

-SYLVIA-

It's just the corner of my eye that catches a glimpse of him. The guy who stole my camera walks out of the restaurant and turns left on the sidewalk. I suppose that I should have yelled at someone to stop him, but I've got the self-control to just set my food down and walk out the door.

I hate to waste food too. This sucks. I'm out the door, ducking through the on-coming crowd and as usual I can't see a thing because of the height issue. At the curb there's a newspaper box, and I jump on top of it. The tall, brown-haired jerk with the camo T-Shirt and faded jeans walks normally down the sidewalk without looking back.

I've got him now.

The crowd around me shifts and churns in every direction here in the plaza. I'm too small to have my way through a busy sidewalk, so I hop off the box and run down the street along side the parked cars.

I hadn't even gone back to the apartment yet. I hadn't even loaded those pictures. I just bought the camera not three months ago so no, he is not getting away with this. Mom is gonna be pissed. I told her I'd be back with the mail before eight, which is no longer a card in the deck. There's no fooling her either. Between late-night dramas and the eleven o'clock news, she always knows what time it is.

The side of his face is over 21 years broad, and his chin is scruffy below his blunted cheekbones.

Walking casually he turns my camera over as he goes, with the empty bag un-zipped and flapping open with each pace he makes. From here his brow looks hung over his eyes, broad like a neanderthal. Looking up, he heads to a crosswalk so I stop.

his hair is long and unkempt brown, dangling dry-looking like Afghan-hound fur down to just around his shoulders.

His deep-set looking eyes stare into the LCD of the camera as he walks with the crowd across the street. He's looking at my photos. Unforgivable.

I cross the street following the thief. If you picture the whole city birds-eye view above the clouds, from where I am is probably exact opposite from where my apartment is. It gets worse because he's leading me away from it. Past the shopping plaza, down toward the subway station. I wander away from my mother, sitting on the couch watching game shows as the clock rolls past 7:00.

She needs me because she is mostly useless. I probably shouldn't get too down on her. She's just coming off being fired from when she didn't come back to work from her ankle injury. Six months should have been long enough to heal a busted foot, and 2 years, you'd imagine she'd be dancing. Mom filed for disability when she broke her ankle, then

unemployment when she lost her job, then welfare when she got hungry. She was approved by all and since then, she's been watching television. When the ankle excuse stopped working, she had the ailment changed to chronic depression. It worked. While she sat home comfy, I was heading to the welfare office to file claims that in her current state she would be unable to make it in person. Really all she does is nurse her unemployment and leg on the couch, and hope for a better tomorrow. Only nights mom is pissed that I come home late is if I have mail that is either bills, disability, unemployment or welfare. All of our mail is forwarded to a post box. Just in case someone wants to chat with us, and they can't. In today's stack of letters I had bills and disability. It's in that bag he's got, so all the more, I have to get him.

I get on the train after him. He's in the next car over on this subway train as the both of us coast out of the central part of the city into a part of town where things as ugly as subway rails will blend in to match the scenery.

He gets off in the filthy, yellow-tiled Jeffories Station. Way back in history this was the first station in town to install bullet-proof glass on the attendants window. Most of the lights don't work. Patches of neon light spot the littered floor. I follow him out, the only passenger left besides me, but he still hasn't noticed. In the glint I see a strand reflection on the ground. It's a syringe. He walks down the landing with my camera now in it's carrier, and he strides past the discarded brown bags for whiskey and empty zip-lock bags for meph or rock. He makes his way off of the landing to the stairs and I hug the walls to follow him. No way will I let this crack-head walk away with fifteen-hundred dollars of photo-equipment.

Jeffories St. Station's entrance is a dark, one-line hole in the ground. Ceramic tiles chipped off in big chunks and there's a dent in the wall on the stairwell, sealed with a translucent plastic tarp that makes a crumpled-paper sound as I walk past it.

For a fast moment I think to myself that this is not where I want to turn up dead.

A man wrapped in a sleeping bag holds a bottle, and they both lay next to each other on the sidewalk at the opening of the subway. He snores faintly and I wince imagining the scruff of his beard scraping on the rough pavement.

