

Flammability, Incorporeal Creatures and the Parking Lot of Eternity

Vasileios Kalampakas

John (folia onoma) was the best I'd ever seen with a blowtorch. He wielded it like Da Vinci wielded a god-damn paintbrush. He could do things with it that in many places were certainly illegal and definitely deranged, with the possible exception of Japan and/or (vale mono to or) Australia.

There was this thing about John and the blue-hot propane flames that bordered - nay, even surpassed - the realm of wonder. If Jesus could come down and visit from Heaven and work with a blowtorch next to John, he'd look like a pyromaniac hobo with a messiah complex and a background in carpentry, while John would just shine with a bright white light from within, turn water into beer and beer into piss with just a look. John was just that good.

So it was a fucking bummer when I learned that his last words actually were: "Don't be a pussy, oxygen tanks do that hissing sound all the time."

As far as classifying bummers goes, this was a triple-A class bummer, the kind of showstopper that had only been theorised up to John's untimely and gruesome death. The kind of bummer that could make Jim Carey's face flat and emotionless and Bill Clinton sworn to celibacy. It ranked way far above the A-plus bummer of being recently divorced, fired, being fired upon and being set on fire at the same time (afta ypoti8ete oti ta epa8e aftos h apla ta anaferei? Opws kai na exei den kolane) .

Which was bad in and of itself, but not as bad as John getting blown up a day before the Job. That was a sad state of affairs that meant I was now a very sorry son of a bitch with a life expectancy that made the term "lifetime warranty" sound like a tasteless practical joke.

So here I was, melting away in a decrepit diner on route 72, at a swampy nowhere with some supposedly native american though actually gibberish name like 'Alatanoosa' or 'Whahananoka', someplace between Alabama and Tennessee. The coffee tasted like imported dirt, the kind of dirt you read about being very fashionable and exaggeratedly overpriced but at the end of the day, was just dirt. The fried eggs looked like fried eggs, but only in the most rudimentary way: there was an orange bit with some white plastic all around it. I guess my flair for adventure was wearing out so it just sat there, where I happily failed to ingest it.

I really didn't feel like eating at all. Maybe it was the god-damn heat, the stale humid air and the fact that about the same time tomorrow, I would be probably looking at the wrong end of more than a couple of gun barrels because I had promised something I couldn't deliver to some very single-minded people with a propensity for shooting, rather than having coffee and

biscuits and sympathizing with the bad card life dealt you.

The reason I couldn't deliver was I couldn't do the Job. And I couldn't do the Job without John, because John, the flamboyant blowtorch virtuoso with an unmatched record of ninety-two safes, safe-rooms, and bank vaults, an average time of three point three minutes, clean as a germ-obsessed placebo-munching single old lady right before kidney stone surgery and a no-smoking-on-the-job policy that kept my cigarette budget intact, had gone and killed himself in his brother's-in-law chop shop. (eipame na plateiazeis alla edw to exeis xesei poses fores 8a mas peis oti pe8anne o typos?)

I stopped and asked myself at that point whether that unfortunate death, at such a bad time, right before what would now prove to be the last gig in my career was a sign from God to stop doing what I did best: stealing. In a rare know-thyself moment I reminded myself I wasn't half as good at it as some Wall Street people, politicians and the let-me-lend-you-your-own-money cutthroats that roamed the street unabashed.

Logic would then imply that if there was going to be any smiting and all that holier-than-thou business, any God with a sense of perspective, morality and justice wouldn't start dishing it out on my end. And in any case, I decided that if God really had something to tell me, he'd better make a really really good point with lots of compelling arguments, like saving my ass pronto. Or at least point me to a direction, show me the road to salvation that preferably led somewhere warm and sandy in the Pacific, along with a couple of Cayman bank accounts, some instantly gratifying plastic surgery and twelve hundred different driving licenses. I'd have thought about asking for another favor but they said that size didn't matter, bank accounts' notwithstanding.

Realising how God and reality rarely intertwined, I felt some kind of emotional pressure the likes of which I hadn't experienced since high-school and all the awkward parties. A stress relief mechanism kicked in someplace inside me and I sighed deeply before shouting out an expletive, something eloquent like 'Fuck!'.

That made some heads in the diner turn and raised the attached eyebrows apprehensively. It also gained me the attention of the establishment's chef- du-cuisine, a six-foot-three, two-hundred and fifty pound red-haired, bush-bearded wild-eyed man-like Alabama creature with a meat cleaver, a stained apron and a murderous gleam in his eye. He pointed that cleaver towards my direction and said with a slight snarl "Now yo' better watch that god-damn filthy mouth a yours, 'less you got dental, son."

I think I nodded faintly and muttered "I'm sorry" in an absent-minded fashion before I put ten bucks on the table, got up and left. He probably felt that'd given me a good old fashioned run-down, but I was simply in a hurry (nai gia auto einai mesa se ena diner kai xazevei ta avga tou gamh8hke na trexei kai na mh ftanei).

I looked at my watch, one of the few items I had actually bought with honest money from a winning lottery ticket back when I kept saying to myself that heists were 'a temporary thing'. It was half past ten in the morning, and I had more or less twenty two and a half hours to live. As I looked at the bland green and brown Southern scenery, I noticed a couple of dogs humping without a care in the world, oblivious to pretty much everything else.

I was about to think something profound about nature and the will of life to survive and continue, when I noticed they both had "stuff" dangling underneath. Even nature had a way of giving me the finger. I looked up into the blighting sun and all I could see was white and red dots for the next ten minutes. I'd left my glasses inside the diner. I said to myself, fuck that, I don't need sunglasses. **I'm Bobby. (mhn ksexasw na auto systh8w)** I'm going to do what it takes, and I sure as hell can do it without sunglasses. In retrospect, that might have been a mistake cause those sunglasses had a history of their own, but it was time for action not remembrance. So I acted on impulse, without pausing to ruminate on the outcome of my actions, and especially what those actions might incur precipitate in relation to my person.

Now, thinking back to that particular moment in time, the moment I decided to act was the moment I kept thinking to myself 'Bobby, that doesn't mean shit. John blowing up doesn't mean shit. You can still do this. You can still get rich, or die trying', that must have been the moment that would probably get the most votes in the 'Most Regrettable Moment in Your Entire Life' category. It would also get lots of points in the 'Shit I Wish I Hadn't Done' category, but the real winner in that one was calling up Eileen. I'd done mistakes before, but it always amazed me how impossibly fast I regretted calling Eileen on that particular day. I panicked.

I rang her three times before she picked up. When she did, it sounded like she hadn't talked to a real person in about three years:

"Mmbby? Mmmby Baahow? My Bobby Bear?"

I took little notice that she had been stuffing herself, probably a bad case of munchies.

I said "Yeah, Eileen," managing to keep my tone of voice even, normal. It really felt like biting the bullet when I said "it's me, Papa-Bear,". It also made me cringe as the connotations that old term of endearment implied flashed across my mind's eye. Jesus Christ, not Eileen. What was I doing? Was there no other way? Was this a possible way out or was it just a faster way under?

