



THE RUSH

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Stop. Record.

“You’ll never—” he coughed, “—never get away.”

The trench filled as the torrent poured over the ridge. The surge overwhelmed the levee. It flowed into the dry cracks of the surface using them as tributaries. The thin streams of blood formed a red bead at the curved tip of the horizon.

It hung there for a moment from my finger. It waited before falling onto the carpet. Then, another followed.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

No need to rush.

I paused.

I paused like a VHS. Ribbons of static waving through the picture. I stared. Sensing the moment would be over too soon. I had plenty of time to savor every second.

Record everything in my mind. Analyze every element.

The keynote was starting in mere minutes. Still, I needed to take the time to commit this all to memory. Examining the details is a way to get away with these types of things. Crimes of passion converted into a coldblooded calculation.

Stop. Rewind.

Knock. Knock. Knock.

“Yeah, who’s there?” His gruff voice boomed from behind the hotel room door.

“Dr. Thompson, it’s Marianne.”

A moment passed. The peephole went dark for a moment before the chain clanked against the metal door frame. The hasp. The latch. The handle.

He opened the door. His necktie was dangling over his gut. He whipped the broad side of the necktie over the thin. He always tied a full Windsor.

“And how is the conference going for you?” He asked, waddling to the mirror.

“Good so far.” I perched on the corner of the bed. “My presentation over the gene sequencing modifications in the Torch Initiative protocols went really well. And this afternoon I’m helping Robert with his research poster.”

“Such a shame that Robert's proposal for methylation marking was rejected. Maybe next year he will find a better use of his funding.” He adjusted the necktie knot in the mirror. “And you two have gotten quite—”

“Maybe next year’s conference *he* can give the keynote.”

“Speaking of which, what do you need? I have to finish getting ready to give this year’s.” He lifted a mug to his lips and took a slug of his coffee.

“Well, I came because...” I paused. “I have noticed a shift in the research. I wanted to let you know that—”

“Shit!” He brushed his tie and button-up. He wiped his mouth from corner to corner with the back of his hand. He raised the ceramic mug above his head frustrated that the wave of coffee missed his mouth.

Excellence is the Standard.

The slogan stamped in blue across the cheap, thin mug. This ridiculous mantra links every Annex of the project. Epitomizing its contradiction between orphanages and pathology labs.

St. Vincent’s Home for the Impoverished.
Abell & Lenderman.

Patron saints vs. pairs of scientists.
Independent piety vs. collaborative empiricism

Both promise miracle cures as the baseline.
Both require funding with opposing approaches.

Imagine if people stopped throwing money at churches, praying for miracles, and instead just threw that money at science. We might have some goddamn miracles.

Render unto Caesar.

Stop. Fast Forward.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

My hand was like a desert coming alive again after a long drought. I didn't care about the stain. I didn't care if the floor would ever be innocent again or be forever marked. The rush pulsed and enveloped me like the embrace of a memory. I missed it.

I had plenty of time to get clean. No sense in ruining the moment, fretting over the ramifications before the deed was done. These worries were like regretting something that has not yet happened.

All this was deserved. I had been patient. I had done everything by the book. This indulgence in the fruits of my labor was owed.

No need to rush.

The handle hung loosely against my knuckles. Ceramic broken into jagged edges. I wasn't sure anymore if it was his blood dripping from the points or mine.

Drip. Drip. Drip.

The scarlet fluid had become sticky on my palm. Already the plasma was reducing from my body heat. Slowly wiggling the joint, the sides of the trench clung together as though the blood was clotting to hold together a wound.

I knew better. I knew it was his body's last desperate attempt to bind up the predator to prevent more wounds to the prey.

This is exactly the way I remembered. I evaluated my performance. This part had to be perfect. If something was worth doing, it was worth doing right.

The sudden opening of my hand tore apart the crimson adhesive holding the gorges formed by the underside of my knuckles.

The earthquake under the now blood-saturated desert shook free a splatter of the little bit that had not dried.

Stop. Rewind.

Thump. Thump. Thump.

My heart slammed into my sternum. The deluge was approaching. I was already anticipating how this would end.

“—I wanted to let you know that I know 31542’s importance.” I blurt out, “I know what we have done. I no longer want to be a part of this research.”

“You don’t have that choice.” Dr. Thompson laughed as he set the mug on the small desk table. “What if the authorities find out about your past? What happened to your stepfather? The real reason you were orphaned?”

He reminded me of my stepfather, the VHS collection, the things my sister and I did on tape.

Stop.

I recorded over all of it.

He wiped his button-up with the hotel napkin. It rolled into thin stalactites from the friction. Then, as he plucked and dropped them, I realized I was just as disposable. “Don’t forget how desperate you were. We remade you. Took you from one side of the Annex to the other.”

I escaped the violence with science.
I bought their silence with service.
I ascended to excellence.

Excellence is the Standard.

I stood firm. “No. And I’m leaving with 31542.”

“Over my dead body,” he huffed. “You were a scrap when we took you in. We made you and 31542 for this. Just this. Face it. Without us you’re both nothing.”

This wasn’t planned but it was always an option. This wasn’t passion but it was always just under the surface. The desert was always waiting for the right moment.

His keynote was starting soon.
He deserved the same fate as my stepfather.

I snatched the cheap mug on the table. It smashed into his jaw like a shattered candy cane. Hot coffee and shards of ceramic flew from the impact. His cheeks were cut into channels.

He bounced off the mirror. It splintered against his forehead. He groaned from behind the king-size mattress.

I descended upon him. One fist pulled his full Windsor knot tight against his hyoid bone. The other plunged into him like I was kneading dough. I was relentless.

“You’ll never—” he choked out as I wound the tie around my hand. His own blood silenced his voice from within.

The handle of the mug felt like shiny brass knuckles.
The sharp edges drove into him like white daggers.
The rush returned like a torrent to a trench.

Stop. Record.



MODERN GODS

Without freethinkers.
Without major changes to the way we educate ourselves.
Without empathy.
Civilization, as we know it, is doomed.

But laughing at the absurdity and darkness,
we gain perspective.

Because it is only when we suffer who we are
that we will suffer for whom others want to be.
Because if we can't grasp to be pulled from the mire soon,
we'll be irreversibly buried in our own egoism.

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compel uncomfortable reflection and
with others, lively, if heated, debate.

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