

THE GAMBIT

A COLLECTION OF SHORT STORIES

By

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AUTUMN

It could have been the Fall afternoon or the old familiar place that brought upon the feeling of nostalgia. Sitting alone on the bench while the wind chilled my body didn't make it any easier to forget what had happened the year before.

I had been sitting on this same bench feeding the pigeons when I heard her scream. At first, it sounded like laughter and then suddenly turned to shrieking.

The bag that sat in my lap was filled with seeds from the local market. The birds were few and I was wondering what to do with the leftovers. Maybe I'll be back tomorrow, I thought? I was lonely and had been for quite some time. It was getting late and soon I would be walking back to my old apartment. I was in no hurry.

Another scream and this time it was unmistakably cries for help. There were no words, only muffled sounds and then blasts of audible pain. My eyes went into the direction of the sound and I was moving without notice. Pigeons had long since scattered obviously sensing danger.

As I moved closer there were other screams. These were less powerful and carried a more pleading tone. Christ! It's a woman, I mumbled. The sun had begun to descend into its resting place and I could already make out the first evening stars. I noticed the park was now empty and I was alone except for what lie ahead beyond the trees and shrubs.

Another scream, weaker – almost tired. I still held the bag of seeds that were now spilling from its bottom. My fist was clenched around it so tightly I must have burst its paper seams. My mind commanded me to run toward the alarming sounds but my legs would not obey. I was frozen, afraid, and wanted to scream myself. Finally, I was moving again. Slow at first, with great apprehension, and then soon I was almost jogging.

There was a hill that fell toward a pond and broke off into the scattered foliage that surrounded it. To the left, I thought, and turned in that direction. Closer I came to the sound's origination but now there was nothing. As I pushed my way past the lower shrubs and rounded trees, I began to slowly make out an image near the water's edge. Closer still, it took shape.

I was forced to bend and stoop in order to make my way through the thicker bushes and wild thorns which now pricked and tore at my clothing. A voice kept whispering in my mind telling me to turn away and run. I could feel the impending danger. It was too quiet and now even the birds were silent.

The day grew darker still and my eyes were finding it difficult to adjust. The pines were near and I could smell their sweet odor. The earth was soft underneath my shoes and felt wet.

It had rained the day before and I had been forced to return home earlier than expected. I remember running from the park and weeping as the rain fell upon my face.

How strange, I now thought. I couldn't recall why I had been so sad. Suddenly, there was another scream and I was ripped from what could only be described as a daydream. I dropped the bag of seeds and ran toward the image without fear.

Finally, I burst through the last of the trees and found myself nearly running into the pond. A terrible thought came to me just then and I thought if that were to happen, I would surely drown.

It was then I could clearly make out the image. It was not a woman at all, but a little girl. She looked to be only six years old and was kneeling at the water's edge. I ran to her wondering what could be wrong? Where are her parents? Why was she left alone? In my haste I had not been looking where I was going and tripped. As I went sprawling, I smacked my head on the ground and felt a bit dazed.

Remembering the little girl, I was soon moving again but this time crawling toward her on my hands and knees. Her face was so sad and she had been crying. I now was crying too.

It all seemed so familiar and then my mind exploded with understanding. Agony ripped through my body and I could no longer even crawl. I couldn't stop this awful feeling that stole the strength from me and threatened to tear me apart.

With much effort I looked again and the little girl was gone. I must be going mad, I thought. The depression, loneliness, and solitude were only byproducts. Then I remembered why I was in the park.

I had been coming here for almost a year now. Sitting on the same bench in the same place while feeding the pigeons and staring into the pond beyond the trees.

Through great endeavor, I managed to crawl to where the little girl had been kneeling. The sand was wet beneath me and the water now soaked my legs and shoes. It was cold and within only a few months would be nothing but ice.

The tears fell from my face as I wrapped my arms around my chest rocking back and forth on my knees. I was going insane for no apparent reason.

A name was pounding in my mind and I hadn't realized for several minutes that I was saying it aloud. "Autumn. . . Autumn. . . Autumn."

There was something clutched within my hand which now stung as it dug deeper into the flesh. I looked down as I slowly opened my fingers and saw what I had been holding so tightly was a locket. It was attached to an old chain of silver while the locket itself was gold. Silver and Gold. . . the colors of Autumn, I thought.

I released the clasp and it popped open. To my amazement, there was a picture inside. It was the face of the same little girl which knelt before me only moments ago. It was then that I wept again. This time I would not stop until death finally came and gave me peace.

My heart asked if I remembered and I replied, yes. She had been my daughter and would be seven years old today. A year ago, I lost her to a terrible accident. She had drowned in this very pond. I looked away for only a second and she was gone.

With much effort, I rose to my feet and began to make my way back home. I would fall asleep this evening alone again with her face just out of reach within the darkness of my room.

In the last of the day's light now fading into dusk, I took one more look at the locket. Beneath the face of what had once been my angel, read an inscription. I can still recall her face when she read it for the first time. Her voice was sweet and she had been crying. I hear her now as she read the words aloud and then kissed me on my cheek. "Autumn. Forever. Love, Daddy." It was the first time I had ever lied to her.

SIMPLE THINGS

The first thing I remember was that you couldn't believe a word he said. Now that I was obviously powerless to fight, he sounded more sinister than ever. The whole thing had been ridiculous from the beginning. It was over a toy. A goddamn toy for Christ's sake, which split us apart and drove the final wedge between what had been our friendship.

Out of desperation we had become pals. Our houses were almost a mile apart, but closer than any other house in the area. It was mostly farmland. He was a year older than me and much experience was crammed within that one year.

According to Shane, he was not only smarter than me, but tougher as well. At the moment, the latter seemed to be true.

