

## A Terrible Thing

It was a perfect life. A life unscathed from the barbarism of mankind, the brutalities it conceived. It was indeed a life man would kill to have his own. It was a life much dreamed of, and a life squandered like none other.

And what a life it was. With it came a home glimmering with mammon and opulence, placed in the very humility of suburbia. It was a small, yet intimidating place, crammed into the intricacies of greenbelt paradise. A cerulean Rolls Royce was proudly showcased in their driveway. It was the newest model, evidently polished to perfection by its owner, as if it belonged in an automobile museum. An arsenal of lavish décor had accompanied its presence, bringing to only a great fool a feeling of pity. A marvelous new coat of vermilion paint sparkled as it rested on the wood, along with a dark brown door servicing the entrance. This doorway was complimented with a beautiful pane of stained glass, placed carefully in the wood of the door. And it was every morning that a man would exit through the door. He would have a suitcase firmly clutched in his hand, a slick haircut with a curl placed carefully across his forehead. He was a handsome square-jawed man, armed with the squalor of ignorance. He was the man with this wonderful life.

It was clear that time and money had been put into this home. Almost too clear to its unwilling spectators. The home couldn't help but reveal the fervor and affluence its tenants occupied, receiving to others as a sort of errant arrogance. He certainly was a man of fortune, and his fortune spread farther than he had any notion to care. Those who looked on with awe would say he was the ideal man with the ideal life. Others would say he was nothing but a target.

"Honey, would you hurry up with the nosh, already? My friends here are staring to drool over our furniture!" The man's Midwestern accent echoed throughout the affluent home. The laughter that followed nearly shook the glass that carefully rested on the granite tabletop. The woman that sat patiently behind it couldn't help but watch a black and white Lucille Ball on the television, whining and crying as she always does. A bit of resentment mixed in with envy is what forced her to drink from the glass. The three men were silent after the uproar of laughter. It was the shrill voice of Jerry, the man who sat to the right of the woman's husband that ended the silence. "Lucille Ball. She's a real goofball there, 'aint she?"

"Who?"

"You know. Lucille Ball in 'I Love Lucy'."

Jerry was the plumpest of the three, wearing a small pair of spectacles at the tip of his nose.

"I know who she is. Why in Sam hill are we watching this, anyway? This your idea of entertainment?"

"No, buddy. This is some idiot's idea of prime time scheduling. This is what we gotta pay for when we wanna catch a game. It's on in five, I think."

"I don't get it. First we tune in to see Truman harp on about some Little Boy, and next everyone's watching this poor woman pop out one of her own!"

"What? You think Truman should have popped his out sooner?"

“The trouble is in the delivery room, these days, Jerry. People are so concerned with those thousands of little discrepancies running around...it just slows things down, in my opinion. But besides the foolishness of it all, the show itself is senseless. Now, I'll give them that the show makes a few laughs here and there, but for the most part, it's too fantastical. As if women could understand the details of being the leader of a house. There's a lot of good work involved that they couldn't handle. There's just too much fiction to be considered anything of a television show. Honey, put down the glass and bring those snacks!”

Felix, the fittest of the three, chirped in. “You've got quite a thinker there, don't you? A woman like that shouldn't waste her time thinking. Especially in the presence of her guests.”

“Mister, that's exactly what I told her. Did you hear him, love? Thinking. What's the use of that? Take a look at this poor woman here. Lucille Ball. She thinks she can punish her husband by locking him in a closet. She thinks she can trap him where he can't get out.”

“You know, her husband... that's no ordinary Joe. That's Desi Arnaz. He's dynamite, I'm tellin' ya. Take my word for it.”

“Well, if I were in that position there, I'd have to show her who's the leader of the house. She wouldn't like it one bit. Would you, my dear? There's no need for thinking in this house. Not for a housewife.”

But in fact, all the woman could do was think. The moonlight reflected off the glass as her hand reached for it. She considered asking herself how many times she had lifted the glass to her lips, but realized the absurdities of such a thought. She came to the decision that she would stop as soon as she felt the numbing haze she had felt the past three nights. She shut her eyes tightly and recalled it had been more than three nights. Much more than that. The woman wiped the whiskey from her chin and reluctantly lifted the tray of deviled eggs from the table. She heard the muffled cheering as Lucille Ball's sobbing came to an end, and the baseball game began. She set the tray in her husband's lap, and walked back to the counter where she was greeted to her glass. The stalker to the left of the man lunged for the deviled eggs, collecting five or six to eat while watching the game. The husband, however, turned his head from the food with a displeased grimace. When the fittest to his left asked why this was, the husband replied with absolute abhorrence: “I thought my wife would have brains enough to make something worth eating. When she mentioned eggs, I was expecting something more...engrossing. Oh, well. Better luck next time. Right, honeybunch?”

