

Suspended – Stan Jose

Franz Lucre burned his back sometime between sleep and now. He only discovered it because the wool suit-jacket he wore creased and pressed into pain he had already noticed but brushed off as a prickling of naughty back hairs that would right themselves with a good (morning?) stroll. Odd he was in the city. He knew he was supposed to come for the Stereo Gipsy concert that weekend, but even if he'd missed a day (blackout drunk (although he always considered himself an everyman drinker(fun; not violent, depressed, stinky, or lascivious(let alone blackout))))), by his calculation, it would be the mid-century Thursday.

The evening he last remembered was home on the round wooden table. A single-bulb lamp swung wildly overhead which Lucy Lin just knocked trying to swoosh her short black hair up (perhaps wishing it was a little longer) – getting a little too into the ideal romantic riding of love Franz thought; wherever and whenever (so far the couch, the carpet below the couch, the hallway, the bathroom, the morning, the afternoon, the evening, and against the front door (her idea was to look through the peephole out into the hall (whenever someone would walk by she would giggle so hard that his dick would slip out and he stood there looking quite stupid not even included in the joke (after the fourth time he walked away angrily (Lin doubled over on the floor watching his bare-ass jiggle away) and finished off in the bathroom sink))). They sat down properly in their chairs after that, relatively unkempt and unclothed but composed, and she looked up towards the lamp (still swinging now closer and closer to its potential) which dimly lit the new-couple-sized kitchen. She asked, “When are we getting out of this?” He stood up on tiptoes and reached his hand up, touching the gnarled texture, and gave a playful smile, “Low ceilings. I know.” She looked back and scoffed, “Low ceilings?”

The light hit the buildings as shadows shortened in time with the rising sun. The sidewalk was wide to accommodate foot traffic, but now Lucre walked alone towards a tall blue building built completely of reflecting glass. The lobby was closed (though when he looked up there were patched squares of yellow glowing on the floors above. He decided to assess the damage and pulled off his suit-jacket, unbuttoned his white shirt underneath, and moved his tie out of the way. He rolled up his t-shirt which had been tucked into matching suit-pants and a shiny black belt (he'd never dress like this for a Saturday night, but having no other explanation he decided on First-time-Blackout-Drunk-Due-to-Extenuating-Circumstance (young enough he thought it was good to try most irresponsible things before it got sad)). He'd gotten his shirt up with some pain and twisted his torso to reveal a thin imprint of reddened skin running along his back. He remembered it was the signpost which directed him left everyday towards his workplace and wondered why he took a right (into this unfamiliar part of the city) when he woke up this morning. He pulled down his t-shirt, buttoned up, tucked in, and began walking. Now a little confused about exactly where he was, he thought he'd ask the next person he saw how to get to the Grey District.

He decided he'd whistle to pass time and in such a cheery mood (and as cheery moods often prescribe) luck found him just down the street and left at the intersection. A corner store with a burned-out neon sign patchily claimed **DONUTS AND COFFEE** in a blue-orange glow. Inside he sighed some small relief (of course

worry is natural to one who wakes up disoriented and alone on the streets). He walked up to the counter where a woman (probably mid-college years (he salivated slightly at the offbeat dressing, a couple of piercings, and an illegible inscription across the nape (must be an independent shop (that only aroused some other crude feeling from his own time only a year or so ago (damsels he would save (their dragon a breakup of existential proportion (which he was good at slaying he reminisced)))))). A thin strand trailed to the counter. She looked at him scowling and asked, "How old are you?" He composed himself best he could standing upright from leaning over the counter and said grinning, "not a day over twenty-two." She stood looking uninterested at him. Good-Natured Franz thought he'd pay patronage for his question and said, "I'll have a cup of coffee." She responded, "We don't have coffee." He leaned down and looked into the glass displaying a variety of donuts and said, "Okay then, I'll have a donut." "It will take about an hour," she responded. He took the hint and said, "Well then I just need directions. Where's the closest bus station?" She laughed with her nose "hm." and walked through a swinging door which claimed **Employees Only**. He stared after her, gathered himself up from the counter and walked outside.