While laying on my back and tasting the blood which now ran from the corner of my mouth, I wanted to kill him more than anything in the whole world. Shane loomed above me, obviously gloating over his recent victory. I don't know which was worst the pain in my face or the hate that blossomed like fire inside my brain. I hated him from the moment we met, but I was desperate and lonely for someone to play with.

Shane's hands were now against his hips while he stood looking down over me triumphantly. The smile on his face was filled with both pity and exhilaration. "Give me the toy!" Shane's voice sounded more like a man's than that of a twelve year old boy. "If you know what's good for you. . . you'll hand it over!" he said.

It was hopeless at the moment and I held up the toy, which now felt more like a burden than a plaything. I wanted it to be over. The barn was scorching and the day had already been filled with enough disappointments. I was angry. It had been mine from the very beginning and Shane wouldn't have known it even existed if it weren't for me.

I had trusted my friend with this most prized possession. He had not any toys like it and now commanded it be given over to him without question.

“You’re being unfair!” I said and fought back the tears. It was then I moved to get up and as I did, Shane’s foot came crashing down upon my chest and forcing my head to snap back. I felt a sharp pain in my neck and the barn went black momentarily. He must have caused me to pinch a nerve, I thought. As I fell back against the dirt floor of the old barn, my hand that was holding the toy struck the ground with a thump.

“You idiot! Do you want to break it?” I cried in both anger and frustration. “Stay down!” Shane said in another one of his ‘I’m bigger, smarter, and better than you’ tones.

“Screw you!” I said and the rage grew within me even more. “It’s mine and was from the very beginning!” I said, and Shane only smiled.

“No matter,” he said. “It’s mine now.”

It was approaching noon and the barn must have climbed three degrees in only five minutes. I was thirsty and my mind drifted to when Shane and me would take turns holding our heads under the old water pump. The water was cool and numbed the back of my neck. We had been laughing during this time. The thought of us ever being pals seemed distant and unbelievable right now. It was a lie anyway. I had tolerated him, but never really enjoyed his company.

Shane was getting bored with this little game as well and became more persistent. "Give me the toy!" he said.

"I'll hand it to you when I get up!" I screamed, becoming more agitated, obviously worsened by the heat.

"No! You can hand it to me from where you are," Shane said, and seemed to want only to humiliate me even more. I thought it was to further establish his dominance and ultimately prove once and for all he was in fact better than me.

I had taken a lot of abuse from him over the past few months, but I would now make a stand. Like I said, it had been

my toy from the very beginning and I wasn't about to give it up so easily.

Shane moved closer and bent forward just slightly. He now reached toward me with his hand outstretched and open. "Give it to me!" he said in an almost apologetic tone that came across condescendingly.

My eyes drifted upward and I saw the birds that lined the rafters and thick cross beams above me. They sat silent and watched as if mocking. I grew angrier still. I then looked at Shane and he hadn't moved, his hand still waiting for the prize.

"Do I really have to kick your ass all over again?" he said and pumped his arm a couple times to signify his impatience. "Come on! Give it to me and I'll let you get up!"

The situation was far from lost and I made up my mind I wouldn't lose my toy. Not like this. I again held it up toward Shane and offered a smile of my own. Our eyes met and he looked to be pleased with my decision. "Take it!" I said. "You won!"

Shane nearly laughed at this as if to say, “Of course I won – was there ever any doubt?” I hated his smug and belligerent manner. I said, “Well, take it Shane, my arm is getting tired!”

He reached and grasped the toy. When I felt the weight of his hand and quick jerk in order to pull it from me, I fired.

The explosion was deafening and it echoed like thunder within the enclosed barn. The birds scattered in all directions, finding the small windows high above the beams in which to fly away.

I had a quick glimpse of the bottom of Shane’s high tops and then his back slammed against the barn door causing it to break away from its track running along the dirt opening. “I’ll have to fix that before my dad finds it broken,” I thought to myself and slowly got to my feet.

There was a small hole near the center of Shane’s chest. A perfect shot indeed. Of course, I thought. We had been so close – the barrel almost touching him.

A surprised look was frozen on his face. The look of victory now gone. I stood over Shane's limp body still holding my toy that was rightfully mine. It felt even more powerful.

That night I dug a deep hole near the northern edge of our crops. Wrapping Shane in an old tarp, I buried him along with the toy he so desperately wanted. I then crafted a cross from two pieces of wood and tied them together with twine. With paint left over from the barn, I scrawled a single word over my makeshift crucifix. It had been fitting that the color of the paint was a deep red.

Standing away from the grave, I took one last look before turning to go. It would be a long night and tomorrow offered many uncertainties. The sun cast an eerie shadow against the cross, highlighting the word I had written. By morning, it would be dry. "Friends" was what it read.

A
RADIO
OF
THUNDER

My story reads like a tragedy in which I am left without the mercy of death, but instead the reality of wisdom delivered from anguish. Courageously escaping her vile grip after a moment of triumph, having refused to make excuses for my behavior, I ended up alone in the darkness.

However, I would not let this most troubling situation ruin me. I have wandered the dimly lit streets before, but only in my mind. While catching a well needed breath after running from the house, I knew I would never return. I began to fight what I hoped to become a heroic battle against the evil that threatens to destroy my very soul – and yours.

“How dreadful,” you must think at this point. To this I say it is as horrible as it sounds. My plight is grave and the speedy rhythm of my heart amplifies this fact. You see, I have

been incarcerated by hatred, starved for years in a home at the foot of hell, and forced into woeful submission. Making matters worse, my captor used that damn radio to broadcast what was referred to as, *The Truth*.