The woman couldn't help but redden at the tittering that followed the remark, as she tried to understand how she fit so poorly in society's design, a peculiar variable crammed into the sophisticated elements of everyday life. She had been taught to count her blessings, yet could not force herself to do such a thing while seeing her husband alive, breathing and living. She tried to remember how a man could work so little in his life and ruin so many lives, say so many hurtful things. She tried to recall why she couldn't thrust a kitchen knife through her own dearest husband's heart and watch him disgorge his own blood. She tried to remember why she couldn't make him feel her agony. But she remembered very well why, and the reason caused her even more pain. He was above her.

And yet, dark thoughts crept through the intricacies her mind. *Even murder*, she thought, *wouldn't be enough of a punishment for the bastard.*

"Damn Yankees. They might as well kick at the ball when it's thrown to them. These fools can't hit!" The stalker one, his mouth stuffed with deviled egg, replied:

"They sure as hell can. You should see them. On a brighter day, they're warriors on the field. You just put your money on those Yankees and you won't be sorry."

A chuckle from the man made the stalker fellow redder. "I wonder what the scouts must think. They're probably sticking guns in their mouths. This sort of playing is just unforgivable. They might as well put a couple of dames on the field. Give the kids a few balls to take home."

"Now here's the thing, pal. A comment like that is just plain insulting."

The man laughed at this, and observed the television screen with conviction.

"The day women play baseball is the day the world ends. Mark my words. And you know something? If I ever saw my wife playing baseball, I'd give her a reminder she wouldn't soon forget. If I ever found she was doing a terrible thing like that at all, well, she'd never do it again after I was through with her. I'd beat the evil right out of her if that's what it would take. Isn't that right, honeybunch?" The woman stopped itching at the bruises on her arm, and filled the glass once more.

The morning in suburbia was not one to ignore. There seemed to never be a cloudy day in the neighborhood, as the community would accountably behold one, respectfully ignoring it.

"A phone call at this hour? Who the devil could it be?" The morning sun had revealed its presence through the flawless stain glass windows, as spatters of light struck the marble kitchen countertop. The smell of buttermilk and syrup wafted through the house, summoning indulgence and turpitude without prejudice or vindication. The man's wife was patiently cooking breakfast, as a sullen and inevitable ringing continued to echo throughout the house.

"Whoever this fellow is, he's a damn fool. Calling my home at this hour." He carefully picked up the receiver, yet contorted his face angrily as if the caller were standing before him.

"Hello? Who is it? I demand to know! Do you realize what hour it is? Do you know who I am?" After moments of pausing, the man chuckled to himself, boldly setting the receiver in its rightful place.

"No answer. Must have been plumb scared of me. Serves him right, calling at this hour. What's this? You damned fool. Look what you've done. Don't you know how to handle kitchen ware?" He hastily stepped over the mess of buttermilk and dough on the floor. "It's not an exact science, you know. I'll be home at eight. Clumsy whore."

The man was the C.E.O of a massive conglomerate that focused on the ideal ambitions of a corporation: advertising and selling assorted goods. The company was extremely well known, being one of the largest industries in the country. He would drive the Rolls to his work building, one of the largest on the block. The man made certain that at least five people saw him before he left the car. He would prominently sit in the driver's seat, carefully eyeing the other vehicles, fearful there would be another Rolls. When his

fears were confirmed to be false, he would leave the vehicle. He would then make his way to the main offices where he would work for the rest of the day.

The man took pride in the size of his work building, considering that his quarters were located on the top floor. This position allowed him to see the rest of his city from the massive window in his office. He could pleurably look about the groundlings and shorter buildings. There was one building, however, that towered above his top floor office. This building was a collection of assorted offices, but it was most known for its selection of Armed Forces Recruitment Centers. This challenge to the man's Tower of Babylon had been abandoned, however, home but only to a few derelicts.

"Today is the day we honor a man whose dedication has graced this office for many years. More years than we can count. A man with more integrity and determination than any other man in this office. It is my pleasure to honor Mister...oh, hell. What's the use of even saying his name? He knows exactly who he is. Don't we all? Let's give a hand for the man of '53!"

The applause began just a few moments after the man stood up to be congratulated. The employees were gathered in the man's office, with as fine of a décor as his suburban home. He took his bow with a grin, and removed a creased piece of paper from his pocket. Mr. Everson, who had announced the man's recognition, grabbed hold of his hand in congratulations.