This place is a squalor and a dangerous one. Residential became Industrial. Industrial went bankrupt. In a different time, I might have walked out to a market, or a metropolis but as for the here and now I'm chasing a thief into the dragon's dungeon of the city's south east side.

A half-moon cuts through the October-misty sky. Weak white moonlight and dim street lamps orange the tight, empty streets and alleyways. This one road is the only lane with stores on it. All of them caged up for the night. None of them looking clean with greasy glass and spray-painted security gates.

There's a jewelry, guns and pawn, a shut-down liquor store and a bail bonds office. These are the only three shops out of ten compartments on either side of the street. Above and beyond them are the towering smoke-stacks, and chimneys. There are industrial tanks and coke-refining plants. Every one is silent, since the plants shut down. I can see him walking toward these looming towers into the twisted, rusting darkness ahead.

Again I'm thinking I don't want to die here.

Again I'm thinking I want my camera back.

Somewhere, I hope far, fucking far away from here I hear a gunshot ring out.

Two more. No siren.

I follow him.

Down the street he turns into an alley narrow enough for only one person to slip through at a time, and he still hasn't noticed me. Out on the other side it's an industrial street. There are docking area, loading bays, access roads: black, silent, empty and forgotten. He crosses over a street and unlocks a door. It's eight o'clock, and in the less life-threatening part of town she's there. She's watching canned laughter and commercials. Entertainment that goes on unaffected by her overflowing ashtray, filled to the brim with butts and soot.

This is not exciting. This is not an adventure. Even clicking my heels three times won't whisk me back to my apartment. I see a light on the second floor of this warehouse. He's home and I have no idea what his home is. Maybe creaking boards, maybe leaking ceilings. There could be bare mattresses, rusted industrial sinks, and pipes that run steaming hot through his filthy bedroom. Clogged toilets, roaches scurrying everywhere, heroin needles or amphetamine pills or, oh God, who knows?

My camera is in there, somewhere and I am determined to get it. It is a warehouse. It's two stories tall with three windows and maybe 100 yards long trailing off to where the street light can't show. Storage space so big that no thief could ever fill it. Brown brick coming through chipped red paint and I come up to a door that reads "9-Comm inc."

A deadbolt lock above the doorknob and I reach in my pocket for my torsion wrench and probe.

-DAVE-

I can't believe this wallpaper. What was I thinking? When I moved in last year this place was squalor. A dry, crusted out warehouse. The ceiling leaked. I know it was old because the drywall (what there was of it) was lath and plaster. Nobody uses lath and plaster anymore. All of it was coming to shit on me. The sink was a rusted bucket, almost eaten through and the flooring that wasn't bare concrete was composed of loose, decaying vinyl tiles. It wasn't a glamorous place when I started renting it, but I needed a new home. It wasn't safe in my old apartment.

You can call it paranoia if you want, but I had to leave the apartment shin-dig behind me. I had the desk clerk or janitor wondering why my hours were so irregular. Why I leave so early and come home so late.

Saying 'None of your damn business.' couldn't cut it for long. They were figuring out that I stole stuff for a living. I wasn't going to risk becoming a quick bounty for the owners of the place. I could totally have seen my super bringing me in for a fat reward, then turning around and selling my stuff out to a pawn shop, or on eBay.

So I move out and rent a warehouse space in an industrial district. Some of the machines still churn in the late night. When I moved in to this pad there was an office, a meeting room and a water closet. It was rotten to the core. I walk in and on my left was a wall of chain-link caging that had a stairway going up to the second floor behind it. In front of me was the huge expanse of the warehouse storage space. I go to the end of the chain-link and in a u-turn direction from the front corridor the stairs go up to a steel-platform balcony. The office and water-closet were both at the top of these stairs, and downstairs, with a wide, dirty window in it was the meeting room. It was a shit-hole, but it was secluded, had no nosy staff, and no cops around, so I took it.

I had my work cut out for me.

