

CLASSIFICATION PENDING

D. G.

Record as submitted.

Lot numbers have been changed.

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For those who notice the extraction.

INDEX

FILE_ I	
Bidder Beware	1
<i>Notes from a Tax Sale</i>	
FILE_ II	
The Hermitage	49
<i>Rituals of Compliance</i>	
FILE_ III	
Terminal Status	93
<i>Not for Broadcast</i>	

FILE_ONE
BIDDER BEWARE

NOTES FROM A TAX SALE

NOTE_1 MONDAY

The building was holding.

Blue paint peeled like sunburnt skin. Bone trim barely clung to the frame, its lower windows hazed with grime. I downshifted, eased over the sidewalk, and parked behind the Blue Hotel and Saloon.

I stepped through the saloon's back door—my sneaker caught the hollowed threshold. Inside, sour beer and bar rot. Colours flashed from compact discs dangling above the booths. The room hummed with the smoky tones of Sarah Vaughan's "The Boy from Ipanema," spilling from a vintage jukebox.

I stopped just inside.

Arthur drew me here with the promise of cash. The spry auctioneer had offered me a job: help prepare the hotel's contents for catalogue. The owner, Mr. Mortimer, was a compulsive antique collector who'd let his tax debt outrun

his sentiment. Authorities intervened and ordered an auction. Not ideal work, but I needed it.

A deep laugh cut through the room. I recognized Arthur in the corner booth.

“Over here,” Arthur called.

The laugh belonged to an imposing bald man in his mid-thirties sitting sprawled out across from Arthur. He slid over to make room while his emerald eyes scanned me.

The man in the corner seat kept his hood up.

“David, this is Mark and Chris, my nephews.”

Chris, the hooded one, was thirtyish, short and stocky. Tattoos covered his face and hands. Prison ink? I didn’t ask.

I shook their hands. “You guys from here?”

“Fresh out of San Quentin,” Chris said without hesitation.

“Came back from Vegas,” Mark said in a deep voice, tugging his shirt collar.

Arthur’s cellphone rang. He excused himself to take the call.

“What did you do down there?”

“Man, I took care of business. I worked the doors. It’s hectic—too wild.” Mark fired off his words, hand rattling for punctuation. “What’s your story, bro? Arthur tells me you live in a crazy cabin up on the mountain?”

I paused.

“Crazy? Nah. It’s just cabin life. Carry water, chop wood, cheap rent.”

Mark shook his head. “You’re up there in the winter? No running water, no power? I couldn’t hack it.”

We wore the uniform of the early 2000s streets—loose fits

and skate shoes. We weren't officials or even employees, but to Mr. Mortimer, this was how the order arrived.

Arthur was more distinguished. Perfectly combed white hair, pencil moustache, white button-up, and suspenders on tired blue jeans. His voice, roughened by years of cattle rattle, had weight.

"Be respectful," he said. "The owner and his family live here. Your job is to tag everything. If you can't put a tag on it—put it in something and tag that. My team will be here Thursday to write descriptions and catalogue the items. No one works a room alone."

We were tasked with going through every dusty corner—back room, cupboard, crawlspace—looking for forgotten treasures, keepsakes, trinkets, anything we could get our hands on. All while people still lived there—lingering, watching, listening.

Two men were quietly hunched on stools at the back corner of the bar. The owner took a break from eyeballing us to serve the holdouts.

"What about behind the bar, the booze?" Chris asked. "We tag that too?"

"That reminds me, I have to speak with him about that."

Arthur waved the owner to the opposite end of the bar. Mr. Mortimer's eyes bulged with anger, then softened into something like pleading as the two men spoke in harsh, low tones. He pointed at the jukebox, prompting Arthur to sweep his forearms across his chest—not safe, not out—just finished.

The court order, rolled tight and sticking proudly out of

Arthur's back pocket, stated that rented rooms could not be entered. Of the fourteen, only one was rented and therefore legally off-limits: Room 304. And now, he told us, the liquor bottles were off-limits too.

Arthur droned on about antique valuations. I wasn't listening. I was wondering how I'd ended up part of the solution to a place this far gone.

The jukebox whirled up a new record, "You Belong to Me" by Jo Stafford.

Arthur handed me a box of tags and led us toward the interior passthrough to the lobby. "You guys start in the lobby. Chris, you're with me up to the owner's suite. We'll get that out of the way," Arthur said, stopping in the doorway.

Chris had gone ahead but Mark and I got distracted.

Arthur watched, waiting for us to get going. But we didn't. We stopped. That's when I really took it in.

The Wurlitzer was planted near the saloon's back entrance, glowing like it hadn't gotten the memo. Persian turquoise bled through textured glass pillars. Chrome trim caught whatever light the room could spare and threw it back cleaner. Its curved glass canopy flawless, the mechanism inside exposed—records carouseled over gleaming buttons, waiting for a finger to choose.

The turntable purred softly as the record spun.

We lingered without meaning to.

"I wouldn't let that go," Mark said.

I didn't respond. I was reading the title cards without reading them. Names, songs, decades. Thinking how this machine had survived every bad decision in the room.

Arthur cleared his throat and stepped closer, pulling a tag. “If anyone tries to grab something or gives you trouble, come get me. The wife’s away, but the son will be around. Keep an eye on him.”

He tagged the jukebox with authoritative zest.

Lot #0501 | Wurlitzer 2000 jukebox | Centennial 200 Select; 100 records | Condition: excellent.

NOTE_2

THE LOBBY

The lobby was no longer a place to check in. Hotel furnishings, antiques, and boxes were crammed wherever they fit, leaving a narrow passage along a worn path in the hardwood. Broken lamps, chipped teacups, trays of tarnished silverware. The walls were green, textured by painted-over peeling wallpaper. Tall wooden baseboards and cove mouldings—the only signs of what the room once was. The kind of finish work that lasts.

The front windows had old newspapers and pieces of craft paper taped up to block the view. Rays of light leaked through the gaps.

From the saloon, the jukebox played “Bye Bye Love” by the Everly Brothers.

Towards the main entrance, the room widened. The front doors were boarded up. A wood balustrade led up the grand staircase into the hotel’s darker interior. Arthur and Chris climbed the stairs without slowing.

I reached into the box of tags. Grabbed a big stack for Mark and another for myself. Pre-numbered. Yellow. Cheap tie wire already attached. Arthur had explained the system once and wouldn't explain it again. And if you weren't sure, tag it anyway. The catalogue would sort it out later.

We started in the back corner. Mark bobbed to the music, bouncing the old floor and rattling nearby furniture.

"Think Arthur'll notice if we snag some of those records?" Mark said.

I stuffed my pocket with a wad of tags and gave Mark a side-eye.

He threw me a mischievous glare, eyes sparkling. "It's all about the details, man," he said, lowering his voice. "There's too much stuff in this place to keep track of. This time next week, it's all in the wind, brother."

I tied a tag onto a scratched-up dresser. Nothing valuable as far as I could tell. Maybe a fixer-upper.

The blank tag was enough for now. Just a number—Lot #0001.

CLANG.

An old grandfather clock struck its bell.

We both turned. It sat out of place, leaning amongst a pile of stacked furniture. It was missing a foot.

The pendulum moved again and stalled mid-swing.

I stepped closer.

The wood floor gave a sharp crack.

The clock *LURCHED*.

BONG.

The pendulum dropped free.

Mark dove in like a seasoned outfielder, fingers catching the case before it could tip.

“Nice save.”

“This one will get bidders going,” he said, already kneeling, wiping dust from the base until the inscription appeared: Jenny and Joe. Eternal Love. 1912. “Love stories always sell.” He snapped his gum—cherry Bubblicious and cynicism. “Looks like the honeymoon’s over for these lovebirds.”

I tied the tag. It would later appear in the catalogue as:

Lot #0002 | Grandfather clock | Condition: intermittent; no foot.

Object description was not part of our job.

We continued the task: a porcelain vase, a tea service short on spoons, a dull suit of armour near the front door.

Loop. Twist. Move on. It didn’t take long before there was nothing left to learn.

Arthur and Chris plodded down the staircase, arms full of furnishings—a brass lamp, a telescope, some books. They left it all in the lobby, which functioned as a staging zone.

“You guys tag this stuff and get going in the basement next,” Arthur said, turning back up the stairs.

We weren’t close to finishing, but Arthur was moving faster than the work would take.

“Check this out,” Mark called, holding up an ornate curved blade. He tagged it before I could say anything.

Lot #0132 | Dagger | Antiquity unknown | Condition: sheath loose.

Mark placed the dagger back on a table when shouting erupted upstairs.

I didn't know if Arthur kept Chris close because he didn't trust him or because he wanted a bodyguard. Probably both. Arthur was arguing with the owner's son, Mortimer Junior—that's what we called him. The owner's suite was being processed for removal of non-personal items, and something up there had crossed a line.

Mortimer Junior came down the stairs heavy and unsteady, all size and no direction. Big man. Sloppy. He didn't make eye contact with Mark or me, but a wave of boozy stench hit us over the smell of musty wood as he passed.

He staggered. Bumped a table. The dagger fell—I reached for it, too late, then picked it up. Mortimer Junior shook his head and continued into the bar.

"I've dealt with this type of clown a thousand times," Mark said, tying a tag onto a coat rack. "He'd be light work. Bag 'em and tag 'em."

He said he worked the doors in Vegas. A bouncer, I assumed. Maybe he meant coat check.

I looked down at the dagger in my hand. The blade was partially unsheathed. I pushed it closed with my thumb.

"Shit."

A clean cut. Immediate. Bright.

A single drop of blood formed and held there, heavier than it should've been.

For a moment, nothing else mattered—at least not the lot number or the rules.

Something had pushed back.

NOTE_3 INVALID ENTRY

I held the dagger in my hand. The room thinned. The light blazed. A golden glare over endless dunes. I blinked.

The lobby came back in pieces—stale air, the jukebox humming out of sight. My hand was still wrapped around the dagger. The cut on my thumb stung.

Davius.

The name arrived already certain, pressing forward as if it belonged here.

Heat.

Not the warmth of the room—hotter. Dry. Vast. Sand against skin. The blade glinting. A hand closing around it.

I saw flashes, not scenes.

Gold. Dust. Men moving fast. Badly. The sense of running toward something already lost.

A voice—or a pressure—urging *forward*, always forward, without saying why.

Then the jukebox skipped.

The desert folded back into the lobby. My breath came out too fast. The knife was still in my hand. Only a thing. Steel and ornament. A catalogue entry waiting to happen.

Still, as I set it down, I had the sense that I hadn't imagined the name so much as remembered it. Not as a life, or a story, but as a shape. A role I could step into if I was not careful.

Somewhere in the building, a door closed.

I licked my thumb.

NOTE_4 UNTITLED

“Earth to Dave.” Mark waved his hand in front of my face.