"We got you something. The board decided that you deserved this. I think it'll look mighty fine next to that old Victory Ribbon of yours. Bet a Kraut never got anything like this, huh?"

The man's secretary revealed a small, bronze figure with the words "the ideal man" etched in at the base. Below these haunting words was a quote: "He who burns bright may shine brighter than all." The statue glowed as the sunshine of the glorious steel blue day highlighted its features, nearly seeming it holy in quality. The man was instantly mesmerized. He fervently took the shining bronze statue from his colleague, shaking his hand firmly, yet not taking his eyes off the statue. It was a businessman, clutching a suitcase in one hand, while the other formally placed on its thigh. The statue had a rather jovial expression, a smile carefully carved on the head of the figure. The statue felt rather light in the man's palm as he slowly lifted it to his colleagues.

To receive such a statue was of the highest prestige, many men would kill to have one their own. The man could feel tautness and covet crackling through the air. Not one man in the crowd was without envy. This made the man smile wider than before. Another man, over the applause.

"C'mon, now, give us a speech!"

He cleared his throat and began to read from the shriveled piece of paper. "It is an honor to receive such an award on this fine day. I've worked myself to the bone to be at this level and...well..." The man reached for the handkerchief in his pocket, and carefully dabbed his tearless eyes.

"It can be hard to pull together such a company on your own. It's like leading a brigade of soldiers into battle. There's a lot of hard work. Commitment. All for the best, I suppose. So today, I raise this statue in honor of the future. To the future, boys!" After all the man's colleagues congratulated him and left his office, he noticed one man was still

standing at the corner of his office. He was a thin, small man with thick-rimmed glasses who wore a navy blue coat and a lavender tie. Bergman did not attend the ceremony; he merely overheard the festivities, being in the office right next to the man's. A clear glass door connected the two offices together, as well as a double-sided closet.

"Mr. Bergman. It's mighty fine to see you today. What can I do for you?"

"You said you'd tell them."

"About what?"

"You said you'd tell them about the merger."

"I suppose I had a change of heart. What's the harm, anyhow?"

"You lied. You said you did all of this on your own, did you not?"

"If my colleagues had the notion to care, this statue wouldn't be mine. Look at this way. This company wouldn't as much as sell paper clips if it wasn't for me."

"You're an egotistical fool. This company would be headlining on the moon if it weren't for you. How'd you keep the merger away from the board, you rat?"

"Careful now, Mr. Bergman. There's no need to say such things. Now I'll give you the chance to leave before you regret what you're doing here."

"You don't get it, do you? This lie of yours is going to get a lot of good men fired. You don't have the slightest clue of what you've done. As soon as this company starts its way downhill, you won't be able to do anything but watch. Is that what you want? A train wreck of a business sweltering before you? You've just as well driven this company to the ground."

The man paused, and then smiled as he caught a glimpse of his statue. "You know, Bergman? It just so happens that I don't have any desire to drive this business into the ground. In fact, I believe that such a thought is...premature. Now here's the thing, Bergman. There are certain people in this world. In fact, one type of man in particular. This man is as pale as the moon, handsome, wealthy. Has an obedient wife, a nice car, a comfortable job. A gleaming, toothy smile. That's the kind of man they write about; the kind that women dream about. It's the kind of man you see traipsing onto the silver screen, once or twice on the small. That's the kind of man that helps old Atlas with that pesky little burden of his. The kind keeps things together. And that man is me, Bergman. And I don't tend to let myself forget it. Now you've said some terrible things, and I'm willing to forgive them. Of course, I'm also willing to make a few phone calls concerning your wellbeing. Sometimes I enjoy being a bearer of bad news."

The man didn't care to look at Bergman stormed out of the room with his mouth sealed. "Do yourself a favor, Bergman. Relax, why don't you. Catch a film. Maybe one of those in three dimension." After hearing the glass door close, the man had to sit down. He thought about the taste of a cigarette to wash out Bergman's words, and perhaps a glass of water. *Bergman's always a damn fool*, he thought to himself. *He can't form a straight thought without insulting someone in the process. I also heard he was a homosexual. Damn shame. What the world would be like if terrible people like him were just washed away in some Godly manner. God could just sweep those terrible people away without a second thought. Only God doesn't get to sit up here, on this floor, now does he?* He switched his attention to the massive window just behind his desk. He stood up to watch storm clouds slowly conceal what was once the afternoon sunshine. *That means rain*, he

thought. *There's never been such thing as a pleasant storm.* He then stared intently at the statue that sat on his desk until he realized he needed a cigarette. But before he could remove himself from his seat, his secretary entered his office.