Only seldom did I avoid the deafening blasts of revolting rhetoric that came from those tortuous speakers by hiding within the confines of the basement. This only infuriated the radio's master even more and she took increasingly dramatic action to recapture me. She was a tricky one and at times would switch the frequency to a soft and melodic station while I hid. Before I realized what I was doing, the music brought me out into the open and I danced and hummed to the beautiful sounds.

“Gotcha!” she screeched. She dragged me upstairs and slammed me down onto the hard wooden chair that sat next to the battered desk where the radio stood like a malevolent guard. Its knobs and mesh grill in the very center of the old design made it look like the face of a madman. I often thought that this was how the owner of the voice looked – as sinister as his words.

It was in this very chair I remained a prisoner for hours while the man inside the radio dug into my brain with his continuous ugly and useless information. Once in awhile I stole a moment to fantasize while trying to look as if I were still listening. If I appeared to drift, my captor turned the dial that controlled the volume clockwise. Afterwards, the man's voice, which had been the usual non-stop talking, now sounded like screams.

My favorite of all fantasies had been joining a secret army. Quite understandably, during all of the many dangerous missions in which I heroically volunteered, I was never captured. In reality I could not deceive the master of the radio into releasing me, but in my mind I literally could walk through walls if need be. Although she tormented me daily with the endless resonance of ominous propaganda exploding from the airwaves, I managed to enter a psychological state where I no longer registered pain. However, this state of bliss was controllable for only a few hours at a time and I soon had to

return to my real world – occupied by me, my captor, and the radio of realism.

If I survive, I will promptly rejoin the world outside and only harmony will emit from the speakers. Certainly no more idle banter, pompous ideologies, and above all, no more talk . . . talk . . . talk of someone’s nauseous concept of *The Truth*. Perhaps I will become a highly unorthodox and extraordinarily effective hunter of those who tell only lies and expose them for what they really are. I could become an unprecedented independent force of one, masterminding and executing ingenious schemes to infiltrate networks of diehard *bags of wind* and show the world the very truth in which they speak is a myriad of deception.

Goodness, I am getting a bit ahead of myself and should explain how I came to be in this terrible situation. In order to do this story justice, I must stretch back as long ago as the crib. From the wooden slats around me, I recall the sound of a winter wind whistling a sweet melody over and under the bare branches of the trees just outside my bedroom window, which

was glazed from the early morning frost and snow. It was too cold for the birds and therefore none chirped incessantly. The sun, shining through the window's icy crystal, created frozen flowers spread against the glass and cast glittering shapes of light about the room.

As a child, only three or four, I also remember the young girl that cared for me when the bad woman was away. There was the texture of cotton and colorful stitching that made up her dresses. Both simple and elegant at the same time. How she smiled when she pulled from her pocket a trinket or something tasty for me. Her small metal buttons, which looked like shiny dimes, filled with air. And, of course, the pleasing feel of her skin and the shape of her behind, knowing underneath her dress she wore no panties, revealing her smooth and plump curves.

I used this memory quite often while trapped with my captor and that damn radio. She had not changed as the years passed – just as cruel now as she was then. The woman fired the girl who cared for me almost immediately for what I can only assume was showing me too much attention. I recall at

that time there had not been any electronics in the house, although, there was a strange looking battery-operated object that looked like a very peculiar flashlight.

I remember finding it accidentally while rummaging through the dresser belonging to the woman. This had been one of the few times I dared to violate the perimeter of the woman's bedroom. The 'flashlight' appeared to come alive to the touch. Startled, I threw it back into the drawer and it rattled violently against the wood. "I must have really pissed it off," I thought. I assumed the woman found the object still protesting because shortly thereafter, she purchased the old style radio. It was then she began to proclaim that what curious and mischievous little boys needed was a good dose of *The Truth*. It has been a little over ten years and since then I have not displayed another single act of defiance.

Even as a young boy I gave no cause for discipline, but she always found some reason to punish. All of the corrective measures brought against me fell under the shadow of religion. She didn't need to work and I was an only child. She never

permitted me to play with others and certainly not with her. In fact, the woman said the young caretaker was a huge mistake and swore never to bring another person into our home. She insisted that I only refer to her as Mamm, however, I believe her first name was Krosell. She, like her name, was highly unusual and was never without complaint nor spite.

From my earliest memories, I recall how Krosell proclaimed the fact I had been an utter failure from the moment of birth. She insisted on suffering over this unfortunate blunder and found her place on the cross quite comfortable. She was always reminding me that one day I should not be too surprised to find myself among the demons and Satan himself. Had I told her then that day had long since passed, I don't think my lungs would have taken another breath.

Despite the constant ridicule and moronic radio broadcasts filling the cold and empty house, I did not rebel nor demand any change of course. I simply took what was given. There was no other choice but to buckle when facing the teeth of such fierce opposition.

Anything I said or did was tempered by the fear of retribution and the threat of amplifying the volume on the so called “Truth Box.” Regardless, as the words of the radio’s fanatical blabbermouth slammed into my skull, my mind became an emotional battleground, and I always lost. The longer he spoke the more frenzied his voice became and you could hear him labor for air. Sometimes I thought to myself, “Don’t blow a fuse asshole,” and fought the grin that threatened to give my thoughts away.

As I advanced in age, a part of me began to panic even more, wondering how much more of this I could withstand. My mind and body seemed to be partitioned off most of the time and each moment became an endless cycle of insurrection and reprisal. After she imposed the harsh policy of listening to the radio – four hours on and one half hour off – I nearly went insane. Even in sleep, I could not escape the constant drone of words that I secretly thought of as absolute and utter bullshit. I was stripped of all autonomy and lay before an empire of verbal and malicious crap.