"Awwww, Papa-Bear.. Is, this really you Bobby? I miss you so much, you know."

She sounded quite sincere but then again crazy people always do

since they do believe you are actually an ursine humanoid, complete with fur, claws, a fluffy tummy, and an unhealthy hunger for honey and Taco Bell.

"Right, Eileen. That's, me.. Yeah. Papa-waka-bear (to xezels). Huh.."

The words seemed to be drip-fed to my brain from some sort of mental black hole that spewed forth nothing that made sense. Fortunately that strongly resonated with Eileen's sense of reality:

"Oh, Papa-waka-bear, so strong and furry and manly..With lots and lots of furry shouldery hair for me to rub and that sweet tummy..Can I see you Bobby? Just this once, I won't be a bother, really. We don't need to go boat-pedaling or skating. Just see you, maybe let me rub your tummy. And have sex?"

I closed my eyes and recalled a picture from the past: myself laden with honey from tip to toe, tied to a bed with a Winnie the Pooh plushie wearing a strap-on dildo and Eileen shouting "Rawr! I'm your honeycomb slice, Papa-Bear!". I decided then and there that I'd have to appeal to whatever core of sanity remained in her mind, or else I could just go drown myself in a really shallow body of water, like, say, a gutter.

"Listen, Eileen.. We can't.. I can't do all that, okay? I wish I could, but.."

That was a lie. That was a lie. That was a lie. I was lying to her, but that's okay cause she's crazy.

"Ohh. Why can't you Papa-Bear? We could have so much fun together! We could ride the tram around the city, and I could feed you cotton candy and berries. Like last time, don't you remember? Didn't you have fun? Please, Bobby. Can't I see you once more? Why did you call me then? Do you really want to hurt me, Bobby? (den to epiasa)"

Her voice reminded me uncannily of Boy George and that made my eyes hurt just by thinking about it. I felt my stomach knot at the thought of all the things I would have to endure to get on her good side. Or it might have been the coffee-like dirt-brew. I took a deep breath before uttering the words as if they were my last:

"I need to see you Eileen."

"Oh, Bobby! You really can't tell how happy that makes me! I feel like leaping outside the window and flying to your arms, Papa-Bear!" (h alh8ia einai oti den ton polypetyxeneis ton tropo pou milaei h gkomena)

Oh God, shit no. She was crazy enough to actually pop out the window and crack her head open on the street below.

"No, no, Eileen! Don't do that honey, no. You gotta wait a couple of hours, I'll drop by your place. Okay?"

"But whoosy-cooshy-huggy of mine, I'll be fly to you in a jippy if you just say the word!"

"No, no! Just sit tight, will ya? I'll bring you chocolate chip cookies, your favorite. Just don't go anywhere. And Eileen, take your meds, please. You're still on meds, right?"

"Oh, you mean those horrible pills? They were so bitter and bad for me, unlike you Bobby. No, no, daddy paid off the bad men in white and now I'm home again. Free as a bird. Your little nightingale."

That was probably wrong. No meds, rampant insanity mixed with nymphomaniac tendencies. And ursine fantasies. For a moment I thought it'd be a better bet to just reason with Falconi, but the fact that the last guy who tried that ended up as hand-made soap bars with Falconi's signature on it left me with little doubt about where my chances lay. I'd stick with the looney. At least she seemed to still have this thing for me.

"Okaaay, Eileen. Now, see Papa-Bear's in trouble and I need your help. So, make sure you can get a hold of daddy and tell him that you might need that jet of his for a trip. And some pocket money too. Tell him you're going shopping in New York, okay?"

I listened myself saying all that and momentarily asked myself 'Are you a bad person for doing this, Bobby?', and then the answer came guilt-free 'No, Falconi is a bad person because he wants you dead for something you didn't even do'. It also helped to think of myself as Papa-Bear and not Bobby Barhoe. (mal. k. kEikologikk. analyst
lon marane, se dyo selres kal evgale kal symperasma)

"We're going shopping? Oh, Papa-Bear I always knew you were so much fun!"

"Yeah, I'm a god-damn roaming circus. So, see you in a couple of hours."

"Don't take long, Papa-Bear! I want to squash you in my arms and feel your tummy and tusle your hair and then su--"

Damn you to hell John Staikos, this was all your fault.

"Yeah, yeah, okay Eileen. Anything you like. Bye!"

"Wait, wait!"

"What?"

"Whoopsy-kissy?"

I hesitated just for the tiniest moment and I could almost picture the sad, watery eyes and then the coming onslaught of cries, curses and finely sharpened blades being hurled against me, so I made something like a smooching sound. It might have sounded like a fart, I'm not sure, but she sounded positively

satisfied:

"I love you Papa-Bear! I can't wait to snuggly-wuggly you in my arms and tie you down and -"

"Goodbye!"

I hang up in the nick of time. The ordeal was over for now, but doubts started assaulting me like journalists outside a rehab facility for famous people. Was this my only option? Would she come through? What if she had been waiting for that call, that one call that I might have given her in such a time of extenuating circumstances and dire need, just so I could come running to her for help and then dice me up because I shot the best-man on our wedding day and ran off in her father's Porsche?

I had to keep reminding myself I wasn't the bad person here, even as I strode back into my piece-of-shit Taurus. These were desperate times, and they obviously required insanely desperate measures.

I got back on route 72, heading for Memphis. While the radio waves reeked with country, bluegrass and heart-felt messages to the parishioners to pledge their support to the Church of Latter Day Saints With Semi-Automatic Rifles, I casually gazed outside the window and couldn't help notice that this countryside was so flat and uninteresting that if there was some kind of hell waiting for everyone, this would be it. I was about to start a self-gratifying rant, using phrases like "Good job right there, Bobby", "Sure I can vouch for that sleezeball Mr. Falconi", "Heck no, nothing can go wrong, we're all pros here. Right?" when a big brown legged thing just popped right in front of the Taurus. I applied pressure to the braking pedal and then the laws of physics worked their magic.

Now, despite appearances I'm a fairly well-educated man and I know that Taurus is just a fancy word for bull. I also know that for a car to decelerate from eighty miles-per-hour to zero, it takes a couple hundred feet, and that's because no-one in his right mind would design a car that could turn its occupants into mush or tarmac jelly (depending on the seat belt arrangement) when they wanted it to stop.

That being said, I wasn't really suprised when the Taurus hit that horse. I wasn't really surprised when the airbag tried to rob me of what looked like my early dying breath. Surprise wasn't achieved even when the car swiveled and landed sideways in a gravely ditch. It wasn't the fact that I was still in one piece, nor the fact that the horse - had it been given the oral faculty post-mortem - could not say the same for itself.

It was the shaman.