"Sir? Phone call. Says it's urgent."

"Who is it?"

"He didn't say."

"Oh, alright." He carefully examined his secretary, looking closely at every crevasse, every imperfection she wore. There were not many, and those that she wore were nothing short of lovely. Her dress was cut short, revealing her lily-white legs, flawless as they stood, without the slightest mark of abuse. Her lips were not red at all, but a subtle shade of pink carefully applied to each portion of the lip. She was untouched, a beautiful, blonde, smiling virgin girl, ignorant in a lovely way. Her wonderful blue eyes were complimented with a dark shade of purple that had been rubbed about each eyelid. Such things swooned the man, drowning out the thoughts of his wife. *One day, he thought, she'll be mine. I'll even have her in front of my wife, if that's how it must be. I'll make her mine.*

"Sir. Phone call."

"Yes. Please sit."

The woman complied instantly, still smiling.

You're not wearing my favorite dress. We've talked about this. Light blue complements your eyes. With that shade of green...no such luck, my dear. Would you get me a cigarette on your way out? You remember my favorite, don't you? And please, don't get the wrong kind. You know what happens when you get the wrong kind, don't you?"

"Yes sir. Out the door, more's the whore."

"That's the saying. You've memorized it, I see."

"Worshipped it, sir."

*What a lovely girl,* he thought to himself.

"I suppose I'd better answer this."

"Sir."

"Oh, yes. One more thing. I believe there was a misplaced amount of three hundred and fifty dollars when you deposited my earnings for me. I understand this was at the T. Hegemon Bank."

"Sir, I'm afraid I don't remember..."

"I trust the missing balance will be taken from your account?"

"Sir."

Her footsteps were nearly inaudible as she walked out. *She's a delicate little thing.* He cleared his throat and answered the phone.

"Hello?"

"Kill your secretary."

It was only one moment, one second, where panic spread through his mind. One second of complete shock. One second where reality viciously grabbed hold of his throat and reminded him of how pitiful a creature he really was. He could do nothing more but stop and stare at the blank walls of his office. But soon reality lost its grip, and the man's mind had immediately isolated itself from any chance of threat. He finally let out a laugh.

“Jerry? Jerry from next door. This is him, isn’t it? Oh, this is funny. Jerry, this is very funny. But I’m afraid I have to get back to work now, so—

“Kill your secretary. Now.”

“Jerry, are—.”

“I am afraid you’re mistaken. I will make myself clear now. I am no one you know. I am not a friend. Please sir. Do not move. It would be very foolish at the moment.”

The man was shocked at how the caller knew he had moved from his seat. *This can’t be real*, he thought.

“Yes, sit down. Very good.”

“Now this is going to far. I’ll give exactly one minute before I call the authorities and send you...”

“I can kill you. Would you like a demonstration? To the left of you there’s a statue. A bronze statue on your desk.” The man quickly brushed the statue of the desk to the floor, but the statue did in fact break as it hit the ground. The statue was not made of bronze at all; it was a cheap, brittle metal that broke with ease. The statue had broken in to four, jagged parts. It was no longer a business man, or a statue, for that matter. It was broken. A broken little man. Nothing else.

“What is it you want, exactly?!”

“The situation itself is quite simple. I have orders at the ready. They are to be completed efficiently, or I will kill you myself with a fully operational Zeiss Zielvier.”

“Why would you tell me that?”

“It is important you understand the levity of your situation, or else things will not move along.”

The man felt sweat begin to bead upon his skin. He needed to buy time to think his situation through. “A Zeiss. That’s a German rifle, isn’t it?”

“I live in the past to build a better future.”

The man began to feel the sweat running down his brow. “This has never happened to me before.”

“I did not think so.”

“I don’t know what to do.”

“I have not made myself clear?”

The man gallingly pressed the receiver against his forehead. “How can you see me so well?”

“The Zeiss comes with a telescopic sight.”

“Do you really have a Zeiss with you?”

“Would you like to find out?”

“That’s a funny accent you have there.”

“Do not change the subject.”

“How much do you want?”

“This is not about money.”

“Then what?”

“This is merely about following my orders. Do so and you will live. Disobey and you will die.”

“Why are you doing this?”

“Have you ever killed before?”