The official language of the household was silence and I spoke it very well. Never would I dare to speak unless spoken to and I was to keep my responses to a two or three word reply. Cursing was explicitly forbidden and I spent hours thinking of old and new swear words to help drown out the noise. Another mind game was to repeat the most atrocious and nasty word I could think of and as quickly as I could think of it. I once topped my best record by thinking the word, “butt hole” eight hundred times. When I reached about six hundred, I realized by applying a tune against the mantra it came out sounding rather pretty.

Life was particularly difficult around Christmas and Easter. The woman and the man in the radio had their own preconceived notions about the meaning of these holidays. With all the usual restrictions, this time became just another vicious day riddled with emotional and mental executions.

The only reprieve or migration of prejudice came during all too infrequent electrical blackouts due to an unexpected Spring or Winter storm – how I loved these. The sky turned

black as ink and I imagined it was during these storms the depths of the sea showed its true face across the surface. I saw myself plunging into the watery blackness and being swallowed up forever. For reasons I still cannot explain, this thought always made me happy.

My fantasy was soon replaced with dread. As the blackness swelled all around me, I feared my captor would lunge within inches of my face and scream something she heard during one of the broadcasts, “Philistine! Philistine!” I truly believed that if I could see her face during this verbal attack, she would have been belching foul smoke from her crooked mouth. I also knew for sure that my loosened bladder would expunge its contents and my bowels would most definitely turn to liquid mud.

The woman spent most of her time in other rooms, doing what, I have no idea – perhaps wrestling with her angry flashlight. If it weren’t for the garrulous chatter coming from the speakers only inches from my head, it would have felt like a ghost town. This, of course, was a favorite fantasy – being

completely alone surrounded by only the quiet of the room. I got goose pimples just thinking about it. Unfortunately, the ensuing battle of noise and an oratory of idiocy, waged on a monumental scale, always brought me back to reality. To this day, I still believe the preliminary great carnage of modern warfare began when the first person opened their mouth and spoke.

Regardless of my frequent mind trips, I always returned to my original state of paralysis. From dawn to dusk, each day brought the same corpses I had hoped to leave in a distant dream the night before. I knew in my heart, if I were to ever escape this life, it would come at a high cost.

I wonder at times if I have been stripped of everything valuable throughout this whole ordeal, having sent the better part of my self worth to a distant land never to return. I've tried to make the best out of my situation and, at times, even tried to collect the smallest parcel of wisdom from my captor, or should I say captor-ess, and her equally cruel and stupid cohort. However, to no avail. All that I hear is worthless, I barely move

from my designated place, and I say nothing. I have been reduced to a tomb which only sound can enter. I am no more than a frying pan or fence post – to be used only when needed and then forgotten. Like the church steeples – only the elders remembering their purpose, but too old or tired to share this tiny granule of history.

Of course I've tried to escape, but managed only to get as far as the next room before the woman caught me. Never again will I attempt this, because for weeks afterward she strapped me to the uncomfortable chair with a thick transmission belt. It finally broke after I had worked on it for hours at a time by slowly sawing through the black rubber with a nail file I had stolen from the medicine cabinet. Had the belt not snapped, it would still be tightly lashed across my legs today. If not for that and one other thing I will speak of later.

Cutting through my harness was difficult to say the least because I could not move or shift in my chair – it simply wasn't allowed. If the woman caught me doing this there would be repercussions. Although she was rarely in the same room as

me, she would burst in at a moment's notice, trying to catch me doing something strictly forbidden.

The smell of her cheap perfume offered me some warning when she stood like a sentry just outside the door, closest to where I sat. I remained very still, but there were times I just had to move. When my stomach cramped, I was forced to double over grabbing at my gut. I was starving, but most days I hadn't noticed. I had grown used to not eating.

There were infrequent times when the voice on the radio disappeared for awhile, but never long enough. In the man's place, a cheerful sponsor raved about a new diner or a smorgasbord of delicious grocery items that could be found at the local market. After hearing these advertisements, my stomach protested to the point of absolute agony. Food wasn't scarce, but I was rarely fed. When I was allowed to eat, I had to remain near the radio and could not chew while the man spoke. This was considered blasphemous. Even though I was usually very hungry, the food always tasted of clay. Once during a meal I had nearly vomited after the woman teased me by saying

she was rounding up stray dogs and cats and rendering them down for their flesh, which she promised I would eat without even knowing it. Yet even realizing this could be true, I never sent back a plate of food – knowing this could be my last meal.

As the days ground on, one terrible year after another, the force-fed *truth* along with the woman's bitter rage took their toll on me. However, I was long from being prepared to give up the ghost, so to speak. There was still hope. I had not been influenced by the opinions of the woman or the crackling megahertz of Armageddon from the mesh-mouth of the radio. At what I first interpreted as being emotionally detached, soon developed into a blossoming anger. I was growing stronger and the woman grew weaker. I was becoming what the woman referred to as a wild child, independent and willful. And although hatred surrounded me, I was filled with love. Even the voice on the radio seemed to weaken as time passed and then one day died altogether.

There was no fanfare when the voice disappeared. It was as if one minute he was speaking and then only dead air.

The radio did not make a sound. It was like breathing. The absolute bedrock of the woman's strength seemed to wither in that instant. She had been in the room at the time and stood in front of the radio for what appeared to be an instant, then fell to her knees and wailed. The combination of the radio's silence and the woman's screaming scared me enough to jump from the chair without thinking. I had been imprisoned in the same position for so long my legs were bowed to the point I could barely walk. Standing before the woman who was beyond grief – I tried to stay upright on my horribly deformed legs. She looked up at me and her face was filled with anguish, then confusion, and finally fury. I don't think she had ever thought that there would come a time when I was looking down upon her. For so many years, it had been the other way around. She blurted, "Sit back down or I will cripple you for good!" I did as I was told.

