.[♥] Of course, he acted from both love of Yeshua and a gnawing fear that he had never truly merited the Rabbi's favor.

None of us merited it. I understand, though, that Malchus, the man whose ear Simon Peter severed, came to recognize that fact better than any of the chosen twelve, including the five on the shore with us on the night that Yeshua looked with favor on me, a Decapolean; in all respects but my allegiance to God and the son of Adam, a foreigner.

In subsequent days, Yeshua met headlong the devout, the forsaken, and the frenzied who searched for him along the lake shore. He preached, healed, and evicted demons. Often he did so from, or near, a fisherman's boat, to keep the crowds from overwhelming him. His labors wore him out. He withdrew to the hills. Through Simon Peter, he put out a call for the other seven – beyond the first five companions – whom he would appoint as dependent ministers.

Astonishingly, at least to me, Yeshua included me in that number. I was

[♥] A.N. Wilson, *Jesus: A Life* (London: W.W. Norton & Co, 1992), pp. 203-206. Wilson argues that Malchus, meaning king, may have been Saul, the Christian persecutor who later became the apostle Paul. Saul, after all, had been "the first of the Jewish kings" (206).

the only one of the twelve not also a Galilean, a fact that told against me on the night of the Passover and on the day of the crucifixion. A fact that tells against me now, I fear.

ONLINE LOGOMACHY (II)

Probably so.

You think?

Absolutely. He lacked the others' geographical roots and the loyalty that usually goes with compatriotism.

One way of looking at it.

You have another?

The other eleven, or a significant number of them, held his foreignness against Iscariot.

Oh, please.

To deflect attention from their own inglorious behavior on the night of their master's arrest, they conspired to frame him for betrayal.

A chestnut. A stale chestnut.

Yeah. Well. That old stranger-in-a-strange-land argument slices two ways.

A FAN LETTER

Dear Judas,

Hang in ther. Your cute yo now that. I evn lik it wen yo suk in & chue on sum of yur beerd. Fiona my sister sas its grosss but she has no tast she is a flisten to be biblucl about it. Wich I would lik to be with yo if I cud kno you to luv you an luv you to kno you to be biblucl agan.

The Jap layer of yurs say he knos how you feel me too. Fiona one nite mist kerfew & my dad sed heed ring my neck if I didn rat her out where she waz. So I tol. Fiona when she got hom & fond out come don to my room to lay lik a reel hevvy diss on me. You Judas she yelld to me you stnk-ing liddle Judas. But I, I don think you stnk an if yo weren jess a online emmgie Id lik to mary you. So will you I men lik mery me?

♥♥♥ XXX 000. Luve,

Renata Smith-Koester

Wendy Grice resembles a bird, small and quick-moving. Her attire suggests a goldfinch in the process of trading its grey winter plumage for the yellows of spring. Iscariot regards her hopefully.

So the other eleven disciples sometimes made you feel your foreignness, she says.

Sometimes.

Give the court a specific instance of their prejudice.

Iscariot considers, then says: Yeshua gave us instructions before sending us out as his agents. He told us,

“Heal the sick, raise the dead, cleanse the lepers, drive out demons. You have received freely, so freely give. Don’t get gold or silver or copper coins for spending money, don’t take a knapsack for the road, or two shirts, or sandals, or a staff, for ‘the worker deserves his food’....”

– Matthew 10:8-10♥

Did you and the others obey these instructions? asks Grice.

Insofar as we could. But the business about not taking coins with us troubled a couple of the Galileans. What if there were an emergency? What if those we helped forced money on us, saying that we should take it as an offering to the poor?

What did these worriers decide?

That it would be wrong to make no provision for a crisis and equally wrong to refuse alms for the poor.

Did you agree with the Galileans on these points?

Yes, I fear I did.

So how did the eleven demonstrate their regionalist bias against you, Mr. Iscariot?

None of them wanted to stand as our group treasurer, for fear that taking the job would breach the Rabbi’s instructions and prove a stumbling block to salvation.

Salvation?

Yes. Yeshua had also said that everyone would hate us twelve because of him, but that those of us who held out to the end would find our reward.

So no one volunteered for the job?

Not even Levi, the former toll collector. I won’t do it, he said. I’ve set aside my old ways, and sorting through coins again would only pollute me beyond saving.

Grice gives the jury a moment for this news to register, then turns to Judas and says, So the eleven Galileans foisted the unwelcome job on you?

The job and the moneybox.

In Jesus’ presence?

Oh, no. Out of it. Everyone understood that it would transgress his

♥ *The Complete Gospels*, p. 75.

guidelines and reveal our lack of faith to keep a moneybox. But our fear of the unforeseen overcame our trust in Yeshua's farsightedness.

Why did you agree to act as treasurer?

I was backed into a corner. If I refused, how would I ever gain the others' acceptance?

Did acceptance come, once you'd taken this unpopular job?

No. Not at all.

What occurred instead?

The others accused me of filching from the kitty. They even said I'd taken the job to insure access to these middling sums.

Did you ever betray the others' trust?

What trust? But, no, I never pilfered. In fact, I gave more to our treasury than any of the others, who could pocket whatever they took in without making any sort of account to the entire group.

Mr. Stills would probably say that you could misrepresent or hide donations as easily as anyone else.

I guess I could have, but I never did.

Why didn't you?

I loved the Rabbi. I believed his words. And I wanted the respect of the eleven Galileans he had chosen along with me as his inner circle.

No further questions.

We will now take a ten-minute recess, says Judge Ogilvie.

A POEM ON THE NET

He has a finger in the till,
Another in his eye.
He is a shameless, gutless shill
For his abhorrent lie.
Once more to the tree, Sick Judas,
Once more to the rope.
Hang yourself and thereby free us
To rise from hate to hope.
Judas in the sky with diamonds?
No, dirt-trapped, underground,
Mouthing cant and vulture-pie crumbs
Without a sound.

Dakota Browning, spiffy in designer buckskins, takes a turn for the defense

questioning Iscariot:

Which of the Galileans do you think most resented you?

The three who believed themselves Yeshua's favorites.

Namely?

Cephas and the Thunder Brothers.

Simon Peter and the sons of Zebedee, James and John, all of whom claimed to've seen Jesus transfigured on Mount Tabor?

Yes.

Which of the eleven went after your reputation the hardest, repeatedly and baselessly labeling you a thief?

I don't know. Toward the end, they all seemed to regard me as an untrustworthy interloper. Thomas Didymus remained friendly, but of course he always demanded proof of any dubious assertion.

Who would you name as the most persistent and implacable in his hostility?

The one who called himself the beloved disciple.

Dakota Browning turns to face the unseen jurybox. In other words, John the son of Zebedee?

Without question, Iscariot says.

ONLINE LOGOMACHY (III)

In a rape trial, you can count on the defense attorneys going after the victim. She slept around, she dressed like a slut, she hung where a decent woman wouldn't hang, she was an infamous flirt, blah blah blah.

Your point, Clarence Darrow?

Dakota Browning & Friends intend to put the other eleven disciples on trial. Shoot, they've already started.

You think the eleven Galileans were victims of Iscariot's lies and chicanery?

Amen. We all were.

But if you buy the redemption myth, we were really all his beneficiaries.

I'm arguing legally here, not theologically. Cut me some slack. The biggest victim, of course, was Iscariot's master, but even Grice, Satoh, and Browning don't have the chutzpah to try to sabotage Jesus' reputation.

A minute ago you were griping about the ethical bankruptcy of defense attorneys. Now you call them spineless for behaving responsibly.

We'll see how they behave. Meanwhile, don't jump me for defending Peter and the boys from Iscariot's lawyers' calumny.

Aren't Peter and the boys, especially John Boy, guilty of that very sin? Likewise the evangelists who wrote down their self-serving stories?

Hey, they're evangelists, gospel-makers. They write under inspiration from the Holy Spirit.

Even those inspired of God can run with a beautiful or a holy lie, maybe especially those inspired of God. And if you don't believe in beauty, or holiness, or the lies occasionally undergirding them, then you have a duty to truth – should you believe in that – to dig for the ugly or corrupt foundations.

Pardon me, you blaspheming heathens, but I'm gone.

Farewell.

Au revoir. Auf Wiedersehen. Hasta la vista.

But another participant says, I'm still here. And I have no plans to tuck tail and run, even if Grice and Company drop a five-ton concrete block on the so-called beloved disciple.

THREE EXHIBITS FOR THE DEFENSE

A: ... Mary brought in a pound of expensive lotion and anointed Jesus' feet and wiped them with her hair. And the house was filled with the lotion's fragrance. Judas Iscariot ... says, "Why wasn't this lotion sold? It would bring a year's wages, and the proceeds could have been give to the poor." (He didn't say this because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief. He was in charge of the common purse and now and again would pilfer money put into it.)

– John 12:3-8

B: ... Jesus declared: "I swear to God, one of you will turn me in."

The disciples stole glances at each other, at a loss to understand who it was he was talking about. One of them, the disciple Jesus loved most, was sitting at Jesus' right. So Simon Peter leans over to ask that disciple who it was <Jesus> was talking about. He in turn leans over to Jesus and asks him, "Master, who is it?"

Jesus answers: "I'm going to dunk this piece of bread, and the one I give it to is the one." So he dunks the piece of bread and gives it to Judas, Simon Iscariot's son. The moment <he had given Judas> the piece of bread, Satan took possession of him. Then Jesus says to him, "Go ahead and do what you're going to do."

Of course no one at dinner understood why Jesus had made

this remark. Some had the idea that because Judas had charge of the funds, Jesus was telling him, “Buy whatever we need for the celebration,” or to give something to the poor. In any case, as soon as <Judas> had eaten the piece of bread he went out. It was nighttime.

– John 13:21-30

C: So <Mary> runs and comes to Simon Peter and the other disciple – the one that Jesus loved most – and tells them, “They’ve taken the Master from the tomb, and we don’t know where they’ve put him.”

So Peter and the other disciple went out, and they made their way to the tomb. The two of them were running along together, but the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to reach the tomb....

John 20:2-3♥

Justice Ogilvie reads through the printouts given him by Wendy Grice as Exhibits A, B, and C. He takes his time, using the edge of an expensive letter opener to underscore each line of type. Finally, he looks up.

Pardon me, Ms. Grice, but I’d think the prosecution eager to enter these passages as exhibits for its side.

Yessir, says Grice. The folly of pride.

Really? They paint a rather unattractive picture of your client.

No more unattractive than the one they paint of John as a braggart and a false testifier.

Objection! chorus Stills, Mormile, and Albornoz.

Sustained, says Ogilvie. Or would be if this weren’t a friendly sidebar out of the jury’s hearing. Please, everyone, relax.

Iscariot remains on the stand. Satoh paces the courtroom in front of the bench.

At length he says, You contend that John put in the frame and that his

♥ Exhibit A appears on p. 227 of *The Complete Gospels*, Exhibit B on p. 230, and Exhibit C on p. 242. The New King James Version renders A’s “expensive lotion” as “costly oil of spikenard” (perfumed ointment), and B’s “Simon Iscariot’s son” as “the son of Simon” and Jesus’ direction to Judas (“Go ahead and do what you’re going to do”) as the more specific, “What you do, do quickly.” The variant translations may impact the interpretation of evidence.

Galilean cohorts bought it.

No one but John could have heard what Yeshua said to him in the upper room, and I can't believe that the Rabbi named me to him.

Why did you go out?

Just as some of the other supposed, to make a contribution to the poor from our group treasury.

By this time Jesus knew that you kept a moneybox?

Sooner or later he discovered everything.

Didn't he rebuke you for your disobedience or demand that you disburse all your funds and chuck the moneybox?

Actually, he tweaked us for our lack of faith – a recurring theme with him because we recurrently gave him cause – and sent me out to do just what you've asked, discard the box. I gladly obeyed. It was a relief.

Why did he tell you, Do quickly what you have to do?

He was sharing new teachings and comfort with us, and he didn't want me to miss any more than I had to. Also, he feared that the Romans and the constabulary of the high priests might initiate a raid.

What happened to you on your errand?

I was named as an associate of Yeshua, placed under guard, and marched off to talk to Annas, Caiaphas' father-in-law, and then to Caiaphas himself.

About what?

They were always anxious to placate the Romans on festival days. Jerusalem's streets teemed with pilgrims, some reverent, some rowdy, and they wanted information.

So you told them Jesus' whereabouts for thirty pieces of silver. Right?

They said they'd nail me as a cutthroat rebel if I didn't help them. They also swore they only wanted to question Yeshua about any knowledge he might have of insurrectionist activity among the crowds. No one offered me even a tenth of a denarius for my help.

Didn't you think that these people might want to catch him in a punishable impiety? The priests and the Pharisees were no friends of yours.

With some heat, they mentioned Yeshua's cleansing of the temple during an earlier Passover, but ... so what? Yeshua told us to expect the world's hatred. He also said we would overcome evil through faith.

When did you realize the authorities had lied to you?

Not until troops and temple police with torches and weapons jostled me along to the garden.

So you didn't betray the Rabbi.

Never. I loved him.

In your view, you did nothing wrong?

My crime was too much trust, or faith, in the intentions of the priests and the power of the Nazarene.

When did you come to doubt even the power?

When they tried him, scourged him, sent him stumbling along the Sorrowful Way, and hammered him to a cross. When even the eleven Galileans broke ranks and fled. Iscariot's voice cracks and he begins to weep.

Forgive me, Mr. Iscariot, but didn't you in fact receive thirty pieces of silver for your help?

At the moment of Yeshua's arrest, someone thrust a bag at me. I took it without knowing what it was. Later, I found it to hold a few crooked coins from the temple moneychangers.

Not thirty pieces of silver?

No.

What did you do with those crooked coins?

I returned to the temple in the morning and flung them at the feet of the scornful elders.

Then what? asks Satoh.

Judas rubs his temples, knuckles one eye, shakes his head. In his longdistance stare, online spectators can see reflected a canopy of rose-purple blossoms....

ONLINE LOGOMACHY (IV)

Matthew says that Iscariot went to the priests before the last supper and asked for a reward for handing Jesus over. The betrayer lies.

John was the only disciple who could've possibly known whom Jesus singled out as the culprit. Maybe he lied to the others, and Matthew, or Levi, tailored his gospel account to the cut of John's lie.

Whoa!

How so whoa?

You can't label John a liar on the matter of Judas' guilt and swallow whole his assertion that Jesus named the betrayer to him alone. Show some consistency here.

Okay, he lied throughout, during Jesus' earthly stay and after, in person to the other ten and on papyrus to posterity.

Christ, such cynicism!

Are you addressing the Lord or profaning his name?

Probably some of both. You Iscariot lovers seem to want to defame a hundred saints to redeem a single black-sheep creep.

A biblical desire. Jesus said, If someone has a hundred sheep and one of

them wanders off, won't that person leave the ninety-nine in the hills and go and look for the one that wandered off?♥

Gag me with an exegesis.

Whatever you want. Care to make a date?

DIVAGATION: AN ISLAMIC LEGEND

Pilate releases Barabbas to the rabble, who, by crying for the highwayman, have condemned the Nazarene to die. But at this very moment, God lifts Jesus bodily into heaven. Neither Pilate nor the crowd apprehend this miracle, owing to the fact that at this same instant God snatches up the traitor Iscariot, makes him over atom by atom to resemble the condemned Rabbi, and deposits him on the porch of the governor's house in Jesus' stead.

Iscariot cannot believe either his transformation or the severity of his plight. He cannot speak, either to protest or to explain. Who would believe him?

In a last effort to appease the crowd's bloodlust, Pilate has Iscariot scourged with a knotted cord weighted with slivers of oxbone. When this effort fails, Pilate allows his soldiers to drive the stumbling Judas into the courtyard. Here they strip him, cloak him in scarlet, and subject him to a variety of mocking torments. These culminate in his forced march along the Via Dolorosa.

Upon the cross, Iscariot tries to emulate the behavior that his master both preached and modeled. He repredicts the fall of Jerusalem. He forgives a repentant thief. He thinks, I die for the sinless Nazarene. And he says, Father, into your hands I commit my spirit. Whereupon, torn and breathless, he dies in the ascended Jesus' place.