“I zoned out.”

“Did you smoke your breakfast?” He was already reaching into his shirt pocket. “I brought something for lunch. Might help you refocus.”

My thumb went to my mouth again without thinking.

“You okay?”

“Yeah. Just a nick.”

He picked up the dagger, turning it sideways. “You know what the curve’s for?”

“Slitting throats.”

Mark nodded, satisfied. “Probably a tourist trinket.”

“Hard to tell the good stuff from the junk in this place.”

“Wait till Friday. Pickers’ll be crawling all over this dump. Buyers from everywhere. States, too. No one cares where the money comes from.”

The work didn’t reward practice. Sheer volume

flattened everything—collectables, heirlooms, furniture—once in use, now inventory. My role was clear. I was not here to admire or rescue anything. Mark seemed to love it. Every item sparked a comment, a guess, a buyer profile. He had a way of seeing value where I mostly saw fatigue.

Mark reached up for a high-five, and like that, the lobby was done.

The camaraderie that comes with hired labour. If the same man hired you, he vouched for you. Arthur's seal of approval covered both of us.

We went into the dining room to tag the few items that were there. The room was mostly empty—waiting.

The long tables had been pushed to the edges, their leaves folded in, their purpose reduced to surface area. Chairs were stacked in pairs, backs touching, standing aside for something more important.

The center of the room was open except for a stack of rented banquet tables. Not set up yet. A clear space. Someone had decided what would belong there.

A sideboard stood alone against the far wall, its drawers empty, doors left open. It had already been checked. Someone would check again. There was a small placard firmly attached. Diners' Excellence award in metal, no date, the printed details worn away.

Nothing here asked to be defended.

I tagged it.

Lot #0362 | Sideboard with award | Condition: fair.

The tables were where the easy things would end up. Objects that could be lifted without resistance. The things that didn't need to belong—just had to look like they did.

We finished the dining room and went back to the lobby, passing the staircase to the upper floors. I was never up there.

“So,” Mark said, nodding up the staircase, “what do you think they're hiding up there?”

I shrugged. Not an answer—occupational unease. I needed the hours, needed the pay.

On the way toward the basement, I noticed a narrow coat room tucked beneath the stairs.

I stepped inside.

“Just some hangers. Oh—lock box,” Mark said, leaning in.

The lid creaked open under my hand. “Half a coat check ticket.”

Mark exhaled through his nose. “Figures.”

“Tag the box?”

He shook his head. “Nah.”

A moment's hesitation, then the box clicked shut.

Turning to leave, my elbow caught the backboard.

Not part of the original framing. Hinged.

I swung it open. There was a small space under the stairs.

Inside, on the floor, sat a typewriter. No case. No cover.

Just a machine in a box.

Mark moved closer. “Well? Check it out.”

I knelt down, didn't touch it.

The keys were dulled. Dust packed into the seams. One key sat lower than the others, stuck down like it had been pressed too hard and left there.

“Looks old.”

I didn’t know what else to add.

The space felt smaller than it should have. Or maybe quieter.

“You gonna tag it, or write a novel?”

“I’ll leave it for now.”

Mark gave me a look, then shrugged and headed for the basement.

I stayed a moment longer. Didn’t touch the keys. Didn’t try to fix anything.

“Dave, you coming?”

“Yeah.”

I closed the panel and retreated.

We entered the basement: dank concrete, old wood. The lights flickered over a wall-to-wall stockpile of tools, retired restaurant equipment, boxes, crates. Too much to clock with one look.

By the end of the day, I had almost forgotten about the dagger and the typewriter.

Almost.

NOTE_5 TUESDAY

Morning came clean.

Dew steamed off the cedar shingles. Golden mist over evergreen forest. My cabin sat where it always did—eighteen by twenty-five feet, built with careful hands, perched high on its knoll.

I stepped out on the porch and down the path toward the outhouse, then stopped short where the view opened between two old fir trees. Town below. Lake beyond. Nothing moving yet that needed me.

Nature's call.

A simple transaction.

No audience and no receipt.

Back at the porch, I sat on the edge of a step and closed my eyes. The stillness came easily. It always had up there. Thoughts slowed to the pace of chopping wood.

A branch cracked somewhere downslope. I opened my eyes, looked down, and saw the cut on my thumb had opened

again. A bead of blood surfaced, patiently. I brought it to my mouth and tasted iron.

“Davius,” the wind said—or maybe not.

I didn’t answer.

* * *

When I reported for work, the smell was already familiar.
Damp stone, something sweet underneath.

There was just enough light in the basement to make everything look held hostage.

We worked.

Tag. Loop. Twist.

Box the small stuff.

Lot the junk together.

I found an oil can by the door leading outside. Thumb pump. Narrow spout bent from use. It leaked enough to keep the can from rusting.

I picked it up.

The basement didn’t disappear. It thinned.

The smell changed—lake water, cedar, sun-warmed pine. A screened porch. A hinge complaining softly every time the patio door swung. It wasn’t broken. Just tired of being ignored.

I pressed the pump. Oil dripped on the hinges.

Still squeaking.

My hand looked older. Worn. A nick across the knuckle I didn’t remember earning, but recognized.

I applied more oil. Moved the door back and forth. The sound softened, then stopped altogether.

No applause or thank you required.

The lake sat still beyond the porch. Someone else's place. Someone who would never know why the door stopped making noise.

The basement came back.

The oil can was warm in my hand. Familiar in a way the other objects weren't.

Mark was two aisles over, arguing with a box of cutlery.

I looked at the can again. No maker's mark worth caring about or detail that would matter to a buyer. It simply worked.

I attached the tag halfway then stopped.

I set it back near where I'd found it but more hidden, tucked beside the frame of the door.

Untagged.

No one would notice.

The rest of the day passed without incident. Somehow that made it worse. Objects stayed objects. Things onto which I tied tags.

At quitting time, Mark followed me out to the lot.

"You heading up the mountain?"

"Yup."

He glanced back at the building like it might be listening. "I'll come by later, if that's cool."

"Sure. Four clicks up, left on Keddleston Road. When you hit gravel, keep going to the last driveway. End of the road."

I drove home slow.

The cabin was moodier than it had been that morning.
Mark showed up at sunset, running lights glowing
through the trees before the engine died.

He came up the steps carrying a box, with a six-pack
sticking out the top. Too much box for just six beers.

“Figured we earned it.”

We sat on the porch. Sipped. Smoked. Watched the sun
go down, then watched nothing happen. The kind of silence
with no need for a label.

“So,” he said eventually. “That place is something.”

“Oh yeah.”

“You notice how Arthur keeps saying ‘just tag it’ like it
means the same thing every time?”

I shrugged.

Mark took another pull. “Doesn’t.”

He reached down beside his chair and pulled out the box
—slid it across the porch boards with his foot.

“I grabbed something for you.”

I didn’t reach for it right away.

Inside was the typewriter.

Same dulled keys. Same one pressed lower than the rest.
A few sheets of blank paper.

“I didn’t tag it,” I said.

“I know.”

We finished the joint. Drank two more beers. Talked
about nothing worth keeping.

When Mark left, the night closed in around the cabin.

I lit a gas lamp and some candles inside. The typewriter
sat on the coffee table.

NOTE_6

THE TYPEWRITER

I sat at the table with the lamp turned low.

The typewriter waited.

I rolled in a sheet of paper. It went in crooked at first. I backed it out and tried again.

The carriage stuck halfway, then slid into place.

I rested my fingers on the keys.

Nothing happened.

No voice or image. No heat.

I typed a line.

The keys struck unevenly. The ribbon was dry. The letters came out thin.

I tried again.

The “b” key stayed down.

I lifted it with my fingernail.

It dropped back immediately.

I fell into the sofa.

“What’s the point?”

I sat up, tried writing something else. Nothing poetic or literary.

Just my name.

The machine choked on it.

I pulled the page out.

Two lines. Nothing finished.

The paper felt warmer.

I set it aside and fed in a fresh sheet.

This time, I didn't start with words. I just pressed keys. Let them hit where they wanted.

The carriage jammed.

I stopped.

I didn't know what I was allowed to write.

NOTE_7

WEDNESDAY

After a quick breakfast, I didn't linger.

I lifted the typewriter into the back of the van. It had more weight than its iron should carry. As I set it down, my thumb opened again. A little red, and a rustle in the trees. I shut the door.

The engine purred as I coasted down the mountain.

The town looked the same as it always did. I passed the coffee shop and kept the money for gas. Halfway down Main Street, something let go underneath me. A clunk, then a long metal scrape. The engine still ran, but the van lost its pull. I coasted to the curb and shut it off.

I sat there for a moment, pressing my back into the seat. Then got out and looked under the van. The rear axle joint had failed. The driveshaft hung loose, dragging. I didn't have the money or the time for a mechanic or even parts.

I scanned the street. A sign in the pawn shop window flickered to life—OPEN. Neon glow over dusty assets. I

walked further up the street and found my broken universal joint scattered in pieces on the asphalt.

I opened the back of the van and took stock.

Half an hour later, I crawled out from underneath. My hands were black with grease—the driveshaft was persuaded back in place.

I wiped my palms in the pockets of my jeans, climbed in, and drove away.

The town and the repair were in the rearview. Running late now, but moving.

I turned into the Blue Hotel's back lot just as a car tore past me, throwing dust and gravel. I watched it go—was that Chris?

Arthur was cursing at Mark when I reached the lobby.

“David, get over here. We’ve got a big problem.”

My heart sank.

Mark shook his head. “Come on, Art, we didn’t take anything. I was with Dave all day. Whatever happened, we weren’t involved.”

“If either of you guys took anything, tell me now.”

Mark looked at me, then I looked at Arthur.

“Junior has it back now.” Arthur gazed past us when he said it. He wouldn’t name it. He wouldn’t name him.

Mark stayed silent.

So did I.

“We’ve got too much work to finish to be wasting time on this. And now we’re down a man. Let’s get to it.”

Arthur went back into the saloon, where he’d commandeered a booth for an office.

Mark and I were left in the lobby, leaning on the bellhop's desk. It hadn't seen customers in a long time, and when it last did, I doubted it was providing service.

Mark pressed the dull brass bell.

Nothing.

He pressed it again. Harder.

"Dead." Mark had already decided.

I lifted it. The spring was intact. The striker wasn't jammed. I set it back down.

Lot #0668 | Bell; brass | Condition: inoperable.

Back to the basement. Damp stone. Dust. Cold fluorescent light.

Mark grabbed a fresh roll of tags and snapped it open with his thumb. The sound hit the room like a threat. "Let's just finish this section," he said. Not a plan. A procedure.

We worked in silence, falling into rhythm. Lift. Loop. Twist. Tagged. Set it down. Move on.

I tagged a stack of chairs leaning against the wall like a drunk who'd lost his friends.

Lot #0389 | Banquet chairs (x8) | Condition: rough.