There I was, still trying to decide whether or not I was still alive and with my brain between my ears, when I saw through the hazy smoke and vapor of the smashed front of the car the figure of a lone man, looking directly at me with a deeply sombre gaze,

as if I had just killed his horse. He was dressed in a brown leather jacket, criss-crossed leather vest, and soft tan shoes. I'd have wagered he was some kind of a disco enthusiast with a slightly bent sexual orientation, if it wasn't for the feathery hat and the somewhat austere, manly jaw line. He was the spitting image of some Cherokee. Or Navajo. I didn't know, I just knew they name cars after these kinds of people.

He spoke with a peculiar voice that had the impossible qualities of gravel and running water at the same time:

"Are you hurt?"

I would normally have taken the time to think about faking some injury so I could sue the guy for damages. But under the circumstances, namely that if everything went according to plan I had less than a day to live combined with that this guy's entire estate most probably consisted of a dead horse, a tipi and his grandparents in a convenient ash form, I instinctively opted for the truth. Everything felt connected to the proper slots and I literally (and sadly, figuratively as well) saw no great blinding light at the end of a tunnel.

He came closer, shook open my jammed door and helped me get out of the car. He struck me as neither too old and neither too young, kind of exactly like Ronn Moss.

"Yeah, I think I'm okay. Where did you, ahm.. I mean, the horse just popped out of nowhere, and.."

"I know, Bobby."

His words had a strangely calming effect. They oozed serenity. It was like listening to the voice of a loving grandfather, and by loving I don't mean pedophile. But then it hit me:

How did he know my name?

What did he mean by saying 'I know'? What did he know? I looked blankly at him, wondering briefly if there was a universal balance being observed right at that moment. My impending doom, and a horse dying in front of Taurus. Could it be that somehow the cosmic forces of life contrived to tell me something? Had some sort of karmic exchange taken place right in front of my eyes? A horse's life, for my own? An offering, a sacrifice to the powers beyond reach? Was he a holy man? Some sort of shaman? An emissary of fate? Was this the break I so desperately needed?

How did he know my name?

His next words jarred me out of my shocked reverie:

"The plates."

"Excuse me?"

"Says here on the car plates, 'BOBBY B'. Isn't that your name?"

I felt a bit silly, standing right beside him on the side of the road, bending over looking at what must have been horse gut sprayed all over what at some point, had been my Taurus' radiator.

"I'm sorry, I must've been thinking out loud. Well, yeah. Bobby Barhoe."

He looked at me sideways, somehow failing to mask his feelings disappointment. I couldn't know if it was my name or the pool of blood oozing from the horse.

"What kind of a name is that, Barhoe? Seriously?"

It was an odd **choice** to ask, but then again I'd just run over his horse so I felt I should indulge the man. It might have also been an unconscious, fool-hardy effort to steer the discussion away from the dead horse.

"I've never really given it much thought. It's just a name, really. I actually think it sounds sturdy, homely. Like, say -"

"Burroughs?"

He furrowed his left eyebrow in a grimace that would have normally required a monocle for full effect. I took a closer look at the steaming pile of heap that used to be the engine block. From a long experience in messiness, I could tell changing the tires wouldn't work.

"Yeah, kinda like that one. Or Thibodeau. Sounds dependable, right?"

"That doesn't sound sturdy, homely or dependable. That sounds like someone fell down the stairs."

"I think it's a good name. And so is Barhoe, don't mind me saying," I said and sat in front of the dead horse, arms crossed, trying to sound convivial. I must've come across like a prissy twat.

"Well I really don't think so, Bobby," he said and he scratched his head under the feather hat while grinning profusely as if he was enjoying all this immensely.

"I don't want to sound like a total jerk since I seem to have inadvertently fatally injured your horse over there, but you know who I am, while I don't."

I think I pointed lamely to the dead horse and sounded like a total jerk.

"I'm The Sad Son of A Bitch Whose Horse Runneth Over."

"Wow. Really? That's kind of tragic, isn't it? Talk about karma, huh?"

"Not really. Just because I'm Alabama it doesn't mean.. The name's Steve Johnson."

After all the pointless discussion about names it felt like I'd been cheated.

"What kind of an indian is named like that? I mean, seriously?"

"Now look here, I'm tired of this shit. Just because I'm Alabama it doesn't mean our people live like a hundred and fifty years ago. I went to college. I got into a greek society, got drunk and wedgied and did all that frat-house shit just because I lacked the necessary maturity and personality like every other post-adolescent American male. And on an athletic scholarship, mind you."

His name, even though it was as common as the cold, sounded oddly familiar.

"Did you by any chance play football at Kentucky?"

"Track and field, Alabama State. Do I look like I could play football?"

He was about five-foot-ten, a bit on the light side, no more than a hundred and thirty, a hundred and forty pounds. In pygmy football he might've been a world champion, but I don't think there is such a thing as pygmy football. Nor should there be.

"Not really, no."

His back was turned to me, looking at a far part of the sky brimming with timidly approaching dark clouds when he abruptly spun around and said with a beaming smile:

"That doesn't mean I'm not a shaman though."

"It doesn't?"

I suddenly felt the conversation was starting to get a bit light-headed, when he explained:

"Shamanistic rituals form the basis of a hard core of belief in existentialist individualism, a wave breaker of people against the tsunami of pragmatistic atavism of today's profit-driven societies. Part of the SSSD manifesto stands for -"

I couldn't resist interrupting the bullshit storm so I told him with a straight face:

"I'm sorry, I'm not familiar with that SS thing. Is it, like, Hitler's SS?"

"What? No, no. It's the Societe des Shamans et Sorciers-Docteurs."

The man seemed impervious to sarcasm.

"That's german, isn't it?"

"No, it's french for the Society of Shamans and Witch Doctors."

Even though he was probably right, I was pretty convinced that French and German were one and the same.

"So you got your own thing going? Shamanizing? Actually, is that a real word?"

"Well, the internet's helped a lot, you know? Coming together, feeling the buzz, spreading the word, but what's -"

One of the few things that I really feared apart from dying gruesomely in the hands (holding sharp instruments of death implied) of Falconi's goons was being surrounded by miracle workers, televangelists and all sorts of religious yahoo's that sounded just as coherent and sincere as that church of something where rich, famous, short actors used to go to find out the really real truth.

"Listen, I'm in a bit of a hurry. I really have to get to Memphis, like really soon. Actually I should have been almost half way there by now. So, say you wouldn't be on your way to Memphis would you? I'd be very grateful -"

"Dead!" he suddenly exclaimed raising his hands as if a switch had been turned on.

"What?"

"My horse is dead."

"I kind of noticed that. It hasn't moved since it spewed its - .. What I meant to say was, could you drop me off with your car?"

"I don't have a car."

"Your bike?"

"No bike either," he said, and shook his head.

"Your other horse?" I asked in vain.

"Awatame was my friend and only steed for many years. May he rest in peace," he said with a genuine sadness that quickly passed over his features as well.

"The horse had a name?"

I felt that was the wrong thing to say but he didn't seem to be offended. He rather asked me with a slim smile:

"Have you heard of a horse with no name?"