From the Islamic perspective, the purpose of this story is to wreak justice and to discredit the resurrection. But to the e-clone of Judas Iscariot, the legend appears to require as profound a faith, or as foolish a credulity, as the orthodox passion narrative. If this electronic court convicts him of the betrayal of which greater Christendom already believes him guilty, will it sentence him to die on a rood of glowing pixels in the echoey virtuality of cyberspace?

THE PARABLES OF JUDAS

In an offline dream, Iscariot puts a series of parables before the court. He will say nothing to the judge, lawyers, jurors, spectators, and netists except by way of parable, so that what he dreams in his torment will evaporate

♥ Matthew 18:12-13, *The Complete Gospels*, p. 90.

totally upon awakening.

To no one's question but his own, he spins this parable:

The betrayal of God's empire of light is like a tiny bead of poison that a man drops into a well of sweet water from a hidden vial. Though the drop is even smaller than the pupil of a sparrow's eye, yet, when it spreads throughout the well and pollutes even the spring, all who come in faith to the water and drink, clutch their throats, fall to the ground, and die in an agony of perplexity and blindness.

He tells them another parable:

The betrayal of God's empire of light is like a cowbird that invades the territories of sweet-singing larks and lays a single egg in the nests of these songbirds so that when the larks' own eggs hatch, a black cowbird hatches with the larks' young, and takes their food, and crowds them from their nests, and displaces their parents' carols with croakings of raucous triumph.

Iscariot puts a third parable to the court:

The betrayal of God's empire of light is like a hacker who logs on with a stolen password, roams the system at will, and secretes within it a viral program that activates itself upon another user's inadvertent command. He then begins to convert coherent data into ceaselessly self-propagating hieroglyphs of nihilistic jabberwock...

And so when Iscariot has finished dreaming these parables, he awakes in cyberspace, asweat and atremble, with each parable seared into his consciousness like a cigarette burn on a snowy linen tablecloth.

Dakota Browning says, Anything else you'd care to say in your own defense, Mr. Iscariot?

One thing. One thing only.

Go ahead.

Not long after time began, Lucifer betrayed God the Father out of ego and self-deception, supposing that he could somehow supplant the Creator.

Browning hopes to persuade the jury of his client's robust mental health. I assume you narrate metaphorically, he says.

I speak what I believe, Iscariot says.

Because your Yes is Yes, and your No, No?

Yes.

Although Browning appears dubious about issuing a second go-ahead,

he says, All right. Proceed.

Not long after awakening as an e-clone, I learned that the evangelist John wrote in his gospel that Satan entered me. He reports that with Satan thus at work in me, I handed over our master.

You dispute both assertions?

I've never had an ego like Lucifer's and the most painful self-deception I've ever practiced was that built on my hope that the other eleven would one day warm to me. Iscariot halts and grimaces.

Do you need a recess?

No. Sometimes . . . well, sometimes I have bad, horridly oppressive dreams. In them – and often I think that this is one – food tastes salt and bitter, music turns to insupportable clamor, and the sun drops into eclipse, never to emerge again. I despair.♥

Ogilvie leans toward Iscariot. Believe it or not, someone meant this trial as an antidote to despair.

Iscariot smiles wanly. A suicide has trouble believing that. But my resuscitation's taught me a lesson.

Tell us, says Ogilvie.

Despair is a harlot. Despite treason after treason, and sabotage after sabotage, God's empire of light never falls into total eclipse. Satan wages a futile war. Those who wage it with him wrap themselves in the pain and terror of their own self-betraying sins. Iscariot falls silent.

A fine lesson to learn, says Browning skeptically.

I had to die and come back to learn it.

Well. Yes. Anything else?

No.

No further questions, Your Honor.

Ogilvie looks to the prosecution. Cross-examination?

Rebecca Mormile half rises. To nearly everyone's surprise, she says, No questions, Your Honor.

ONLINE LOGOMACHY (V)

They had a chance to subject the jerk to a killer cross and they passed it up? What's wrong with these high-priced clowns?

♥ In *Lucifer: The Devil in the Middle Ages* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), Jeffrey Burton Russell notes that people once cast Despair as Lucifer's daughter, who entices Judas to betray Jesus. "When Judas has done the deed, Despair prompts him to suicide, and the demons rejoice at his eternal damnation" (267).

Don't you mean clones? They're simulacra.

That's right. Nobody's paying them.

Maybe they think the defense did their job for them. I do.

The prosecution's blown it. Iscariot's got a fan club.

Yeah. Aficianados of Pol Pot, Hitler, and Attila the Hun love him.

No way.

There's always a way. Catch this bulletin-board doggerel from an admirer:

Judas is my kind of strudel,
A pastry both cheesy and fey.
Do you like him too? Then yodel:
Just open your gullet and bray.
If you love Yehuddah,
Who's really quite shrewd-a,
Don't bother to brood-a:
Just jap, double-cross, & betray.

I don't know, keyboards one discussant. There's a lot of ambivalence there.

Avery Stills rises. Your Honor, I'd like to call the evangelist John, a.k.a., the beloved disciple, to the stand.

John, a.k.a. Jonah Bar-Zebedee, emerges from the electronic courtroom's sea of unseen spectators, approaches the stand, and, despite Jesus' admonition to abstain from formal oaths, swears to tell the truth, the whole truth, etc., on a book containing a philosophical gospel that he himself allegedly wrote. The defense confers about this untoward swearing-in, but decides not to object to it.

You've heard Mr. Iscariot's testimony, indicting you as a liar and a slanderer, says Stills to John. Your response?

I stand by what I've written.

But the defendant claims

The light shines in the darkness, and the darkness did not comprehend it, interjects John. The same holds here, as it so often does.

Stills leads the witness through a point-by-point rebuttal of Iscariot's testimony. John denies any regional bias amongst the disciples against Iscariot, any collusion in burdening him with the moneybox, any conspiracy to scapegoat him, or any plan to drive him to suicide.

We never desired anything bad for our Decapoleian brother, says John.

Only fruitful growth in the spirit.

Why has he said what he's said?

Objection, says Wendy Grice. Counsel wants the witness to speculate on a matter in which he has a powerful bias.

With that understanding, we'll allow him to answer, says Justice Ogilvie.

Thus prompted, John says: The man hurts. His hurt speaks, and the speech shaped from it gives him ease.

You bear him no animosity for contradicting the testimony of your gospel?

None, John tells Stills. I bear something else altogether.

For instance?

Sorrow that he didn't live to see even one of the Rabbi's resurrection appearances. Sorrow that his own sorrow persists.

Stills turns to the defense. Your witness.

Grice moves to take Stills' place in the middle of the courtroom. She clasps her hands behind her back. She studies the floor.

ONLINE LOGOMACHY (VI)

She'll badger him twelve ways to Easter. Then Satoh'll go after him. Then Browning.

You sadistic goober, you relish the prospect....

Grice turns to John. You saw yourself as Jesus' favorite, didn't you?

I did.

Giving you a self-proclaimed status rivaling that of Simon Peter, the rock on whom Jesus said he would build his church. Correct?

You say so.

Do you see yourself as a prideful man, Jonah Bar-Zebedee?

I hold myself in, well, a decorous esteem.

Really? A decorous esteem. Head down, Grice paces. Do you see yourself as a jealous or an envious man?

Only rarely.

Only rarely envious? Or only rarely aware of the tendency?

Objection! says Stills. Counselor descends to the catty.

True, says Ogilvie. But the ambiguity of the response does seem to warrant clarification.

I'm only rarely envious, John volunteers.

Why in your gospel do you refer to yourself in the third person as the beloved disciple or even the disciple Jesus loved most? asks Grice.

I didn't want to obtrude on the more important, indeed the most impor-

tant, story.

Yet you give yourself a rather grandiose kenning and behave with self-described nobility under its label. Doesn't that strike you as immodest?

It would've impeached modesty to name myself outright and belied events to omit myself entirely.

So. Grice stops pacing. You really believed yourself beloved of Jesus beyond the other eleven disciples?

Each of us may've believed that.

Yet you recorded events supporting your self-perception as especially favored.

I saw what I saw, then told my story.

You recorded Peter's three denials of the Lord on the night of his arrest? As did Matthew, John Mark, and Luke. The denials happened.

Okay, but you imply that you alone among the disciples saw the crucifixion.

One of us had to stand by him in his agony.

The others?

They fled, even Simon Peter. And Iscariot went out and hanged himself.

You write that from the cross Jesus gave his mother Mary into your charge?

I accepted it gladly, and our Lord's mother remained in my household until her death.

You write that you outran Peter to the empty tomb?

Yes.

The relevance of your swiftness afoot to the meaning of the empty tomb escapes me. Do you think your foot speed certified your manliness? Your saintliness? Both?

It bore witness to my agitation upon learning that someone had taken our Lord from the tomb.

An agitation greater than Simon Peter's, right?

John shifts his weight. I'm a burlier man than Peter. I recorded my earlier arrival at the tomb not in relation to his later arrival but in relation to my turmoil over troubling news about the Rabbi's body.

Your getting there first didn't otherwise signify to you?

John shifts his weight again. No.

Wendy Grice goes to the bench for Defense Exhibit C. She reads, But the other disciple ran faster than Peter and was the first to reach the tomb. Grice looks up. You expect us to conclude from this that you didn't exult in your triumph? That you weren't in fact gloating over it?

Rebecca Mormile pops to her feet. Your Honor, counsel is browbeating

the witness! And the relevance of all this to the guilt or innocence of Mr. Iscariot seem at best tenuous and at worst nonexistent!

I withdraw the question, says Wendy Grice. Rebecca Mormile sits down.

John leans forward in the witness box. I have a point to make. Ignoring the prosecutors' warning looks, he says, My account states forthrightly that Simon Peter entered the tomb first.

Grice snatches up the court's Bible and thumbs through it. Sir, your permission to place the witness's voluntary assertion in context.

Ogilvie nods his assent.

Grice says, After noting that Peter went into the tomb, the decorously self-esteeming John writes, Then the other disciple, who had come to the tomb first, went in also; and he saw and believed. Grice turns to the unseen jury. Does no one else detect a peculiar obsession here?

Mormile, pounding the table, pops up again. Your Honor!

Enough, Ms. Grice, says Ogilvie. Move on or wrap up your cross.

AN E-PISTOLARY PROPOSAL

Dear Producers, Trial of the Millennium:

This online courtcase of a despickable religious traitor from a couple thousand years ago has had its moments. It suggests some other possibilities to me as well. Use them as you see fit, altho of course I would like a mention in the front & back credits & a small cut of user fees, advertising loot, & future program sales.

Trying dead bastards who never went to trial is a winner all the way. As subjects for new proceedings, try: the Tamil suicide nerve-gas bombers who just hit the new soccer stadium in Jaffna; Lee Harvey Oswald; Adolf Hitler; John Wilkes Booth; Tomás de Torquemada. It'd probably be neat – i.e., entertaining, a jimmyjam ratings boost – to try a bitch or two, but I can't think of any. Marie Antoinette? Lucrezia Borgia? You guys can put researchers on this, right?

If you end up giving Iscariot the e-equivalent of the death penalty, I think you ought to hit him with something besides hanging. He's done that. Maybe you could introduce him virtually to complete vacuum, him being a moral vacuum & all. I have a program that I think would work for this. Give me a commission & I'll get busy on it.

– pldflpp @ brwn.u.bkst.rtrd.

Grice lays the Bible aside and turns back to John. You heard Jesus whisper that the one to whom he gave the dipped bread would betray him?

Yes.

And you were the only disciple privy to this revelation?

Also true.

No one else could have know what Jesus told you unless you told the others in turn, right?

John says, Judas' presence in the garden with the troops would've also told against him. And did.

Even with Roman soldiers and Jewish police, our client's presence in the garden is subject to interpretation. And your interpretation condemns. Grice stares long and hard at John before saying, You write that when our client took the dipped bread, Satan entered him.

You say so, and you say correctly.

How did you know that Satan entered him?

I knew. It was apparent to me.

How, precisely? Did Satan pop into view and jump down Mr. Iscariot's throat? Did an evil fog that you detected by means of extrasensory perception or an acute sensitivity to invisible auras make Mr. Iscariot start glowing purple?

John raises his eyebrows and looks to Stills, Mormile, and Albornoz. He shifts his weight in the witness box.

Grice, virtually pouncing on him, says: HOW DID YOU KNOW?

John flinches. A moue of offended disappointment twists his bearded features. I heard you clearly. Did I understand you? Perhaps not, but loudness doesn't help.

Does taking questions from a woman trouble you?

John looks to Ogilvie, who shrugs.

Grice recites from Paul's First Epistle to Timothy from memory: Let a woman learn in silence with all submissiveness. I permit no woman to teach or to have authority over men; she is to keep silent.

Do you find my sex a bar to candor and responsiveness?

Objection, says Avery Stills wearily.

Sustained.

Grice turns to Ogilvie. Still, sir, I believe you should direct him to answer my original question.

Ogilvie smiles. Straightaway, ma'am. The witness will answer the question: How did you know that Satan had entered Mr. Iscariot?

John looks back and forth from Ogilvie to Grice. How else could he have handed over the Rabbi?

In fact, says Grice, you deduced from your after-the-fact consideration of Jesus's arrest, and Mr. Iscariot's role in it, that Satan had entered our client.

Anyone could see it.

But, in fact, none of the other ten saw it all, did they?

None said they did.

Isn't it likely that you made this unverifiable assumption after misunderstanding Jesus' whispered words to you?

I heard what I heard.

Grice lowers her voice. Mr. Bar-Zebedee, a sagacious woman once said, Satan is a way of perceiving opponents.♥ Haven't you read Satan into our client because you read his presence in the garden as a betrayal?

John takes a deep, lung-filling breath. He looks away from Grice, shakes his head in annoyance.

Whether intentionally from malice or inadvertently from superstition, says Grice, gripping the witness box, you've demonized our client, sir, and created a monster that in fact exists nowhere but in your own religious imagination.

Objection! Mormile and Albornoz half-rise. Stills tilts his head back and smiles wide-eyed at the ceiling. Mormile says, Counsel draws her own conclusions. Plus she's trotting out the stale relativistic notion that evil is a situational figment or illusion.

Grice says, I

Mormile gallops on: She should save it for late-night bull sessions with know-it-all adolescents.

ONLINE LOGOMACHY (VII)

Incoming! Incoming!

These two gals're cheetah mamas, ain't they?

Grice definitely gets my hydraulics working.

Please. Me, I endorse that stuff from 1st Tim. about all submissiveness. Unless they've dropped to their knees, females should keep their mouths shut.

Run for cover, guys!

What for? We know where you live, you pathetic synthetic-testosterone junkies.

Go easy. Can't we all agree that Grice and Mormile are both babes?

You've picked the wrong b-word, bonehead.

Help! I'm lost among these intellectual giants like a baby squirrel among ancient sequoias....

♥ Elaine Pagels, quoted on p. 63 of David Remick's "The Devil Problem," *The New Yorker* (April 3, 1995), 54-65. The remark synthesizes a major argument in Pagels' book *The Origin of Satan* (June 1995).

Grice pivots toward the prosecution's table. I don't deny the existence of evil. I simply deny that it exists as some sort of preexistent counterprinciple in an ongoing combat with preexistent good. In that scheme, Rebecca, we all become pawns of the one or the other.

Interesting, says Mormile. But theologically suspect and irrelevant to this case.

Not at all, Your Honor. By reading Satan into our client, Jonah Bar-Zebedee denies to both Mr. Iscariot and himself, indeed to all of us, any capacity for self-generated evil. If Satan has entered our opponents, then Satan can't inhabit us. This attitudinal bias promotes the demonization of others and a smug sanctification of the self. It absolves us of the need to control our own native tropisms toward the dark.

Your Honor, says Mormile, this is heady claptrap.

Is it? says Grice. I propose a concept of good and evil that allows the prosecution to convict defendants on the basis of their own culpability, not on mere allegations of satanic possession. And what I propose doesn't automatically absolve our client, it simply requires a thoroughgoing demonstration of his guilt.

Demon? says John. Demon, stration?

Every Stills motions Rebecca Mormile to sit and says, I think were arguing petty semantics here, Your Honor. Which, along with John's arrival from another cultural and religious dimension, has left him gasping to follow Ms. Grice's verbal loop-de-loops.

Grice looks to Ogilvie. The witness's milieu of origin laid the groundwork for ours. Nor do I think there's anything petty about alleging that Satan, Hebrew for God's most dogged adversary, has entered another human being.