Lot #0390 | Kitchen knives | Condition: dull.

Lot #0391 | Oil lamps | Condition: some chimneys cracked.

The numbers climbed faster than felt honest. Every now

and then I caught myself slowing. Looking too closely. Letting an object linger in my hands longer than it needed to. Each time, I corrected myself. Set it down. Kept moving.

Nothing protested.

I found it in a milk crate full of old menus. A guest book. Leather cracked at the spine. Names, dates, short notes written for no one in particular. Some were careful. Some rushed. Others written like someone might actually come back to read them later. I didn't read long enough for it to mean anything more than words on a page.

I pulled a tag and tied it to the crate.

Mark broke the silence. "This guy didn't throw anything out. He could've had a yard sale to pay the tax."

"You're probably right. He sort of is. He just outsourced the labour."

"Ridiculous." Mark tied another tag without looking.

I reached into the next crate. A mix of religious items—candlesticks, a rosary tangled around itself. At the bottom, wrapped in a linen towel, was a small painted wood icon.

Saint Joseph.

The paint was worn where hands had touched it most—face, shoulders, the child balanced on his arm.

I held it. Nothing happened.

No smell of incense or memory of kneeling. Only the hum of the lights and the ache in my feet.

I stood there gripping the icon. Long enough to notice I was waiting.

There was a small chip at the base. Someone had glued it once and the repair showed.

Mark glanced over. "Say one for me."

I put it back. St. Joseph looked past me. He wasn't disappointed. Just... absent.

I tagged the crate clean.

Lot #0398 | Devotional items | Condition: decent.

The work overtook the moment. The numbers stopped meaning anything. They never did. The objects turned into units. The silence too.

Arthur came halfway down the stairs. "You boys stay busy. We've got to pick up the pace."

"Keep busy—get paid," Mark said flatly.

I hadn't seen Chris all day.

We didn't talk about it.

NOTE_8 THURSDAY

When I arrived for work, Arthur was already tagging behind the bar. When he saw Mark and me, he grabbed his clipboard and started moving.

We went back to the basement, where the rhythm returned quickly. We were behind schedule and the work didn't care that today mattered more.

Lot #0312 | Glassware | Condition: mismatched.

Lot #0453 | Toolbox; plumbing tools | Condition: serviceable.

Lot #0480 | Rolodex; business cards | Condition: dividers missing.

Above us, a sharp, angry voice rose over "Runaround Sue." Then Arthur's loud response, trying to keep it level.

Mark paused. "That'll be him."

We didn't go up right away. We waited for the sound to get better. It got worse.

When we got to the top of the stairs, Mortimer Junior was storming through the lobby, red-faced and swaying, a baseball bat loose in one hand. Arthur was following. They stopped inside the saloon entrance—Mortimer Junior too close to the jukebox.

"You people don't listen," he said, the bat swaying lightly by his side. "I told you—this is not for sale."

Arthur kept his distance. "We've been through this."

"You've been through nothing," Mortimer Junior said. "This is mine. I pay rent here, my stuff's off-limits."

"It's in the saloon, it's under seizure," Arthur replied. Calm. Flat. "And if you swing that thing, it stops being a conversation."

Mark stepped forward—not aggressive. But occupying space better than most people.

Mortimer Junior raised the bat, and for a moment I thought he might actually do it—take a real swing, not at Mark, but at an easier target. The Wurlitzer.

The moment passed. He lowered the bat, breathing hard.

"This is bullshit," he muttered, already backing away. "You're a bunch of bloodsucking lowlifes."

He took cover behind the bar—dropped the bat on the bar top, then a glass, then the whiskey bottle. The record kept playing like it still believed in the place.

Arthur shook his head. "That's the last time," he said, though none of us believed it.

Mortimer Junior knocked back his drink. He picked up

the bat, reached beside the cash register and took the receipt spike. Iron base. Sharp point.

“What do you think you’re doing with that?” Arthur asked. “That’s got a tag on it. Put it back.”

“Make me. Or call the cops. I don’t care,” he said, walking right past Arthur into the lobby.

“Leave the tag!” Arthur shouted.

He didn’t.

“Not worth it,” said Mark.

Arthur unplugged the jukebox.

* * *

Arthur’s team arrived soon after and all at once. Appraisers. Valuers. Cataloguers. A contents specialist. They moved through the hotel like a forensics unit, deciding what evidence had what value.

The catalogue crew were moving some high-value items to the dining room.

The basement was done enough that Arthur ordered us to move on to finish the saloon.

The locals and the barkeep were gone. The admin team were setting up in the saloon.

The jukebox was still off.

Mark went over to it.

“Shame,” he said.

He reached behind the cabinet and plugged it back in.

The machine hummed—low and steady. The sound of something built to work.

“Play something.”

I selected “Blue Moon” by The Marcells.

The doo-wop harmonies brightened the room. We kept processing.

Novelty shot glasses went into a box. A framed baseball team photo got tagged.

The walls were covered—metal beer signs, enamel ads, hand-painted boards nailed up crooked decades ago.

Everything there had once been chosen. Now it was tagged for mass liquidation.

I heard someone ask, “Can you turn that down?”

Pretended I didn’t.

The catalogue team was working every room. They didn’t get to know the hoard the way we had. They spoke in shorthand, assigning descriptions and categories.

“Group that.”

“Separate these.”

“No—that one goes in the dining room.”

Objects moved. Context broke.

The catalogue began asserting itself.

I watched a dresser lose its mirror because the mirror wasn’t original and complicated the description. Watched a table split from its chairs because they didn’t match closely enough. Watched a box of children’s drawings labelled as:

Lot #0748 | Mixed paper | Condition: used.

The tag didn’t lie.

It just didn’t say anything that mattered.

NOTE_9

THE DINING ROOM

The dining-room tables were almost full now, crowded with small antiques, china, and other high-value objects that were easy to place. People worked even faster—fluent.

Lot #0714 | WWII aircraft compass | Condition: needle stuck.

Lot #0375 | Oil portrait; sitter unidentified | Condition: torn.

Lot #0519 | Art Deco lamp | Condition: Euro plug; untested.

Looking around, the room didn't have anything I wanted—other than a means to a payday.

Some of the items we tagged as lots in the basement were now here as individual pieces. We were told to put new tags on them.

I learned to split a full matching dining set by type—plates, bowls, cups, saucers. That forced more bidding.

Mark finished off a table. "This stuff's clear," he said.

He was right. Clear purpose. Clean tags. The room was staged for extraction.

The cataloguers were quickly writing descriptions on tags and entering the items in the ledger.

We wandered through the lobby, checking corners, looking for anything we might have missed. That's when I noticed the song—its driving groove. "Touch Me" by the Doors. More of a persuasion than a request.

I was adjusting the suit of armour when I heard the conversation about a box we'd left untagged.

"Look at this," someone said.

"What is it?"

"Postcards. Hotel ones."

They were lying in a shallow box. Same image on the front—the Blue Hotel in better years. Blue paint intact. Windows bright. The name printed proudly along the bottom.

Most were filled out.

Short notes. Long ones. Addresses carefully written. Some crossed out and rewritten. A few blank, corners still sharp.

"Is that mail?" the lead cataloguer asked.

Someone flipped one over. "No stamps."

"So they're not mail—we can sell them," she replied.

"Are you sure?"

"Not stamped, not sent—doesn't count."

"What do we call them?"

She picked one up. "Vintage stationery. Group it. One lot."

They gathered the postcards, squared the edges, and tagged the box.

Lot #0468 | Vintage stationery | Condition: some written on.

I didn't move any closer.

The catalogue didn't hesitate.

I was near the front desk. The desk itself wasn't going anywhere—built in, part of the room. But the pen had been tagged.

A desk pen. Chained. Meant to stay.

The tag hung from the chain.

There were words on it. Crossed out.

~~Lot #0437~~

~~Desk pen, restrained~~

I left it alone.

The music slowed, the pitch dipped, then it stopped.

The catalogue crew was finished.

It had taken us three and a half days to tag the place. It took only one day to commodify it.

* * *

Late afternoon, for the first time in years the front doors opened. Early viewing. The space filled quickly. People strolled in with notebooks and coffee cups, pretending not to want anything yet. Pointing. Whispering.

Arthur moved constantly. Mark had become more quiet. He stayed close without comment.

I was told to bring a crate up from the basement.
When I set it down I noticed a trophy and picked it up.
Polished metal. Cool. Mounted on a black base with a
nameplate I couldn't read.
I tilted it.
The room shifted.
Flashing lights. Cameras. Compressed beats. Someone
called my name.
I moved forward without deciding to.
The floor beneath me was red. Clean. Each step already
known.
Heat. Want. Envy.
Conversations opened with ease. Men nodded. Women
smiled.
I wasn't pretending.
That was the problem.
The crowd outside looked for faces they should
know.
I was someone. Not because they knew me—because they
didn't.
Then a shift.
A look that didn't land.
Someone checked a list.
My name wasn't missing.
It was finished.
I looked at the trophy again.
The plate was blank.
Polished clean. Reflective.
I could see myself in it.

There, back in the lobby. Voices. Footsteps. A chair sliding.

The thing in my hands was an object someone once held high.

I set it down.

When I looked again, it already had a tag.

Eventually the crowd in the hotel subsided, viewers left, and the auction team were finishing up.

Outside, the air had turned flat and colourless.

Mark lit a cigarette. "Payday tomorrow."

I nodded.

NOTE_10 FRIDAY

The day started before anyone said anything important.

Engines idled in the lot—diesel, gasoline. Trucks, vans, trailers backed in at odd angles, some like they'd slept there overnight. License plates from British Columbia, Alberta, Washington, Oregon. Men and women in work boots and ball caps stood around with coffee or tape measures, measuring things that weren't theirs.

The hotel no longer felt like it belonged to anyone.

A woman with a clipboard stopped near Mark and me.

"Can you two do me a favour?"

She didn't wait for an answer.

"Turn the tags so they're facing out. Some of them are twisted."

That was it.

We fixed the tags in the dining room, then moved through the lobby, straightening wire, rotating numbers toward the aisles.

Arthur walked past us, fast, already elsewhere in his head. He registered us the way you register furniture—present. Sometimes useful.

A glance, an adjustment of pace. His jaw set, then released.

That was enough.

Mark looked down, twisted a tag neat and flat.

He spoke low. “If Arthur didn’t want us here, he should have paid us yesterday.”

I watched Arthur march into the saloon.

“Let’s keep our heads down,” Mark said.

I kept still. I looked at that back corner where Arthur disappeared into the saloon—the jukebox beyond, and the back door where I’d first entered.

Our work was finished. The tags were all turned to meet strangers. Pathways had been widened, furniture angled for show. The auction crew swept through the hotel, like stagehands.

At the front desk, the chained pen was upright in its base. The tag hung loose from the chain. It hadn’t been corrected.