Its simple. All you have to do is KEEP BOTH EYES OPEN and FIRE. KEEP BOTH EYES OPEN and FIRE... *pop*. Pop? Are you kidding me? Just *pop*? *thud*. No, I mean a beautiful *THUD*. And then? Exhilaration. Everything came together nicely. Someone said in the distance something... now upon the doe. Its still breathing. Now someone said, "Finish it off." "Don't let it suffer like that." And what did I do? I just stared and stared and stared and it breathed and breathed and with each breath it bled and bled out of its neck and looked up desperate and I just stared and then it put its head down and half shut its eyes. *Bang.* Not fair. How come he gets a nice resounding *bang*? Then someone said, "Son, you can't let it suffer like that."

Now outside, the sun fixed itself properly in the sky right above – lighting everything. Mr. Lucre thought it best to ask the next person he saw the way home. Luck again as the thin-haired man hurried past the steps of the store. Lucre walked down quickly enough to catch up and shout. The man turned around and his face was wet with the slime from all the pores on it trying to excavate a sad sickness (poor and confused body of his was trying its best). He raised up his fist towards one of the buildings or perhaps towards the sky, "Animals! They are all animals!" Then he looked recognizing Franz angrily, "What are *you* doing here?" Then he became sad and pleaded to no one in particular, searching everything in eyeshot for the answer, "I swear I didn't do anything. I DIDN'T DO ANYTHING. I just kept my head down and responded, 'yeeeeessss ssssiirrr. Yeeeeessss maaaaamm.' As kindly as I could muster. Maybe they heard the intonation. Could it be that obvious? Could they be so cruel? A life for an intonation?" Franz stepped back, "I am afraid you have me confused for someone else." The man looked incredulous and then he punch-arm-laughed with Franz (or so he thought), "Now's not the time friend. You can help me. When it gets really bad... People might not like what you do, but *I* understand. Only when they need you the most. That's what you're here for right?" And then his face

lit up exuberant with understanding and hope. "Why did I ever doubt you? You are like the Angel of Death here to take me away! I never want to go back there. Green? No, you take me to a Pastel color. I can definitely do one of those. Most definitely." Franz was now convinced and so he said, "No, no, you have me confused for someone else." He turned around, but he should've seen that old man's face when he did. It transformed into confusion and then desperation and all that dried up wetted on his face again fresh. And after him he called, "But what about my kids and my wife? And the summer home? And their good education? What about my security? My retirement? I will go back. I'll go back no problem. I love it there I swear. Please! ... Franz! Franz!"

Lucy Lin was ready for work when the phone rang and she thought maybe it was Franz. She picked up hello. Not Franz, but the man on the phone said she won a vacation and she thought she very much deserved that but hung up before he could say any more. Now she thought that she shouldn't have laughed so much at poor Franz, but it had only been one night since he left (back to work he claimed (he certainly dressed like it)). Oh, look at the time. Into her car and off to work. He would be back.

Lucre wondered what time it was. He thought Lin may be getting a little worried, but he assured himself that he would be home before she got back from work. He took a left on the closest street to cut off the old man's line of sight to him. He walked a little quicker now. The sign he turned on said **Narrow Lane** although the sidewalks and streets were wide as ever. In an alley he walked by there were a few mangy mutts all circled around something they hid well. A brown rabbit, camouflaged between thrown-out cardboard boxes and yesterday's garbage, sauntered around unharmed. It looked up at him for too long, so he said, "Hey!" and it sauntered off again, uninterested, into a cracked door inside like it was home. The dogs looked around for a moment and soon trailed after it. The first one pushed open the door with its nose and the others followed inside. Franz thought it quite remarkable and looked back to where the dogs had circled. There stood fine dirt mounded up and on its peak a blooming flower – its petals a dark purple and its center pregnant with dotted yellow. He saw a worm (well, really a centipede (how could he know?)) standing up right in the center saying, "step away." Okay then. He didn't want any trouble (little did he know that centipede had just missed out on a meal (can a centipede eat a whole human?)), so he walked towards that open door and before he went in he looked up towards the sun and thought it maybe got fat-and-happy in its glorious position and didn't want to let it go today.