Stills rises. John, didn't you make that allegation as a symbolic way of saying that Mr. Iscariot surrendered to his own evil impulses?

This way lies chaos, says Ogilvie, rapping his gavel. Mr. Stills, you're out of order. Ms. Grice, where do you suppose this digressive philosophical brouhaha is going?

I don't know, sir, but I'd love to hear the witness respond to Mr. Stills' out-of-order question. In fact, I'll repeat it: John, do you regard Satan as a symbol, a mere figure of speech?

Satan exists, John says. Satan entered Yehuddah Bar-Simon.

Did Satan leave Mr. Iscariot again?

I don't know.

What do you think? On the basis of your keen sensitivity to the Satan-inhabited, speculate for us. Did Satan ever leave Mr. Iscariot, once having

entered him?

Perhaps when he hanged himself.

Why would Satan permit such a valuable instrument of his malevolence to hang himself?

He'd served his purpose.

So. You're saying Mr. Iscariot possessed free will only when Satan released him, at which time he expressed remorse for the latter's crime by hanging himself?

You say so, and I've also said so.

Then why're we trying Judas Icarion? Let's get Satan in here and grill him instead!

The electronic courtroom erupts in laughter and applause. With a look mixing amusement and disgust, Ogilvie pounds his gavel. Silence. Silence! The noise dissipates a little, and he says, We'll now take a thirty-minute potty-break! Another collapse of manners like this last one will result in my clearing the room and ordering these proceedings offline. A mild pox on all of you.

QUESTIONS FROM THE E-NUT GALLERY

Isn't grilling Satan a lot like tossing Br'er Rabbit into the briar patch?

Take the t off Br'er Rabbit and whattaya get?

Two thousands years older and one helluva culpability debt?

How does an e-clone take a potty break?

By shedding its impulses?

If this trial goes offline, where exactly does it go?

If a computer crashes & there's no one there to dash around in recursive panic, has it ever really been with the program?

Does anybody know Wendy Grice's private fax number?

ONE ONLINE SIDEBAR, WITH WITNESS AND JURISTS

Before Ogilvie can get to his chambers, Grice stops him and prevails upon him and her fellow attorneys to gather near the witness box for a demonstration of the potent consequences of demonization.

Demon? says John, standing down. Demon, stration?

Hold your right arm out in front of you at shoulder level and make a fist, Grice says. Bemusedly, John obeys.

This is highly irregular, Henry Albornoz says.

Hirofumi Satoh sighs and slaps a C-note into the palm of Dakota Browning's outstretched hand.

Stop that, Grice says. Take note. John here, a bona fide Thunder Brother,

has several inches in height and who knows how many pounds on me?

Ogilvie compliantly ogles Grice. Stills checks his watch. The others glance back and forth between John and Grice, who is pressing down on his fist with her index finger.

Resist me, Grice says. Try to keep me from moving your arm downward. John resists effortlessly. Good. Very good. Grice withdraws her finger.

Your point? says Stills.

With your permission, I have a couple more simple requests to make of the witness. May I?

Exasperated, Stills gives her a curt nod and folds his arms across his chest.

Grice tells John, Relax. Lower your arm. Shake out the kinks. Good. Now extend it just as before and make a fist. Excellent. Now lower your eyes and repeat the phrase I'm a bad boy clearly but not belligerently until I ask you to stop.

For heaven's sake, Wendy, says Mormile.

I mean it, Grice says. Come on, John. Say I'm a bad boy I'm a bad boy I'm a bad boy...

This is demeaning, Albornoza says. We object.

It's all off the record, Browning says. Lighten up.

I'm a bad boy, John says over and over as Grice presses down on his fist with her finger. John grimaces and strains, but his arm drops steadily lower. His left eyelid succumbs to a noticeable tic. Grice removes her finger.

No one says a word.

Grice pats John's shoulder. Let's do it again. This time, though, look me in the eye and say with feeling I'm a good boy.

This time John successfully resists Grice. His tic goes away, and he smiles faintly through the tangled red shrubbery of his beard.

Do any of you legal geniuses require an explanation of this fascinating phenomenon? Ogilvie asks the prosecutors.

Bad boys' arms go down more often than good boys'? Rebecca Mormile says.

Neat trick, says Stills to Grice. You must really liven up a party with that one.

Trick? An enacted parable. It shows what a drumbeat of verbal abuse can do. I contend that repeated accusations of satanic influence drove Iscariot to surrender to the lie and hang himself.

It still doesn't prove him innocent of selling out Jesus, Albornoza says.

Then it's our boy's word against yours, says Browning.
And Matthew's, John Mark's, and Luke's, says Alborno.oz.
Later, says Ogilvie. Inflict your clouds of witnesses on the trial proper.
Here they just befog my glasses. . . .

A PROTEST FROM THE E-NUT GALLERY

If they bring on the rest of the apostles, this trial could still be in progress when Christ comes again.

Well, I'll be gone. Long gone.

The prosecution calls Jesus of Nazareth, says Alborno.oz.

A ripple of astonishment works through the courtroom, and every monitor screen worldwide gives back a panorama of the spectators, who, thanks to computer graphics, have flamelike tongues of fire on their shoulders and heads, as if each one were a votive candle. This surreal graphic is brief, however. The ripple among the spectators subsides, and the trial's programmers cut immediately to Justice Ogilvie, who appears in closeup like a great, ebony condor.

Impossible! he says, booming without raising his voice.

Why? says Alborno.oz, undaunted.

Because summoning him as a witness would be to induce the Parousia, and no mortal human being, whether of the flesh or the microchip, has that authority.

Alborno.oz says, But who better to clarify the issue of what he told John in the upper room?

Who indeed? says Ogilvie.

Without his testimony, sir, the question's likely to remain forever moot.

Them's the breaks, says Ogilvie.

ONLINE LOGOMACHY (VIII)

Puhwhozit?

Parousia. The Second Coming. You don't induce it.

ISCARIOT TO GRICE, A HYPERTEXT E-PISTLE

Dear Ms. Grice,

I've said I loved the Rabbi, and in truth I did. I first loved him from afar, I next loved him for the deeds of healing and exorcism I saw him do, and I finally loved the man for his charisma, holiness, and beauty. He had a comeliness of bearing, movement, voice, and repose that banished from the eye the middling imperfections of his face and body. For whatever rea-

son – shame, perhaps – no evangelists wrote or spoke privately about these aspects of his attractiveness, but no one who met the Rabbi failed to see or admire them.

The prophet Isaiah may have foretold the coming of this man of sorrows, this mortal angel familiar with both grief and despal, but Isaiah's prophecy miscarried in his vision of Yeshua's appearance. Do you recall how Isaiah, the son of Amoz, describes our deliverer?

He grew up before the LORD like a young plant
whose roots are in parched ground;
he had no beauty, no majesty to catch our eyes,
no grace to attract us to him.
He was despised, shunned by all,
pain-racked and afflicted by disease;
we despised him, we held him of no account,
an object from which people turn away their eyes.♥

Yeshua drew people to him. No one but his enemies – folks he'd outgrown, folks whose authority he challenged – could fail to esteem him. Like me, he was a peasant, a man who'd once made his living making practical goods with his hands. In his case, benches, roof beams, and tables. In mine, tools and weapons. Oddly, during my discipleship, the only thing I ever saw him make was a corded whip with which he careered through the temple, shaping panic among the moneychangers and pigeonsellers. But that was after I'd sought him out on the great lake and begged for a place among his closest followers not with boasts or sighs but with love and work. Despite my arrival from another land and my awkwardness among the Galileans, these offerings secured my place, and I found myself a movable home and a sliver of reflected fame. In faith, apart from the Rabbi and along with Judas Lebbaeus, I was an instrument of healing, an expeller of demons, and a herald of God's imperial reign.

I never wanted an infamy such as I have now, the reproach of millions. Instead I wanted the regard of our master and comfort in the night, things I tell you, along with what follows, because Jonah Bar-Zebedee, my accuser, reports in his gospel that Yeshua said, And you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free,♥♥ and because Didymos Judas Thomas reports in his less renowned gospel that Yeshua said, If you bring forth

♥ Isaiah 53:2-3 in *The Revised English Bible with the Apocrypha* (Oxford and Cambridge University Presses, 1989), p. 637.

♥♥ John 8:32 in The New King James translation.

what is within you, what you bring forth will save you. If you do not bring forth what is within you, what you do not bring forth will destroy you.♥

Spiritually speaking, honesty is the best policy.

And so: One night we thirteen slept in scattered pockets along the shore between Capernaum and Bethsaida. We'd come together to talk about our work among the lake villages. In some we'd met success, in some consternation or rebuke. Weariness had fallen that night among the successful and unsuccessful alike. James and John, the Thunder Brothers, sleeping apart in two different spots, earned their nicknames.

I couldn't sleep, despite my fatigue. I left my place under a gnarled fig tree with Lebbaeus and Simon the Zealot; I wandered down the beach and found Yeshua lying alone in the chapel of an upturned, rock-braced fisherman's skiff. I knelt down and crawled in beside him. He opened his eyes and accepted me into the crook of his arm, and so we lay.

Later I put my lips to his ear, as if whispering, and one of my hands strayed to a place out of my view. Yeshua caught it by the wrist and with great gentleness touched the back of it to his mouth. The water lapping at some nearby rocks and the uncanny sound of a hermit fisherman chanting a psalm from a boat far out emboldened me, and I twisted in Yeshua's arms as I was later to twist, they tell me, in Blood Acre. He smiled, a smile only faintly visible, and gripped me tighter.

Take rest, he said.

Yeshua, I said, I desire

But he put a finger to my lips and said, Whoever has come to know the world has discovered the body, and whoever has discovered the body, of that one the world is not worthy.♥♥

I didn't fully understand, but it seemed that without encouraging me in my longing for him, he approved the sort of body talk that between male and female seeds the world and between loving others may at times stir both comfort and joy. His eyes said as much as his words, but I couldn't always see his eyes to read them. When I tried to move or speak, he said, Shhhh.

And then he said, How miserable is the body that depends on a body, and how miserable is the soul that depends on these two.♥♥♥

♥ Thomas 70:1-2 in Elaine Pagels' *The Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1979), p. 126. Compare this version to those in *The Complete Gospels*, p. 316, and Marvin W. Meyer's *The Secret Teachings of Jesus: Four Gnostic Gospels* (New York: Random House, 1984), p. 32.

♥♥ Thomas 80:1-2 in *The Complete Gospels*, p. 318.

Even this cryptic saying, despite his iteration of the word miserable, didn't feel like a scolding but like an openhearted attempt to pour light into me. Don't mire yourself in lust, Iscariot. Yet don't assume the soul so fragile or meatbound that it can't rise clean and smiling above the body's exultations.

This, I came to know, was not a teaching that Yeshua shared with everyone. That night, however, I laid back in the crook of his arm, well content, and slept. No other meeting like this occurred between us again, and yet I never thought him avoiding me or disappointedly intent on picturing me to the Galileans as the serpent in their vineyard.

At dawn I awoke to find John casting a long shadow into the upturned skiff. He stared down at me with the disdain of a rich matron for a turd. I sat up, striking my head on the boat, and then rolled out from under it groggy and dazed. John made me feel like a harlot, an orgiastic devotee of Baal, and yet I'd done nothing, except in my mind, but lie beside the Rabbi and draw warmth from both his body and his presence. As for Yeshua, seeing the big fisherman, he propped himself up on his elbows and laughed heartily.

Look at you, he said. This morning you seem to wonder at my meaning when I said I'd make you fishers of men.

Maybe it was too early in the day. Maybe John didn't care to think the disciple from distant Kerioth even a twelfth so beloved as he. He bridled at the Rabbi's joke and lumbered back up the shore to his companions of the night.

From that day forward, he loved me less and less and I sweated like a slave to stay out of his way. I don't mean to brand John a vindictive lout, for my sins groan louder by far than his, but what Yeshua forgave me, I wish the world would forgive. My name has become anathema and filth. I'm not in the mouth of one of Satan's three heads, Ms. Grice, but I am indisputably in hell.

Your respectful client, Judas Iscariot

Your Honor, says Satoh, we'd like to enter this letter from our client as a deposition and as Defense Exhibit D.

Why don't you just put Mr. Iscariot in the box again? says Ogilvie. He isn't absent, after all.

No one in e-space is either altogether absent or altogether present, sir. We do this in the interest of saving time. Out of courtesy, we've already

♥♥♥ *Ibid.*, 87, p. 319.

filed a copy with Mr. Stills and his associates.

Ogilvie looks to Stills. If you agree to the defense's request to enter the letter, I'd permit you to put Mr. Iscariot on the stand for a cross. But I have no bias in the matter either way.

Henry thinks it highly irregular, says Stills. But we have no objection.

Thank you, says Satoh. May we send e-copies to the jurors' fax screens, please?

Consider it done, says the stenographer, a robot retained in the courtroom out of atavistic sentiment.

Will you call Mr. Iscariot for a cross? says Ogilvie.

No, says Stills. He'd only lie again anyway.

Sustained! barks Ogilvie, looking toward Wendy Grice, who has half-risen from her place.

AN INFOHIGHWAYMAN HAS HIS SAY

My Ghod, the kisscheek from Kerioth's a real in-your-face faggot.

The proceedings proceed. Dakota Browning threatens to summon every Roman soldier who ever participated in or observed a crucifixion outside Jerusalem during the high-priesthood of Caiaphas.

We don't know much about most of those fellows, Ogilvie says. You'd get some pretty vague and inchoate resuscitants.

Browning yields on this point, but spends two days interrogating an expert on osculation, or kissing, with special attention to the socio-cultural import of nonromantic kisses in quasi-public places. A day later, he brings in aerial photos gridded to show the distances between Kerioth and the Galilean hometowns of the other eleven disciples, plus income charts, occupational statistics, and samples of each village's exports and home-grown foodstuffs. Over the new few days, Browning summons three vague and inchoate resuscitants who recall Jonah Bar-Zebedee lying to them about various matters; questions a lexicographer on the many connotations of the word betrayal; and calls several heirs of the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar to testify that (a) the disciple John did not write the gospel so often attributed to him and that (b) even if Iscariot had in fact maliciously betrayed the Christ, he should receive along with his master shared credit for humanity's redemption. As Browning struts and preens, many people fight sleep and Ogilvie prompts giggles by making a show of holding his eyelids open with his thumbs. Browning yields to Satoh, and Satoh summons a night watchman from the Garden of Gethsemane.

Enough! says Ogilvie. Onliners've fled these proceedings in droves lately,

and I'm sick of all the yammering.

Bless you, says Rebecca Mormile.

Ogilvie goes on to say, The jury will now decide, Is the defendant guilty or not guilty of betraying Jesus Christ?

The head juror, still out of view, asks Ogilvie if the jury may acquit Iscariot if it concludes there is a reasonable doubt of his culpability.

Yeah, yeah, says Ogilvie. You know the drill. Hop to it. And if you find him guilty, I'll have to think up a sentence commensurate with the crime, something worse than what he's already endured.

Maybe you could hang him and bring him back seven times seventy times, says the chief juror.

Stills says, If you favor the eye-for-an-eye approach, a crucifixion would probably

Enough! cries Ogilvie again. The jury will please retire and return us a verdict. Pronto!

THE VERDICT(S)

Your Honor, we the jury find Yehuddah Bar-Simon, a.k.a. Judas Iscariot, not guilty of betraying Jesus of Nazareth, his teacher, master, and Lord.

Grice, Browning, and Satoh trade highfives. The courtroom erupts in murmurs, cheers, hisses, applause, singing, and boos. A snake-dancing conga line of Iscariot supporters winds from the spectator section into the area between the bench and the attorneys' desks.

Halt! says Ogilvie. Cease and desist!

The trial's programmers delete the interfering celebrants.

Pardon me, Your Honor, says the chief juror, but we're not quite finished. You're not?

No, sir. On the unspoken charge of committing a gratuitous self-execution, we the jury find the defendant guilty. Suicide is a profanation of the temple of the body warranting severe censure and punishment.

[Execute, whispers Browning to Grice. Ever notice how that word means both to bring into existence, as in to execute a perfect somersault, and to remove from existence, as in to kill by electrocution or hanging or so on?

No, whispers Grice. I never have.]