For the first time all week, there was nothing left to touch.

Arthur stood in the dining room and cleared his throat.

“Ladies and gentlemen.”

That was the signal. The permission to begin. Then—the gavel.

The dining room went first.

It had become a showroom, its tables crowded with the best items that would fit. People moved fast. Hands shot up.

Heads nodded. Arthur's voice found its rhythm—practiced, confident, unbothered by sentiment.

Sold.

Numbers moved. Items disappeared.

The lobby followed.

Someone from the admin team asked me to grab a copy of the catalogue from the saloon.

I went and got one.

When I came back, they said they didn't need it anymore.

Mark waved me over.

We slipped out back to smoke one.

The saloon came next.

First to go was the pool table.

Then the Wurlitzer. It was plugged in for the sale and got the crowd louder than anything that day. The bidding climbed higher than any of us had guessed. Mortimer Junior wasn't there. No one mentioned him. The jukebox wasn't there either. Sure, it was on the floor—but whatever it had been was over. No one complained.

Next up were the bar stools. Then the mirrors. The glassware boxed and counted. Someone shouted, "Five hundred for the bar."

"Not for sale," Arthur said in amusement, which got a big laugh.

Someone else bought the unopened bottles that were no longer off-limits since the paperwork cleared.

Then the saloon was done and the crowd moved on.

Only the bid winners stayed behind and lined up to get processed.

The team in the temp office booths worked as fast as they could. Cash drawers, carbon paper, payment machines—buyers paid immediately or didn't bid again.

Money kept things moving.

The walls were stripped bare within the hour. Each item pulled off the wall left a pale outline behind, a cleaner shape where time had been held back by habit.

The Wurlitzer left through the front doors on a dolly, wrapped in blankets. A credenza followed, scraping the door frame as two men carried it out.

Chains clanked. Ratchets clicked. The parking lot became chaotic. Engines revving, men shouting numbers to one another, trailers inching forward and back.

Come late afternoon, there were two auctions at once. The smaller junk in the basement and the bigger junk outside. Arthur called bids outside through a microphone.

A few cars. A tractor that hadn't run in years. Equipment whose value depended entirely on who needed it that week.

Nothing in the basement interested the pickers. The small crowd was mostly locals looking for deals on tools or hoping something interesting might be hidden in a boxed lot. There were a few tools down there I thought of bidding on—didn't know if I could. Nothing happened when I touched them.

No thinning or heat.

The appraisers called out lots in clusters now. No romance left.

Sold.

Sold.

Sold.

The day stretched. The serious buyers were done. What remained were the leftovers.

Mark and I were sitting on the front steps. No one had told us to go home yet. Arthur was still chanting outside. Locals bidding on some old yard equipment and an Oldsmobile.

Then Arthur called the final lot. "Ladies and gentlemen," he said coarsely, voice carrying through the whole property and beyond from a PA speaker. "The catalogue ends here."

That was it.

The parking lot was busy with people loading. I saw one man break his taillight trying to load a dresser into his hatchback. His wife gave him a look.

Arthur saw us and paced over. "Right, I have to get you fellas paid."

He pulled a sheet from his back pocket and did some quick math. A thick wad of bills came out of his front pocket. He counted the money out loud into our hands.

Cash.

Not even an envelope.

No speech.

No handshake that meant anything more than completion.

And Arthur was gone.

We stood there for a moment, the Blue Hotel behind us. Winning bidders were still there and the light in Room 304 was still burning.

Mark jerked his chin toward the hotel. "Well, that's that."

"Yeah," I said.

We went our separate ways.

The hotel stayed where it was. The objects didn't.

And nothing asked me what I thought about any of it.

NOTE_11

CODA

I don't remember when I left the cabin. Only that one day I was gone. Towns blurred. Jobs changed. I tried to fix things that didn't want to be fixed. I learned to move on before anyone too important noticed I'd been there.

Mark and I stayed in touch for a few months, before one of us left town first. I imagine the objects from the Blue Hotel scattered too. Private homes. Storage units. Living rooms where no one knew where a thing came from, only that it sort of fit for now. The typewriter remained in the wind.

I carried the catalogue longer than I meant to. It wasn't useful. It didn't explain anything.

When writing it down, I learned a little. Nothing wise or heroic. Only that I wasn't meant to. The moment I wrote it, the moment you read it, we changed it.

I can still hear Arthur's voice.

The catalogue ends here.

Sold as-is.

No warranty implied.

SOLD.

NOTE_12

ADDENDUM

Additional items as recorded:

Lot #0812 | Sign; “Employees Only” | Condition: paint chipped; mounting holes bent.

Lot #0813 | Bottle; small; green glass | Condition: no label; residue inside.

Lot #0814 | Blue Saloon coasters; full box | Condition: mostly new; one with lipstick mark; partial phone number written.

Lot #0815 | Record (45); Billie Holiday “I’ll Be Seeing You” / “I’ll Get By” | Condition: VG; plain sleeve; incl. jukebox title strip.

FILE_ TWO
THE HERMITAGE

RITUALS OF COMPLIANCE

NOTE_1

THE SEARCH

Cloud forest. Warm fog hung in the trees above a dirt track cut into the mountainside. Spanish crackled over the radio. I couldn't translate it. I didn't need to.

I was riding shotgun in a camo green Jeep through the Mexican highlands. Binoculars hung from my neck. A granola bar and a water bottle rested on my lap. The men around me had machine guns and the posture of people who don't need to raise their voices.

The driver, the boss of the detail, wore neon Oakleys and motocross streetwear. Not the usual soldier look. Different kind of authority. Different kind of off-roading.

Mist closed around us. The convoy worked the hillside. One Humvee ahead. One behind.

"Tell me again," he said, like you repeat a code to confirm you copied it right.

I answered the way you answer people with guns.

The truth is, I was convinced nothing was wrong.

But that wasn't a resource.

My thoughts were a light breeze. Their thoughts summoned a small army, and I was carried along—

The tires made that soft crunch sound on the trail. I kept waiting for the moment someone would notice how unnecessary this was, laugh, and call it off.

No one laughed.

I looked at my hands, dead still. My calm seemed to make them uneasy. In their story, someone important had been kidnapped.

And I was the last person to see them.

The radio squawked. The tone, the look, they were talking about me.

I was part of an operation now.

No fear. No panic. Only a familiar residue: I never had a say.

NOTE_2 THE ARRIVAL

Three weeks prior.

The bus switchbacked up a mountain, then down towards a small city where tourists don't go. All my belongings were with me in a backpack, and a book on my lap called *Everything Is Teaching Us*. I tried reading but I was getting motion sick. A yellow sticky note kept the page, marked with a name and a phone number.

Mexico was a side quest. A month-long mission to cook for a Mexican monk I'd met in Canada. He was coming to set up a hermitage in a mountain cabin.

The bus rattled—old model, no AC, windows down, hot breeze.

I'd be arriving early. Early felt like I was prepared. I had the number. That was the plan. A number and my willingness to follow instructions. I wasn't an insider, just willing enough to be useful. I wanted in. Wanted to be a monk without *wanting* it. Like you're supposed to.

When the bus arrived, I stepped off and stood for a moment in the terminal. Taxi ushers called out and moved in. I sidestepped them, continued to the street and escaped down the sidewalk. I needed a snack. Something processed, familiar. Mexican Coke and corn chips.

It was time to make that phone call.

Someone answered after two rings, in Spanish.

I gave my name. Then the name I was supposed to say.

I understood one word: *No*.

I said my name again.

Where I'd expected to find warmth, there was a procedure.

"Hotel Mexico," the voice said. That's all I caught.

They were trying to give me instructions on where to get picked up, but they changed plans because 'Hotel Mexico' was easier for me to understand. I didn't expect a room there. The monk told me that his mother would be happy to put me up. He had changed his arrival date, so it went from a few days to a week.

When I found it, I knew it was the official hotel of the city. The location and the architecture made it clear. I stepped inside and stood where it seemed acceptable to stand. I tried to look like I was waiting for someone important, which I was, technically.

This was the moment I wondered if I was a person they wanted to retrieve.

My mind kept running as trained: interpreting discomfort as a spiritual exercise.

This is a test, I told myself.

A white sedan pulled up, nothing special. I didn't require anything special, but I half expected it. The driver—strong but relaxed, a Mexican Magnum P.I. without the floral print—wore blue jeans and a gun on his hip. He got out waving a sign with my name on it, like it was his first time. I got in.

He drove hard. Shifting gears, working the brakes, pulling tight turns. We didn't talk much. After a while he smiled, like something in my silence had finally registered as harmless.

We ripped through the city grid and I let myself imagine the next part going the way I'd been promised. Hospitality. A wealthy family playing patron to a monk's project. I'd been living in a monastery in British Columbia off and on over the past year—long enough for the monk to feel like a friend. Long enough that my offer to cook read as commitment, not enthusiasm. He was given independence from the Canadian abbot, who had ordained him. If I came down and did the work, it made me part of the group even if no one would ever say it out loud.

The abbot was due for a visit in three weeks. I had the practice. He could give me a place at his monastery back in Canada.

That was my frame of mind when I noticed we didn't seem to be traveling in a nice-neighbourhood direction. We reached the end of a side street and stopped near the corner. Even the nice places there hid behind plain block walls, but this didn't look like a residence. It looked like a place you get dropped at.

NOTE_3

FRANCISCO

The driver was aloof—present the way a door is present: he existed to redirect flow. He said something in Spanish, checked the surroundings and opened his door. Bodyguard energy.

I got out and walked into the heat. The street noise hit me. I followed as he carried my bag to the front entrance.

A woman opened the front door. I went inside. He set my bag down and introduced me. She was friendly, but we both knew I was misplaced.

I assumed—because of the monk's instruction, because of his offer and wealthy mother—that we were going to a home.

This wasn't a home. It was a homeless shelter.

Albergue San Francisco.

Not a normal place to stay when you're told you'll be taken care of.

The driver left.

My plan collapsed into humiliation.

I didn't understand why I'd been put there.

I told myself: test.

But my body didn't believe me.

My body believed: rejection.

She went into the kitchen and made a call on a cordless phone. She looked at me while speaking.

I wanted to make it work, to endure.

There was a couch meticulously covered in clear plastic.
Could I sit on it?

If there was a place for me this wasn't it.

The manager turned her back. I picked up my bag and reached for the door.

It was better outside. It felt safer to be lost than to be assigned.

I walked deeper into the city until I couldn't find my way back if I tried.

* * *

I don't remember the exact corner where it happened, but I remember the young man.

"Hey, ese!" he shouted, passing by on a bike.

I heard him but pretended I didn't. Keep marching. Eyes down.

"Yo, homie? What are you doing here?" He was circling on the road.

Keep moving. Don't engage.

"Where are you from?"

English. A resource. This looked like risk. It sounded like hope.