His question had a curious ring to it but I couldn't quite

remember why.

"Look, we **could** **or** like this for hours but not today. In about twenty hours or so, give or take, some really pissed off people with very little in the way of ethics considerations concerning the sanctity of human life are going to come looking for me, and my instincts tell me to run and hide, and they're usually right. You might think I'm pulling your leg here, having killed your horse and so on but -"

He took off his feathery hat and straightened his hair. He said with unnerving casualness:

"Yeah, you vouched for Dempsey, and when he vanished into thin air with thirty million in Falconi's bonds, he gave you another shot - the Veteran's Fund job. Problem is, John Staikos blew up along with his brother's-in-law chop shop, and took the job with him down the sinkhole. You're not a gun-crazed ape so you can't deal with Falconi going in, guns blazing. You are the careful, studied planner who has taken everything into consideration and has mathematically proven you need John to pull off the job. You can't just pretend to do the job and get caught because then Falconi would take care of you in the jail anyhow. You can't find a replacement - no less in such a short notice - because John was the only guy who has cut open a vault like that, ever. You're thinking about flying away with Eileen's help. Maybe hide somewhere in Mexico, or in the Andes. Or maybe someplace real deep in the Amazon."

I watched in stunned silence as flies the size of hummingbirds buzzed around the horse. I managed to ask him with what I believed was a valid question under the circumstances:

"How the fuck do you know all that?"

"I told you, I'm a shaman. I resonate with mother Earth. I communicate with the spirits. I conversed with John, actually. We were drinking buddies back in the college days. He asked me to help a friend in need. So here I am."

Instincts took over so I couldn't believe a god-damn thing he was saying so I reverted to what should be the most logical explanation according to my experience as a fund displacement engineer:

"You're a Fed, right? This is some kind of elaborate setup. You've been monitoring me for some time now and you want me to confess, put Falconi behind bars, put me in witness protection. I can see the snipers. Let me tell you, not a chance. Falconi will find a way to kill me. So I'm not buying. Oh, and I don't know who he is. Or what's his name. I'm talking man. You got nothing on me."

I think I had said pretty much everything I wasn't supposed to say but once more that wouldn't prove to be much of a problem.

"John said you'd be hard to convince. What if I can answer only

something the two of you would ever know?"

"You could have gotten to him, tortured him for every little detail. Heck, you might've blown him up just to put a wrench in Falconi's job."

"I guess you're also thinking we didn't land on the moon."

"Of course we landed on the moon, in '53. The landings in '69 were just a cover-up to discredit all the --"

"I get the picture. What if he told you himself? Would that be enough to make you believe?"

"So it's a ruse? He's alive, right? Working with the Feds? Are we still on, Steve? Or should I call you Agent Johnson?"

I smiled smugly and thought I had him nailed right over there. Things looked like they could still turn out OK in the end. Maybe we'd have a cold one at a strip joint, and laugh about it surrounded by well-endowed professional dancers with allergies to any sort of garment. I couldn't be farther away from reality.

"I'm afraid he's pretty dead. Bought the proverbial farm. But, you're still on."

"We are? How?"

"Like this," Steve said and closed his eyes before he started dancing. At first thought it was part of keeping in par with the whole indian routine, doing the rain dance and shrieking like a baboon. But the way he tip-toed, spun and jumped into the air, then gracefully landing and doing a pirouette reminded me of soft ballerina's shoes, stockings and New York Times articles on homophobia.

Instinctively I took a couple of steps back watching with increasing horror as Steven pranced around the dead horse with arms extended like paws, and suddenly all I could think of was Michael Jackson and zombies. I was about to break into a hopeless run thinking that nutjobs usually can't afford snipers until they're elected in office and then I saw John as a bluish, thin apparition seeping out from the horse.

He was wearing goggles over his eyes and had a blow torch in hand; he was looking rather pale which under any circumstances seemed only natural. I was about to yell 'Hologram!' when he uncannily zipped right next to me and said:

(symazepse tes ligo aftes tis treis, mikrine tes)

"Bobby, my man. The Taurus got totalled, huh? Bummer."

"John?"

"Where you expecting someone else?"

Needless to say I did the first thing that came to my ape-descendant brain: I tried to poke him with a finger but it went right through. Then I tried not to faint, and I remember I heard Steve say:

"Tell him it's all true."

Then John, or his apparition, or his astral projection or whatever it was I was technically talking to said:

"It's all true."

"See? I told you," said Steve and smiled encouragingly while my eyes darted back and forth trying to find some point of reference that would explain all this and keep my brain from melting. That mostly failed. My lips moved but nothing came out of my mouth except perhaps some drool.

"Huh?"

John the Ghost, or John the Apparition, or the Spirit Formerly known as John said:

"Don't try to understand, at least not now. Steve's a buddy, so do what he says and he'll fix us both up. I might actually help you live through it and make it in time for the game on Saturday as well."

Steve popped a question with a frown:

"Buffalo?"

"Nah, Nicks. So, Bobby. I'm counting on you. I gotta run now, some attendant's busting my balls, says I parked on a handicapped spot."

And just like that, before I could breathe in and out, he vanished. I managed to make sounds like words again. Almost.

"Uh. Um. That was John?"

Steve nodded 'yes' with his head.

"And he wasn't fucking with me? You aren't fucking with me?"

He shook his head in a well-known fashion that in almost any known human culture meant 'no'. I took a few deep breaths while my mind tried to empty itself. It took a while longer than usual this time around.

"So what did he mean? Why is he counting on me? Can someone else do the job for him? Oh, I get it! Can he possess Falconi, make his head spin around and break his neck? Or do some of that weird ghost shit, scare him shitless and make him jump off the 41st floor? Was that a ghost? Or a ghou? I can't tell the difference, you should know that stuff. I mean you can summon the dead, right?"

I think there was a strange gleam of shocked terror when I said that, so Steve sounded a bit apprehensive:

"You're weird. He's neither. He's in an incorporeal form. His spirit still roams the Earth freely and can be called upon, but his soul is trapped in the Parking Lot of Eternity. If he doesn't find the exit soon, he'll be trapped there, forever searching the ticket for his green Honda Accord."

"That piece of crap? Yeah, okay, I just talked with a dead guy. So, how can he help me? Can he do the job in that condition?"

"He can't, he's dead. We have to bring him back. Well, you actually."

"Bring him back from the dead? As in, raise him from the dead? As in, resurrection?"

"Technically, it's not exactly like that. There have been precedents. Lazarus, Jesus. Disney, Elvis. Hitler. It's more like, re-rolling the last dice."

"What, like in a game?"

"Isn't life but just a game?"

"What's with all the philosophical questions today? The accident.. The dead horse.. I was badly injured. I'm in a coma. And I'm seeing these visions, and you're like a spiritual guide but in reality, you're just a figment of my imagination, a creation of my subconscious mind which is trying to stay alive and--"

And then he suddenly punched me really hard in the face. It made my jaw go numb for like a minute or two, and then I knew that for all intents and purposes this was probably real enough.