Nowadays, Ogilvie tells the chief juror, we stay the hell out of personal decisions of that sort and

thus debase the concept of life's essential sanctity, says the chief juror, finishing Ogilvie's sentence for him.

That's another trial, says Ogilvie. And one from which I recuse myself

now on the grounds that I'm an e-clone without a viable stake in the natural world encompassing cyberspace. And so, Mr. Iscariot, you are a free man.

The trial's programmers materialize Iscariot at the defense table. He stands and shakes hands with his attorneys.

And not only free, says Ogilvie, but changed. Or, I should say, eligible for change.

I don't understand, says Iscariot.

The court hereby offers you somatic transubstantiation from your present e-space existence to full corporeality on the good earth itself.

Iscariot looks to Wendy Grice for help.

Just as Pinocchio went from wooden puppet to real-live boy, Grice says, you may now go from electronic resuscitant to honest-to-God full-bodied man. The process is called somatic transubstantiation. Do you want it? If you do, say so and prepare to emerge into the harsh instabilities of our dystopian century.

Of course, says Iscariot. I want living water.

The courtroom vanishes. The Iscariot e-clone, alone in a dimensionless mother-of-pearl shimmerstorm, undergoes the process. The computer saves him; analyzes and encodes him; and sends this complex DNA blueprint to an online transfigurer, from which a three-dimensional hard copy of his unique person unfolds and strides forth.

Into sunshine, air, and uncertainty.

Two steps beyond his resurrection, Iscariot encounters the wrath of one who claims to've loved Yeshua even more than he did.

This person leaps into Iscariot's arms and carries him back out of the world in an instantaneous blast as loud and colorful as a redbud tree.

JUDAS

Yeshua once said to Didymos Judas Thomas,

Whosoever drinks from my mouth will become like me; I myself shall become that person, and the hidden things will be revealed to him.♥

As for me, I should have said, Rabbi, forgive. I should have resisted the beauty of that redbud. I didn't slay our master on the cross, after all, but in the thirsty despair with which I knotted my rope, sleepwalked under that scarlet canopy, and leapt like a fool into a mirage of living water rather than the water itself.

Rabbi, forgive.

♥ Thomas 108:1-2 in *The Complete Gospels*, p. 321.

Receding Horizon

Jonathan Lethem & Carter Scholz

“That which is possible will surely happen.
Only that which happens is possible.” – Franz Kafka, *Diaries*

From darkness, the Statue of Liberty blazes onto the screen with a crashing fanfare of music. The arm with the sword rises up as if newly stretched aloft, and surrounding the figure are the glowing words COLUMBIA PICTURES. Frank Capra leans over to speak to the man on his right. “This one’s for Jack.”

2.II.1924

Lieber Max!

We are settled. In the Holy Land’s warm clear air, already I feel a new man. Yesterday we saw Dr Löwy, and he explained his cure. He uses the sputum of the bee moth, *Galleria mellonella*. They are plentiful in Palestine. They dote on honey. Löwy learned the technique from a Frenchman at the Pasteur Institute, Élie Metchnikov, who died in 1916. As he explains it, the substance breaks down the waxy armor of the tubercle bacillus. But Löwy is more than a man of science. His first words to me were, the difference between health and sickness is foremost a difference of imagination. So at once I knew I had a doctor I could trust. As to writing, my true sickness, it is behind me. I have cast it off as a penitent casts off his hairshirt. Dora sustains me. Blessed be the day you introduced us.

Deiner, FK

Jack Dawson, screenwriter, 55; born July 4, 1883 in Prague, Czechoslovakia; died September 22, 1938, Cedars of Lebanon Hospital, Los Angeles, of

pneumonia. Dawson, who emigrated to America in 1933 and legally changed his name from Kavka, rose rapidly in his profession under the patronage of director Frank Capra. Dawson shared writing credits on many Capra films, including *Mr. Deeds In The Big City* and *Meet Joe K.* A memorial service will be held at Temple Beth-El in Brentwood.

4.VII.1935

Lieber Max!

After anonymous months in the publicity department, I am now a screenwriter. The director Frank Capra, who won so many Oscars last year for *It Happened One Night*, came to our office with a contest to name his next picture. I won fifty dollars with my title, *The Man Who Disappeared*. As he was writing the check, you will not believe it, he recognized my name. (I have resolved to change it.) He had just bought at a fabulous price one of the few copies of *Das Urteil* to escape the burnings. A true American bourgeois, he cannot read German, but my negligible volume, unread, shares an honored shelf at his Brentwood estate with a Shakespeare Fourth Folio, a first edition of the *Divine Comedy*, and a proof copy of *A Christmas Carol*.

I know this because he had me to dinner. A strange evening. He was visibly disgusted by the way I chewed my food. He said he has just fired Robert Riskin, who wrote *It Happened One Night*, and is looking for a new writer. According to Capra, Riskin's themes were too political, insufficiently "universal". He professed to have found a kindred spirit in me. I told him I needed a room and a vegetarian diet, nothing more.

The evening ended in near catastrophe. Capra collapsed and an ambulance was called. Next day he was out of danger, and I visited him in the hospital, attempting to buoy his spirits with tales of my own sickness. He was silent, and I grew increasingly ill at ease. He asked about my writing, and I said I was a coward, that I had withdrawn from it in order to save my life, that my work was an offense to God. He said nothing but regarded me intently.

Now he wants me to begin work with him as soon as possible. I am stunned by the rapidity with which one's fortunes change in America. Boundless opportunity! Though I came resigned to end my days as a faceless clerk, I find I am embarked again upon writing. Of a sort.

Joel 2:25, "And I will restore to you the years that the locust has eaten." But in what form?

Deiner, FK

The old druggist weeps as young George shows him his mistake. Still despondent from the death of his own son, he has erred in preparing a prescription for another child. George brandishes the still-open vial with its deathhead emblem in a gesture that is almost threatening, while the druggist sobs out his gratitude, "How can I ever thank you, George. I'm an old fool! Why, if that prescription had gone out, it would have meant shame and disgrace and prison!" "And yet," George says, "sometimes a cure, or an inoculation, begins with a small amount of poison, isn't that so?"

Frank Capra shifts uneasily in his seat. Although the script has gone through many revisions, he is certain he has never heard that line before....

25.XI.1935

Lieber Max!

I have remade myself. A new life, a new name taken from the *kavka*, the jackdaw emblem that you will remember hung outside my father's store. I am still his son.

First day on the set. Gaudy, vulgar, exciting. After a wrong turn on the lot, I found myself in a narrow street that might have been Prague. Buildings all false fronts, belying the reality of my past life, establishing the inescapable reality of the present. Rounding a corner into a phalanx of cameras I heard the shouted command, "Cut!" I retreated to the sideline in embarrassment. A couple of hangers-on were saying:

"What was Capra in the hospital for? He told me TB, that don't make sense."

"Crap. It was peritonitis. But that's no story Frank would tell on himself. Trouble with the gut, that's a peasant thing. TB, he thinks that's spiritual, an artist's disease."

"He thinks he's an artist so he fires Riskin? What a mistake. Frank's the schmaltz, Riskin's the acid."

"Why does Frank pick up with a nobody like this Dawson?"

"Riskin wouldn't stand his crap any more."

On the set, Barbara Stanwyck. I could not keep from staring. Like Milena, that stately dark vulnerability, restrained fire. I heard her say, "When you're desperate for money, you'll do a lot of things."

When he heard I was the new writer, George Bancroft told a joke. "You're not Polish, are you? Did you hear about the Polish starlet? She fucked the writer." Barbara looked coolly at us and I blushed like a boy of fifty-two.

JL to CS: It might be appropriate to include some of our notes to each other in the story itself, making it a metafiction. What do you think?

CS to JL: Well, that makes me uneasy. Calling the artifice into question virtually requires further turns of the screw, and where do we stop? Once you start the process, there's no safe burrow to retreat to. With ground this uncertain, we could title it "The Metamorphosis".

Max,

FC has changed the title from *The Man Who Disappeared* to *Mr. Deeds in the Big City*. He wants to cut the trial scene, but I, I am convinced Deeds must prove himself in court. At stake is not the contested fortune, but the man's very existence. All around him people are trying to make him disappear, to replace him with their idea of him. He is in danger of ceasing to exist. FC exhorts me to forget words, to think of the action, the image, the movement. He cannot see that this reality he carves out of light is a reality of surface, while my reality is not what moves, but what animates.

I am among mouse folk, Max. I am a singer, of a sort. They are tonedeaf yet they seem to understand me. My faint piping. They give me no special dispensation for my singing, no recognition that I am special, but I have a place in their hearts. Yet if I cease to sing, they will go on with their mouse lives as before and I will be forgotten.

Interior. Night. The Bailey dining room. George's father comes to the table, his heavy dressing gown swinging open as he walks. George thinks: my father is still a giant of a man.

His father sits, and pokes at the meal George has prepared.

George speaks. "It's awful dark in here, Pop."

"Yes, dark enough," answers his father. "I prefer it that way."

"Y, you know, it's warm outside, Pop," says George, stuttering slightly, a habit he knows his father deplores, yet he cannot himself. Indeed, it is only with his father that he stutters.

His father lays down his fork. "Have you thought of what you're going to do after college?" George has been dreading this moment. With his brother gone, it was only a matter of time before his father brought up the family business. "I know it's only a hope," Bailey senior continues, "but you wouldn't consider coming into the asbestos works?"

"Oh, Pop, I couldn't face being cooped up in a shabby office..." At this, George understands that he has hurt his father. "I'm sorry, Pop, I didn't mean that remark, but this business of spending all of your life trying to save three cents on a length of pipe... I'd go crazy. I want to leave Progress Falls. I'm going to build things. I'm going to build skyscrapers a hundred stories high. I'm going to build a bridge a mile long!"

"George, there are many thing in the business I'm not aware of, I won't say it's done behind my back, but I haven't an eye for so many things any longer."

"Anyway, you know I already turned down Sam Wainwright's offer to head up his plastics firm. I'm not cut out for business."

The elder Bailey glowers at him. "Oh yes. Sam Wainwright. You've told him about your engagement to Mary?"

"Well, sure, of course."

"Don't deceive me, George! Do you really have this friend Sam Wainwright?"

Doubt flickers in George's eyes. He begins to answer, but his words are garbled, as if something has gone wrong with the sound equipment....

Max,

Receding Horizon, the Ronald Colman epic, is now permanently shelved. FC disregarded my advice to set it in Oklahoma, and went hideously over-budget trying to recreate Tibet in a local icehouse. Harry Cohn declared the film "a consummate editing disaster" because of the proliferation of unrelated fragments towards the end. A late scene where Ronald Colman attempts to regain his lost paradise, which recedes from him at every step of his approach, especially infuriated Cohn.

My working title for the new film: *The Life and Death of Joe K*. An innocent man, Gary Cooper, tries to survive in the midst of cynical manipulators. Innocent of the rising power of Norton and his motorcycle corps. Innocent of Barbara rifling her father's diaries for his speeches: the betrayal of intimacy into the public eye. "When you're desperate for money, you'll do a lot of things."

Finished writing the last scene in a kind of trance: suicide is the only redemption for Cooper.

CS to JL: You realize, don't you, that if we put ourselves into the story, those aren't our real selves? They're busily creating yet another alternate version of FK & FC, and possibly of themselves and their reality as well.

JL to CS: Lighten up! It's only a short story. You act as though the universe were at stake in every word.

CS to JL: Alas, that's how I feel; more depends upon these acts of representation than we can know.

George thinks: this town is no place for any man unless he's willing to crawl to Potter. Even then one will be forced to wait a hundred years in the

antechamber before being admitted to Potter's outer office, a room crowded with petitioners. There a secretary indifferently makes notations in a gigantic book, offering appointments to meet with Potter's personal assistant, who never appears in the office but who controls all access to Potter. At times George wonders whether Potter himself even exists – but where did that absurd thought come from? George knows Potter, he has dealt with the man, and yet . . .

This scrap of film flutters to the floor of the cutting room and is lost among countless other scraps.

Meet Joe K is in the theaters. Tears of shame and pleasure mixed in my eyes at FC's changed ending. Regardless of its falsity, how affecting Cooper is! The betrayed intelligence that shines from his eyes. He knows he has not been redeemed, but damned to a life of pretense.

What is FC's reflex for the redemptive but a foredoomed attempt to make things come out right? He doesn't believe in it himself; doubt and skepticism live in his nerves, his haunted eyes. Yet despite his impositions, his unbearable confidences, I am drawn to him. Barbara says, "he senses what you want to keep hidden." And the film will be a success. Of course. FC tested five endings and chose the most popular.

As the final credits rolled, I felt an odd, almost narcotic relief. I was betrayed but not exposed. None of the film's surfaces and movements are the movements of my soul. This is no knife to be turned back upon me.

Exterior. Night. In a sort of baffled fury, George paces in front of the home where Mary Hatch lives alone with her mother. The town of Progress Falls has trapped him, the mocking laughter of the townsfolk when he tried to speak of travel has chased him back to Mary's street. It is as though the greater world is an illusion, a receding horizon, whose only purpose is to establish more forcibly Progress Falls's inescapable reality. The town exists only to lead him back to this street, to pace before this house.

He will not go in, he swears to himself. It would trap him forever, not just in Progress Falls, but in some abysmal predicament of which Progress Falls is merely the emblem. At that moment Mary leans from her window. She calls: "What are you doing, picketing?"

George starts in guilt. "Hello, Mary. I just happened to be passing."

"Yes, so I noticed. Have you made up your mind?"

"About what?"

"About coming in. Your mother just phoned and said you were on your way over to pay me a visit."

“But...I didn’t tell anybody!” protests George. “I just went for a walk and happened to be....” But as he speaks his fingers are already fumbling the catch of the garden gate, they have made his decision for him, yet the catch won’t release, and as he fumbles Mary’s features become more anxious, and George almost prances with the strain of being caught between two worlds, and Frank Capra turns to ask how this outtake has made it into the rough cut....

Taking a deep breath, Odets entered Capra’s office. The director’s lips were pressed back in a pained smile belied by his heavy Sicilian brow. He’s going to have me killed, thought Odets. This isn’t a story conference, it’s a rubout. That’s what happened to Jack Dawson – Capra had him *done*.

Capra tossed a sheaf of onionskin onto the desk between them.

“‘The Judgment.’ Jack thought this was his greatest work. And this is the best you can do? One page of notes?” Capra lifted the sheaf and read from the top page. “‘Georg Aussenhof, a young merchant, is writing a letter to a friend. The friend has done what Georg always wanted to do: leave his hometown for the big city. Friend has tried to encourage Georg to leave, but Georg is doing too well in his father’s business. The father, however, is a monster. This drives Georg to suicide at a bridge.’”

“Evaluation: This material is hopeless for a movie. No fee is large enough for me to jump through these particular hoops. Find another writer.” Capra dropped the manuscript and glared at Odets.

“I’m sorry, Frank. That’s my honest opinion. I happen to think it’s a good story, but it’s completely internal. There’s no movie there.”

“Of course there’s a movie there! I’m no writer, but I know genius when I see it!”

Odets saw with astonishment that Capra was stifling tears. “Damn it, I want to bring that sad little man’s vision to the widest possible audience. But keep it true. Look, you’re not thinking here. Why don’t we turn it into a Christmas story?”

“Christmas?” Odets asked faintly.

“Dickens!” said Capra.

Odets thought it an odd response.

“Dickens!” said Capra again. “He was Jack’s favorite writer!”

This seemed mildly unbelievable, and certainly irrelevant.

Capra punched at the single page of notes that Odets had produced in a week’s labor. “This Georg Aussenhof... what’s that mean anyway, Aussenhof?”

Odets had looked it up. “It’s the outer courtyard of a castle. What the

English call the bailey. Why, in London there's a court of law...."

"Fine. George Bailey, then. He thinks his life is worthless because he's never left town?"

"That's about it," said Odets.

"Stay with me, Cliff. That's the point where he's driven to the bridge."

And me with him, thought Odets.

"A Christmas Carol."

Lord, thought Odets, he's around the bend. I'm a dead man.

"You've gotta do like the Ghost of Christmas did, pull him off that bridge and show him what the town, what's the name of it?"

"I believe it's Prague," said Odets drily.