I was raised in a Catholic orphanage so one thing I learned was to work out a fixer-upper. I learned everything I needed to fix the warehouse. The sisters and I (because I had a knack for it) we fixed everything. At 7 I was driving nails, and cutting boards. By 10 I could do some minor plumbing work, and set tiles or seal pipes with caulk. By 17 I'd taken enough extra lessons to become a certified electrician. Maybe the sisters wanted me to build things for a living. To be more like Jesus: a carpenter. I hope they knew it wasn't to be. Still, I learned all the things I needed to know to make a warehouse a home. After church every week I came home to the warehouse and I ripped out the lath and plaster, blasting dust in my face. I re-insulated the bare sides with fiberglass, and covered it all with gypsum drywall. I tore out all the old floor tiles and laid down carpet. I rolled up my sleeves and installed a new toilet, sink and shower. I used joint compound and screws to set drywall. I could cover bare wood, or sub-floor plywood with carpet or linoleum, and Y-joint pipes to put in more sinks. I chose blue, flower-print wallpaper.

Yuck. It's got to go

I toss the camera onto my bed.

I disassembled the old desk that was left here and turned it into hanging shelves and cabinets. Just like I do with everything I steal. I turn it into something I can use. I redeem it. Anything I needed to install in this place was just a phone-call away, even getting new furniture meant that it could be dropped off in the enormous vacant twenty-two-hundred square foot concrete floor that used to be filled to capacity with cardboard boxes. I don't even know what to do with it, so I kind of use it for my basement. I can't flip on the lights out there, less I leave them on and have to pay an ungodly electric bill. My washing machine, dryer, central heating: all of them are in this clearance off to the side.

The office is my bedroom. The water closet now has a shower and vanity and the meeting room has all my cool stuff. It's great to have everything here: my computer, TV, a counter with my fridge and canned-gas stove, my bean-bag chair, video games. Almost everything in it was re-modeled by me personally. No work team wants to come to my area for more than an hour. Habitat for Humanity won't even come out here.

I step into my bathroom thinking about how I need to pick out a new wall-paper. Green would be nice. Perhaps green with a vermillion pattern would work. A change to the bathroom would be great too. It's so meager. Sink shitter, shower, all of them practically crushing one another in the tiny office-space lavatory. There's a scratch on the toilet bowl, where the shower door has scraped it every time it opens all the way. I want some more space, but since no team in their right mind would ever want to do extensive construction in this area, it'll never happen. I was lucky to get the shower installed. The sink is the first thing to greet you, I took out the old rust pile basin and installed a ceramic one. I replaced the faucet and polished the whole thing to gleaming. Then I made a cupboard. When I was done, I added a nice white paint job and linoleum floor. I'm very proud of the work I've done thus far. With enough room to slide into, and at least enough elbow room to brush my teeth I can't really complain.

I walk into the shower in the back right corner of the bathroom. It's a plastic shell with plexi-glass on three sides. My little secret is I love the acoustics. I start my shower, and begin singing.

“Oh Lord my God when I in awesome wonder
Consider all the worlds Thy hands have made
I see the stars, I hear the rolling thunder
Thy power throughout the universe displayed”

Baptism is not a one time thing. Baptism, whether it is by christening or voluntary-sprinkling or immersion is only the beginning of a lifelong commitment. Every sin we give ourselves to; every shortcoming that falls us away from approaching the divine love and being of the messiah. We must constantly be re-baptized, re-committed, re-affirmed. Our faith is a constant renewal.

“Then sings my soul, my Savior unto thee!”

This is my re-commitment. It's the new, constant baptism. I take these showers and I feel the dirt and grime and sin of the day, everything I've exploited, stolen, all the sin I commit myself to in the day, it all washes away. Head and heart-mind and spirit, I cleanse all, I am renewed

in the love of my God. The echo in the shower is a deep cathedral kind. Even in this enclosed space it resounds tall and deep.

“How great thou art!
How great thou art!”

I finish my shower, walk out of the bathroom and into my aluminum Louisville Slugger. The bat strikes me on the forehead, and I slide back holding my aching head.

“Son of a bitch!”

I look up, and there's this little girl standing there. Very little. Like, 4 feet tall.

She's put a welt on my forehead.