The radio then came to life and I noticed it startled the woman as much as it did me. However, it was a new voice and without so much as an explanation, he began where the last had

left off. It was the same idiotic words, but in a strained voice – more endless stupid questions, both meaningless and irritating, yet not in search of an answer. Everything was again back to normal.

The woman jumped to her feet and appeared baffled as well as embarrassed. With a puzzled look on her face, she quickly left the room. I concluded that she had a moment to see what had become of her life and what she was doing to mine. I believe this frightened her more than the radio's silence. It horrified me to see her weak, but at the same time, I felt a surge of energy and that is when I began to feel this would all be over soon.

Although *The Truth* was again filling the musty room with its usual lies, I was also seeing how things were changing – so I settled in while I thought of a plan. But first, I daydreamed about how I would forget everything, including the old me.

At first, I thought I was thinking aloud when the voice bellowed, “Forgotten!” This word was followed by, “Cease to

exist! Wiped from the world!” And finally, “That is what will happen to all of mankind as punishment for the homosexuals, lesbians, Jews, and minorities!” I was relieved to know it wasn’t me who said the word *forgotten* – afraid my plan was thwarted, but then only despair in response to the vulgar ignorance and hatred that spewed from *The Truth*. “Dear God, he was so wrong,” I thought, and wanted more than anything to weep aloud.

I carefully began to develop a system to help block out the abomination that for some terrible reason was given a means of mass communication. Unable to write anything down, I adopted a mental process in which I forced myself to think as far back as I could and reclaim feelings and reactions. These were flagged with associated colors, smell, touch, and taste. In this way, I could fixate on a memory and sail through the unending stream of insufferable words that were the furthest thing from *The Truth*. Regardless of the memory, I always came back to the young girl who once cared for me. In that short time, she taught me more of love than my captor could

teach me if I were to live to be a hundred and five. I owe a lot to her. She influenced my development as a child and laid out the pattern of a man. Once I had stolen a hug from her, which isn't exactly true because she was more than happy to give it away. I remember how I wept against her breast, which smelled of lavender and autumn.

Having so few good memories to choose from made cataloging them easy, but I feared I would grow tired of repeating them in my mind. The years of viciousness and hatefulness traumatized me. It changed me, but not for the worse. Not yet. Of course, years of being straddled to a chair took a physical toll on me and I suffered terrible nightmares. They differed in character and concept, but the voices of the monsters that pursued me had always mimicked the voice of the man on the radio. And in the distance, I could hear the woman screaming, "Kill Him! Eat him alive!" I grew afraid of the dark and the things in which I imagined it held. I developed panic attacks. Some so strong, I could barely breathe and was certain I would go quietly insane. I would have liked to believe

I would shout like a madman, but knew that even though I was going mad, I would have remembered to remain silent. It had been years of conditioning.

As I grew older, I grew wiser. The woman also began sitting for longer periods in the same room in which I was held against my will. This made matters worse, but not as bad as the gradual understanding and realization of what the words coming from the radio actually meant. I began to realize what *The Truth* had been all along – an ignorant and illiterate teaching of prejudice infiltrating thousands of homes by just turning a harmless knob. According to *The Truth*, all were damned to a lake of fire for all eternity except those who fit into a very stringent brand of human being. At the very least, I began to understand what hypocrisy meant and especially how it felt. It was time to go.

My spirits lifted while I planned my escape. I traveled less and less into my usual fantasy world and concentrated on more important matters. As my confidence grew, so did my inner-strength. Fear was slowly being replaced by rage. In fact,

on the day my final plan of resurrection sprang into action, I addressed the woman – before she had addressed me! It wasn't anything out of the ordinary for most, but it was a milestone of accomplishment for me. I had simply called her by a name she had refused to bear possession since the day I was born. I still remember how the word sounded as it seemed to float from my mouth with the ferocity of a lion and the cunning of an owl – mother.

I was staring upward from the chair and into her face. Everything seemed so right. I can still feel it. She pondered what I had said and appeared to prepare her reaction mentally before speaking. The look in her face was as if to say, “I have to get this perfect – because it must never happen again.” After a long pause and with clenched teeth – she spoke,

“I will prepare a regime of strict rules and harsh discipline, accompanied by draconian punishment for the least of your infringements. These rules will be ruthless in their severity, and the punishments will be equally extreme.”

Afterwards, the world went black.

It was when I regained consciousness, I realized she had slapped me. The side of my face felt like molten lead and pulsed. I could taste salty blood and my tongue was a half-size larger than normal. I thought, “I’ll kill her before she hits me again.” But this was a lie and I knew it. The tears rolling down my cheeks told me so. To wound me even more, the radio was now blaring *The Truth* and the speaker took great trouble to imbue upon whomever was listening, or required to listen, his own philosophy of loathing. I struggled to remind myself that my mind and soul cannot be taken from me and that I will carry them with me to death. What I am, who I am, and what I know – these are the things that count. At that point, my last conscious thought was, “Stand Up.” After that, I went into automatic pilot.

I crossed the room without incident and felt myself walking away from the chair. I could see it in my mind’s eye beckoning me to return. The sound of the radio began to fade.

I then entered the other room where she now stood as if hiding, and after seeing me, collapsed to the floor. “Get up.” I

said in a low voice that appeared to come from another place altogether. “I will not stand for cowardice.” I said, and my mother pulled herself upward using the wall as a guide. She was dreadfully afraid that I would physically harm her and although the thought had crossed my mind on several occasions, I just couldn’t bring myself to hurt her.

Apparently, she saw this as a weakness and leapt for me. It proved fruitless. I had become shrewd without realizing it and easily read her manner. I stepped aside gracefully, she missed her target, and fell once more.