"Fine, call it Proggsville, or Progress Falls, that's it. That's our title: *Miracle In Progress Falls*. The Ghost shows him what Progress Falls would be like if he throws himself off that bridge. How many people depend on him, and love him, his girl –"

Odets didn't interrupt. He was interested despite himself. Capra's brand of integrity was not the worst in Hollywood, even though Odets had already noted a few dodges and fades in the director's teary encomium to Dawson – Dawson had been over six feet, not a little man at all, and Capra had shown no scruples about altering Dawson's great screenplay *Meet Joe K.* almost beyond recognition, copping out of the suicide ending at the last moment. The result had been a travesty, an impossibly uplifting ending to a tragic, bitter story.

But Odets had seen his own work similarly mutilated. It was par for the course. If it was going to happen, let it happen at the hands of an Oscar-winner like Capra. And at the best rates this town paid.

CS to JL: Odets? What kind of name is that?

JL to CS: Funny you should ask. I stumbled onto Odets in my research. He was a celebrated dramatist in his day, and a guy who really made the movie we're ascribing to Kafka. He went to Hollywood and he did write for Capra. What's odd is how completely he's disappeared from literary history. It appears he championed some arcane philosophical system called Socialism.

When I turned in this draft to the duty officer at Artistic Control, there was already a red flag on my file. The next day the Odets research material was missing from the library. From the catalog, too.

Are we going to have trouble publishing this, Carter?

"Cliff, to help you realize Jack's vision, I'm giving you access to these papers of his. He left them to me. Notes, letters...."

"Who's Max?" said Odets, reading the salutation on the top sheet.

"That's Max Brod, his best friend. It's funny. I found out Brod was killed in 1933. The Nazis. Jack kept on writing to him anyway. There just wasn't anywhere to send the letters."

Odets studied the letter. The small, precise handwriting had the concentration of a real writer. Somehow this depressed Odets. A real writer doesn't end his days working for a man who subverts his work.

"Cliff, I don't think you've heard how I met Jack."

Odets had. Three or four times, actually. But he was clearly going to hear it again. Capra thought Dawson had saved him not just from death, but from moral collapse as well. There was a moral economy in the world, and on this occasion Dawson had been its agent. Capra's version was as close to reality as this movie was to "The Judgment."

"He called me a coward, Cliff. He said, your talents aren't your own, they're a gift from God. When you don't use the gifts God blessed you with, you're an offense to God and humanity."

Capra glowered at Odets, as if to impress upon him the gravity of such an offense.

"Jack said he was through as a writer. Washed up. But he hated to see me go down the same way. That gave me the courage to rise from my sickbed and go back to work. I swore to myself that I'd make it up to him. And we made some pretty good films together, Jack and I. But now, Cliff, now I want *you* to show some courage. I want you to take another crack at this thing."

You remember those odious melodramas we saw decades ago at the Palastkino, Max, you and Otto and I. *The Student of Prague*. The young student makes a deal with the devil, an Italian sorcerer. He trades his reflection for wealth and happiness. But the mirror-image takes on its own life and destroys his hopes. Is it too fanciful to see this tawdry tale in my relations with FC? Yet it is not FC who dooms me, it is FK asserting himself over Jack Dawson.

A year later Wegener made *The Golem*. The dull robot falls in love with his master's daughter, naturally!, and her rejection rouses him to a rampage. When he falls from the parapet, his body shatters like clay. Myself and Barbara. She might as well be FC's daughter. Glimpse of the cold spaces between our worlds.

Alone in his office, Odets lit another cigarette and mimicked Dorothy Parker's fluting voice. "Cliff, the Dawson notes you so generously shared are intriguing, but I'm not sure, quite, what one can do with them. This

one, for instance: 'In the Oklahoma Open Air Theater, George recovers, through paradisaical magic, his vocation, freedom, and integrity, even his parents and his homeland.' Is Frank making a musical?"

It had gone no better with Hammett. Nor Trumbo. West didn't even return his calls. He had gone through every name writer in town, even Aldous Huxley, merely because Capra wanted class. One was tied up, another was under contract, a third was drying out somewhere. Of those who'd come in, none lasted a week. Capra wanted the impossible: a bitter minatory tale transformed into a fable of redemption.

Eventually Capra would be forced to bring in some real screenwriters, script doctors who knew what they were doing, who would excise the last trace of Dawson. Meanwhile Odets soldiered on alone. The conferences got grimmer. Capra was doing his godfather act again.

"Change it."

"It's very clear, Frank. The bad guy is George's father. See, says right here, 'Georgs Vater'."

"Change it, Cliff. This is a Christmas flick, the bad guy can't be family. We need a Scrooge. Make him a competing businessman. Make up a name."

Odets sighed inwardly. Father, Vater, pater. "Potter," he said.

"Bingo," said Capra.

Uncle Willi, make that Billy, has misplaced an important file. A government agency requires the asbestos works to keep a close accounting of its procedures. This file has been lost. George is furious: "Do you know what this means, you old fool? It means shame and disgrace and prison! One of us is going to jail! Well, it's not going to be me!" George rushes out. In the gathering dusk, snow is falling. Across the town square is the courthouse, a structure that seems to rise to heaven, its every window blazing. The adjutants of the court perform close-order drill before the gates, under the floodlights.

This is no outtake, thinks Capra, but something stranger, as though some other reality, hiding between the frames, is asserting itself....

Every evening Odets dragged himself home from Columbia, drank a pint of Scotch, and stared at the walls, an unread book open in front of him. Every morning he drove back to the studio, tallying in his mind the interrupted projects of his own he would resume once he was done with Capra, even as he sensed that the potential world to which those works belonged, while he delayed in this one, relentlessly receded from him.

He dreamed about a library, vast and dim, in which Dawson's unwritten

books could be found, alongside unwritten volumes by Parker, Fitzgerald, Hammett, Trumbo, Faulkner, himself. Odets crouched reading in an aisle; the heavy steps of booted guards could be heard at a distance. He could read and understand the pages, but they made no sense. It was as though the world had tilted away from an entire set of meanings. Like George Bailey, Odets felt estranged from a world as compromised, dull, threatening, and suffused with loss as Progress Falls. He awoke haunted by the unquiet ghosts of those unwritten books.

Odets had been around enough not to blame Hollywood – no writer needed outside help to procrastinate or to fail; Dawson himself had freely given up literature years before coming to America – but as Odets worked against the Dawson story it seemed to him that something more abstract, almost a cosmic principle, was at work, bestowing gifts merely to subvert them. George Bailey would never leave Progress Falls; nor, it seemed as the days dragged on, would Cliff Odets ever be free of this damned script.

Oddly, though, Odets was haunted less by his own unwritten work than by Dawson's, the outlines of which he vaguely glimpsed like the battlement of a castle in fog, looming darkly from Capra's world of determined optimism.

What had it cost the world that Dawson had written scripts instead of novels? He could not escape the feeling that the scripts were urgent warnings shouted in some arcane and forgotten language. Some days, the world Odets walked through seemed flimsy and insubstantial in the dim yet insistent light that Dawson's work cast.

What other world would have welcomed the unfinished works Dawson alluded to in his letters to Max? Odets tried to imagine it, imagined some other pair of writers in some potential world a half century hence, coming upon this same material....

Odets realized he was wasting time. He shook himself out of reverie and returned to his hopeless task.

JL to CS: Damn it, will you quit making this harder than it has to be? I thought we'd decided to drop Odets.

CS to JL: I don't see how, now that we've given him voice. Given the circumstances, I'm sure he'd be happier out of it. As would I, if you want the truth. But if we don't finish what we've started, in what red-flagged library carrel will we end up?

JL to CS: I'm more worried about where we'll end up if we *do* finish. When I handed in the last draft my AC duty officer said we were creating a penal colony for writers, torturing them on the racks of our prose. It

sounded like a veiled threat to me.

CS to JL: I tried to warn you. A metafiction opens everything to question, even the ground of our own existence. It could be as hard to escape as Progress Falls.

Interior. Potter's office. George flinching under his words. "You once called me a warped, frustrated old man. What are you but a warped, frustrated young man? A miserable little clerk crawling in here on your hands and knees begging for help, no better than a cockroach. You're worth more dead than alive. I'll tell you what I'm going to do, George. As a stockholder in the Bailey Asbestos Works, I'm going to swear out a warrant for your arrest."

George felt he must sit down, but now he saw there was no seat in the room. "But what have I done?"

"Why, we'll let the court decide that."

George turns and starts out of the office.

"Go ahead, George," says Potter. "You can't hide in a little town like this." The patriarch lifts the telephone, and says: "Bill, this is Potter." Then he covers the mouthpiece and speaks again to George: "So, now you know what more there is in the world beside yourself! An innocent child, yes, that you were, truly, but you're also a devilish human being! Yes, you are, George, don't try to deny it! And therefore, I sentence you to death by drowning!" George runs from the office, into the snowy streets of Progress Falls.

Capra turns to his assistant to complain, this was never in the script, but the seat on his right is empty....

In Jack's dream, he is in Palestine. Dora is at his side. Outside, the desert is hot and brilliant. The sky is blue as porcelain. A bowl of Jaffa oranges glows with its own light beneath the doctor's window.

"A clean bill of health. Scarring from the lesions, of course, but the disease is arrested. You are cured, my friend." Dr Löwy, in a curious gesture, places his hand upon Jack's forehead.

Jack leaves the kibbutz where he has lived during his cure and moves to Jerusalem. He teaches law at Hebrew University. He writes articles and propaganda film scenarios for the Palestine ministry of information. The state of Palestine grows strong, and Jack is a valued citizen. From afar his lean German prose alerts European Jewry and its allies to the Nazi threat, and the pestiferous Hitler is crushed and humiliated in the 1933 German election – but here the dream collapses. He cannot keep out the reality of Brod shot dead in a Prague alley, his sisters Elli, Valli, and Ottla hauled off to labor camps, the motorcycles roaring through the streets.

The bridge—! It is immense, a mile long, more! From the catwalk where George stands he cannot see the ends of it, the roadway recedes and vanishes into falling snow. The bridge is so broad that even its far side is vague and distant. Unending traffic streams both ways in countless lanes, sending sickening vibrations through the soles of George's feet. The braided steel cable he clutches for balance is as thick as a man's waist and vibrates as if all the machinery of the world were linked to it.

In desperation George cries, "Clarence! Get me back! I want to live again!"

"But, George, you've given all that up. You have no legal claim to live in Progress Falls. None at all. And yet..." Clarence stands, ear cocked, in the falling snow. Abruptly he straightens. "Permission has been granted. Owing to certain auxiliary circumstances..." George doesn't wait. He is running from the bridge, up the snowy street, past a streetsign: Aspetuck, Kitchawan, Katonah, Chappaqua. Which way? At home the sheriff and bank examiners are waiting. For a wild moment it appears that George might bolt to Aspetuck or Chappaqua, he appears to be on a racing horse, leaning against the wind, but the moment passes, and he is running home to the drafty old house on Sycamore Street, to accept his fate, to be beaten into an ecstatic submission by the love and regard of his fellows – yet at this moment the projector falters, so that frame by frame George's steps slow and his image flickers and the hope dawning in his face takes on a frozen alert look of concentration, as if he hears urgent but unintelligible voices from some other realm beyond even Clarence's ken.

In the darkness, Capra's voice rings out. "Damn it, what's going on here?" But even in the fading light from the projector, he can see that the screening room is empty but for himself....

CS to JL: An officer of the Directorate of Moral Economy called me this morning, wanting to know if this collaboration was your idea or mine. He suggested that we might have to file a Thematic Impact Statement.

JL to CS: Oh God. What have we got ourselves into?

CS to JL: The version of Kafka we've invented, those works he's failed to write, it's so strange, I almost feel they're seeping into our world....

JL to CS: You and your Kafka! We should have used Max Brod. At least people know who Brod is.

COL S CAPRA XMAS CUT CANNED. Director Frank Capra, whose spendthrift rep has dogged him since his unreleasable epic *Receding Horizon*, has put another nail in his own coffin with *Miracle at Progress Falls*, insiders say.

Capra's Christmas nod to deceased writer Jack Dawson is reportedly far over budget and as hopeless of completion as his previous golden turkey. Eight high-priced scribes, from Odets to Faulkner are said to have spilled ink on the project, to no avail. Columbia head Harry Cohn isn't talking, but he is steaming, as he prods Capra to salvage something from the expensive rough cut footage.

—*Hollywood Reporter*, July 5, 1946

We are shadowed, Max, by events that do not quite happen. An infinity of worlds exists alongside our own. I dream of worlds in which I have died, and you survived and yet betrayed my trust and exposed my unfinished work, my drafts, my inmost thoughts, to the world's scrutiny. Some nights I turn in bed to find Dora beside me, I feel her warmth for a moment before waking, alone. Some nights I hear my own voice calling across vastnesses, urgent but unintelligible.

When I went with Dora to Palestine, I told her: I love you enough to rid myself of anything that might trouble you; I will become another person. For over ten years I wrote nothing, nothing. But after her death, the return of the repressed was inevitable.

The disease also returns, Max, after all those years. A lost dog, abandoned on the street by its master, finds its way home at last, arrives grinning with matted fur, notched ears, bloodshot eyes, lolling tongue.

Dr Löwy is dead. The mark, the Shem, placed by his hand upon the golem's head awaits erasure.

My doctor here has not heard of the bee moth. Instead, he offers this course of treatment, as put forth in the third edition of Alexander's *The Collapse Theory of Pulmonary Tuberculosis*. Artificial pneumothorax: the intentional collapse of the afflicted lung by injecting gas between it and the thoracic wall; if this fails to collapse the lung, two holes are cut in the chest wall, for a thoracoscope and a cauterizing instrument; one searches for adhesions between lung and pleura, then burns them away, freeing the lung to permit a total collapse. Oleothorax: the pleural cavity is filled with oil rather than air. Extrapleural pneumolysis: the lung and both pleural layers are stripped from the rib cage; the phrenic nerve, controlling the diaphragm, may be crushed with forceps or reeled out through the chest, paralyzing the diaphragm and immobilizing the lung. Finally, one may simply remove a dozen or so ribs, breaking them from the spine and discarding them.

Were I still able, I would write the story of a patient obliged to a course of treatment that is in reality a penance for failing God. Bit by bit the body

is taken away. Then the intellect, the personality, the soul, are broken off and discarded.

I am being erased. As if I had never written. All those torments and ecstasies belong to another world. At last! I am responsible for nothing.

It is a wonderful life.

JL to CS: My number just came up in the public surveillance lottery. I pulled Panopticon duty for two weeks. That's enough for me, I can take a hint; let's drop it. The pressure's giving me hives. Or maybe it's the material – the bridge between Kafka and Capra, Prague and Progress Falls, is too far for me. I'm jumping off.

CS to JL: Well, that's a disappointing response. This was challenging work. Now I'll have to meet my Minimum Cultural Contribution Requirement with more pages of that ancient trunk novel I've been passing in. What with the ozone hole officially declared a myth, it reads like science fiction now. Oh, I'll want back my copy of Kafka's *The Golem*.

JL to CS: You'll have to wait a few weeks. Keep your shutters closed.

After the disaster of the unreleased *Miracle At Progress Falls*, Capra's career went into eclipse. He had become terminally afraid of any project or collaborator that might sidetrack him into questioning fundamental verities – a fatal fear in a profession based on collaboration. For the film's failure he variously blamed Jack Dawson, the eight writers who worked on the script, and James Stewart, cast as George only after Gary Cooper refused the role. Whatever the reason, *Miracle* marks one of the most precipitous declines in the American cinema. Capra in his later years was reduced to making promotional films for defense contractors, and working on an unpublished autobiography. He died in June Lake, California in 1984. When the American Film Institute released a much-edited version after Capra's death as part of a "lost classics" series, their charity was more admired than their judgment.

–Michael D. Toman, *The American Cinema*

Hamisch In Avalon

Eliot Fintushel

Hamisch, thirtyish, tall, blonde, and a tenure-track math professor, saw no reason why she shouldn't pick up Izzy's precious "ook." Why did Old One-brow, world-class psychic and a channel to intergalactic bejeezus, always have to have things *his* way – *just like Willy?*

"Ook, dammit, Hamisch! *Oo-kulele*, not *you-kulele*! That's what they call it down on Honolulu Bay, and that's the thing's name. *Kapeesh?* Don't touch it."