“Where did you put my camera, you fuck?”

“Who the hell are you?”

She winds up like she's going to hit me again. Damn is she small. Her hair is straight and blonde. It flows over her shoulders restrained from her gray eyes by three little stainless steel hairpins. I'm guessing she's about 11 years old. She tries to butt me with the head of the bat. I reel back, and slip. My towel drops off me. I see her eyes dart down, then with a blink, snap back up at my eyes.

“Meh.” She says. “Not bad, but I've seen better.”

I gather my towel.

This now starts to make sense. It's the girl in the restaurant. She hunted me down. Tracked me from the moment I snatched the camera. I was checking her photos on the way over here. Bizarre to say the least. Candid shots. Guys in locker rooms. Changing, showering flexing. Gross. I thought it was gay porn.

She comes at me with the bat, and swings back too far. I grab her by the elbow. In a panic she drops the bat, and tries to pry herself free.

“You took those pictures?”

“Give me back my camera, then I'll call the police.”

I smirk. I've never been busted. Not by the police, anyway.

“The cops probably won't listen to a twelve year old.”

“Goddamn you!” I grab the bat and she swings a swift kick, to my gut. It hurts a little, but when I toss her off, I've got my slugger back. She's slipped on the floor, and she's on her back, her lower-half in the bathroom, the rest out on the platform. My towel's dropped, but I

don't give a damn.

I walk towards her, scowling, squinting. Tapping the bat in my palm. Now I'm towering above her.

“Do not take the lords name in vain in my house.”

“You call this shit-hole a house?”

I pin her chest down with the bat. Her chest rises and forms evenly under her brown hoodie sweater. Her body is slender, and I see, slightly curved around her deep blue jeans, and half-exposed midriff. I notice almost offhandedly, but very distinctly that her breasts are very developed for someone her age.

“Do not ever call my home a shit hole.” I get right down and close to her face, where I can hear her breathe. One of these breaths sounds like 'no.'

“At least not while you're a guest.”

-ARTHUR-

I'm at my desk at work on this suddenly cold, but blindingly sunny October day. Outside the stiff air holds chilled to the warm sun-baking blacktop, and the raised grassy divides in the parking lot. I can see it from my desk. I'm in the lobby of the Building. Inside the air is quite comfortable, and the sun is brilliant overhead through the glass ceiling of the entrance, and the skylight directly overhead. An 80's soft-rock station is pumped into my desk's stereo, to be a pleasant sound for anyone coming in, but I am quite alone here in the lobby, running my fingers gingerly across the laminated faux-oak of the desktop. There's a sign in registry and some other paperwork. Some pens, odds and ends, my computer and a phone.

Line one is on hold. It's been on hold. I'm in no rush. Line five starts ringing. I pick up.

"DeLobb insurance company. Arthur speaking. How may i direct your call?"

"Artie! Fuckin' A. I got the shit for this weekend."

This is Chad. My drinking buddy, of sorts.

"Hell, yeah. Speed ball?"

"Mixed the shit today. Not just that, I got some nitrous."

"Nitrous? Like laugh your ass offhandedly nitrous?"

"One in the same."

Line three Rings.

"You know Eddie?" Chad says "You don't know Eddie. I know this guy, Eddie he works part time in--"

"Chad, hold on I have another call."

"Hang on Art--"

"DeLobb insurance"

"Hello? I'm calling to make a claim on my car."

"Alright, sir, I'm going to transfer you to one of our representatives. Please hold."

I put him on hold without transferring,

Line five.

“So you have the speedball. I'm guessing we're set with pills. So who's this Eddie guy?”

“Well, Eddie works part time in a dentist office. The guy went on vacation, and Ed grabbed a tube of this laughing gas. I got it off him for a 50.”

“Hell, yeah man.” I say in my stoned voice “Let's get retarded.”

Line two starts ringing

“Hold on a second, Chad.”

Line three.

“Alright, sir, I'm going to transfer you to the next available party. They'll be able to process your claim.”

“All right then.”

I get rid of him off to one of the hive of cubicles off in the long, dreary soft-light north wing above the cafeteria.