While she lay at my feet, I felt both pity and disgust. It was then I took the opportunity to say only a few words.

“I believe God exists and that He is the purest form of love, but how we live our lives is up to us and not rewarded nor punished by a divine spirit while on earth. However, I truly believe the rules change drastically when we die. We are responsible for our own actions and we have to live with the consequences of these actions – especially the consequences of what we fail to do with our lives. I believe God is there waiting and watching. I also believe you have failed in your life and will die miserable and alone.”

With this last statement, she was up in a flash and grabbed hold of my throat. It is here that I began my story.

Now, the fight continues to cleanse my soul of the past. Regardless of what my mother felt was the *truth* about human nature, I will continue to believe we are better than that.

And lastly, I would like to share two final memories. The first of which took place before leaving what was my penitentiary for almost thirteen years. In the background, I could faintly hear the following communication emitting from an old radio that should have been unplugged a very long time ago . . .

“...After these important messages from our sponsors, we will return to our regularly scheduled broadcast of *The Truth*, featuring Reverend Bart Hostead. Reverend Hostead will also be telling all you faithful listeners where to send in your donations in memory of the late Reverend Callurous D. Apple.

A RADIO OF THUNDER

Next week marks our 25th anniversary and the gracious brothers and sisters of The Church of God's Chosen will be holding a potluck at the West Bank Picnic Area. Our speakers will be the illustrious Reverend ...”

The second memory was shortly after I reached the darkness of the world outside – suddenly, I could breathe.

THE GREAT AMERICAN MURDER MYSTERY

At first, Azel devoted his imaginative gifts mainly to literature. It seemed as if he had systematically guided the course of his development in this direction through many varieties of experimentation with the written word. But Azel was a resourceful artist and simply writing his tales wasn't enough. He desired to actually live them.

In fact, Azel had once told a group of friends that writing should be a free and direct expression of his whole being. As such, he would make a better writer indeed if he were to truly take on the role of the various characters within his stories.

Reaching this innovative goal would have been nothing short of inspiring if it weren't for the fact there were two distinct types of people in Azel's books – those who were

murdered and those who did the murdering. It was apparent Azel would choose the latter.

Azel's method of transference from fiction to reality was unsettling. When he made these preposterous claims I detected a seriousness to his nature, almost contemplative.

One evening, I mustered the nerve to ask Azel if he truly believed that taking the life of another human would enhance his writing. I was hoping to hide my fear beneath a thin layer of cynicism. The deception failed miserably. Azel quickly detected my somber inquisitiveness. It wasn't exactly how he answered that made my bowels loosen, but his meticulous choice of speech.

In a distant and strangely noble tone, Azel said, "I dearly love not just the words I write, but the atmosphere in which I write them. I cherish an equally warm affection for life as you my friend, but there are sacrifices that need to be made. Bringing a world of fantasy to a reader is a daunting task. The writer must first draw from the realities of their own existence. Amazing verse requires more than mere uncritical and

superficial worship of literature. No. It is with extremely clear and keen eyes a writer must see their creation come to life within the pages. And, I say with the weight of an alert and flexible intelligence, there must be death before life.”

It was perfectly evident that Azel meant to follow through on his idea. He had not been duped by my question nor my reaction as I stood gaping with beads of perspiration running down and tickling my back.

Azel was tenacious and the vigor he demonstrated throughout his literary projects was intoxicating. He wrote nothing but murder mysteries. I’d read his work and the writing possessed a most distinctive quality – authenticity. Nevertheless, he now struck me as being completely insane. I’ll take my opinion to the grave, I thought, and shuddered at the potential foreshadowing.

As time went on, I kept my distance from Azel. The market showed little demand for his genre and I figured he had stopped writing altogether. Still, his outlandish plan to write the

great American murder mystery left me with a nagging feeling of dread.

I had once learned that it is the token of balance between the powers of self-discipline and desire that tears at our human nature. Azel's assurance that he would literally kill for his chosen art gave me pause – it seemed to be more than mere frivolity. Though literary genius is as precious as it is uncommon, there are limits.

To my dismay, I ran into Azel months later. Well, it was essentially Azel who ran into me. I had just been leaving my small apartment on the lower east-side, when I was nearly thrown to the ground by the ream of paper slammed into my chest. Azel stood before me panting, hunched over with his hands clasping both knees. In a breathless whisper he managed, "Read it." Afraid and admittedly interested, I flipped the cover page over and began reading. There seemed to be around a hundred pages that, oddly, were handwritten.

The first sentence seized my heart. Trying to hide my horror and disgust, I read what Azel wrote.

I stamped a mark squarely between where the cranium falls around and into the nasal cavity. The solidity of the mallet easily sculpted the desired form. My fingers wanted to play upon the recently crushed and misshapen surface. However, my enjoyment waned ever so slightly due to the time which elapsed while treating my subject – the ordeal was all too fleeting.

Every written line was equally descriptive, depicting a brutal massacre, leaving me void of physical strength. This had apparently been precisely what Azel was hoping for, because when I looked up he had been smiling. It was imperative that I offer Azel some sort of congratulatory comment. Unfailing tact had always been my strong suit, but now all I could do was stare into his jovial face. A face that resembled a silent scream.

I finally croaked, “Well, it’s classic Azel that’s for sure.” There was an awkward moment of silence and then Azel replied. “This will be my masterpiece – a best seller indeed.

The story line may be more or less richly fascinating, but I must say my good friend, the pleasure I felt while writing it was unadulterated.”

I had long since forgotten my intended destination, but desperately wanted to leave. Evidently bent on relieving me of what my bladder struggled to hold, Azel tapped the stack of papers still in my hand. Smiling sheepishly, nearly giggling, he said, “Read a little more.”