She *kapeeshed*. The ook lay on a card table in Fay and Izzy's bedroom – sunlit magenta walls (Fay's influence) – next to a venerable dingus she recognized to be a monochord: basically, it was a string mounted on a notched stick. In olden times, itinerant musicians carried them around like tuning forks. They used them to transfer their personal tuning systems to whatever instruments they might encounter.

Hamisch knew all about tunings. Her ilk and Paderewski's had a common ancestor in Pythagoras. She rapped the ook's soundboard and listened to the faintly echoing fractions. Pure pitches, Pythagoras's simple ratios, didn't allow most octaves to match up, so composers jimmied the tuning a hair – "tempering" – to align the octaves at the cost of a few hertz here and there. Everybody had his or her own system, most famously, J.S. Bach ("The Well Tempered Clavier") – including, apparently, Izzy.

"Don't touch nothing in there, Hamisch!" Izzy gargled from the bathroom doorway. He was doing his late afternoon traction, neck in the harness, hand on the pulley rope, lengthening his spine above the bad bone.

"I won't, Iz!" She swung the ook by its neck between two fingers, as she looked around the room. "I'm just gonna wait here for Fay, okay? She's the only one who understands that jerk son of yours, Iz. I'm gonna leave him this time, honest!"

"No, you're not. You two start having kids in a couple of years. You got a long life together, with grandkids and everything. Willy goes in his sleep. You last a year or two more."

"I'm not listening, Izzy!"

Beside the card table, under a framed, autographed photo of Arthur Godfrey, there was a cheap stand with an open songbook clipped to the music rest. A page had sprung from the clip; its edge stuck out toward Hamisch. On one side Hamisch could see "Aloha-oe" by Queen Lidia Kamekha Liliuokalan, and on the other the 1930's tune "When My Dream Boat Comes Home," by Friend and Franklin. But she couldn't see the one between, the one sticking out, the one Izzy had been working on.

Hamisch tucked the page back into the clip. It was an Al Jolson song from the 1920's: "Avalon," a dreamy, sentimental number about lost love. *That Izzy!* A romantic! Just like his bastard son Willy. How could you stay mad at guys like that?

She held the ook's soundboard against her temple and rubbed the strings softly. *My dog has fleas!* – the old tuning trope. She winced – the *fleas* was off. Most people would not have noticed, but Hamisch had excellent 'relative pitch,' a Pythagorean ear for intervals. The supposed B was not a true B at all. The other strings were okay. Maybe a tuning peg was loose. She turned the bottom peg a few degrees and tried again.

My dog has fleas! Perfect. A444, and the rest just where they ought to be – by modern standard tempering.

"Ook is easy," Hamisch mumbled, "just a guitar with two strings lopped off." Hamisch could play some guitar. She cradled Izzy's ook against her belly and started to play, singing as she sight-read Jolson's song:

"I left my love in Avalon, beside the bay..."

The C₇ chord was a finger mill, but the alternating F was easy. Cute tune.

"I left my love in Avalon and sailed away..."

Now came the big chord change, the shift to D₇, like a cloud drifting before the sun, making everything suddenly darken and change color, the hills glowing greener, the bay deeper blue.

From the next room: "Hey! Lay off that!" The sound of pulleys spinning fast, velcro ripping free, Izzy pounding toward the bedroom. "Hamisch, no! The B's off! Don't!"

The big dope! It was just a four-stringed box. And now, because of Hamisch, the fourth string was *correct*.

"I dream..."

And there it was, the D₇, a major triad – D, F#, and A – with that wonderfully dissonant C on top, on the *fleas* string that Hamisch had corrected. Izzy was shouldering through the half-open door in his sweaty jersey, trailing neck straps and smelling like dead fish. His single, thick brow, temple to temple, was raised to what used to be his hairline. “Quick – the G-minor! Play the G-minor, Hamisch...!”

Hamisch’s fingers went numb. The air shimmered, then liquified. It thickened to the consistency and color of gefilteh fish gel, then crystalized: not just the air this time, but *everything*, Hamisch, Izzy, and ook included, as if plunged into a flask of super-cooled hydrogen. As dread swept through her, cell by brittle, dodecahedral cell, everything shattered.

And just as she had always feared, Hamisch’s last words were: “Oh, shit!”

She said them again, the words she didn’t want to be her last. Her four-square world was *pfft!*, she realized, and Willy was the least of her problems. “Oh, shit!” They were churning up pine needles and sod underfoot. Everything was lovely emerald green, sun-dappled where the fog parted: enchanting. *Too damned enchanting!* Hamisch was stricken with a familiar vertigo: once again she found herself thinking – and seeing – ridiculous, gigantically impossible things just as if they were ordinary phenomena. Izziosis. Acute, recurring Izziosis.

“Iz, where are we?”

“Avalon, dearie, Avalon!”

She yanked her arm from his grasp. “Take me home this instant.”

Izzy stopped and panted. He leaning over and rested his hands on his thighs. “You’re the one who got us here. I told you not to touch nothing in there. I tuned that ook special to prevent things like this. Jeez magees, my back don’t like this kind of ruckus!”

Fairy wisps of fog swirled and cleared before them. “Izzy!” Hamisch said, “Who’s *that?*” At the center of the circle of giant pines at whose periphery Hamisch and Izzy stood, an old man was struggling over a massive stone. He had long, silver hair. He wore a rude doublet and leather breeches. His bare feet pressed against the base of the rock as he pulled back at the end of a pike or rod, it looked like, embedded in the stone.

The old man grunted and labored, heels pushing, thick arms pulling, so that his entire body leaned out 45° – Maybe 44, maybe 46, Hamisch thought – away from the vertical. From between gritted teeth, the chant, somehow vaguely familiar to Hamisch:

“Hic laborat Arthurus,

“Rex quondam, rex futurus!”

Over and over, the old man spat out the words, so punctuating his efforts.

Hamisch stared, amazed. "Iz, who's the fossil?"

Izzy shook his head. "Arthur, dear. *Arthur!*"

"Arthur Godfrey?"

"I wish!" Grunt by wince, Izzy ratcheted himself up to something like his full height, tightening his belly to make up for the leaky bursa. "Wait here a minute." He took two steps toward the center of the circle and stood tall in sweat pants, jersey, and the penny loafers he'd changed into when he got home from the factory. "Arthur, ye old has-been," he trumpeted, "forfoughten as ye be, ye wield not sich puissance as may prevailin this devoir. Stint ye 'ere brast brainpan sue."

The old man turned his head. His hands slipped from the thing in the rock. His legs expanded like a let spring. He somersaulted backwards and landed on his face. "Izzy," – spitting pine needles – "God's wounds, man, can it be ye? Fair friend, I take no force of all my discomfiture if but that it be ye."

"Yeah, it's me, all right." Wasting no time, Izzy strode to the rock and grasped the end of the thing Arthur had just released. "Eek have I sore need of this baby, Arty my man, for I am in great woe and damage, and eek yon damosel, if you catch my drift."

"Izzy!" Hamisch ran to him. "I get it! That's King Arthur! *King Arthur*, Izzy, albeit greatly discomfited and having suffered much evil lodging." She shook her yellow locks triumphantly as she downloaded syntax from an undergrad lit course in long-term storage. "That's gotta be Excalibur there in the rock. No way you can pull Excalibur out, Iz! Only the Rightful King Born of All England can do that!"

"Yeah," said Iz, "him and Robert Goulet," – sliding Excalibur out of the stone. Only it wasn't a sword. It was Izzy's ook.

"Who's the wench, Iz?" King Arthur heaved himself to his knees. "Comely!"

"Stick your eyes back in your head. She's spoken for."

In sooth, Arthur had been so captivated by Hamisch that he hadn't noticed that Izzy had unstuck the ook, but now Izzy was plunking strings and twisting the tuning pegs, and Arthur leapt to his feet. He stretched out his arms like a sunburst. "Izzy, my champion! Ye have achieved Excalibur now as then, when ye did secure for me the crown of all England. Now am I delivered clean from this noyous demesne. By the rood, I have been here overlong!"

"Izzy!" Suddenly Lit 101 was not such a consolation to Hamisch. "You??"

Arthur went on: "My ladies three – Morgan le Fay, the Queen of North Wales, and the Queen of the Waste Lands, who ferried me hither from

where Sir Mordred smote me down – although they have nursed me until the healing of my wounds, are without force to return us hence to England. I am fordone and cast into an umbre, I that was king and did but wait for my wounds to heal ere I should return again to England.

“But now am I delivered by your puissance, fair, noble Izzy Are ye clean certain the damosel is affianced? Grutch who lust, yet she chargeth my natures.”

“Wait a damn minute!” Hamisch bounded to the rock. “Stint ye the horse trading, buckos. This entire conversation is over a thousand years out of date. I don’t belong to anybody, not Izzy, not Willy, and not King Arthur, thank you very much. I belong to me.”

Arthur smiled at her. Hamisch could see that her words were incomprehensible to him, centuries removed from the most liberal thought in his fifth century cogitorium. Clearly, he apprehended the cadences only, and he seemed to find those appealing.

“Relax, Hamisch,” Izzy cooed. “. . . I wish I had my monochord. I can’t get the right tuning to take us home.”

Arthur grabbed the ook about the bridge. “Certes, friend Iz, ye trow not as that ye should leave hence without that ye speed me to the great world where I shall reign again?”

“Things are bad, Arthur,” Izzy said. “You don’t wanna go back, believe me. The Goths and the Visigoths are honey bears compared to what they’re doing to *one another* across the Adriatic, east of Gaul. (‘The Former Yugoslav Republic,’ they call it, but it’s *future* to you, God bless ya!) Or take a couple steps south of Numidia – it’s a blood bath, Arty; Ethiopia, Somalia, Botswana, take you’re pick! In England, everybody’s on strike, and Princess Di’s all over the front page of the *National Enquirer* . . .”

“A princess and a *page*?”

“Things are a mess, believe you me. The noise alone is impossible. What with refrigerator hum and leaf blowers, you’re lucky if you can cop a few z’s on a Saturday morning. And people, Arty, *people!* Well, look at Hamisch here. She’s got the finest man in three counties, sensitive, full of brains, a passable bod, earns a decent living, and waddaya think – she wants to call it quits! Stay on Avalon, Arty. Let go the ook.”

Hamisch put a fist in, squeezing the ook at about the third fret as she came within gnawing range of Iz and Arthur. “Leave me out of it, will you?”

“Meseemeth,” said King Arthur, “there is but one way to settle this matter, to wit, that we here ordain a contest at arms twixt Izzy and me. We twain shall joust. If I am foredone, I shall sojourn yet awhile in Avalon, till that ye deem my rightful moment hath come. If that I, God willing, prevail, ye shall

ook me hence, Excalibur withal, to England and the world, where I shall set all things right, by my trow. Eek, if I prevail: I get Hamisch.”

Hamisch tightened her grip and made a sound like the lid of a pressure cooker demolishing a hung ceiling.

“Yeah, well, that is me loth,” Izzy said, ignoring her, “but sithen I must needs, I will dress me thereto.”

“The hell you will,” said Hamisch. “*I’m gonna dress me thereto. Where are the horses? Where are the lances and swords and shields? I’ve had it, Izzy. I’m gonna knock this bum on his keester – I don’t care what kind of rex cumqwat or futurus – and then, by God’s blood, Izzy, I’m gonna fricassee you!*”

Arthur shouted for his squire. A boy appeared who looked just like the Jack of Hearts; Hamisch cocked her head to see if he looked the same upside-down – he did not. *Did I just do that?* she thought, but thinking wasn’t quite what it used to be.

“We shall release Excalibur into young Glivet’s keeping,” Arthur said. “He shall return it to whoso winneth our contest. Agreed?” Izzy, Hamisch, and Arthur let go, and the Jack of Hearts caught the ook.

Then Arthur smiled at Hamisch again. “Comely!” he said.

Izzy’s explanation didn’t shed much light on it:

“Every dimension’s got its own scale and chord structure, Hambone. Avalon here is modal – Dorian actually – and in the key of A-flat. Albany, Schenectady, and Utica are Mixolydian, mostly, and in C, like the rest of the so-called normal world.

“Newton, Einstein, all them point-mass guys... way off! Not even in the ballpark! Fact is, the worlds are made of music, different kinds of music. My ook – they call it ‘Excalibur’ here in the Dorian – is an interdimensional passcard, a sort of Circle of Fifths, Hamisch, if you get my meaning.

“Same way you can play a tune in any key, you can play out a life event in any dimension – simple transposition. Only thing is, a dining table here could be a catafalque there, a pussycat here might be a nutcracker there; a marital spat could be a joust, if you catch my drift. Only one thing stays the same through all the modes and keys, my girl, and that’s my ook, Excalibur.

“...How come the stories say it was a sword and not a ukulele? So, did Dewey beat Truman or vice versa? Guys makes mistakes, Hamisch, and it’s partly happenstance which version is preserved. Ook don’t ring so chivalrous, know what I mean? So the sword story comes down. Hmmph! Try playing dogs and fleas on a broadsword! The things people will believe!”

Three dwarves delivered her armor and weapons to Hamisch’s pavilion

among the apple trees. A fourth tethered her horse to a tent pole. It was a huge sorrel caparisoned in jeweled samite and leather dyed black. It made Hamisch's knees weak to look at it. She'd ridden a horse only once in her life – a pony, on her tenth birthday; a man in a ten gallon hat had led her in circles until she threw up.

She sat in the sparse grass and mud, jimmying herself into iron breeches, cuish to poulaine, feet transformed to armadillos, thighs to furnace ducts. Then she squirmed into the breastplate and tassels. She felt like a planetarium apparatus, round metal parts rotating against one another. The chain mail attached over her crotch.

"You don't know how dumb you look," said Izzy.

"I wish I had this stuff the first night I spent with Willy."

Izzy helped her with the shoulder plates. "See, I do this jazz all the time, Ham, changing keys and that. Time travel, interdimensional hoohah, it's my briar patch, Hamisch. A couple centuries don't mean diddly to *me*, but *you're* a layman. It impairs your judgment. Do you think you'd be slamming yourself into a sardine can and swinging meat cleavers if we were back in Utica? I gotta say, this is a very bad idea."

Hamisch clanked, clipped and thonged the carapace onto her arms, then started coaxing her fingers into the gauntlets. "He wants me to put my career on hold so he can finish up his PhD. Izzy, I've got a proof on the cooker that could cinch my tenure, and he wants me to nurse a bunch of undergrads through Business Math – for the moolah. After all, Willy's the *man* in the family, right?"

"Hamisch, a sense of perspective, pleeyuz! That's King Arthur you're tilting with, not Willy."

Hamisch clapped the helmet over her head. It caught the ends of her hair where gorget hit pauldron, yanking to the roots – "Yowch!" Her own yelp deafened her, echoing inside the plumbing. She could no longer hear much of the outside world. Nor could she see much through the slit in her helmet. In that iron exo-skeleton, she lacked the coordination to lift her own visor, and she was damned if she'd ask anybody's help.

Summoning all her strength, Hamisch stretched what she hoped to God was skyward. She knocked forward, or something that should have been forward, like a pilot flying through an ice storm by instruments. A reddish wall of flesh slammed her in the cabonza and whinneyed; Hamisch stopped.

"Give me a hand up." Her voice sounded to her own ears like a surgeon's voice through ether. A hand came. She was rising.

When they had first moved in together, Willy lifted her across the threshold of their railroad flat by the brewery. "Oh, Willy!" The blood rushed to her face as she

felt a pleasure she did not want to allow herself. He kissed her then, and she gave him the benefit of the doubt... as always.

First you let them open doors for you, then they chain you to the stove and nursery. "May I have the pleasure of this dance?" – then your career is quits while they finish their degree. Damn the office they had shared in Ithaca! Damn the entire patriarchal lineage, Willy to Izzy to the ilk of Arthur, fifteen centuries back!

"Am I in the saddle now?" Her voice echoed inside the armor.

"Pretty close," or "Petticoats," or "Pick your toes," said Izzy. It was like listening through a furnace grate to a party four floors below.

"Then hand me up my lance and shield. I'm gonna whip some butt."

Something very heavy pushed back Hamisch's right shoulder and lodged itself in the crook of her arm. *Ah, the lance! Hope it's pointed the right way!* The thing around which her left fingers were closing must have been the shield handle, she figured, since the light on her left side diminished when it arrived: big, not too heavy, opaque.