Line two.

“Hello. This is the DeLobb insurance agency.”

“Arthur, it's Jay.”

“Jay. What's up, friend?”

“I've got some bad news, Arthur. You know the deal that was headed south?”

“The China thing?” I ask

“Right. That. Head-office has decided to divert labor back to factories in Germany.”

“Really?” I ask. “So the Heat exchanger parts?”

“It will take them at least 3 months to relocate the hardware. Then we're looking at six more for calibration, testing and certification. That's minimum. So, realistically it's going on the order of a year and a half before we're back up to capacity.”

“What about large scale production?”

“On hold, and we'll be selling our warehouse goods until the factory's pumping again. There will be some exchangers produced in the Argentine factory per usual, but with demand, it's not looking too positive.”

“How's the company handling it?” Line four starts to ring.

“Wait. I have to take another call.” I say

For the record, this Chinese factory went on-line two months ago. It's awful quick to be shutting down now.

Line four.

“DeLobb insurance.”

“Hey, hi. It's good to hear from you again.”

Martha. Nymphomaniac. Fuck.

How did she get this number?

“Martha, you really can't call me on this line. It's, you know, business.”

“Yeah, I know. Joan and Brian aren't answering so I had to call somebody. Oh, and also Chad is not picking up his phone.”

“Hold on.”

I should know better than to ever sleep with women like this. Men are usually not this bad. They're much less clingy/crazy - Or at least more manageably so.

Line five

“Chad, this is the snort kind of speedball, right? Not the injection kind?”

“Yeah. No needles required: Extra pure smack.”

“Good, now tell me something. How did Martha find out about the bunch of us going out Friday?”

“You're fucking kidding me.”

I go on the internet to check the ticker for my stock: 279.

“No I'm not. Hold on.”

Line two.

“Jay?”

“Still here?”

“Now we're still cool for 70/30 correct?”

“Yeah. I'm cool with it. Deal's a deal.

“At current I see 279 a share. I'm going to do some crunching on the numbers, and get back to you.”

“OK, man.”

“Just stay on the line for a bit more.”

“Well, wait, when are you going to sell?” He says, of course, concerned-Of course.

“Tomorrow, and if prospects are good later on I'll be there to buy up, and ride out of the slump. Now please hold.”

Line four.

“Chad?”

“No. Martha.”

Shit. Wrong button.

“Are you talking to Chad on the other line?”

“Hold on, Martha.”

“Wait. Tell Chad I-”

Line five.

“Chad? Has Martha been calling you lately?”

“Yeah. Looking for you. I got 3 texts from her yesterday alone. But I swear I didn't give out your number.”

“Chad, Please.”

“Dude, I swear.”

“Chaaaaaaaaad.”

“OK, yes I did, but only out of desperation. She digs in, and wouldn't stop getting on my ass. Please find less lunatic girls to sleep with, man.”

Line 3 rings again.

“Hold for a second.”

Line 3

“DeLobb insurance.”

“You again!? You just transferred me.”

It’s the car claim guy,

“Sir I forwarded you to one of our agents, could he not sort your claim?”

“No, she just sent me back to you.”

This is the part about being a receptionist I hate the second most. Every problem that can’t be solved by the person supposed to do it just gets boomeranged right back to you.

“Alright, sir, so why couldn’t she take your call?”

“Said she couldn’t handle a claim on my car.”

“Yes, but why not?”

This questioning and answering in cycles is 90% of all business conversations that I answer to. It’s amazing I haven’t killed myself yet.

“Because it’s a Bugatti.”

I can’t believe we’ll insure a Bugatti. We’re going to pay out the ass for this one.

“Oh. For claims regarding cars valued at greater than \$150,000 I’ll have to forward you to a special claims adjuster. Please hold.”

Line two.

“Jay?”

“Yeah, Arthur?”

“I can get you your share two weeks from today.”

“That’s gonna be a problem. I need it by Tuesday.”

“Oh, I’m sorry. Really?”

“Yeah. Got some bills to pay.”

Little snake.

“What’s it to you?” He asks.