He had stopped on his bike ahead of me, not blocking the sidewalk but one wheel on the curb.

I looked up and made eye contact.

Warm. Friendly. Grace.

“I’m Francisco. What’s your name?”

“Dave.”

A young man. Careful in the way he spoke to me. Respectful. The kind of respect that didn’t feel performed. It felt like he’d decided I was a person and he’d treat me like one.

We walked and talked, Francisco rolling his bike beside him.

I asked how his English was so good. He said he’d been deported from Utah recently for driving without a license. His wife was still there.

I told him I was here to meet a friend I’d met in Canada. A monk. I said his family was supposed to put me up, but I left.

“Put you up, and you left?”

“Yeah. It didn’t feel right.”

I told him the family name. I tried to pronounce the name of the shelter—Albergue... San Francisco.

“No. Homie, that’s a homeless shelter. But they’re a good family,” he said. “That doesn’t make sense. He’s your friend?” He looked at me like it couldn’t be true.

“Yeah,” I said, “I’m here to help. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Maybe a hotel. I’m not sure I can afford a whole week.”

He nodded once, decision made.

“We should take you back. They own that place,” he said. “They’ll take care of you. I can talk to them at the shelter and find out what’s going on.”

Francisco walked me back. He kept defending them the whole way—good family, mix-up, don’t worry—like saying it out loud could stabilize it.

When we got to the shelter, the manager was upset. Not relieved. Stressed. Like she’d spotted an error she couldn’t afford. She went straight to the phone. While she was talking, she kept looking at Francisco.

She lowered the phone. “Who are you?”

Francisco answered. Her tone shifted. Rude. Almost yelling. Ordering.

I understood the shape: accusation, blame, control.

Francisco took it. He waited until there was a gap, then turned to me.

“The mother is away,” he said. “They want you to stay here.”

The woman kept going—into the phone, then at Francisco.

“They don’t trust me,” he said. “They say you shouldn’t be hanging out with strangers.”

I looked at her. Then back at him.

When she turned back to the phone, Francisco leaned in close.

“I finish work at two p.m.,” he said. “Tomorrow. I’ll meet you here. I’ll show you the town.”

And then he left, like he knew staying near that phone call would only make it worse.

I stood there and bowed my head, struggling to make this a lesson.

The woman handed me the phone. It was the monk’s mother. English, finally, but not comforting. She told me she’d be back next week. Until then, I was to stay at the shelter. That was it.

I thanked her. Of course I thanked her.

After the call, I was placed in a small room at the back.

I dropped my things and told the manager I was going out for some food. I left and walked around town for a bit—to feel like I could still move on my own.

But I kept checking the time.

I had to be in by 6 p.m.

NOTE_4

THE EXTRA BIKE

For six nights, I lived at the shelter. The rules came down in broken Spanish, sharp gestures. The message was clear enough: if you don't leave by 7 a.m.—you'll be locked in all day. If you go out and are not back by 6 p.m.—you'll be locked out all night.

It felt like the discipline I had come to Mexico to practice, but stripped of the romance. The shelter manager softened when the chaos of the morning cleared. She let me eat breakfast in the kitchen with her instead of with the men in the mess hall. More importantly, I negotiated a small mercy. She would let me stay until 8 a.m. while she cleaned up. An extra hour in that world was a VIP upgrade. At 8 a.m. I was released.

I spent the morning in the town center, killing time. I sat on a bench and watched high school kids—two guys, two girls—flirting and laughing in uniforms. They had a

schedule. I had a plan to dissolve myself. They approached me, tried their English, told me I was the first white person they'd ever seen in their town. They walked me through the market, made me try different foods. It was a taste of normal life. The teens were the anchor. We made a plan to meet the next day at 11:30 a.m.

I went back to the shelter and waited out front to meet Francisco. He showed up right at 2 p.m. We walked. He translated the city for me. Never asked for anything. Just seemed happy to spend time with me, to speak English, to be helpful.

After a few hours I returned to the shelter and took my place in the back room, waiting for the next day to repeat itself.

I sat there reading: Impermanence, suffering, no self. Coming back to the idea that this truly was a test.

By the monks, maybe.

By some unknowable force, definitely.

That force was more reliable than humans.

Humans rearranged me.

The force at least had a theme.

If I endured, I won. Outlasting the discomfort felt like power.

If I had no desire, I'd be free.

For a few days I repeated the routine. Breakfast with the cook. Late morning in the town square. Afternoon with Francisco.

This time he rode up to the shelter on his bike, wheeling an extra one for me beside him.

He showed me more of the town, pointing out many restorations the monk's family had done to churches, heritage buildings, and monuments. The local geological museum had been the deceased father's personal rock collection. He told me that they used to be the richest family in town, and were now second only to the blue jeans family. American brands like Levi's and SilverTab were made in this town. He explained the tension: the blue jean bleach and dye poisoned the well water. Everybody hated them. Birth defects, health problems, and now everyone was forced to buy bottled water. Even the monk's family were not immune. They had cattle, chickens and crops. They needed clean water.

I knew the monk's family was wealthy. I hadn't realized they were practically royalty.

"They built half the town," he said.

And I believed him. In that town, the wealth had architecture.

It had security.

He took me to his family home, where he lived with his mom and younger brother. It was on the edge of the city, where the roads turned to dirt. Stray dogs, garbage, broken-down cars and dirty ditches.

The house was small, all brick, but had all the basic amenities. He was proud of the washing machine and big screen TV.

We left the bikes there and took a transit van back to town. He made sure I got back safe. He was working double shifts the rest of the week at a cardboard box factory.

That was the last time I saw Francisco.

Inside the shelter, my determination collapsed. I did some laundry by hand in a wash basin in the open courtyard.

I spent the evening in that back room.

NOTE_5 THE CROSS

The next morning, I stayed inside.

I didn't want to go out and perform "okay" anymore.

I skipped breakfast. The manager came back and asked if everything was alright. I told her I was going to stay in. Then—the doors were locked.

Back to sleep.

When I woke up, it felt like a mistake.

And that's when the roof escapes started.

Clay tiles. They break when you step wrong.

Razor wire on top of a ten-foot wall.

You don't climb over it. You negotiate it. I found a spot where the wire was breachable. The busy street and sidewalk waited below. I hung over the side of the wall and dropped. Someone saw me and laughed. I laughed too.

The afternoon was exploring and snacking. Returning to the shelter, I slipped through the entrance and went right to the back. If she noticed I'd left, she didn't mention it.

. . .

Doing it twice made it half as absurd.

I learned where to put my weight, where the best gap in the wire was—how to avoid attention. A cut from the wire. A broken ankle from the drop. A run-in with the Policía. I avoided it all.

My feet hit the city sidewalk.

A large cross topped a hill on the horizon. I walked toward it, trusting I'd find the path.

At the edge of town it was cornfields and dirt roads. I chose one and kept going. A small farmhouse on the hillside had a speaker facing out the window. The Shadows' rendition of "Apache" played loudly. The sun's strength on my brow, a tumbleweed rolled ahead, and the trailhead appeared.

I climbed the mountain. At the top, I knelt by the cross and paid respect. Maybe I was buddhist and trying to erase myself, but I wasn't going to try and erase Him.

NOTE_6 THE ESTATE

Day six in the homeless shelter, I got the call. It was time to cross the street. To the mom's estate.

It was an 18-foot concrete wall that extended half a kilometre just on the side that faced the shelter. Gun towers rose even taller. They were manned—guards in green army gear and black baseball hats, ready with scopes on their rifles. I saw at least three towers on that block alone.

I walked to the main gate. The walls angled into large steel doors, ten feet wide and fifteen feet tall, set under an arch. There was no bell. No door knocker. I looked for a way to request entrance, then I saw it. A slit in the concrete. A steel cover slid open, only big enough for a set of eyes. "Hola," the eyes said. "I'm David," I replied.

The steel doors creaked open. Two men with machine guns greeted me. It was like a portcullis, walled on two sides. Attack dogs lurched at me. Chains pulled hard against steel

anchors embedded in the masonry. The men shouted back at the barking dogs.

Golf green filled the open pattern in the driveway pavers. The estate house stood straight ahead, flanked by garages, carports, and outbuildings. Green lawn—the first I’d seen in town—stretched beyond for what must have been sixty acres. Tall trees scattered across the manicured expanse. A black helicopter was perched on a designated area of the turf.

Lush gardens wrapped the buildings. A massive walled compound in the city. I was handed off to the driver—the bodyguard who’d dropped me at the shelter. He led me toward the house. There was a parrot in a cage by the front door. I had the feeling of being inside someone’s private country. Then the mom came outside.

“Welcome, David,” she said politely.

The mom was a restoration specialist of churches and monasteries. She had tea brought to the library building. Besides the thousands of books, it was filled with old things that looked like they’d been taken from somewhere else and cleaned until they looked rightful.

As we had tea, I told her I was originally from Vancouver. She said she had a condo there. Of course she did. She asked what I’d done all week.

I told her about Francisco. He was the best thing about the week.

She made a face like she already knew. Like everything in town was known to her if it mattered.

Her reaction was sharp.

Angry, almost.

“Dangerous,” she said.

She tried to flatten him. To turn him into a category.

My lived experience—his kindness, his carefulness, his second bike—had no authority against her label.

I nodded. That small nod you show when listening even when the mind is resisting.

I got quiet. It wasn't a time for pushback.

I was learning, without wanting to, that miscommunication with this family triggered things.

Tea time was over. And like a strange guest I was placed in a small room off the kitchen—servant quarters.

The cook fed me dinner in the kitchen.

The monk would arrive tomorrow.

NOTE_7

THE HERMITAGE

After breakfast the monk arrived. He apologized for the change in his schedule and explained the reasoning for the shelter. He already knew how I'd interpret it. Opportunity for practice.

We didn't leave for the cabin right away. Some estate staff were out shopping for us. They'd make sure the place would be well stocked. We hung out in the library building. He was busy doing emails. He offered some time for me to check emails as well, briefly. He let something slip about corresponding with a female disciple in Mexico City. We all let things slip. Those things we leak, they grab my attention and the recorder starts going. I can't help it.

And then, it was go time. We left the estate in two minivans and a car. All to deliver the two of us and our food.

Finally, we were going to the hermitage. What I came for.

A mountain retreat area where wealthy locals have places to escape the heat.

Isolation. Discipline. A cabin. Paths. Trees. Cloud forest air.

And the schedule took over. The monk was on a mission to sit 4-hour meditation blocks twice a day. Adhitthana—don't adjust, don't move, sit perfectly still on the cushion for 4 hours until the bell rings. And I was there for it. I wasn't a rookie. This was what I wanted. Not a lesson from the monk, a supportive environment.

We sat.

I cooked.

I walked.

I watched.

Four days in, I was dialled. I made an audio recording:

REC_oIH.