"Did you imagine that? I don't think so. And to get down to business, John really wants that second chance. I mean who wouldn't? Except maybe people who owed lots of money. But to do that, someone has to vouch for him. If he fails to get that second chance, he and that someone get to serve at the Parking Lot of Eternity as attendants for, well, all Eternity."

(Hmm okey thn analogia me to parking lot of eternity thn vriskw lame sthn kalyterh periptwsh sorry)

"Is that like a valet service for the dead then?"

"You could say so, yes."

"So how are you going to do it?"

"Do what?"

"You know, save John. Give him his second chance, save my life, all that."

"I'm not doing anything like that. You are going to."

"I am? Maybe you are imagining this?"

He looked at me in a funny way that expertly conveyed the message 'do you want another punch in the face?'.
"

"Yeah, I think you're not imagining it any more than I am. Come to think of it, I'm done for either way, right?"

"The smart money's on that."

Falconi would scour the Earth to get me. I'd have a considerably shortened expiration date and the overall idea of growing old and senile around scantily clad teens that didn't speak a word of English would be thrown out of the window.

I was scared. I was panicked. The instinct of fleeing in the face of insurmountable odds and grave danger overcame my cold, calculating sense of reason, even though I was starting to reconsider the wording 'reason'. If all that were true, if indeed there was the slightest hope of John coming back from the dead, and doing the job, what did I have to lose apart from my sanity?

"Okay. I'll do it. What do I have to do?"

"Collect spirit shards."

"What, like Zelda or something?"

Steve looked puzzled.

"What's Zelda? Some new age Zen crap? Because the spirits will be angry if--"

"No, it's a game on the Nintendo."

"What's a Nintendo?"

"The Wii?"

"We what?"

"Forget about Zelda, she's can be a real bitch anyway. What kind of spirit shards are you talking about?"

"Real spirit shards, from willing souls. I need to perform a certain ritual for each and every soul that is willing to merge a part of it with yours."

Instincts kicked in so I couldn't help asking:

"Will that hurt?"

"No, I don't think so."

"You don't think so?"

"I don't. I haven't done it before."

I should have known I'd hear that phrase at some point in the discussion.

"Oh, that's just classic. I mean, what is this, amateur shaman night ? You haven't done it before?"

"Have you talked with lots of dead people?"

"Not really, no. Just John back there."

"Well, that's because it's pretty fucking rare. So are spirit shards. Souls are very fickle and rarely accept such a thing."

"Right. And how are we going to pull that soul-catching off then?"

"I have something in mind. At least someplace we can start."

"Whatever, I'm game as long I get to keep my head and my balls attached. Do you know how to do your stuff?"

"I'm qualified. I've taken classes."

That sounded at least ridiculous. I'd seen stranger stuff just a couple of minutes earlier but I just spurted the words:

"You can't be serious. Does it involve dancing like a queer?"

"I am. And if you mean 'ballet', it does. We need to act quickly. And you need to get us some transportation. Hitchhiking a ride might do the trick."

"Why me?"

"You're the white, respectable-looking guy."

"I'm a god-damn thief. And I got some Latino blood in me, I'm not all 'whitey'. I have this thing for salsa and tortillas, someone in the family must've been an hombre."

Steve looked at me with a vaguely mixed feeling somewhere between pity and disgust.

"I said respectable-looking. Don't blame me for your society's prejudice against native americans."

"I thought it was your society as well. That you had integrated and so on."

"That's just what we tell folks at job interviews. Now, remember I'm only doing this as a favor to John. I'm not sure we can be buddies yet, so remember that too."

A slightly uneasy silence followed as we both looked onto the

street, hunting for a passing ride. At some point I felt like I just had to ask:

"He owes you money, right?"

"Yeah. Two hundred bucks. Said he had some debt he needed to pay off fast."

"That's funny, he owed me two hundred bucks."

Steve looked at me wide-eyed and exclaimed:

"Well, dress me up like Custer and shoot me full of arrows. That's karma, come a lyin'."

"Don't sing that, I hate Culture Club."

"Don't sing what? You mean like a choir club?"

* * *

A pair of furry dice hang from the rear mirror. Instead of numbers from one to six though, each face sported an extremely detailed depiction of men engaged in activities of a sexual nature, with sheep nonetheless. Steve was looking at the dices with mystified awe, as if he was for the first time in his life, challenged to believe people could do such things.

The truck driver's name was Ivan Kerrilov, and when he spoke he never failed to make me think he had picked up english inside a fishing barrel, talking to tuna who couldn't read or talk but had learned it themselves using a chinese electrical appliance manual for textbook. Needless to say, it sounded like garbage.

"You are to each other? To get there?"

I tried to maintain a conversational tone without giving away the fact that I could not understand what the hell Ivan was saying, while Steve kept touching things that one could never know whether or not they had been inserted into orifices regularly as of late. So I tried to reply:

"We are who we are. Together. What does 'together' really mean, you know?"

With safety in mind first and without taking his eyes off the road, Ivan took his hand off the wheel and made two little figures with his fingers that first walked casually next to each other, and then one seemed to bend over only to get the index finger of the other hand repeatedly inserted into an imaginary cavity. At first I squinted at the little charade, trying to think what could be going on in Ivan's stranger-fiction-mind. And then I saw his leery smile and rhythmical movement of his pelvis I irreversibly knew he was asking whether or not me and Steve were a 'thing'. I answered as delicately as appearances and circumstances allowed:

"The fuck no! We're guys!"

A bump on the road slightly jerked all three of us. Ivan grinned widely seemingly to purposely reflect almost eighty percent of sunlight directly on to my face with his metal teeth. He constantly made me feel I was in a Bond parody film set with the same supporting cast, only slightly bent.

"So?" asked Steve without provocation and without a care, delving deep into the insides of the truck's dashboard and assorted interior extra, like the small cupboard in the back and the impossibly tiny WC. I had seen where this kind of talk could lead and I always regretted rising to the bait. I resolved not to be tempted, especially then, and especially in there.

"I'm not doing that. I'm not getting into a discussion about homo-sex with you."

"Why not? Homo-sex? Who says that?" asked Steve while carefully studying the fine finishing in the beautifully lacquered cupboard doors in the miniscule kitchen area. A smell like vodka permeated the air.

"Look, he's smiling already! This must be some kind of perverted sexual fantasy coming true, two straight men hitching a hike, arguing about gays and sex between gays and animals and straight men like us."

A really big truck with a streamlined design overtook us on the left, blaring his horn all the way. At the end of the huge tank he was carrying, the driver had put up a neon sign that said 'HONK IF YOU'RE HUNG LIKE AN ARMADILLO'. Before my brain had time to fully explore the possibilities that such a statement entailed and what it really meant (for instance, what is an armadillo hung like? is it hung like an anteater or other thing beginning with 'a?'), I was reflexively covering up my ears because Ivan had just honked, laughing like an immigrant version of the Woodpecker. On the other hand I noticed Steve was browsing through the mini-bar, which invariably seemed to possess enough alcohol to fire up an amateur rocket. Most of the tiny bottles were empty and the rest of them was emptied around the driver's seat.