“I’ll tell you what it is to me. You are trying to cash out. You want some quick cash, not a big payoff. I suggest you sell your own stock if you want to make an instant buck. It’s not what I’m in this game for.”

“What? No, look-”

“Jay, I am relying on you to give me sound investment advice. If I can’t get that, you’re of no use to me.”

“No. No. No, man I’m serious. The stock-”

“It’s going to be just fine, isn’t it?”

“No because the china thing: it’s blown completely to hell.”

“I’m not doing this with you Jay, your cut just went to 10. I’m holding out for big money.”

“You motherfucker!”

“If you want to make any good cash at all on this Jay I suggest that you rethink-”

And I slam the phone down. Always hang up during your argument. You get the last word, and nobody will call back to hear what you wanted to say.

Line three is blinking. It’s next in queue. I forgot who’s on line three. I pick up.

“Hello?”

“Yeah. I’m here.”

“And you wanted...”

“The Bugatti!”

“Oh, yes. Your extension is 5827, just for future reference. I’ll transfer you now.”

I transfer.

Line 5

I say, "I forgive you."

"OK."

"Chad, I'll take care of Martha. She'll probably be coming along, so brace yourself."

"Whatever. I'm ready."

"Friday night will go of as planned, get all the D's and C's together at your place. I'll be there at 9:00."

D's are drugs. I'm going to need a wide variety.
C's are children. Not literally, of course.

Five days out of seven I'm your average filthy-rich spoiled rotten manic-dep-bipolar phone receptionist. On the weekends I am the pulsing beat of a dance floor. I'm the colors of the hallucinogenic rainbow. I work hard for the inside cash, but I live to party.

"I'll have everything ready. Sweet. Later, dude." He hangs up. Dialtone.

There's line four blinking at me. My big romantic mistake for the month of September.

Martha, oh, dear. Won't forget me. Martha. My God.

Today I can take on the whole planet. Today I could laugh-off a severed finger. Nothing can stop me, I'm the diamond-edge kid. Total control. These hassling phone calls and requests and problems flow around me with gentle grace, like tai-chi. I've got Friday night sorted, settled a claim, saw through an attempt to steal my money and I did it all on one phone in less than 15 minutes. I can handle Martha.

Line four.

"Hello?"

"Martha, you know where Chad's place is?"

"Yeah, I partied there a couple times."

"Be there at 8:00 on Friday."

"OK, cool."

"Dress fancy, and you might get lucky. Gotta go, bye."

I hang up. I breathe in. My eyes are closed. I must find my center. I am the center. I am the center of the universe.

King of the fucking world.

Line one is on hold. Line one has been on hold. He won't hang up. My whirling confidence grates hard against my obvious avoidance, and forms an edge of indignation. Center of it all? Total control?

Line one.

"Hi, dad."

"You had me on hold long enough."

"Yeah, lots of business. I'm sorry."

"I know how it can get."

This is my father. This is my boss. This is the man who said it was in my best interest for him to oversee my first job. I wanted to move away, I wanted to move up, I wanted out. He thought better, I suppose.

"I'm expecting a call from Will. If he rings, don't transfer to my secretary. Patch it directly to me."

On this end, I nod with a gentle harrumph meant to sound like an acknowledgment.

"You want to do anything Friday? You know just you and me?"

"Oh, sorry Dad, I had plans."

"How about Saturday, then?"

"Well, you know. We'll see."

"So, yeah, Patch me through that call, or let me know if you're up for anything this weekend."

"Sure thing, pop."

No-one on this planet is more distant from my life than my closest living relative. I'm supposed to look up to him, all I want to do is look beyond him. He's always on hold the longest. Always.

"I love you, son."

What I say is true, but doesn't stop the fact that I need more.

The Three Weasels 1-2

<http://www.14rivers.com/threeweasels.htm>

“I love you too, Dad.”

Flinchless I click down the receiver.

“Hmph.” I say to myself, curiously.

Line zero?

Send questions, Comments, thoughts to
Author@14rivers.com

More Chapters will be made available. <http://14rivers.com/threeweasels.htm>

You may distribute, but not alter this document.