Phone alarm: four fifteen. Dismissed.

Dressed. Sitting room: dark.

Cushion adjusted. Seated: four thirty.

Timer set by the monk to mark end.

Sitting maintained.

Timer chime: eight thirty. Light: adequate.

Sitting concluded.

Coffee prepared. No breakfast.

Free period: one hour.

Meal: eleven a.m. On time. Presented.

Only meal concluded.

Free period until two p.m. Walked.

Seated: two p.m.

Sitting maintained until six p.m.

Free period. Read. Bed.

Filed.

No further action.

The 4-hour sessions kept going. Eyes closed. No movement. Me and him, absorbed in the practice. I could endure the discomfort. I could let go of thoughts. Stillness became a skill.

But sitting that long, the pain was brutal. I'd watch the breath. If the pain was too much, I'd watch it instead. Don't hide in the breath, go right to the suffering.

One time the pain subsided but it felt like I was sitting *sideways*, like ninety degrees to the floor. So what. It passed. Then another time my head started **growing**. Like a water balloon, heavy and expanding.

We had maybe two more hours of sitting to go. Don't move. If you scratch one itch, you'll get three more. It wasn't a big deal. Don't want it gone. Don't want that relief that comes from not wanting it. This was how my mind wandered as excruciating pain took hold. Knees, hips, ankles, the tops of my feet against the floor. I accepted the pain as necessary. I stayed with it.

Then—the flood. All pain vanished in an instant. The body was light and tingling all the way through. The gentle effort to hold concentration was no longer needed. The mind had a bright ease on its own. It lasted until the bell rang and ended with a smile.

On the cushion I had some authority.

DISCLAIMER: The narrator's sustained doctrinal compliance and proximity to described concentration states are not presented as evidence of spiritual attainment.

This is just a different kind of suffering, I told myself. But I let it mean something. Simply that I belonged, with the monks.

Mostly it meant I was compliant in a very refined way.

* * *

During my free time in the afternoons, I'd take walks on the rough mountain roads. I explored the area, little farms, country folk, nice views.

I met a rural man with a donkey about an hour's walk from the cabin.

We did a back-and-forth gesture conversation. The kind that makes you grateful for hands.

I asked how long it took to walk to town.

He told me: one day if unburdened. Two days with a loaded donkey.

He pointed in the general direction, follow the jungle road. That made sense. Stick to the path.

It was practical information. Ground truth.

I filed it away.

NOTE_8

THE ABBOT

After two weeks of retreat in the same routine, the abbot arrived from Canada along with a resupply of groceries. He was delivered in the same three-vehicle caravan, led by the family bodyguard.

Authority entered the frame. He brought his own layman —Mike.

Catching up was casual. I knew him; I knew Mike. The abbot laughed about my time in the shelter. “Good opportunity for practice.”

The caravan left and the hierarchy quickly took physical form. I had the meal ready. I became a function inside the routine.

We ate in the same room used for meditation, the cabin’s great room. All pine walls, floor, and ceiling—imported from Canada like me. A wall of windows looked out over the landscape and, on the horizon, a view of Pico de Orizaba.

I set out the sitting mats with geometric precision. I

prepared the trays—tissue box, spittoon, water—arranged as he preferred.

I carried the alms bowls in their crochet cases, walking low, bent forward so my head never rose above theirs when I got close. I knew the movement protocol: avoid turning your back to the monks or the buddha statue—which in practice is impossible, but you make the effort. Side-step. Retreat. Exit backwards.

At mealtime, the formalities peaked. I approached the abbot and bowed three times until my forehead touched the floor.

“Ajahn, the sangha is invited for the meal.”

Three more bows, back out slow and low. In the kitchen, I presented each dish with both hands, making sure he was the final point of contact so the offering remained “pure.” Because I cooked the meal that day, the honour went to me. Proximity established.

The monks filled their bowls and took their seats. The abbot gave permission, relinquishing the offering so Mike and I could take food. Bowing three times, we took our seats. Then more waiting. Waiting for the chanting to conclude. Waiting for the abbot to take the first bite, then the other monk.

Until he was chewing, the meal hadn’t begun. No one else moved.

After the meal, the bowls were cleared and the floor was swept.

Meal complete: 1 hour cooking; 1 hour ceremony and eating; 15

bows.

My forehead had touched the ground fifteen times, and that was not counting the single standing bows. Fifteen bows to maintain the structure of an institutional hierarchy that, by doctrine, didn't exist spiritually.

I'd spent the last year orbiting his monastery in British Columbia, trying to prove I could hold the silence. That's where I met the monk. When I heard about this trip, I didn't wait to be invited. I saw the gap and injected my offer early.

The abbot seemed wary of ordaining me. The wariness lived in small placements: who he addressed, how long he paused before acknowledging me, how he responded to others praising me. Some kind of order was being kept. Like housework. Hygienic. Not spiritual. Institutional.

By the teaching, we were peers—two consciousnesses navigating suffering. But doctrine didn't run the room, the abbot did.

I returned to my old function: make yourself useful. Cook. Carry. Clean. Don't require explanation. Pass the tests. That was my method—professional compliance.

* * *

I didn't remember getting up.

I woke the house, startling Mike, the abbot, and the monk by shouting out my open bedroom window in the middle of the night. I didn't remember.

In the morning the abbot told me, like he was checking the sky. “David. Rough night?”

I looked at him, unsure.

“You were yelling,” he said. Casual. Like a weather report. Shame swelled. Shame is fast.

“What did I say?” I asked.

“*Go away. Get out of here,*” he said. “You were shouting out the window.”

The explanation came immediately, before a question could form. “Deep meditation—intense practice can do that,” he stated.

Like putting a tag on it. Like it was something he could translate and catalogue as handled. Safe.

The monk and Mike chuckled. I watched. Kept still. Testing, testing—nothing.

Lot #0816 | Dave’s scream in the night | Condition: contained.

At least while I was awake. Now I was supposed to be vigilant in my sleep too. I was merely lacking a skill. Yes, I’d read about that in the tales of Thai forest monks. I must be getting close.

Intense practice. Case closed.

The abbot looked at me, maybe more concerned than I was. In his own process. I said nothing. His explanation held.

I had done something loud and I didn’t own it. I had become unreliable even to myself.

After that morning, I felt more visible. Not fully. But enough to see I could be a problem.

NOTE_9 THUDONG

The monk wanted to do a thudong—a long walk to town.

This is an allowable austerity practice in the Thai forest monk mythology. Essentially being a wandering monk. In this case only for a day or two. This was the style I imagined I would practice when I became an independent monk. Sleep in a cave, walk from monastery to monastery in Asia, where locals would provide food if I went out in the morning for alms. Not as torture, not as hardship, but I thought at least for some years I could actually enjoy it. Living simply on generosity, supported by the system but somewhat adjacent. I wanted to go on this walk with the monk.

He'd been planning for a while. Someone bought him all the gear he was allowed to have. A monk could ask his parents for things. His mother had the means.

I noticed it the way other kids notice when someone has all the good toys.

I was given directions by the donkey man. The monk was

given a GPS device. He played with it for a week and plotted the route.

Mythology with coordinates.

He was studying the map, so I told him about my roadside chat and intel. He laughed.

I watched.

Watching was my main talent.

Soon after Mike and the abbot arrived, the decision happened.

Mike would go, I would stay and attend to the abbot.

I didn't protest. I didn't feel betrayal.

This was my preference not playing out. And I was volunteering to erase that.

So I did. I accepted it and even enjoyed it. I told myself staying behind meant more time for the abbot to get to know me. If he did, I'd be in. I'd play the long game.

They left one afternoon.

The monk and Mike ate well that morning. We had the meal a little earlier than normal.

They planned on sleeping out on the way—one night, maybe two.

We'd all heard the legends of monks living with tigers in the jungle. Compared to that, this should have been a walk in the park.

Mike took the camping food and supplies.

The monk took his backpack with his gear and his GPS.

The abbot and I waved them off.

The cabin wasn't all that big, so I spent the day crossing paths with the abbot.

I was reading a book in the basement. A zen book. It was more like opposition research. We were theravada. But the abbot chimed in. A light warning that zen has some “wrong ideas.” Now I had to watch what I was reading. He didn’t trust my ability to discern for myself, I thought. I must be projecting weakness. I continued reading the book.

No 4-hour sits. The new schedule was an hour in the morning and another in the evening. Boredom became the new discomfort filed as a spiritual challenge.

I went for a walk. Out on the dirt road I saw a familiar face. There was a caretaker who lived nearby. He brought us tortillas every other day. We started talking in broken phrases, smiling at the wrong times.

He tried to sell me a horse ride. I was tempted. I imitated a galloping horse, he imitated a horse walking on a leash. No, gracias.

Then he gestured to wait. He went inside his little house and came back out with something wrapped in a rag.

He pulled the cloth back.

It was a gun.

He tried to sell me a gun.

Casual.

Like offering coffee.

I declined.

“You hunt?” I asked, trying to bridge the gap.

“Sí,” he replied.

He managed to communicate that the neighbouring cottage belonged to the rival family. The one that makes blue jeans. He was also their cottage caretaker.

He told me about their property and its fenced-in reindeer.

“For hunting.”

He said it like it wasn’t ridiculous.

That detail stuck.

If the abbot had known this guy offered me a gun out here in the middle of nowhere, it would have made him uncomfortable.

One time we had a run-in with the Hells Angels in BC. We pulled into a gas station for coffee and about twenty Harleys were out front. The bikers were getting coffee too. I was amused by the contrast. He made a childlike face, scared of being embarrassed. Then stern.

“We’re not going in there.”

I offered to go in for us but was ordered to keep driving. He didn’t have to endure discomfort the way I did, or maybe this was a test for him and he knew how to pass it. Either way, he had done his time. I still had to do mine.

So I wouldn’t tell him about the gun.

NOTE_10

THE CALL

Less than twenty-four hours later, the phone rang.

I answered.

The mother was losing it.

“Where are they?” she demanded.

I tried to reassure her. I said the reasonable thing. “They aren’t supposed to be in town yet. They planned to arrive late afternoon or even the next day.”

“I’m very concerned. We need to find him.”

“He told me that you were aware of the plan. They aren’t late. What’s the reason for the concern?”

This made her angry. I just wanted to help.

It was turning into an argument. At some point she seemed to realize she was arguing with nobody important and calmed down.

She didn’t need to hear what I had to say. She ended the call.

Reason couldn't compete with panic when panic had money.

Not long after, I heard a plane engine. I looked out the window—a single-engine Cessna passed low over the cabin. The abbot was nearby assessing the situation.

The phone rang again. I answered. It was her again.

“I called the governor,” she said. “The search is in motion. They may want to talk to you.”

Her words didn't sound like a mother anymore.

I went out on the patio. The plane circled and dipped its wing. I waved. That seemed correct.