"Now see why we should just shut up till Memphis?"

"Ivan says talk. Good for pass time, therapy, hum, no? Like Op-Rah. Spring-er?"

"No thank you, we can have some quality time to talk later, mind you."

I thought that comment had put an end to the discussion, but when Steve sat next to me holding a mini bottle of Stolichnaya, he asked something that was a very punch-worthy thing to say:

"Haven't you ever been fingered by a lady?"

Had I the capacity, I would've boiled most of the water in my body into steam, turning my eyes into jelly in the process. But as I recall I simply foamed a bit while trying to restrain myself from actually hurting Steve, the curiously-inclined-to-talk-shit-like-that shaman:

"What the fuck kind of a question is that? Are you asking about whether not I've ever had a finger inserted up my ass? What the fuck's wrong with you?"

"Hey, just making some idle conversation. It's not like I asked if you're sucking--"

"Now wait just a minute. That's just sick."

"What? Why, women do it all the time!"

"Yeah, well, women do that all the time! Not guys!"

"Why not?"

"Because, women are supposed to suck and men to.."

"Blow?"

"Hell no!"

"So you think you're so much better than women? Is that why you're degrading them?"

"What kind of - I didn't say anything degrading, I just said -"

"That they suck. That they're not as good at you at--"

"What? Good at sucking cock? Is that what you're saying?"

I noticed Ivan gave me a very strange look that somehow implied sexual tension to arise would be more than welcome on his part. For someone who couldn't talk a word of proper english, he communicated quite clearly.

"You bet your sweet ass they're better at sucking cock than I am!"

I said and Steve looked at me straight in the eye, paused for a moment and asked with a flat, serious voice, the voice of someone doing a census:

"You think my ass is sweet? As in, lovely-looking? Perhaps, even, hot?"

"Stop saying shit like that."

"So you're just not as good at it as you'd like? Is that why you have this weird fascination and keep saying women ain't -"

"Not as good at.. The hell.. I do not.. Suck.. Cock! Period!"

I made it pretty certain then that the flustered red on my face

was not war paint but blood past its boiling point. But Steve just had to try my limits on the subject:

"I knew you were weird, I just didn't know you hadn't come out of the closet yet."

"Come out of the- what?" I asked and saw my fist involuntarily punching him in the face. A split second later Steve thought it was time for some kind of psychological evaluation.

"See now that's typical behavior of repressed sexuality. You have a problem opening up to society as a homosexual man, so you become defensive, try to look like the dominating male figure, while in fact you subconsciously hitched a hike with an outspokenly gay man - in a milk truck no less - and just a moment ago admitted you're worse at sucking cock than most women. And that's why you punched me, because in this soul-searching quest you are too confined by your own-"

I punched him again, and this time it had the desired effect. He stopped talking shit and looked at me through half-open wary eyes, probably mindful that some things, and especially things concerning Bobby Barhoe's manliness were better left unsaid for a good reason that involved jarred bones and bruises.

I was visibly seething with anger. My male pride had been hurt. I almost felt like a proud elk being stripped of its horns, an elephant without a trunk, or a stud without its junk. It also felt like Ivan was eyeing me creepily, and grinning incongruously to every mention of a word even remotely related to intercourse, like 'milk', 'butter', or 'hoe'. Before abject terror pulled at my instincts and made me leap outside a truck doing eighty, he turned and said to me with an approving tone, proudly waving a badly groomed finger in the air:

"You talk like man. Ivan like that. Sexy, like a man."

I tried not to think of that as a compliment, or even a comment of any kind.

Steve looked slightly miffed, sitting somewhat uncomfortably, nursing his jaw. It looked like the last punch had left him a purple-coloured souvenir. It's only reasonable then that he must've unwillingly disconnected his mouth from his brain when he said:

"I hope you are not developing a thing for me, because I'd have you know I'm not into-"

I was about to punch him a third time in that exact same sweet bruised spot and if God was a proponent of applied justice, I would have broken his jaw with the added bonus that that would have probably made him **shit** up for the rest of the ordeal, when I felt something with the apparent magnitude and force of a giant metal claw tugging at my left shoulder. It was Ivan who said:

"Memphis. We here. Look."

And I turned and saw the sign that said 'Memphis NEXT EXIT'. I saw the bleak unattractive greenish scenery that reminded me of mosquitoes and moonshine, and I was instantly overcome with agony, because the dreaded moment had arrived. We were about to meet Eileen. Which reminded me then to finish what I had started, and punch Steve in the face. A moment, a grunt and an expletive later he was complaining:

"What the fuck was that for?"

"That's for starting this shard business with Eileen."

"A close, intimate relationship. Female softness of heart. She's the best candidate."

"You might want to meet her before having an educated opinion first."

"I'm sure you're overreacting, just like with the whole homo thing."

I only had to slightly give him the eye, and he fell silent again, looking the other way. He then said with conviction:

"I'm pretty sure saying she's crazy and denouncing your relationship is just another way of coping with the fact that you're a homo--"

I'm not a violent man per se, and it definitely says something for a person when he's so eager to punch people in the face and break their legs, but in Steve's case, I would bet he could get the Pope mad enough to beat him to death with a bible. Before there was time to choke him to death (kanto ligo pio kseka8aro fainete les kai milas akoma gia ton papa), Ivan effectively disarmed me with but a few words of very special meaning:

"So, who is going to pay Ivan by butt-sex now we here?"

I think my genitalia shrunk to microscopic levels instantly, and my anus clenched itself airtight. I looked at Steve in terror and he simply smiled back, impervious to what the words implied for my gender. Impossibly, trying to ignore the inevitable I smiled back as well and thought that staying alive had its good moments, and its rape moments. This looked like a rape moment. And the funny thing is all I could think of was Nirvana and Kodak.

* * *

Ivan waved his goodbyes as enthusiastically as a little russian kid who got vodka and tickets to a bear fight for Christmas. He was holding a small wad of cash in one hand, and his smile shone with the radiant intensity of the finest soviet dentistry had to offer, which is to say not very much unlike nickel.

"'Buy' butt-sex! Jesus, what a horror. I thought he'd rape me and you'd just sit by and watch!"

"Would you have enjoyed that? It's understandable to have a fear of penetration."

"Steve. Seriously. I don't want to hear that kind of bullshit. For the last time, I'm not a homo."

"Nobody is. Not the first time. You're just experimenting. I can grok that."

By that time I had mastered my instincts and even though a proper response would have been a punch in the face and a kick in the nuts, I was content to sigh and get on with the job at hand which seemed a lot more likely to test my limits than hearing Steve's rants about me being gay.

"Just.. Just ring the bell."