It was getting hot in there, and not the least of Hamisch's discomfort was the feeling that she could easily come to enjoy the vibrations moving up through the chain mail on her crotch; it wasn't the right moment for this. It made her think of Willy, then instead – by strength of will – of the saint at the stake who reputedly said, "Turn me over; I'm done on this side." Like him, Hamisch couldn't turn herself over.

A trumpet sounded. The sorrel snorted and paced about. Izzy pulled him to. Arthur called: "Fairwell, Avalon! Warrior damosel, have at ye. Ere long, ye shall lie beside me!" Something like that.

Or maybe it was just a vivid memory. Maybe it was Willy that night in the office in Ithaca, working late on the Fermat thing, when he propositioned her over sums of powers that could no longer be denied, with the sofa so near and the night so warm. And he said, "Lie by me, Audrey," the romantic dope, and she did, and they did, and it seemed to add up.

Crotch to withers, trusting the Goddess and her internal gyroscope, Hamisch dressed her lance, or else it was the horse she was lifting and the lance was between her legs – inside that crankcase, it was academic. But she must have done something right, because Old Paint started to gallop and she heard a warwhoop Doppler toward her from Arthur's camp. Or was it an earthquake? For all that she could see out the visor, she could have been going over Niagara Falls in a barrel – and that's prettymuch what it felt like.

In the solitude of her armor, where the roar of her own breath pervaded, Hamisch began to have misgivings. 'Buyers' regret,' they call it in real estate – especially vicious when what you're buying is *the farm*. Ah, for the dull certitudes of the Mixolydian! Maybe it wasn't too late to transpose....

Suddenly, the breath was knocked out of her. Her visor clanked open. She saw her lance shatter and fall away. Arthur closed in on her like a compactor in an automobile graveyard. Ashwood on iron, block chords sounded like a forearm across a prepared piano. Hamisch was the prize morsel on the royal shishkebob, a swizzle-sticked maraschino cherry, a poked lobster, Q-tipped ear wax, a tinsel toothpicked meatball, *a woman! Damn his eyes!*

She felt the sorrel's rump slide between her legs. The tail whisked her face – an awful smell, but fleeting – and she hit dirt with a deafening crash, a dumbwaiter in freefall, pots and soups airborne, then a clatter in the bus boy's puss – Izzy, in this case.

"Idawanna look," he said.

Hamisch heard him clearly. Her helmet had shot off her head, unsheathing her sensorium. Noticing that she was horizontal, hair plastered across her face, limbs splayed crazily in their fender-bendered chassis, Hamisch located her hands and grunted her torso plumb by pushing down against the earth.

Arthur reined in his steed. It was a ferocious animal. From Hamisch's station it looked as tall as a telephone pine. Arthur dismounted – *sporting of him!* He pulled off his helmet and smiled broadly, then threw the helmet to the ground the way someone might smash a wine glass on the hearth – a celebratory gesture.

"You can cart that grin to the sofa," she wanted to say, "because I'm sleeping alone tonight." But that would be inappropriate. That's what she'd said to *Willy* after he had announced "their plans." It had never occurred to *Willy* that she might have other ideas, that she might not have the same self-sacrificing spirit his mother had had, Izzy's old paramour (pre-Fay) who would hock her privates for the precious child. Hamisch wasn't *Willy's* mother; he still didn't get that.

"I'm not your mother," Hamisch shouted. It stopped King Arthur in his tracks. If she'd had her lance at that moment, she could have kebobbed his tonsils. Instead, she pulled out her sword. It took every ounce of strength she had left, but she was damned if she would let him go on thinking that she was his mother.

"Wrong key!" cried Izzy. He backed away from the field of combat and collared the Jack of Hearts. Hamisch watched him for a moment while she got a grip on her weapon. The little fellow still had Izzy's look. Izzy was gesturing wildly, striking some sort of a deal.

The damned sword was impossible; she couldn't keep the tip higher than the pommel for longer than a few seconds. She gave up trying and attacked, dragging the thing the best way she could. She ran at Arthur with an ear-shattering yell, G-sharp or so.

Arthur stared at her. He stood stock still, sword in his scabbard, arms dangling at his sides like a couple of loose gutterpipes. For Hamisch, it was a peak experience, a moment of vivid awareness, like the January morning she had sprayed ether up her nose instead of into the carburetor of Willy's stalled Chevy. There were birds chirruping in the apple trees. The sky was-California purple. Arthur's little squire was sitting in the grass, slipping on a pair of penny loafers, while Izzy tortured a tuning peg on Excalibur.

I am woman! Hamisch charged.

She had not quite reached striking distance – supposing she could strike – when Arthur sank to his knees, clanked his palms together, and begged for mercy. “Lady! Devour me and ye would. I weened not till the present instant that ye were my very benefactress, the Lady of the Lake!”

“Of the Lake?” she managed. Now she heard Izzy strumming the C₇, the F, the D₇.... “Was that *me*? The samite sleeve? The hand sticking out of the water, waving the sword, all *that*?”

Then the G-minor. Things were starting to transpose. The air was thickening again. “Without you, Lady, I were naught! My power is from you. I love you! I’ve been an ass.” Arthur was becoming younger before her eyes. His hair turned color from silver to red, like Willy’s hair. His beard was sucked back into his pores. Then the air became utterly opaque, and Hamisch couldn’t see him at all. She lifted her gauntleted hand to her head to try stop the spinning – and it wasn’t a gauntlet but a telephone.

She was sitting in Izzy and Fay’s room with the magenta walls (Fay’s influence) talking to Willy on the telephone. “Yes you have been an ass, damn it!”

“I know it. I had to call. I knew I’d find you there, Audrey. Come home. I’m sorry. Of course you should be working on your proof and not just supporting my degree. I’ll manage, Audrey. I love you.”

Izzy tiptoed by – barefoot – the ook cradled tightly to his chest. He nursed open the closet door and laid the ook on a cluttered shelf. He reached for the music stand and shoved it in there too, music book and all. Then the monochord. He shut the door.

“I love you too,” said Hamisch and hung up. She looked dreamily at Fay’s magenta ceiling. “The Lady of the Lake!” she sighed, she couldn’t quite remember why.

“That was *me*,” said Izzy. “Arthur was mixed up. I can’t tell you the quantity of seaweed I got up my proboscis trying to hold the ook high enough out of the water for that oaf to see. I still have sinus trouble from it.”

Hamisch looked daggers at him. “I suppose you found the Holy Grail as well!”

“Yeah, Fay’s got it in the closet somewheres, in a Dutch Masters’ cigar box – the old kind, a real beauty! They don’t make cigar boxes worth spit nowadays.”

Hamisch made for the door.

“Where you going?” Izzy said. “Fay’ll be back any minute.”

“That’s okay,” she said. “He loves me, Iz – in every key.”

“I know.”

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The Man Who Fell

Jim Marino

It was just after his fourth suicide attempt when I got the interview. I had to fly straight from Beijing to the place in the Finger Lakes where they keep him. The location is secret. There was no time to see Linda, or even call, but this story was one-of-a-kind, one of the only one-of-a-kinds there are. Now I don't know how to write it.

The feds aproned me in lead, passed me through a "radioactive screen", frisked me (as if having a gun would matter), and read me rules.

"Has he been acting up?" I asked the head spook. He stopped what he was doing and looked me in the eye.

"Mr. Kurtz is here of his own volition," he said. They're scared shitless, and I don't blame them. All he would have to do is turn destructive one morning, or show up in some tinpot army, and the cultists trying to bust him out last month didn't soothe any nerves. But his suicide attempts are the real danger.

"The patient has finished his afternoon nap," the spook said. "You can see him in the garden." The guards let me cross the garden by myself.

We'll have to use the file photos yet again: no cameras allowed. There'll be some snapshots of the blur in the yellow cape, with captured felons and rescued planes and so on, and then a selection of pictures from his trial, and to round it out, as always, *de rigueur*, the one existing photograph of him as Kurtz, familiar to every human eye. A grainy black and white of a man with close-cut hair, wearing a badly rumpled suit and a precisely knotted bow tie, a look of puckered anxiety on his brow. It won't tell the readers anything. But new pictures wouldn't explain.

It was almost winter, and my heavy coat felt thin. He was sitting in a lawn chair with a stack of books, wearing a black sport shirt and cotton slacks. It jarred to see him out of uniform, as anything except a quick distant blur. Few people have seen him that close, and most were in the near reach of the death. The monitoring bracelet around his wrist looked frail. It was a long walk across the garden, but he knew I was coming.

"Mr. Korzenowski," he said. "I'd shake hands, but better not to take the risk. Please." He gestured to a chair.

The dazzling smile and diamond-chiseled jaw, even more impossible at close range, brown hair ruffled ever so slightly in the wind. And bright blue eyes that might be seeing anything at all. The sun was muffled, but there seemed to be light on his face. I did what I could. "How was your nap?"

He smiled benignly. "I'm afraid that's a euphemism. I don't actually sleep."

"Never?"

"I napped for perhaps half an hour, three weeks ago, because the doctors insist. And there was a time, of course, when I did it every night. But I had to give that up."

"Ah." I needed a glass of water. "Why was that?"

"It was never really necessary. I spend my nights reading, usually. The consolation of philosophy." He gestured to the books: Thomas Aquinas, Martin Buber, Kant, Arabic and Hebrew and Greek. Everything looked like the original language.

"And theology, it looks like."

"Ideal for a prisoner, really. You don't need to know the Chinese situation to count angels on the head of the pin." I, of course, was forbidden to even hint at the Chinese situation, or any other outside news. He smiled again, taking up a large part of the world. "You can start when you like, Mr. Korzenowski."

"All right." I had to look at my notes.

"During last month's attempt," I started.

"You won't be able to print that."

"That's for me to try. It's rumored that you disarmed the Golden Crusade cult and suggested alternative religions."

"Well, I think the Upanishads, say, or a good rabbi, would give them what they're looking for better than I could."

"So you denied being a god."

He laughed, which seemed curiously artificial. "It would be a sorry thing for religion if I were."

"Were you a military experiment?"

The ends of his mouth lifted by millimeters. "You're an expert reporter, Mr. Korzenowski. Look around. If they had made me, wouldn't I be unmade by now?" I looked at the barbed wire, the radar towers, the snipers getting triple pay. "The fact is, I don't know. Mutation, genetic experiments, outer space. Atlantis. Any crackpot theory could be true.

"I wasn't so different as a child. The powers were dormant and sporadic, really inseparable from my fantasy life. Didn't you believe, as a child, that nothing could actually kill you, that if you only wished it hard enough, you could fly? Well, so did I. By my twenties it was true, and I had to flee to Alaska."

I wasn't allowed to ask when that had been or where he had grown up, or he'd refuse to continue. I could only ask, "Why?"

"There were great difficulties during my transition. Imagine using a sixty foot crane to lift a china cup. That's a fraction of the control I need to open a door or shake a hand without grotesquely inappropriate force. I could easily have killed someone I brushed in the street, before I learned control. Also there were headaches, from my new senses phasing in and out, and trouble staying on the ground."

"Excuse me?"

"There's this constant upward pull. I have to remember to stay grounded."

On his third suicide attempt he had levitated straight up, heading through the stratosphere toward outer space. After twenty-three air forces scrambled and the missiles went to code red, he'd been persuaded to come down.

"How long did you spend in Alaska?"

"No. No questions that could establish my age. I have people to protect, still."

"All right. Were there stops between Alaska and New York?"

"No. I was so starved for companionship that I went directly to the biggest feast of humanity I could find. And then it was impossible to leave. I can be forgiven for that, I hope, no matter what the sin."

"I don't understand."

"What kind of idiot did I have to be, what kind of arrogance?" He was no longer having the whole conversation with me.

"You began your career as a hero. You were loved."

He waved impatiently. "Exactly. The root of the whole problem. Vanity." He threw his head back, as if to examine Saturn's rings. "Childish, indefensible vanity."

"Was it less vain to be Simon Kurtz?"

He looked at me, or into me, or through me.

"Kurtz," he repeated. "Is that bastard here? I said for them to keep him out."

"No," I said. It was a great deal colder. "He's not here. Someone asked me to ask about him."

"Because he's not allowed here, you know. He's not on the list."

After I finish the story, I can catch a flight back to Beijing, or try to cross overland through Tibet. I can badger the Chinese embassy about Xian and the jailed dissidents, badger the State Department about the embassy's bullshit answers. I can pitch the boss on a trip to Chile, to write about the crackdowns, or ride the bandwagon to the Azerbaijani war. All my notes are right here on my desk, covered in blue pencil.

"Your wife called," an intern comes by to say. "She left this number." He leaves a post-it on my desk.

That's just the thing. So many choices.

"I met Simon Kurtz in New York." He was seeing it all again, coming back from someplace far away. "New York City. There was so much, so much *noise*."

I laughed, as much from fear as not. He looked at me with wide, serious eyes.

"Really," he said. "You have no idea. But I've heard it all." My laugh guttered out and died.

"That was the best part," he said. "In the north, the silence, each sound is so distinct. I'd never heard anything like this. Manhattan drowning out Brooklyn, Brooklyn drowning out the Bronx, that whole vast roaring sea of sound. Subways, traffic, voices, footsteps; there was no way to make out anything."

"So, essentially, you were deafened."

"Deafened! That's it!" Fevered excitement lit his eyes. "I couldn't hear more than anybody else. What could be wrong with that?"

"I don't know."

"Exactly! You see. The easiest thing in the world." He was triumphant.

"And then you met Simon Kurtz."

"I made him. Birth certificate, driver's license, even diplomas. He should have remembered that. I could find a few hundred dollars in one afternoon, just lost cash that settles between a big city's cracks. A lot of money in 1955, and in a few months I got work at the Public Library. I had it all. A job, an apartment, a subway to ride. Even my suit, my absurdly golden glorious carnival suit, to keep Kurtz's privacy. I was a wealthy man then, and almost knew."

I thought of the Kurtz picture, the pained furrow cleaving his forehead.

"The costume was for Kurtz?"

"Oh yes. Always for Kurtz. To keep his life as normal as we could. But even Kurtz, deafened like a normal man, couldn't help knowing about accidents and crime. There was the newspaper, morning and evening, every day. Could you sit watching a murder, or a rape, knowing that you could stop it?"

I didn't answer.

"But I still wanted a normal life. Work until five, coffee with friends, cook myself dinner. I even slept, because Kurtz did, seven hours a night that I couldn't possibly need."

"Did you date?"

He looked at me. "Marlo is not part of this interview. You know that. But yes, for the sake of argument, there was Marlo, too."

"That's how you fool yourself," he said. "You put on your fancy cape and silly mask and think you have everyone fooled. You can go out and come back and change your disguise and be a normal man. If you're out for an hour or two a day, doing whatever good you stumble across, you think you're entitled to the same life as everyone else. An apartment to go back to, and time to eat your dinner. Enough money to buy a hot dog or go to a movie, if you have someone to go to a movie with. It didn't seem like so much."

"Was it?"

He looked at me as if I were very young. "It's more than you can ask."

In 1957, he began to appear in the back pages and the tabloids. By Christmas he was on the front page of *The Times*, officially real.

In 1969, my parents took me to New York to see the miraculous Mets. But in secret I was hoping for a glimpse of a golden man between the skyscrapers. It was only for a second, and at least half my imagination, but I never forgot.

"I was fine-tuning my control all the time," he said. "I couldn't help but improve the hearing. I got so I could hear conversations in other rooms, fire engines in other boroughs, count change in pockets downtown. Gunshots and screams are too distinctive to miss once you know them. I heard a little girl shriek one night on Long Island where I'd gone to dinner with a friend. I was playing at being Kurtz. So I made some idiot excuse, like I was in a goddamned screwball comedy, paid the waiter and squeezed out a bathroom window. Turns out the little girl had been in New Jersey, and I caught the kidnapers on the Pike with a gun to her head. Maybe it was

another month before I got to apologize to my girl, but I was proud that I had heard. And guilty, too.”

“Guilty?”

“I told you. They were starting to pull the trigger. What if had taken me another minute, fooling with that waiter?”

(He was referring, as close as I can tell, to the Sarah Jane Porter kidnaping in July 1968. It made medium play in the papers, because his crime-stopping was now old news.)