NOTE_11

THE SEARCH II

Soon after, two Humvees and a Jeep entered the driveway.

Men with machine guns got out wearing green fatigues with tactical gear. And the leader in his Oakleys.

Official enough. I didn't clock any insignias or obvious markings on the men or the vehicles.

He walked up to the patio. I was asked basic questions. Which way the monk went. What time they left. Information they should've already had. Did anyone else know about their plans?

And then I was told they'd be searching the jungle, and that I'd be coming with them.

"What resources do you have?"

Not a question. A directive.

Resources.

As if I was supposed to be prepared.

Like I might have something legitimate to offer. Besides

being a bad cook who'd been placed in a hermitage like a utensil.

I froze, then did inventory.

"I have binoculars," I said, like that would help me fit in.

"Good, bring them. And bring water."

At that moment the abbot was further down the patio by the door. As I went in to get the supplies I turned to him. "Is it okay if I go?"

I asked like it was actually his decision.

Like spiritual authority had jurisdiction over an armed convoy.

Shoulders shrugged, his palms turned up.

For a second I realized, in this reality, he was a nobody too.

Not morally or spiritually nobody.

On this mountain in Mexico, he was literally nobody.

A man in a robe standing inside someone else's power.

I moved quickly to the Jeep—the convoy was already rolling in their minds.

* * *

We drove southwest on the cloud forest road. Puerto del Aire is what they called that area. We passed a small shrine to the Virgin Mary at a crossroads. One of the soldiers made the sign of the cross.

The men were calm. The radios weren't.

My mind flashed to the caretaker offering me that gun.

Maybe I should have bought it. These guys might respect me.

I didn't know I wanted their respect until I was in their group. If I had the gun, I'd be more of a peer and less of a willing hostage.

"What time did you see them last?"

I had already answered this question at least once.

"What did they have for lunch?"

They weren't asking because they wanted to know. They were asking because they needed my mouth to agree with the shape of the story.

A fire pit by the roadside.

He keyed the radio. "¡Alto!"

The convoy stopped. He gave further instruction.

All four of us got out. The two men from the back seat raised their guns and guarded the Jeep.

One man got out of each Humvee, guns ready.

The driver and I investigated the fire pit while the four men stood guard with automatic weapons.

An empty sardine can lay beside the charcoal.

"Did they have this food?" he said, poking the can with a stick.

I wanted to laugh, but laughing would be insane. Laughing would be guilt.

I recognized this section of trail. I'd walked here before on one of my solo excursions.

"Man," I said, trying to keep my tone respectful, "we are like two kilometres from the cabin. I fed them lunch before they left. They didn't stop here."

He looked at me like I was obstructing.

Not with anger. I still can't put my finger on that look.

This is something I've never been able to fully reconcile: people aren't dumb. We just look dumb when we're performing roles.

They weren't solving a mystery. They were searching for confirming signals.

A sardine can is a signal.

My words were not.

We got back in the Jeep.

The convoy kept moving.

We snaked slowly through the cut.

It got quiet for a while, only the noise of the tires and engines. You couldn't call it a road anymore.

We stopped before a steep section.

They were making a plan. I tried to understand. If I watched close enough, if I focused hard enough, maybe I could comprehend. Continue on foot? Hold the position?

The radios woke up.

Short phrases.

Confidence.

Cheering, on the radio and in the convoy.

"Package secured," the leader said to me with a smile.

I wasn't relieved. I just closed the file.

NOTE_12

THE EXTRACTION

Note compiled from Mike's account of events:

It was around 2 p.m. on the second day of the walk. Mike and the monk were walking through a field outside of town.

A helicopter came fast and low, surprising Mike.

The monk was not surprised. He said something like, "That's for us."

The helicopter landed in the field. It was one of the family's fields.

They were taken to the family estate and landed on the lawn.

Until that point, Mike didn't know how rich they really were.

The two of them were not in great spirits.

They'd gotten into a big argument on day one of the hike. Fighting over GPS coordinates versus the path. Myth versus ground. Procedure versus reality. They took the monk's route

and got lost in a bramble. Rather than turn around they pushed through, following the blips on the screen.

That night they slept at the estate and came back to the hermitage the next morning. The van and car drove away and the machine that had been activated—plane, governor, convoy—relaxed, like it had never been tense at all.

The system had moved and then stopped.

That's all it needed.

NOTE_ 13

CONTINUATION

The hermitage returned to routine.

Cooking.

Walking.

Bowing.

Sitting.

The abbot remained wary.

The mom remained powerful.

Francisco remained dangerous—he had ground truth.

By the next day everyone acted like nothing happened.

I knew the ritual. I joined in the silence.

NOTE_ 14

THE DEPARTURE

I left according to schedule and took a bus to Mexico City.

A transition, not an adventure.

A chance to see what the intense practice did to me
outside the walls.

At the edge of town, I saw the local prison. Concrete and
fencing in the shape of custody.

And parked there, proudly in front, was a Ferrari.

Clean. Bright red. Like a flare.

Wealth sitting calmly beside confinement.

No one on the bus stared at that car like I did.

It didn't hide. It didn't try to be a lesson.

That place fell behind me.

The Ferrari was still.

I watched it until I couldn't.

FILE_ THREE
TERMINAL STATUS

NOT FOR BROADCAST

NOTE_1

GET DOWN (VIDEO SHOOT)

A hip-hop house party in Mississauga with three hundred kids and a twenty-thousand-dollar budget. My first music video production.

Two weeks of planning. Calling crew members found through referrals. Renting gear from houses I'd never heard of. I approved line items I barely understood. Dolly track. A jimmy jib. HMI lights. A generator. I signed the rental contracts and purchase orders.

The location was a luxury home in Lorne Park. Classic wealth, yellow paint, white trim. Pool in the back. Inside it held a private art collection we'd need to hide to avoid copyright issues. Two days before, the owner had agreed to \$2,000 for a 12-hour day. After being rejected by three other homeowners the previous week, I'd told the directors to wait in the car while I got the contract signed.

The partygoers weren't paid. They just came. Word

spread through the blocks that there was a pool party with a camera crew. They showed up in waves—mostly from Mississauga hoods like Woodlands, The Collegeway, Ridgeway, and Forestwood.

Lots of fitted caps, high-top sneakers and Timberlands, the city's youth carrying red cups and blunts.

I was told shootings were commonplace on hip-hop video sets. In Toronto, the police call it “gunplay.” I couldn't afford to worry.

The directors were an African duo. I'd been appointed to them by the production house. We ran through the shot list in the weeks leading up, mostly me telling them what we couldn't afford. They asked for an all-Black crew. They probably asked for a Black producer too. But that's not what they got.

This was their first real budget shoot too. They were excited. They acted like they were on a come up. I was acting too.

On shoot day they stood close to the monitor, calling action, then the next setup. My job was to make sure nothing stopped. The scenes moved fast. As long as the camera was going, I was pleased. Around dinnertime I heard someone shouting. “Get the producer.”

I didn't get radios for this shoot to save some money. Everyone noticed. I wouldn't make that mistake again. The 1st AD yelled into the backyard, “Where's the guy in the button-up shirt?”

“Coming,” I replied.

“Cops are out front, they're shutting us down.”

“Keep going,” I said.

I could handle it. I had paperwork. Authority respects paperwork.

Two cruisers were parked in the centre of the cul-de-sac. There wasn't room anywhere else due to the hundred-plus cars. I walked out to meet them. A sergeant had already stepped out.

“We got a noise complaint,” he said.

I handed him the film permit. The location agreement. The liability waiver signed by the homeowner.

“We're shooting a music video,” I said. “We've got everything filed.”

“Who is it, Drake?”

“No, it's [REDACTED].”

He immediately texted someone. While he waited for status confirmation, he read the permit. He looked at the vans and cars, then at the crowd of kids smoking on the lawn.

“How long are you gonna be?”

“Wrapped by 10 p.m.”

“You got security?”

“We've got PAs managing the perimeter.”

He didn't look convinced, then he smiled.

“My daughter knows who he is,” he said, looking up from his phone. That made it better. Proximity effect.

He ordered me to have most of the vehicles moved for fire code compliance. At least thirty cars were repositioned around the neighbourhood. My phone buzzed with a text from the executive producer, who wasn't on set. He asked

about the police situation. Someone went around the chain of command.

We motored through the shot list, trying to make up for lost time. Exteriors. Interiors. Crowd coverage. A neon acid trip scene in the basement. The camera chewed through memory cards. Day bled into night.

We set up for the poolside scene under strings of patio lights. By that time the executive producer had shown up. He told me he'd never seen a party shoot this big in all his years.

The director wanted one more shot. We weren't supposed to use the pool. The homeowner had been explicit.

But it was the last setup. The director looked at me. Then at the executive producer.

"Fuck it," he said, "you cool with it?"

"Let's do it," I said. Only because saying no would have shown I had no real power.

I looked at the crowd. The kids were drunk, happy, and ready to take the plunge.

The director called action. The beat dropped. The kids jumped. Fully clothed. Jordans hitting chlorinated water. Bodies crashing into the turquoise.

I stood by the monitor, watching the chaos through a small screen, calculating the deposit I might have forfeited.

We wrapped up at 10 p.m. The talent left in a black SUV. The crew loaded the trucks. The kids scattered into the subdivision. I was the last one out. I cleaned a little, walked the property with the owner. No damage. Told him I'd pay for a cleaner. His rental payment had already cleared.

Then I drove east to a midtown backyard that wasn't mine and unlocked a glorified garden shed.

Nine by seven feet. Foam mattress on plywood. Extension cord running through a drilled hole in the wall. I ducked inside and pulled the sleeping bag up to my chin.

I spent twenty thousand dollars that day.

I went to sleep in a box designed for storing rakes.

NOTE_2

FUNDING BODY

I'd wrap one video and jump right into the next. Different production houses had heard of a hungry producer and they'd try and scoop me. I turned down half the work that came my way if I didn't like the budget or didn't like the situation. MuchFACT was the funding mechanism that financed most professionally produced music videos in Canada. In my first year I spent about thirty-three percent of the entire fund.

The videos were mostly hip-hop. I was making about fifteen hundred a video. Each shoot took at least two weeks of pre-production, a day or two for shoot days, then post-production management, accounting, and wrap binder—which was a few hours a day for another week, maybe more.

The fund had \$573,870 that year. I moved \$189,000 of it. My cut: about \$14,500. I did a few videos paid for directly by labels and a TV commercial, another \$7,800 for those.

Now a gatekeeper of money I couldn't access, I approved

all the costs. Spending money I'd never see. Signing off on camera packages that cost more per day than I made in two weeks. The math was visible the whole time. I balanced the budgets to the penny.

The protocol: Stay cheap enough to refuse. Living in the shed meant I could turn down work that crossed a threshold. Work that required full submission and could absorb me into the system. The grey zone wasn't survival—it was resistance infrastructure.