Rather than exposing my true feelings, I lowered my head and began to pick over the words in silent agony.

If I eliminate from her those physical traits customarily used by the authorities to reproduce the crime scene, this drama ends with me.

Before I ended her social participation and commonplace philosophies altogether, there was that exhilarating tussle of wills.

What a shame the high pitch of ecstasy has ended and I am resigned to the scrupulous care and maintenance of the deceased. I must aim for greater efficiency with the next.

For now, while I scrub, chop, and scrape
– I shall simply whistle.

While I read, I repeatedly swallowed, trying not to vomit. I knew Azel was describing a murder he had performed. This was not translation from pen to paper by way of fantasy. This was a historical reproduction of an actual execution. I knew wasn't reading Azel's manuscript, I was reading his journal.

I began to wonder about this unfortunate soul, whose mobility of life had been snuffed out by a madman. Azel must have read my expression – it was obvious my objectivity was long since gone. Azel now looked concerned, and when he spoke, he sounded almost sympathetic. “Have I flogged your emotions my friend? You have always had the strongest temptation for the dramatist, but I do hope you are not being theatrical for the sake of my feelings.”

“No. Of course not.” I replied, aiming for authenticity. Instead, my voice quivered, emitting a blurred and anxious tone.

Azel resumed his previous demeanor, an unusual portrayal of delight. Yet the look of apprehension never left his brow. Leaning closer to where I was standing, Azel said, “I will be finishing this book soon – each chapter more telling, increasing the tension of the conflicted killer.” I thought to myself, “This arrogant bastard is threatening me in the guise of describing the plot.”

He then grew nearer to me, close enough where I could feel the heat from his cheeks. His tone was both sinister and comic. “Permit me to say the book is composed of many fantastic pieces and exquisite achievements of poetic art. But regardless of its amazing literary treasure, combining all the qualities of life and death, I’m afraid it comes to a tragic end.”

At this point, I ceased every activity and concentrated on purely breathing. Any accusations of foul play would reinforce what Azel said last.

Azel continued, “In my larger accomplishments, peripheral to the manuscript you clutch against your chest, there is a central significance representing an old and glorious

tradition. I speak of the amazing range of spheres we call life. How easy it is to change this merry jest, where the battle is taken so lightly one forgets how fragile their days.”

“I have come to learn that I am more than a frightfully good writer, ole chum. My pen is a weapon, but not my only armament. Until now, my place in this world has only been vaguely defined. I can finally say with self-confidence beyond conceited ambition – I know thyself.”

“Now you must answer a question of mine. It will determine whether you possess an abundant wealth of understanding as well as the opportunity of potential fortunes in life. Yet, before I ask, I must preface an already dramatic element by requesting that you answer honestly.”

“Are you a fan or a victim?”

ParaDox R0n

After rounding the last slope, I came to this place. There was nothing physical about my journey. I had been standing still for over three hours. Where I had been before was now a solid shadow that cast itself across my path at an angle. It didn't even look like me – so gaunt and awkward.

The drug punted just in time. I was about to have another one of those thoughts. Mental Note: Up the drugs, I'm nearly falling into the old habits of remembering. This would not be good. The last time I found myself skipping down memory lane, it took seven men to hold me and administer the needle. The damn thing was never sharp enough and ripped rather than punctured the three layers of skin between total exposure and endless rivers of blood.

These rivers now carried the drugs to my brain and central nervous system, stopping momentarily to pay the pumper's required toll. Whatever breaches the epidermal, must always check in with the heart. Isn't that the awful truth.

It won't be long now before I begin to feel the exterior and interior sensations of awareness. I'll begin to perspire, crave food, and want sleep. I'll definitely need to go into overload before sleep steals my thoughts and all control is lost to the impartial judgment of slumber. Christ help me. I need a fix.

Sleep. Thereafter, I slept again, and when I awoke, I seemed to be in a different world. The events of my life have driven me to look for the Presence. This Being in control of me. In far corners of my resting and wakefulness, a puny, abject, shuddering figure, distorted of visage, deformed of shape, disheveled and unkempt of appearance haunts me. It totters as it walks, for it approaches me piteously; but I laugh aloud, mercilessly. Perchance I knew then that it was me.

He's dying! Can't anyone save him? All I could say in return was; why would anyone want to?

. . . in constant fear of my heart's very beat – I will never let the hint that you are not doing quite all I should expect of you cross my lips. . . Tactful silence is seldom broken, however, my heart usually is. The convention is that at any moment I may get into a stride and actually outrun my nightmares. Later, then would the silence relax?

I know there comes a time when it is safe to smile. Are the hopes in which I went out to meet the world too high and much too rosy? So I slip through the days without making my contribution, without discovering all that there was in me to do, without using the most minute fraction of my abilities, either native or acquired. I then manage to be fairly comfortable with failure. To get some respect and admiration, a taste of brief pleasure and maybe love.

It is still predetermined that I acquiesce in the will to fail. How I pride myself in my shrewdness, not suspecting how

badly I have been cheated, that I have settled for the compensations of death, not the rewards of life. If the elaborate game I play never came to an end – never ran down for a moment so that I suddenly saw that it was only a game after all – the will to fail might urge me all too gently downhill, till I came to rest at its foot. No one would dream of protesting. It is only a life they would save, but what is a life without a soul?

Sometimes the game has such a way of breaking off, right at its most amusing spot; and I suddenly wonder why I am running. I can only take the memories with me and the load is all too heavy. How did I happen to be playing hide-and-seek as if my life depended on it?

. . . what became of the real life I was meant to have, while I was off suffering for another's mistake? Sometimes, the moment passes and is forgotten until long after. The game always turns into a nightmare eventually. The nightmare seems to deepen. My sole preoccupation is to just wake up only to begin the hunt for freedom all over again.