A pause. “No...I couldn't! No, it's...is that who you are? A man on the other side of the battle? Is that it? It must be! There's no other explanation! Listen, man! I don't have a Ribbon! I never did! I never had the fortune to taste the iron-tinged air of a battlefield! I have other things, though. Other things that are worth a lot of money! Just...please understand! I never killed any of your brothers in any war! It was just a little white lie! Please...!”

“I do not want your possessions.”

“Then what? I'll give you anything! Please!”

There was a moment of silence, “Do you wish to die?”

“No.”

“There is much you have yet to do in life, no?”

“Yes.” The man could feel a drop of icy sweat run down his arm.

“Then kill your secretary. If your life and reputation mean so much to you.”

“She's too lovely to die.”

“Someone must die.”

“No one has to die!”

There was a pause on the other line.

“Kill your secretary or I will kill you. It cannot be simpler. I have already supplied you with cleaning utensils, if you check your closet.”

“No no no no...”

“You must comply.”

“You're a monster.”

“If you are trying to evoke sentiment from me you will not succeed.”

“You're terrible...what you're doing is a terrible thing.”

“Perhaps in the eyes of some.”

“You're going to Hell.”

“Most do. Now, are you going to kill your secretary? Or must I empty my weapon?”

The man could not say no, no matter how hard he tried to force the words off his tongue. Just as he was about to reply, a figure entered his office.

“Here are the cigarettes you asked for, sir.”

The man looked at the beautiful woman and quickly closed his eyes. He did not think about nobility, nor did he chivalry. Only one thought ran through his mind: *I don't want to die.*

“Darling. Can you please close the door? I've something I need to tell you.”

“I didn't get the wrong kind, did I?”

Hours had passed. The man was pacing around the office, with the phone promptly in his hand.

“I have another assignment for you.”

“I hate you. You sicken me, you know that?”

“You will hate me more in time.”

“You promised not to kill me. Remember that.”

“Did you wash the stain out of the carpet?”

“Yes.”

“Thoroughly?”

“Yes, dammit. I lied to the custodian.”

“What did you say?”

“I told him I dropped my cigarette tray.”

“Excellent. You have done well. You should be proud. And you planted the body where...?”

“I went next door.”

“Yes... quite an idea. I suppose it had to be planted in someone’s office. A brilliant idea. You are full of them. Using the broken pieces of your statue to...yes. That was indeed brilliant. And the pieces?”

“In the trash.”

“This is going rather smoothly. I was expecting you to resist my orders quite intensely. I was wrong. I only have one complaint. When you came at her...there was such ferocity...you didn’t have to touch her so...”

“You promised not to kill me. Remember that.” The man heard a chuckle on the other line and felt his eyes begin to water.

“Your next assignment will consist of a robbery. I have left the proper tools in the parking garage. You will rob the bank. Kill one person.”

“One person? I can’t! I just...”

“You will need to recover at least half a million dollars.”

“This is too much.”

“Is it, now?”

“I can’t do it.”

“Then you die.”

“No! Please!”

“If you wish to live, you will follow my instructions. It is very simple.”

“I can’t imagine you having a soul.”

“Is such a comment intended to harm me?”

“It would if you had a soul.”

“All I care for are the orders I have given. I care not for you nor the dead.”

The man felt tears run down his face, and tried to wipe them away. He then realized he had stepped on the shattered statue, breaking it into more pieces. He closed his eyes tightly. “I’ll do it.”

“Leave the building before Bergman finds the secretary.”

“Where will I find the tools?”

“You will find them in the parking structure.”

“Which bank do you want me to rob?”

“That will be revealed shortly.”

He threw the phone at the wall, knowing the man on the other line had hung up. The man then began to weep as a child would. *How could there be someone so emotionless? he thought. So void of feelings for others? I can’t possibly imagine such a man! What vengeful god have a meddled with? Is this my fate, to be the errand runner for madmen?*

The man dried his eyes and picked up the pieces of the broken statue that were not in the trash, and clumsily dropped them in his suitcase. He made his way out of his office and carefully peered into Bergman's office. He had been to Bergman's office before, to ensure that his office was larger and had the better view. Once sure of this, he never had any care to go back. He looked around the room, hoping he would not see evidence of the beautiful dead woman. But in fact, the man saw that Bergman's closet was partially open, revealing a lock of bloodied blond hair.

The man broke into a more feverish sweat than earlier and realized he needed to leave before the body was found. There was an elevator directly across from Bergman's office. The man started for it as desperately and hurriedly as he could. *If I can just get to the elevator before that sycophant Bergman shows up! Please, God! What I would give for that!* The man had his eyes firmly locked on the elevator door, and was moving quicker than all the other workmen in the building. He kept his arms close to his body, each fist closed in case someone of authority approached him. *I'll tear open that elevator door if I have to!* Just as he reached the elevator, a blur of navy blue and lavender blocked his way. *No! It's not possible!*

"I thought I might find you here."