Lin had been back home from work four times now and she concluded this was perhaps a clean break and then on the fifth or sixth time she began packing and on the seventh she left the small apartment and moved back home with her parents, two weeks and she called in to his work and a nice sounding lady picked up and said, "He hasn't shown up. People skip ya know? I know people who just pack up and go. Sometimes in delirium, but sometimes you've just got to go, ya know? You have a lovely day. Okay, bye." So he skipped. That was alright by her. Then she called

in to his parents. The mom picked up and said, "Well, these things happen. You know, fugue states and whatnot. Sometimes when you're young you've just got to go on such adventures (lord knows she'd been on plenty back in her day (although these days though she barely goes past the front porch)). Now's the time... Okay, you're fine? ... okay good ... yes, come over for dinner tomorrow." The third week home and she decided she'd better get out there again so she dressed a little nicer and put on some concealer and the fourth month home and she was accidentally pregnant and decided to keep it and one year home now and she moved into the impregnator's apartment and by and by she gave poor Franz an occasional memory and that should satisfy him enough she knew.

Now he walked down a carpet flooring of a thin hallway lit by flowering fixtures on the walls. The hallway turned right and so did he. Down the hallway, right, and into an expanse. The concierge's desk was empty but that brown rabbit sat right in the middle so still it seemed a statue but a woman came by and it turned its head. She smiled and said, "good morning sir." At that it leapt off the table and scurried across the lobby and into a closing elevator door going up. Franz stared after it and back at the concierge who was looking at him smiling. "G-g-ood morning. Do you have the time?" She looked at him with a concierge's composure and politely laughed, "Why, its morning sir. I'm not trying to fool you." Okay, still morning. That was just fine. He had plenty of time to get back home. He asked, "Can you help me find a bus back towards the Grey District?" She smiled again, "Why, I have never heard of the Grey District in my life." "Really?" "Yes, really." Franz tried again, "I'm sorry. I'm a little lost and I need to get home." She paused a moment and replied proudly, "Well you are in luck. This is home for people. Up those floors we have rooms where everyone comes and stays. Soft beds, electric lighting, air-conditioning, color television." He smiled, "So this is a hotel? What kind of a concierge doesn't know her way around the city?" She broke that beautiful concierge smile and flustered she said, "Well excuse me, but you are not making a touch of sense. You need a home and I have one for you right up these floors. I do my job well. My manager waits on me. Right on my desk every morning. Just to see my smiling face! I do my job well! You will have to excuse me!" She began to walk off and Lucre felt sorry and called after her, "I didn't mean to offend you. I just need some directions." She left and closed the **employees only** signed door behind her. He thought he might go in after her but then a laughter, like a whole big crowd laughter rose and fell close-by.

My gut wrenched as Tomas Trevino did his lighthearted weed whacker's weed whacker routine mimicking loud workers who woke me up early 8am (I didn't mind really (no really I didn't (they worked damn hard after all))). Then I tried mine (god bless America) and everyone nearly died. All of them were rolling or doubled over and they said, "Do it again! Do it again!" I did it again. Then Johnny (Jacob or Joachim) hunched himself over and walked and breathed really heavy, "Eh eh. You damn kids!" And we all laughed harder and harder still. We lit up and laughed and then we got a little serious and then someone farted and we lit up and I forgot how that beautiful day ended exactly.