“I was cocky and proud with my wonderful ears. But those noises never go away. There’s never a pause. Least of all with sirens.”

“Everyone hears those.”

“You can’t do anything about them.” It wasn’t the general ‘you’. “I could hear them in Westchester and Jersey. And if I rolled over in my bed, I would hear what happened without me.”

Wind scuffed the fallen leaves. He could have paused for the whole day.

“What did you do?” I asked.

“Sleep went first. That seemed easiest. I still wanted to keep my job, you know, have a normal daytime. I’d really come to believe I was Simon Kurtz. That’s how badly he had me confused. And I only needed an hour or two.”

“You said you don’t need any.”

“A lot happens at night. If I rushed, I could cover almost everything, and still wear a tie during the day. Or I thought so. After a while I started to head things off in advance so there’d be less to deal with later.”

“How long is a while?”

“I forget.”

In March of 1971, reports of his exploits quadruple, and by September he disappears from the press unless he does something really unusual. His nocturnal labors had become part of the city’s rhythm.

In summer of 1978, he begins a war on organized crime. Lots of crumpled guns, lots of cocaine sinking in the harbor. Three editorials about vigilantism and a piece on rumored mob rewards for his death. The alleged offerers went to jail in December of 1979.

“Maybe there were a few good months,” he said. “But disasters aren’t rescheduled so I can have lunch. And even Kurtz started to have trouble enjoying his movies and restaurants with so much pain in earshot. I gave almost of all of it up, just from decency.”

“No breaks at all? Meals?”

“I’m never hungry.”

"What about your friends?"

"I said we weren't going to discuss her." There was a pause. "I would have explained if I could." Another. "Maybe I saw one or two people, occasionally."

The paper wrangled his credit record from a private investigator during the trial. After 1984 he has more late payments than anything else, averaging four months overdue. He seems to have spent virtually no money, except rent and basic utilities, after November 1983; only three restaurant bills, large enough, possibly, for two people. In the Kurtz photograph you can see the fraying edge of his collar and the dry-looking stain on his tie. Phone records show an average of nine calls a week, billed at the minimum one minute, to Kurtz from Marlo Siegel.

The intern comes by. His shirt is rumpled from the day's work. "Conrad, your wife's on the phone," he says. "I really think you should answer it."

"Where are you?" I ask her.

"This is the third call I've made to you today," Linda says. "Where have you been?"

"Right here at work."

"There at work. Great, Connie."

"I'll be home in another hour. Two at most."

"We're not there."

There isn't much to say after that, though we try to say it politely.

"It's strange, how that last indulgence held me. I kept the job for months. When I came late or sneaked away, for just ten minutes, to save a human life, I'd be miserable for fear I'd lose it."

"I'm sorry. You considered a nine-to-five job indulgent, after giving up food and sleep?"

"What else should I call it? Hanging around all day dressed as someone else, playing with overdue notices? Some people didn't have any hope but me."

"Weren't you entitled to a little normalcy?"

"Entitled, sure. How many people am I entitled to let die? Three a week? Four? A few hundred a year, to preserve my sense of normalcy? How do you do that math with suffering and grief?"

"All right. But in a city that big, some emergencies must happen at the same time. And even you..."

"Yes. Even me. And then I had to choose."

I got my first big assignment in 1986, legwork on a six-part organized crime feature. Factions driven out of New York in '79 were still turning up in ever more distant cities, from Boston and Philly to Chicago and Houston and L.A. The displacements led to long territorial feuds, with no regard for bystanders. I got my first promotion.

"You deserve it," Linda told me at the time. "This story's important."

"Well," I said, "I won't have to work those hours for a while."

"When did you leave the library?"

"It doesn't seem like there was any particular day. I just went back less and less, until I'd stopped completely."

"Did you say goodbye to anyone?"

"I'm not going to remind you of this again."

"Okay. What happened to your apartment and your bills?"

"Those belonged to Simon Kurtz. There is no Simon Kurtz."

Shortly after our organized-crime series, he was sighted in four cities we'd highlighted. Voluntary surrenders to police followed shortly. New York's crime rate rose a fraction of a percent in his absence. I was loaned to the international desk, filling in for a sick reporter, and sent to Liberia.

"For a while I thought, if I just kept moving fast enough, everything was fine. I could cover Jersey City and Hartford. It was just finding two hours of dead spots a week to get the really necessary sleep. But there was TV and radio to deal with, too, because it's on all the time in the city. I was getting every channel, hearing the news."

"Is that why you began to leave New York?"

"The first thing, you know, was crime I'd driven to other places. That's on my conscience. And there were so many things. Just natural disasters killed so many, and they were defined enough for me to control. But every time I left the city there'd be a few break-ins, or even a murder, if the TV said I was somewhere else. Journalists were irresponsible with that." He paused significantly. "They should have thought about consequences."

Western correspondents say they took Xian three days ago. No one's admitting it, and journalists' movements are restricted. Some of the bureaucrats I know might help me, but only if I'm there to ask them, and maybe not then. Linda left with the kids on Thursday. I'm a day and a half past deadline with this story.

"The journalists, you know, who used to ask how could I turn a blind eye, condemned me when I'd finally done something."

"Editorials? You did it because of *editorials*?"

"No. I'd been thinking about it myself, more and more. By then it was kind of the obvious conclusion. And at the same time, there were people telling me to stop everything, which just wasn't an option."

"Why?"

"Well, some people were upset by the booms. I made little sonic booms because I had to travel so fast, and windows got broken. A few people got ear damage, too, when lives were in the balance. That's on my conscience, too. But I had to make a decision. And there was the Malibu thing."

October 23, 1993: MALIBU, CALIFORNIA – (UPI): The "Golden Crusader" allegedly crushed the ribcage of a small girl while rescuing her from wildfires yesterday. Firemen claim the caped man deposited the six-year-old with them and returned to rescue efforts, but it was unclear...

"How did that happen?" I asked.

"Carelessness. Stupidity."

"That doesn't seem like you."

"I could have saved them." His face was still and smooth, like something carved long ago from ivory.

"How much were you sleeping then?"

"I don't see your point."

On October 25, 1994, witnesses in Hawaii saw him dive into an erupting volcano. No one saw him emerge. A few days later, Simon Kurtz, presumed dead since 1989, attempted to use his credit cards in California and Nevada. On November 1, Marlo Siegel accepted a collect call from Reno.

"It was six months before you appeared again in public. What were you doing?"

"I don't remember. I'd rather not say."

"When you returned, you moved toward international issues."

"I think this is where I made my mistake. It has to be this. I thought New York was basically safe; criminal complacency, looking back. If I had acted earlier, maybe, before world situations had gotten so complicated, or just planned better. I might have done it. It might be done."

I didn't want to go near that. "Why did you begin?"

"There was just so much. The Azerbaijani thing was going on and on, it

would have lasted years. I could stop it in six months. Remember, the UN praised me for that, and Tajikistan and Georgia. Unanimous resolutions.” It was true.

In May of 1996, my editor asked me if I knew anyone for the international desk. “We’ve gotta transfer someone from the city room for the Liberia job. Maybe two people.” Outside it was already ninety degrees, and the windows were open to the sweltering heat.

“You just put on two more for Thailand. And Carter’s got Liberia.”

“I know, but I’m putting her on the UN. He’s spreading us so thin these days.” ‘He’ was Kurtz, and the UN job was the one I wanted. I would have done anything to avoid it two years before, but now it covered a flurry of abstentions and diplomatic backbiting as the “Crusader” gave them more and more to applaud.

“Maybe I could take one of the kids from Jordan,” my editor said. “No, I already sent one to Chile. And the city desk’s bitching that they don’t have enough to cover urban crime. They could do it with two interns a year ago.”

“I’ll make it easy. Give me the UN and keep Carter where she is.”

He shook his head. “No good. You’re going to Bucharest in the morning.”

For a second I thought I’d lost track, which was getting easier all the time, and left a country off the growing list. “Why would he go to Romania? There’s no war there.”

My boss laughed. “No, and no more weapons program, either. Two hours ago he took out nuclear and bacteriological plants which their government is claiming never existed. Carter will get their denials.”

I didn’t end up going to Romania, because I got sent to Pakistan on a similar story, and then to Brazil. After two months those stories got routine and I was put on bigger things.

“How many thousands, how many millions, have longed for those things to be abolished? Why didn’t they do anything?”

“There wasn’t much they could do,” I told him.

“There you have it.”

“Where will it be this time, Connie? Uganda? Nepal?” Linda and I were arguing about our anniversary, so it must have been July, and it was 2003, so it must have been our nineteenth. “Are you going to do another story on his moral complicity?”

“You know I never did those. The civil wars are old news.” There were

fourteen or fifteen, in countries where he had dismantled juntas and secret police. He was containing some of the violence. "I've got rumors about disabled missiles. The Pentagon is sorting out which still work. They deny it, of course, but there's only one suspect."

"Him. God knows, I was waiting for another story about *him*." She coughed, mouth turned from the receiver. "You want a good story? Find out who his wife is. I'd love to talk to her."

The United States still denies any missile activity on October 11, 2003, maintaining that photographs of seven crashed ICBMs in Nevada and Wyoming are forgeries. Experts estimate the maximum altitude of the missiles before destruction at fifteen feet.

"In a way, I was grateful," Kurtz said. "Not to have my country attack me, but those missiles were a lot easier to find when they took off."

"So you still consider yourself American."

"It wasn't about politics. I did French, Chinese, American. Whatever I found." He paused, as if deciding whether to go on. "There's one thing. When they told me to surrender, every country made the same threat. Even the Russians, and I'd *finished* with their weapons. But only one country meant it."

"Threat?"

"Before I surrendered to the UN. They were going to detonate their remaining warheads simultaneously, in place, so I couldn't contain the fallout. The Americans were coding their detonators for the job."

On December 19, 2003, around the time of that ultimatum, he attempted suicide by diving into a Chinese nuclear test. The Chinese took it as a direct attack, and the remaining nuclear powers went to code red. His radar blip was tracked sixty miles north-northwest of ground zero before disappearing. There is no sign of him, as Simon Kurtz or otherwise, until December 30, when he arrived unscathed in the World Court at the Hague.

On December 26, Marlo Siegel was found dead in her car. The coroner ruled suicide by carbon monoxide poisoning. She was sixty-six years old.

There's too much newsprint entirely on the subject of his trial and captivity. I'm responsible for some. He contributed very little. Arguments on procedure drag on for months, with inflammatory statements from all quarters but his. The US heatedly denied his citizenship until it was sug-

gested that he consider himself a sovereign state, capable of making treaties or declaring war.

The problem was resolved by his surprise recommendation, voluntary psychological confinement under international inspection. No one liked the legal formula, but no one could think of a credible way to apply duress.

“Even with this threat, this alleged threat, you could have forced them to make a deal.”

“There were repercussions. Worldwide, a kind of panic I couldn’t ignore.”

“And there was no other way to solve that?”

“I hoped there was. Kurtz, at least, is dead. But I myself couldn’t find a way.” It was almost sundown, and his face seemed even lighter in the darkness.

“Are you still trying?”

He didn’t say anything. The wind bent and unbent the naked trees.

“Your attempts create panic, too. You know that.”

“If I succeeded, there’d be a permanent solution. And it might achieve something else.”

Suddenly his stack of religious books made me uneasy.

“I have responsibilities, Mr. Korzenowski. If your car slipped off a road next week, or you accidentally drowned, I could have saved you. If you were robbed in a subway or swindled by a government, it was because I allowed it. There are few deaths these days except those I permit. But there are more of those all the time.”

“But even you,” I began, and he frowned.

The next thing I knew was a rushing burning sensation, and I was in the air looking down, the queasy instant before fall. He was stretched in his chair hundreds of feet below, looking up as if I were an interesting bird. Then he was holding my collar high above the garden, his feet firmly planted on some rock solid nothing as I dangled in the air. Far away were sounds like fireworks. He eased me gently back to my seat.

I couldn’t breathe after that, and my face was flushed and throbbing. I was later diagnosed with severe friction burns. He looked as if nothing had happened at all. Guards were running across the lawn.

When he spoke it was calm, and even then I could see the carefully measured anger in his eyes. “Don’t talk to me about my limits. You can’t have any idea.” He tossed a handful of bullets onto the lawn, where they steamed in the November air. “I won’t have it.” Then we walked off across the rusty grass, and the guards took me to an emergency room.

I don't know how old he looked in 1955. He now actually looks younger than he did in the Kurtz photo, because of its expression. That was taken in 1979. There is no sign that he will age at a rate fast enough to measure.

A few hours after deadline my boss calls me into his office. There's been another suicide attempt. Kurtz has stopped breathing by deliberate act of the will.

"No breath, no heartbeat, no pulse," the head spook tells me on the phone. "The body's still warm. It's been maybe eleven hours."

"What are you doing to revive him?"

"Do? This isn't a patient you can hook up to an IV, OK? And frankly, for very very deep attribution, if he goes out this way it could solve a lot of problems."

I leave for the coffee shop across the street. Passing acquaintances comment on my "sunburn". There are a lot of problems unresolved.

The emergency room let me go after an hour. The next morning the feds called and said he wanted to apologize. It was not quite five.

He was in the garden again, in the same clothes, with a breakfast tray and a stack of new books on the same subjects. He was very charming. He assured me that what he'd said yesterday had not been his usual frame of mind at all, and that he was making, really, remarkable progress. His behavior had been unconscionable; he hoped I could forgive him.

It would have been foolish of me to hold a grudge. He had coffee, orange juice, and rolls, surely for my benefit rather than his, and I took some of what he offered. He was even polite enough to eat.

We talked about small things, the vagaries of the city you'd consider past his notice. He missed New York badly, and his memory preserved half a century of its minute details, from the faces of the homeless on the West Side to intricate façades in Brooklyn. I couldn't resist one last question about the books.

"Do these help your recovery?" I asked. "Or are you looking for role models?"

He showed me a puzzled frown and then polite laughter. "That's very good. But mostly I enjoy the theological conundrums. Are you religious?"

"My father was a Catholic," I said. "My mother was Lutheran."

"Salvation by works, salvation by faith. A fascinating question."

"And the existence of angels? Do you ponder that one much?"

He looked at me a long time. "You're an astute man, Conrad."

Then I got to go back to my life.

I buy coffee in a styrofoam cup and pay in folding green paper. That could be changed. The street suffers its six pm backlog, and that too could be different. Kurtz sits where he sits by choice, and if finally he cannot choose death, he will outlive his jailers, and his enemies, and me. In time he might see the world beg for his return, or might simply come to find his hermitage no more defensible than his pose as Kurtz. Or perhaps, eventually, he will be cured, and unburdened of whatever false sense of conscience or humanity troubles him. Then he will only be himself, and the transient world will take its shape around him. Or he may be dead. I should probably hope he is.

I have his marriage license, which even the private investigators missed. It would have been the coup within my coup, the document no one else had found about the man no one else had interviewed. I even kept it from my editor, to give its revelation dramatic effect. I burn it in the coffee shop's ashtray. The date was December 26, 1993. The bride's name was Marlo Siegel Kurtz.

I will go back to the office and finish the piece. But first I'll sit a little longer, with my hand curled around the warm styrofoam, watching the customers and the sidewalk. The shop is light, with people, and it's good to be here for a few moments without work. Linda is waiting somewhere for my call, and Xian maybe hoping for the Western press, and other dissidents thinking the same. Some will have to be neglected for others, and I will not write Kurtz' story the way he deserves. There will always be more to choose between. There is so much to be done, and so much more to be left undone, and such insufferable luxury in this wobbly little table, and the three packets of non-dairy creamer, and the plastic spoon.

Late at night, in the deserted office, I finish the story even more badly than I planned, leaving out everything interesting merely to get it done. Kurtz will not mind the injustice. He would feel guilty otherwise, and this little neglect is what he'd prefer. When it's finished I go back across the street, where the store manager is putting on his raincoat. There is the smell of badly-washed floor, and he pours me a cup of burnt-smelling dregs from the last pot. Then I go back into the office and fall asleep on the editor's couch, trying to prolong the taste of coffee on my tongue.

I wake in the middle of the night. My editor is there, and excited. Kurtz has survived, and sent me a personal message which the spooks have delivered. My boss smells exclusive.

"Sorry to worry you," it says. "I'm afraid I'll be here a long time."

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