"I work here, Bergman. Of course you've found me."

"Where do you think you're going?"

"I'm going home."

"Is that right?"

"Where else is there to go at this hour?"

"I'll give you a hint."

"There's no need to fight, Bergman. I'll be on my way now." The man walked past Bergman, only to be fiercely tugged on the shoulder. "Unhand me, Bergman!"

"You won't get away with it, you know." The man's eyes widened and he knew he was caught. He looked around the room and realized no one had noticed the both of them fighting. *I can get away. I could slither under his arm and get away.*

"I know you think you belong on the top of the world, but that thinking is going to end for you. Mark my words. One day, you'll pull a stunt like that in someone else's office and you'll be shot on sight."

The man's stomach began to churn.

"It was horrifying to see such a thing. Of all the possible things to see, it must have been that? You're lucky I don't throw you in prison!"

The man's stomach stopped churning. "What?"

"Oh, don't play stupid. You know damn well why I can't throw you in the steely bar hotel. I'll be ridiculed. Strung up like a naysayer. A traitor. All because they'd take your side for a measly accountant's. And it's a shame, because what you've done here is truly awful. You hear me? You deserve nothing but a one-way ticket to hell. The mess you made. The blood you've spilled..." The man wanted to vomit.

"But what will you do with the evidence?"

"The evidence? Destroy it, probably. Burn it. But mark my words, the day where you come crashing from that cloud of yours is coming. Judgment day is on the horizon for you, sir. And I'll be damned if I don't have front row seats."

*There's still hope. Bergman will keep his mouth shut. This is exactly what I need. A getaway. He won't say a word and I'll live. I'll live. He'll burn the body. Yes, that's what he said. I'll live...* "I need to be on my way, Bergman." The man awkwardly entered the elevator, and stared into Bergman's infuriated eyes as the steel doors closed.

Bergman was left to his own contemplations, as he remained the only employee on the work floor that remained still. All of his colleagues, of whom had payed no attention to the argument, moved quickly through the halls, each worker none the wiser of the man's terrible actions. Bergman scoffed and proceeded to walk back to his office. *That damn fool made the biggest mistake of his life. The merger should never have been made. This company has to pull its own weight to survive. The fact that the merger was barely made with his notice is deplorable all by itself! The blood that that phony must have spilled. The people he must have lied to. Funny, now that I think about it, how he mentioned evidence. I had not the slightest clue that he knew about the files I had kept on the merger. Not that it matters. The fool will crash and burn, just like all the other hotheads. I need to get out, maybe light up.* Bergman looked from the window of his office and witnessed a heavy deluge consume the groundlings that wandered below. *That's quite a downpour. No matter. I need to get out. That man's words sting more than the cigarette does. But I can't go put like this. I believe my coat is in my closet...*

The man couldn't believe it when he saw it, at first. It was almost like just moments ago, when he had first heard the foreign tone of the man on the phone. Insanity was drilling into the man's mind, like a worm pressing its way into a rotting apple. What happened wasn't important. Not really. The fact that friends of the man saw him in the presence of such failure was important. Friends, passing by, looking not with envy but with pity. The man sifted through the cerulean wreckage to find the tools he reportedly needed to rob a bank. But what bothered him the most is that he knew exactly which bank he would rob.

The tools given to the man could have easily fit inside a schoolboy's workbag. The man sifted through the bag, only to find a handgun. Of what kind it was did not matter, only that it could take a life just as swiftly and brutally as any other contraption to its like. The weapon, however, had not surprised the man, no had it made him afraid to hold it. *I can't be afraid of a weapon I will not use...and I won't. But...he wants me to. And if I don't...* The other tools consisted of a crowbar, a black ski mask, and a pair of wool gloves. The man desperately tried to focus at the problem at hand, but all he could see was the lovely woman's contorted, fearful expression, imprinted on his every thought. He began walking the city streets to the T. Hegemon, desperately trying to expunge such an image from his mind. *It's not guilt. I know what that feels like. I know what that's like, but...and...and its not. I wanted to have her. I did, I said it myself, I'd have her in front of my wife, but...but, Lord...oh, Lord.* The man stopped in his very tracks. *Not like that...* The man entered the building, soaking from the pouring weather outside. *Thank the Lord for the rain...without it, these people would see my tears...* The man approached a woman with fiery red hair and blue, cat eye framed glasses. *Could it be her? Will it be her that I kill?*