Laughter came louder and louder still as Lucre advanced upon it. He walked along the surface of soft carpet which gave out thick underneath and around his shoes (his feet kind of hurt (he hadn't walked this long in these kind of shoes before (but the carpet was kind to him))). He came upon the source. A double-door of wood and glass where he could see right into a bar that was doing coffee for the morning crowded with people all dressed up just like him. He thought they must be on break (or maybe they were business men or independent contractors (they make their own hours (true, but without all of the benefits (his company was quite grand with all of the benefits (retirement, long holidays, free travel, employee discounts, healthcare, regular stretch breaks, a gym right in the building (he did not envy them)))))). He opened the door and the laughter rose and fell again, and what do you know but that old desperate man on the street was among that table of laughter talking up a storm (and crescendo and laughter and fall and talking up a storm again). Lucre thought he'd walk over and when he did the man looked at him smiling coolly. He showed Lucre to the table and said, "and this bastard left me to rot." The table grew silent but the man in good faith gave Lucre a wink he didn't understand and said, "but water under the bridge of course. Imagine getting work from this sick bastard. I would be all pastel now. But now I'm RED. I'm fucking red!" And at that the whole table raised their glasses (well more like cups and saucers) and drank to that. Lucre noticed those three dogs were circling around the tables now and people threw down scraps but they didn't seem too hungry and left them alone. The old man had picked up where he left off, "... so there I was just minding my own business. And this fucking Bulldog of a boss comes right up to my desk, slobbering and all. I swear he was looking for blood. I was like a squirrel trapped. So what did I do? I ran right up a tree and let him bark until the sun dropped." Laughter again from the table. Franz now set down his coat and took a seat. They all looked at him and one of them, a younger man but still grey in a thick staticky black beard and balding head asked him, "*You* are with us?" The whole table waited and stared, "No, I'm not with anyone. I'm trying to find the bus station." The man responded, "No, no, you could not fool us twice." And then someone else chimed, "*We* need a car!" Lucre asked, "There's no bus station?" The man got angry and said, "*They* have the maps and the keys!" "They?" He looked at Franz, "It's us or them. You can't play on the fence too long. Someone will shoot you off that fence." The mutts now circled the cool tile around the bar, laid down flat, and pushed the breath out of their noses.

I felt his eyes on me. He just stared while I ate. So I looked at him close and said, "You're not mine. When Lucy comes back, you ask her." But still he just stared and after a while I got so fed up with it that I just gave him a tiny morsel (enough to satisfy him (but not enough so he wouldn't eat when she came home (a new relationship can get ruined like that (I can't tell you how many dogs must've ruined human relationships)))) and I shut the crate and she let him out when she came home.

That concierge walked in to the bar and up to the table with a warm smile. Everyone there quieted. "Hello Mr. Freeman." The whole table muttered, almost

under their breaths, "Hello." "And how are the plans coming along?" The black-bearded man spoke, "We're making progress. We have one of yours now." She looked at the old man and with a pleasant smile asked, "And how does this color make you feel Mr.... hmmm Mr. Freeman?" He hurriedly responded, "Oh yes, very good. I like it here very good thanks." He added hesitantly, "Can you imagine? Me a Pastel! Heheaaa?!" She smiled, "Very very funny Mr. Freeman. I'm happy to see your spirits are up. You gave us all quite a scare with that dramatic exit of yours." Mr. Freeman assured her, "I'm very happy here. I wouldn't trade it for the world." Then she turned to the black-bearded man and asked, "Where is Freckles?" Black-Beard responded, "You know where he is. He threw in his lot. He's real good with those drawings. Those Pastels will take all of them who are real good at something." She tightened her smile at Mr. Freeman and then turned to Lucre. "Have you thrown in your lot then?" Lucre responded, "What? Look, I just want directions back to the Grey District. Does anyone know where that is?" He searched the table, but all of those once-jovial faces had their eyes down to the table. No one said a word. The concierge said, "Of course Mr. Lucre, I can show you a map if you just follow me." At that Black-Beard said, "A map! You will show *him* a map?" She ignored him and smiled, "Right this way Mr. Lucre." Franz finally felt comfort again and got up. He picked up his coat and said, "Gentlemen." The old man said, "Thank you for your services," and Black-Beard grunted.