Steve shrugged and rang the bell. We were standing in the front porch of Eileen's house, a three-story typical southern mansion that reeked of money. If I closed my eyes I could almost hear "Ol' man river" and smell the corn. A moment or two passed. Nothing happened while we waited. I was looking at the old, thick wooden door idly. Steve rang the bell once more. Still, the buzz didn't come. So we exchanged a couple of knowing looks and I looked under the door mat while Steve picked up a couple of plant pots and looked underneath. Nothing. No key. Steve said:

"Maybe she popped out for a while."

"'Crazy' Eileen Novorski does not just 'pop out' for a while. Crazy people, at least Eileen-crazy people do not 'pop out'."

"Why?"

"Because she's agoraphobic, among many other things."

Steve's face froze in a blank expression while he was trying to connect the dots. Failing miserably, he asked nonetheless:

"So she's on a wheelchair?"

"What? No, no. She's scared of crowds. I thought you went to college."

"Business major. Minor in arts. Can barely spell my name, actually."

"I see. Well, something must've happened to her."

"Maybe she's taking a dump."

The intercom buzzed right about then and I heard Eileen positively - and quite literally so - mad with excitement:

"Papa-Bear! Is that you suggah?"

"Yeah, honey-bunny, it's me. Will you open up now, please?"

"Always, my love! Always!"

The intercom spewed some static as she hang up. The door buzzed and I pushed it open. We got inside and a powerful smell assaulted me: the smell of a shitload of money. The large entrance hall was just as I remembered. Stately, sparkling clean, filled with incredibly expensive luxury items chosen solely because of their price tag. There was this wide staircase that led to the upper floors, all marble and carpet. Pretty standard stuff for a cotton mogul like Eileen's father.

Steve was taking in the scenery, seemingly rather anxious all of the sudden and threw me a look I could only think of as ver constipated:

"I'm having this weird feeling," he said and started searching his pockets.

"You need to go to the bathroom?"

"No, no, that's not it. There's something about this place that just doesn't fit."

"What do you mean? I know the tiles look all wrong but it's the tapestry that's a bit off"

"Not the decor. I actually think what it lacks in finesse, it makes up with a few warm personal touches here and there," he said while putting on some kind of talisman that looked like a couple of badgers getting it on.

I couldn't help but crack a smile.

"Really? I actually did some decorating work myself here back in the day. I think it might look better if the panels -"

"Where is everyone? You said her father's filthy rich. Not a manservant, a helper, or a nurse. A cat litter box right by the entrance, but no cat or hairballs to be seen. See that small table? The vase on it had been moved, but there's the patina of stale water in it. No one has bothered to change the water. The ceiling? Take a closer look at that chandelier. Cobwebs. Spun by a genus of spider known as Zoropsis, mainly found in the Meditteranean. Not native."

"I thought you were a business major, not a spider biologist."

"Arachnologist. It's a hobby of mine. Never mind that, we're in danger. This house is tainted."

His eyes had started to shine with a very unhealthy gleam.

"What the hell are you talking about? Listen, let's just talk to Eileen and get this over with fast. The clock's ticking, remember. Where the hell is she anyway?"

And that was when I caught Eileen with the corner of my eye, falling down on me from the floor above, wearing a free-fall jumpsuit, arms outstretched looking lying a flying squirrel on drugs, ready to clench me into her death-love-grip. I barely had time to freeze like an idiot at the inane sight of her, so I couldn't dodge her in time (which would have been an instinctive reaction, no harm intended really). She simply fell right on top of me and we both fell on the floor. I was pretty certain I heard something crack, and while I tried to breath again, I heard Steven's voice carrying the unmistakable markings of someone on a cocktail of psychedelic drugs:

"Ninja assasins, man! They're everywhere!", he said and took a few steps backwards, his back always facing the wall.

"No, that's Eileen, Steve. Steve, this is Eileen. Eileen, this is Steve," I said catching my breath and made the introductions as best as I could considering I was being smothered in kisses, lying helplessly on my back.

"Papa-Bear! And uncle-bear, too! Do you remember, how we went sky-diving last time? I suited up, and jumped all the way down from the, just for you! Look, I even have a parachute!" she said and pulled the string, causing the parachute slot to pop open with a fizz before starting to slightly ooze out of its bag and on the floor, quite without reason.

"Well, good thing you opened it in time then, right?" I said trying to sound approving, even as I tried to squirm away from her. I took a look at Steve and it seemed like he was starting to develop some sort of real mental issue. He was hugging the wall, mumbling something inaudible and had the look of a wide-eyed deer frozen by a couple of approaching headlights. I managed to stand back up after a while, Eileen continuously expressing her endearment, handling me like a stuffed animal and calling me 'booby-woompy', 'etch-a-sketchy' and 'orgasmatron two', among other things. Before I could find a way calm her down enough to try and tell her why we were there, Steve finally blew a fuse and lost his marbles as if Eileen's condition was as catchy as the Embola virus:

"It must burn! Quickly! There's very little time! They're coming!"

For a moment, I thought some real danger had him tripping balls, and peered outside a window.

"Falconi's men?"

"No, the Ninjas!"

I was wrong. I sighed.

"Steve, seriously. Say, let's have a drink. Something stiff. Laced with sedatives?"

"There! Look!"

"What? Where?"

Steve pointed. I looked. He kept pointing, and I kept looking. I couldn't see jack shit. There was nothing there to see other than rich folk stuff.

"Steve, there's nothing there. I see nothing."

"Of course! You can't see Ninjas! That defeats their whole purpose! They're invisible, didn't you know?"

I was about to punch him again just as a stop-gap measure, when I saw Eileen had quickly acclimatized herself to the added craziness: she was doing her best ninja impression, with a length of the parachute wrapped around her face as a mask, wielding a three-pronged candle holder like some sort of dagger, dancing around, blinking wildly and generally looking very much unlike a ninja.

I realised I now had two, instead of just one nutcases to handle, and they were helping each other turn me into one of them. I tried to fold Steve back into some kind of reality that might not involve invisible ninja assassins. I grabbed him by the shoulders and unglued him from the wall, trying to say something that made sense:

"Maybe you ate something bad on the road? That sandwich? Maybe you put some mushrooms in that one, for the taste I'm sure. Or maybe peyote? That's kind of the same ain't it? I'm not being judgmental, I'm sure you can handle your addiction."

His face looked like splitting for just a moment. He then blurted:

"No chance! Peyote tastes like rabbit pee, that sandwich tasted like snake dung, I'd know the difference! Or is it the other way around?" he said and Eileen hove into view with an aerial kick that managed to overturn a small commode (that's rich-folk lingo for cabinets). It also cost me my meager grip on Steve who just snapped at exactly the wrong moment.

"They're here, man! We got to torch this place! Let me go man!" he said, kicked me in the nuts and ran away while I collapsed in agony, seeing bright spots of many vivid colours and what might have been the faint image of a nun wearing a bikini and shorts. As I lay down on a Persian carpet feeling my balls' declare their independence, my gaze unwillingly locked out of focus at what must've been an original Trego, and had this had happened to someone else, I'd find the coincidence quite charming.