"What can I do for you today, sir?" *Another face, another woman's face...smiling at me...so smug...happy. Truly gurgling with pleasure, and joy, and all the things I don't*

*have the fortune to enjoy...and...there's too many people here. It's not too late to call back and...and...there's just too many people here. I'll call him, and I'll give him the Ribbon, and I'll shake his hand and I'll find he never had a gun, only a...a bouquet of flowers. Yes! For the girl...the girl in the closet! Yes, oh, she's alright, Bergman found her. She's still breathing, quite banged up, but she's alright. She'll be fine. Won't she? And I'll live. I'll live after all this. And I'll never have to...have to....*

*"Can I help you, sir? Are you alright?" This'll be the last time. The last. Time. I am a good man. There is no question. I'm a good man and I'll only ever do this once and I'm a good man with a pretty award and I'll fix it I'll fix it all and—*

"Sir?"

"Uh, yes."

"Is there something wrong?"

"No, no, nothing's wrong."

"Would you like to make a deposit?"

The man looked hopelessly at the woman, and clumsily sifted through his soaking wet workbag. The man lifted the handgun up to the woman's forehead. The man's voice shook as he spoke. "Please don't cause any trouble, now. I don't want anybody to die." Five other onlookers saw the gun and stopped their respective transactions. One woman in this collection of witnesses screamed when the man turned the gun at them. The man saw he had done this, and swiftly concealed the gun in his pocket, and placed the ski mask over his head. With this fruitless, insubstantial piece of armor placed upon him, the man revealed his pleading, outstretched hands. "I'm only here for the money, please...I want no trouble. See, here? The gun is in my pocket. I only need the money."

After ten minutes of collecting the blood, sweat and tears of men, the man sat at the corner of the bank, where his hostages had also sat. A child, not much older than the age of three, was present, yet did not dare to question the motives of such a man with his bawling. The man looked down at his handgun, then up again at the five persons before him. One fellow, stared the man, not with resentment, but with pity.

"There are five of you here," the murderer finally whispered.

"Six if you count the woman at the front desk."

"And who are you?"

"I'm the father of this family. My name is Henry."

"These four...are yours?"

"My family yes. We were on our way to set up an account for my father."

The seven sat in awe of such a disastrous circumstance.

"He's from Poland, my father. We all are. He's become a little lost, since we moved...but he's able-minded. Strong."

"I'm sorry." *Then he will be the one to die. He must be. They can't hate me for that.*

"Did you lose something?"

"Did I what?"

"Money. Was money stolen from you?"

"No. But I have been robbed."

"Of a life?"

“No. Not of a life. I won't have to worry about that.”

“What is your name?”

“It doesn't matter, does it?”

“To me, it does.”

The man turned to the old man, who was silently whispering to himself while staring at the ceiling. “I'm sorry. I can't tell you.”

“I recognize your voice.”

A burning sensation coursed through the man's face, as if he has consumed the devil's own wine, straight from his sweltering goblet.

“You're the florist down the street, are you not?”

*Hah...if only.*

“I'm sorry...I can't say. There's no telling what will happen after I—”

“I'm a carpenter. I've come to your shop before...for Valentine's Day. You know, for my wife...”

*Act fast, fool, it's their life or yours. I can nearly hear the phone ringing!* “I remember you. I think.”

“Yes, but then you remember that I could not pay your full wages...a carpenter does not make much in this new world of technology and innovation. This I have come to understand. Surely, you cannot blame a poor man and his family for your ruin. Now, I can help you...in fact, I will help you...”

“Henry, why are you telling this man our whole life story? He wears a mask because he can't trust you! It should be a mutual sentiment! Let us go, you bastard!”

“I will, I just...”

“You what? Do you enjoy seeing our family cry over a man as pathetic as you? Is that it?”

“My wife...I'm sorry, she doesn't understand the situation—”

“You shut up now, Henry!”

Henry's father rested his world-worn hand on the woman's shoulder. “Darcy, darling. Do you hear that? Do you hear it, the whistling winds?”

“Old man, that's enough. My father, as I said...he's a little lost...he has dementia, the poor old fool...”

“Darcy, Darcy, the winds...”

The woman began to cry, as the old man continued to speak so softly.

“What's the matter with her?”

“Her name is Dana. Darcy is some other woman he must have met.”

“No one you know?”

“No one I'd care to. My father lost his way very early on.”

“He's wearing a wedding band.”