Up and up the escalator went. It faced outside and through the glass panes of the building he saw the world tinted blue. He could see his office building out west. Up and up he saw where his apartment would be the green on the edges of the asphalt that divided up urban and suburban. Up and up he went higher than his own building and saw its top for the first time (pipes for plumbing crisscrossed, a door opening over-top the highest floor for an electrician, thin metal poles for signal processing and transmission, and all manner of bird-droppings, cigarette butts, old foil burger wrappers indistinguishable in the distance, shining beautifully under the unmoving sun. The concierge led him out into a hallway with clean and rough carpet, dotted with offices carved into the white gypsum walls (decorated with posters (motivational maxims, company events, important reminders, awards (all of them playfully embellished with squiggly shaped cardboard paper colors (green (all green?)))))). They walked by them. Most had their doors closed and through their windows Franz saw the workers work (phones ringing, typewriters clacking, pens writing, coffee flowing). People walked through the hallway knocking on their colleague's doors (lunch? Do you have those papers signed? Hey its so-and-so's birthday (even just a quick hello how are you)). There was laughter around and Franz felt confident in such a world (so confident in fact that he nodded at the passers-by (and low and behold they nodded back and smiled at him like old friends(at home at last))). Soon they came upon a door in the uniform of the ones they passed and Franz read **Johnny Bulldog** on the embossed golden plate which hung on the door. The concierge knocked and opened the door.

Everything sat where you'd expect it to in such an office (mid-level manager at best (at worst just a lucky employee for an understaffed building). The desk pushed up off-center closer to the window which had a view blocked by a cross-section of a gold-glass building. No one was inside, but that rabbit sat right on the

table. Its brown fur camouflaged its feet and torso and only its head turned to stare at Franz with unfeeling rabbit's eyes. "Shoo!" Franz tried. The rabbit didn't budge but stared on. The concierge said, "Good morning sir!" (still morning huh?). The rabbit responded, "Good morning Ofelia, do I have any messages?" Well, Franz was just about to lose it with that (sure it had been a strange (morning?) but not this (this was Mr. Bulldog's office after all (maybe he would have accepted a bulldog (but not a dirty rabbit))))). And just when bewildered Franz was about to protest this transgression the rabbit leapt off the table to reveal a grey speaker sitting on the table. It dashed out into the busy hallway. Ofelia closed the door at that.

"No sir, but there is a man here looking for home."

"Oh yes, so I have heard."

"Franz?"

"Yes sir Mr. Bulldog."

"Oh, I like that. *Yes sir*. I like that a lot. How do you like the place huh? Would you like to work here?"

"Well sir, that is a kind offer, but I already work out in the Grey District. I'm right on the cusp of a raise I believe."

"Oh no I believe you were right on the cusp of a firing Mr. Lucre. I am offering you seamless integration. Here will be no different from where you last worked."

"Oh... W-well sir, I've got my lease. Lucy'll be home soon."

"Below this floor are hundreds of new homes for you to stay in. Ms. Lin cannot wait on you forever."

"W-w-well sir, thank you for the kind offer, but really I just want directions. Where is the nearest bus station?"

But Johnny ignored that question and spoke to Ofelia. "What should we do with him now?" And Franz, realizing they were busy, decided to excuse himself quietly (so as not to disturb them), so he tried the door. Ofelia responded, "We could send him to Pastel." Franz tried the door again, "Umm, Ms. Ofelia, I am sorry to interrupt, but you seem to have locked us in." Ofelia ignored him and Johnny responded, "No, he could not do Pastel work. No, he belongs here." He tried the door again, "Ms. Ofelia, I really do apologize, but its getting rather late and I need to get home." She spoke only to Johnny, "We could ask Red." Johnny responded, "No, after what he's done, they would never take him." He tried the door again and since he was being so rudely ignored he jiggled and jangled the knob and knocked on the wood panel, "Ms. Ofelia! Hello?!" She ignored him again and now he was getting to a fit, "I'm very sorry for interrupting you Ms. Ofelia, but could you please open the door! I really need to be getting home now. I've got that uhh that Stereo Gypsy concert. Yes, so I really must be going." She ignored him again and said, "Well what do we do with him then?" And Johnny, hearing all the ruckus Franz Lucre was making said, "You don't let him suffer like that. I have a meeting in ten. You don't let him suffer like that. *click*" Franz stopped fussing at that and Ofelia turned her attention back to him. "What did he just say?" Franz asked. He saw her raise her arms together, straight out. Between her hands she held steady a Smith n Weston and Franz thought it looked like a prop from one of those spaghetti westerns and he nearly laughed at it.

Pop just *pop*?

No.

Bang a nice resounding *bang*.