. . . all those in the grip of fear act as if they had a thousand years before them. Although they dream of dance, they spend their precious hours as though the store of them were inexhaustible. . .

If I had only waited a bit longer before toppling over and falling face first into the thorny brush, I wouldn't have dreamed. However, in my exhaustion, the sharp edges of the thorns felt like gentle fingers against my cheeks as they ripped away the flesh. I have begun to look like the monster in my dreams. The monster I have always known was me, but was too afraid to admit.

From where have I come to be so terribly wrought with emotional pain? The journey was so short. How can such an abridged version of my life be so cluttered with the misery of a thousand men over what seems an infinite period of time?

I don't know when it all started. I haven't the strength to remember. I do know it was a lie that ignited the first spark of despair. I also recall they weren't human in the least.

Outward appearances seemed to be both sterile and unassuming. But all I had to do was watch their eyes – the woman’s most of all. She seemed to enjoy it. The evil had clearly consumed the others. However, she appeared well in control of it. It had been a plaything to her. One other concept creeps into my mind. I was chosen.

I need a fix. It is becoming too strained and their faces are now beginning to dance before me. I cannot seem to shake this goddamn fantasy of mine. The pain is overwhelming! Why do I so choose this dream? Isn’t there anything more sublime and less torturous? I yearn for reality – the fix. The drug that pumps through my veins and reminds me of a life where there cannot be such treachery. If only in a pill form, I would consume one every hour religiously. My dedication would astound you. The fantasy is gaining strength and speed. I’m losing this battle and must soon accept the fact that I will again be lost to the conjured memories. Nothing is real or even

remotely true about them. Yet, I cannot control how they overpower my mind and the body soon follows.

I have urinated again without removing my trousers. I must look a sight. I would scream, but I fear will only draw more attention. Oh, dreadful and unforgiving soul, cannot you choose another vision? Reality of the real world is so beautiful and filled with possibilities.

It is time. The room fills with the ghosts I have produced in my mind and I pretend they destroy my hopes for normal existence. I am honest with myself and take the instructions of those wiser. I see the world as it is and it shows nothing terrible in which to fear. Then why do I so choose these fantastical thoughts? Why do I put myself through this when I have been given so much love and freedom?

They had all been so kind to me – never brutal like in my daydreams that last long into the night. I cannot help myself and I scream. Bring me the reality! Give me the fix! Make it stop! Surely, as I am now taking in quick harsh

breaths, I shall go insane if I don't stop this habitual belief that the world is full of the abusive and I am one of its victims. One of its chosen.

Mother, Father – I call to you. Your loving arms held and protected me as a child as they do now. My foundation is solid and built on love. I trust you and you me. Of what am I tattered and so afraid?

Good. A distraction. I can hear the footsteps as they near my waiting place. If I concentrate hard enough on the sounds of each click and thump of the shoe as it strikes the floor I can bear to put off these mind games just a little longer. Maybe even hold out long enough for an explanation. It's then I begin to panic for a different reason. They'll see, I thought. They'll see I have not cleaned myself. They'll see I have been drifting again. I was supposed to have been getting better with each passing day.

The reality of my situation was that I lived in a beautiful world, but the wickedness of my whimsical thoughts is persistent. No one can figure out how, having once been given

a loving and caring home, a child would grow to suffer with such vigor. There had been no terrible events in my life to speak of. No loss. No pain. Yet, I turn the bow of my emotional ship of anguish toward another bleak and distorted horizon.

The footsteps are closer. I have to show improvement or they will keep me here much longer. I begin to chant the words. . . “There are no monsters under my bed. . . There are no monsters in my life. . . I am loved.” Damnit! The words only make things worse. I told them this. Why won’t they listen?

The door of my small room swings open. There is idle conversation – always pleasant. Gradually they transcend into the more probing and difficult questions. My head hurts, but I won’t give away my discomfort. I smile. It is then I catch my face in the mirror across the room. The smile, which feels extremely awkward and out of place, looks more like a grimace. They must see this. Another lie is told without even speaking a word. How dreadful I must appear to them.

A feeling touches my left temple. There is a pain there I cannot describe. It threatens to render me unconsciousness, however, I shant be so lucky. If I could only pass out – but then the dreams. I can't breathe and the panic creeps around my heart. First, almost caressing like a lover and then griping and finally crushing. Thank God! I am passing out. The room spins and my visitors become alarmed. I can hear murmuring and the shuffle of feet. Someone catches me and I thankfully fall into their arms – they are as soft as the thorny bushes. I'm spinning faster and falling deeper. It's almost blissful. Maybe, I won't dream.

Have they dropped me? The jolt was excruciating and it was as though my head was allowed to fall upon its full weight against the hard tile floor. And then I came to. Not quite. I had awoken. The position of my body and the seemingly endless gasps for air. The bedclothes. The bed. All indications were evident. I had been dreaming. Oh, God! What a relief.

As I sat up in bed pulling my thoughts together, I could feel their resistance to surface. By the time I hit the shower I would forget the dream, I thought. I stood up. Then the realization it had only been a dream manifested itself and I fell back onto the bed. A simple question danced in my mind and teased at my lips. If it had been only a dream then what of the beautiful world full of love? What of the abusiveness I had only fantasized about, but never existed? The fantasy had been reality and reality the fantasy.

I will prepare for another day. As I moved across the room, the irony began to build its next twist within my heart. By the time the first of the day's sunlight warmed my face, I was already reversing the game. It began with a chant. "There are no monsters under my bed. . ."

Further back within the recesses of my mind, I had been harboring five simple words, which called out as if behind a great wall, like a sleeping giant.

“I want to go home.”