“He doesn't remember what he did to this family. To his wife.”

*But what if she deserved it? What if she really deserved it? Then, would it be all right then...?*

“Perhaps it's better that way.” *RRing! RRing! BLAM! You're dead, you worthless pile of snot, dead! Say something! Be something! Kill someone! Can't you do it? It's for your own life!*

“As I said before, my wife doesn’t quite understand the situation. I see a man who has lost much...this I can understand. But the dark times are over, aren’t they? We no longer need to bludgeon each other for bread and butter...drown each other in the street gutters in a brutal competition for survival. I see pain in your eyes, not darkness. Please, friend. Fellow American. That is my life, our life you have there in that bag. If you give me that bag, I can help you. Forgive my dramatics, friend...but with this sort of kindness can there be anymore darkness in our future?”

The old man looked cheerfully at the two men. “Of course there can. Darcy. Darling.”

“Don’t pay any attention to the old fool. He can get inside your head, at times.”

“He’s...he’s wrong, anyhow.”

“Very wrong, yes. Now, listen—”

“Am I, Darcy? You both seem to forget the brutalities before your very eyes. Of bombs. Of fat men and little boys. Of kings. Of decisions. Henry. Boy. There is a man. Here. A man with a gun aimed at your head, and you mean to befriend him? There is no reason for us to live, in this man’s eyes. We have seen his face. We have seen his true self. And he can’t have us around for much longer...”

“That’s enough, father! You see, man, the hoary fool has lost his mind. He is not usually like this...”

“Rapture, Darcy! Sin! O, foreboding times! O, devilish snobbery! It will send the mind in a thousand directions! The American Dream, spattered with blood, O! Judgment!”

The man’s face contorted with anger, as Henry began to see this. The world-worn man smiled at the murderer as if his words were saturated with benevolence, not dreadful prophecy. “Listen, now! It will challenge the mind of thee...it may not be a god, or a man, but ah...it will challenge thee, as it lies in your inner circle! Your own eyes, every! Day! It will challenge thee and thine life! Its worth!”

“You’ve no right to speak to me this way! I have the gun, see?” The man removed the gun from his coat pocket at aimed it at the old man’s head, shaking the weapon involuntarily. The old man’s cheerful expression did not change in the slightest at the sight of the gun. “I control you! I deserve to live! I have...my life has meaning!”

“Hath it, fool? Doth thee forget thine sins? Or any notion at all...”

Henry spoke up as he saw the man began to redden with anger, “Please, understand, old friend! This old fool has made more mistakes than anyone in this room. His words are reflections of his own actions. I don’t doubt that. What he says has nothing to do with you! Please, believe me!”

The man ignored Henry and incredulously argued with the lost old man. “How could you know anything about me? You don’t know me! The sacrifices I’ve made!”

“None, all the more? Added together, none! None!”

“That’s not true! You’re an old man, an old man lost in dementia and...”

“Seven in all, after six more! Seven in all, after six more! And then it will be thine!”

“No! Stop it! You couldn’t possibly...! If you were told, then...! Then! Then you wouldn’t remember a thing because you’re a crazy old man! He who burns bright may

shine brighter than all! Do you hear me, you sick freak? You know nothing about me!  
Nothing about the phone...! It's not humanly possible!"

"Not brighter than all, half as bright. Half as bright."

"What are you...?"

"You will burn twice as bright, half as long. It is written."

"Quiet, or I'll...I'll..."

"Written!"

"Father, shut up! Don't you see he has a gun?"

Henry's father began to cry, as the gun finally became more visible to his fractured mind. He held Dana's hand tightly with fear as he stared into the darkness of the barrel. There was only one impediment that resulted from the old fellow's fissured, deep-rooted mind. He could not stop his chant. Whether the chant was unconscious or not, as the evidence leaned more in his favor, the man could not take it.

"Stop it, old man, you'll force me to it!"

"Seven in all, after six more!"

"Father, stop!"

"Seven in all, after six more!" The old man's tears traveled through the cracks and creases of the man's face, his eyes shut tightly, preparing for eternal darkness. Only, would it come in such a flurry of chaos and confusion? Only the man could know that. *Someone has to die...but, please! Not like this! Not like this!*

"Seven in all, after six more! Seven in all, after six more!"

"Stop it father!"

"It won't stop! It won't—"

The man had made his choice.

"You've—you couldn't have! He was sick! Just a sick, old man, and you've done it!  
You've done it and it can't be undone and it can't..."

"I had to, I had to...!"

"I told you, Henry! He's mad!"

"What a terrible thing!"