Eileen was all over me in the blink of an eye. Her eyes looked watery already and she shrieked right into my ear with the overtones of a caring nympho:

"Oh, Bobby! Bad uncle-bear kicked you in the naughty bits! I'll kiss it better, Papa-Bear!"

While it might've been a welcome change in pace, I had to gather my wits, so I motioned a definite no while I felt blood circulation slowly return to the aforementioned bits.

I still lay there panting though, unable to fathom how I'd put myself in a situation that involved a crazy woman, a recently acquainted bonafide shaman able to summon spirits in possession of a definitely disturbed mind. It really felt like a balls-to-the-wall moment. I felt Eileen do something really awkward to my hair and then I saw she was tasting it, an all too well-known dominating her features. I knew then I needed to get up, knock some sense into Steve, preferably force-feeding him some of Eileen's leftover meds that were bound to be found around the house. The developments though, outpaced me, when Steve came into view shouting:

"Don't just stand there! Grab the woman!"

He looked every bit as mad as a mad scientist of native american heritage would, complete with his feathery hat on and wildly unkempt hair. Eileen was still hunched right beside me, tracing the carpet with a finger, probably unable to understand why there were no puddles ripping outwards from the fluffy sea.

"Steve, for god's sake, will you calm down?"

"No time! I turned on the gas! I'll torch the fuckers, don't you worry. All it needs is a sparkle, and this nest of evil will be burned down with a cleansing fire!"

Once more in my life, I felt I was on the forefront of modern psychiatric analysis and treatment. What made things a little different, a bit more urgent and a lot more dangerous than what mental illness professionals faced (more aptly, blabbermouths with a degree and a all-you-can-eat LSD buffet at work). I knew that gas was notoriously known for a tendency to make things explode in flames. So I just used, plain, simple, hard logic to try and put things under control before it was too late. I simply told Steve what I thought of the whole situation:

"Steve, you are one stupid fuck. There are no ninjas, you're just freaking out on 'shrooms."

"I'm not freaking on 'shrooms, man. It's real, you just can't see them because you aren't attuned. They're really very devious. Don't let that pink suit fool you, man."

I tried to picture such a pink, fiendishly devious ninja for a moment, but thankfully I failed. I tried to make Steve see thing my way:

"Okay, let's just pretend this place needed some cleansing, and you went and turned on the gas in the kitchen. But you didn't disconnect the safeties, did you?"

Steve held up a handful of nuts, bolts and valves that looked

very out of place. I kept my cool and asked him without trembling, at least not visibly.

"What about that sparkle Steve? You'd have to light it up somehow, man. You wouldn't be that crazy, say lighting up a match now, would you?"

And then I heard Eileen's syrupy voice coming from the direction of the kitchen:

"Papa-bear? Why didn't you say your tummy was empty? I could've cooked you your favorite, honey apple-pie with salmon and turkey eggs! And you forgot to put some real food along with that tin-foil in the microwave oven, silly Bobby!"

While I tried to make sense of that statement, Steve said the most sensible thing I had heard out of his mouth in quite some time:

"Just run!"

I had this awkward sensation tingling inside my gut. Time seemed to flow much more gently suddenly. And I think I started running like some kind of wild animal that sees the fires approaching, consuming everything, and flees. Only for some inexplicable reason, I wasn't fleeing. I wasn't running outside the house. I ran inside the kitchen, and saw Eileen happily glued in front of the microwave with the tin foil inside, waiting for the clock to reach zero. In the sparse few seconds that I envisaged I had yet to live, I grabbed her by the waist and carried her outside like a brat about to get a thorough beating.

I wasn't paying thorough attention but I believe she was laughing her heart out, flapping her outstretched arms like we were headshowing a very cheap production of The Valkyrie.

As I passed through the open door, I could see Steve running in front of me, and realised his athletic scholarship wasn't just some bullshit he'd made up. I saw the courtyard, and beyond that I could see the path leading to the road, and when I felt this giant hand push me up in the air with an urgency that belied its deadliness, I realised the bird's-eye view is highly overrated and quite unpleasant if one does not possess the ability to land safely.

A fraction of a second later my ears were ravaged by the sound of the explosion that had propelled me and Eileen into the air. I had just enough time to think that it was a really shitty thing to die about a day earlier than you were supposed to, right before my face connected with the dirt horribly and everything went pitch black with a terrible thud.

* * *

When I came to, I opened my eyes tentatively, half-expecting John the ghost to greet me with his car's key-chain in hand, and an endless array of parked SUVs blocking the view to my Taurus,

forever and ever. Instead, I was cheerfully greeted by Steve who had conveniently propped me up against an apple tree which looked like it might have been as old as the one that led to the discovery of gravity (which I vividly remembered having challenged with little success).

"So, how are you feeling?"

The list of possible answers was easily narrowed to just one:

"Blown away?"

"That just about sums up what happened back there. Still, you're in one piece."

I quickly checked the **truths** of the matter and happily concurred that indeed I was wholesome. I actually felt great. I thought it must've been a miracle that I hadn't even broken a single bone. It was a most welcome turn of events, surviving a gas explosion. So much in fact I felt compelled to ask:

"Where's Eileen?"

And then I saw her lying flat on the ground, her hair curled up around her face, tangled like she had just washed her face. She looked insanely serene, and that pun was not intended. She really looked peaceful. Like in a deep sleep or.. The thought just flashed across my mind like it was being stamped with the words by a really fierce customs officer, and my mouth moved of its own:

"Is she dead?"

And then I heard this really warm and sensuous voice coming out of nowhere with crystal clarity, as loud as a thought:

"Right here, Bobby."

I pride myself in thinking that I have extensive experience with using my eyes to look at things. Nevertheless, I was unable to see Eileen's lips move, not even by hair's breadth.

"I'm in here with you, Bobby. Don't be scared," I heard her voice in my mind and I knew she was telling the truth.

Steve was putting together some twigs and sticks on a small pile, when he said as if on cue:

"Yeah, it worked. There was this slight side-effect though. It'll wear off once we're done."

What the words implied instantly made my brain sent powerful signals accross my body, urging me to go ballistic. Holding my head with one hand I could feel my pulse grow stronger and stronger, to the point where if someone pricked me with a needle I'd probably explode. I heard Eileen's voice sweet and calming, as if everything was right as pie:

"Don't worry, Bobby. It's only temporary. I won't be a bother, you'll see."

Somewhere along my mind there was a battle being fought between the impartial, calculating, cold forces of the logical parts of my brain and the mushy, animal-based subconscious mind that always believed it knew better. Beaten time and again, just this once it had won over and its uproar was translated into words coming out of my mouth:

"Damned if I'll be, but I believe her."

Steve looked up to me as if frogs were spewing forth from my mouth and he just had to ask:

"I was not ogling your ass when you were unconscious; that's just something troubled spirits say when outside their bodies. Cross my heart and hope to die. Scout's honor."

"You did what?"

* * *