I rented a small office with another producer at Queen and Bathurst. He wanted help on a Simple Plan video. He asked me to co-produce. The concept was Boogie Nights—a set meant to resemble a porn shoot.

Hard no.

I said no three more times. The money went up. Then the concept changed—my guess was someone important didn't like it either. Now it would be Baywatch-themed. The song featured Nelly and David Hasselhoff agreed to a cameo.

I said yes.

Nelly wanted to bring an entourage of ten to Toronto, so we had his part shot with a micro crew on Venice Beach by the lifeguard hut. The Hasselhoff part was done in his living room, I think. The label handled that end. I had to pull off the beach party in Ontario meant to look like California.

We nailed it. That's where I really shined: getting wins on budget. We needed a yellow Baywatch truck, jet skis, a cigarette boat, ATVs, and a beach we could drive on. I got it all for \$2,100.

I found the jet skis on Kijiji.

“I’m shooting a Baywatch-themed music video.”

“You are joking? I am literally watching Baywatch right now.”

Line #101 | Two jet skis delivered; coach + wrangler | \$300

The yellow truck would be harder. I searched the internet all week and found nothing.

We were driving to a location scout at the beach in Port Colborne when I saw it on the road. I stopped the SUV.

“What are you doing?” the director asked.

“Hang tight. I’ll be right back.”

A yellow Ford Ranger step-side was sitting in front of a dumpy house. I couldn’t fail.

I knocked on the main door—wrong unit. I went up the outdoor stairs to the upper unit. They were big Simple Plan fans. They wanted their CD signed. They would take what I offered. Of course they would.

Line #102 | Yellow Ford Ranger; driver for full day | \$500

When “Hollywood” knocks, everyone thinks it could be their big moment. I used that edge constantly. I was nobody, but I represented the power of the dream. Get them excited—take the resource.

The yellow truck owner could use the \$500, but he wanted to tell people Simple Plan drove his truck. The jet-ski guy didn’t even want gas money. He didn’t need the \$300. He wanted to say he was part of a Baywatch-themed music video.

I was doing it to homeowners who wanted hot girls to show up in bikinis, to girls who wanted a break, and to young professionals who wanted to be legible to the machine.

We pulled off the shoot. I wasn't invited to the afterparty. Not that I would have gone.

I had a date lined up.

NOTE_3

PROTOCOL BREACH

During the Shed Phase, I was dating a girl who worked in intelligence at [REDACTED]. It wasn't a relationship; it was a security clearance mismatch. We met on an app.

She lived in a glass tower near Rogers Centre with a concierge and climate control that hummed like a spaceship. I lived in a shed in midtown that smelled like wet pine and had raccoons crawling on the roof.

A team leader. She didn't carry a gun or jump out of helicopters; the job sounded like meetings and coordinating operations. I heard about her work in fragments—blurred lines of surveillance tactics, clearance levels, and protocols.

"It's exactly like Homeland," she said once, like she was recommending a Netflix show.

She told me about the [REDACTED] safe houses. Canada had access. She'd fly down for conferences, interagency coordination. She described the culture: insular, promiscuous. It was like high school but with bigger secrets.

Surveillance was loose—agents running searches on ex-partners, tracking people they were involved with. She laughed about it. “It happens.”

She told me the ██████ government was about to authorize something her team disagreed with. She wouldn’t say what. Something ██████. This was pre-COVID. Whatever it was, it made her uncomfortable enough to mention it to a guy who was casually penetrating her cabinet.

I tagged it.

I was cataloguing. This was intelligence. Not the classified kind—the personal kind.

I too was operating in bureaucratic gaps where you could execute visible work without being recognized.

To her the world was a risk assessment grid, and for a few weeks, I was an anomaly she hadn’t categorized yet.

The routine was logistical. I’d finish a shoot, hit the gym shower, grab some takeout, and go to her place. The concierge would nod like I belonged there. Inside, the wine bar was stocked and the sheets were high-thread-count.

She was clear about the parameters. She didn’t want a boyfriend. Didn’t want a commitment. She mentioned, more than once, that she wanted a ██████, with a ██████. She didn’t say it like a fantasy. It sounded like a procurement request.

I kept the mask on. I played the detached producer. The guy who had things going on. I never told her where I actually slept.

* * *

The mistake happened at a barbecue.

My landlord—the owner of the main house—was throwing me a little birthday party. He was friendly. I brought her and a few friends as proof that I was a normal tenant with a normal life.

She stood under the patio lights in a tailored jacket, looking bored and expensive. I moved closer. Maybe it was the beer or the exhaustion of maintaining the double life. I touched her arm. I looked at her like she mattered. I said something real.

I don't remember the exact words, only her face. It was the flat, dead stare of someone who had reclassified an asset as a liability.

She didn't argue or make a scene. She just closed the file and left soon after.

Association Status: Terminated.

Reason: Internal Data Breach.

Access: Revoked.

After she deactivated me, I never saw the inside of that glass tower again.

Two nights later, the trouble came from a different angle. A guy from the main house—someone I barely knew who had been simmering with some unspoken grievance from the basement—decided I was the source of his problems. He took a baseball bat to my shitbox car in the driveway.

I heard it from the shed. Windshield cracked, hood

bashed in, fender buckled. Then he came and beat on my shed door.

The landlord called the police.

When the cruisers arrived, they didn't look at the perp in the basement. They already knew who he was. They looked at the car. I hoped they wouldn't run the Newfoundland plates. I'd never registered the car. They didn't.

There were four cops shining flashlights around the backyard. The top officer looked at me standing in front of the shed.

"You live in there?" he asked.

"Temporarily," I said.

"That's not a residence, buddy. That's a bylaw infraction and a fire hazard."

They didn't arrest the guy who trashed my car. They told me I should vacate. The unauthorized tenant was the only problem. I don't know how official it was. I stayed there the rest of the night and then I left.

The next day the car went to the first guy who showed up.

Lot #0817 | Toyota Tercel | Condition: vandalized | \$300

I got another \$400 for my troubles from the landlord. He insisted on refunding me that month's rent. I packed my few bags, walked to the subway and went down to Queen and Bathurst. I unlocked the office, pushed the task chair aside, and laid out in a hammock.

I was thirty-eight years old. I'd produced two music

videos, dated a secret agent, and been evicted from a tool shed in the span of three weeks.

Part of me wanted to disappear. Erase myself peacefully, but I didn't believe that was an option anymore.

I wouldn't join the system entirely. I knew what full placement meant. Absorption. Loss of the ability to refuse.

I needed an escape I no longer had.

NOTE_4

THE DUCKSWORTH

I bought the boat because I couldn't afford a condo and refused to rent a room in a shared basement. Another Kijiji score, one for the books.

A 1973 C&C 25-ft sloop. Her fibreglass hull was laid the same year ground broke on the CN Tower. She had a thousand-pound lead keel—worth the price of the boat, according to the seller. I met him in the dockyard on the Port Lands. Someone didn't pay the storage fees and now the boat belonged to the yard.

She was in the water, tied to an industrial pier. A solid boat in fair condition, sails and ropes—rigged to go. I asked about the motor. There was none. The boat had to be off the dock within 24 hours. He told me he'd show me how to sail. I paid him. Then he didn't quite have time for the lesson, but he introduced me to his dad, who worked there. I convinced him to take me out for about an hour into the harbour.

He showed me the ropes. The halyard, the sheets—how

to set the sails. The lesson came with a hot tip: “You can take her over to Toronto Island and leave her on the shore. No one will bother you, but don’t burn the spot.”

One hour. That’s all I got. But I’d been learning systems fast enough to survive for years. Tax sales, film permits, meditation protocols. This was just another system. Halyard, sheets, tacking. I’d figure out the rest.

I didn’t get a marine survey. Didn’t call an insurance company. Didn’t ask the Royal Canadian Yacht Club for an application form. Those were systems for people who had places.

Line #103 | 1973 C&C 25-ft sloop | Summer shore docking;
sailing lesson | \$1300

The next day, without a motor, I hoisted the sails and the wind carried her right off the pier. I could do it because I had to.

I sailed toward the Toronto Islands, a chain of sandbars and parkland that sat across the harbour like a green mirage. The wind picked up. There were no other boats out, which seemed odd. Now the wind was pushing the sails hard. The harbourmaster blasted a loud warning horn, though I didn’t know that’s what it was at the time.

I had too much sail up. A dark wall of rain swept through the city skyline towards me. A powerful gust slammed the boat over so far I thought she’d flip. When she returned upright, I quickly reefed the mainsail. I didn’t even know what reef meant. The narrow channel by Centre Island lay

ahead. The wind was hard on the stern. I sailed right through the channel into the lagoons. It was chaotic and surreal, and it was working.

I found a quiet lagoon. A U-shaped pool, shielded by a smaller island and weeping willows. I didn't drop an anchor. I drove the bow gently into a soft bank, jumped off with a line, and tied off to a tall maple tree.

There was no need for a lease or a landlord. I had the tree, the rope, and the water. I don't know if she was ever properly christened. I named her *The Ducksworth*.

I lay inside. Now I had a berth with a view of the Toronto skyline.

That first night was a great sleep. The boat didn't rock or creak. She was settled in the mud. I heard leaves rustling against the mast and some coyotes howling. No one came. No flashlights or voices. There were the stars, the water, and the willows. Feral.

The morning was fresh.

Standing on the back of the boat, I peed into the lagoon. As the water splashed, I thought, my asset is about the size of the CN Tower from this perspective. I wouldn't make a habit of that. I needed a protocol to avoid drawing attention or scrutiny.

I made the rules of the grey zone.

Rule 1: Bathroom Etiquette. Don't piss off the back of the boat.

Rule 2: Noise Discipline. Don't play music. Don't take production calls. Sound carries.

Rule 3: Visual Camouflage. Don't deploy a gangplank. Don't set

up lawn chairs on the grass. If you look like a camper, you're a nuisance. Look like a mariner.

Rule 4: The Light. Keep the cabin lights low.

Rule 5: Maintenance. Don't let leaves pile up on the deck.

Rule 6: Location. Move it sometimes. Even if only to the next tree over. Break the pattern.

I lived in sixty square feet of fibreglass. The city lit up across the water. I watched it from the dark.

NOTE_5

THE HOLY OF HOLIES

The morning ferry brought me downtown from Centre Island. I hit the gym, got some breakfast at my favourite cafe, and walked to the iconic 299 Queen Street West building.

I was entering ‘the place.’

The contract came with a phone call. I’d produced a Dragonette video for a director who was a low-level executive producer at Bell Media. He needed a producer for a project, my third TV commercial:

Line #104 | Amazing Race Canada - Chevrolet | Branded content
+ TV promo | \$100,000

They put me at a desk on the old MuchMusic floor. It was separate from the more concentrated cubicles, right by the window with a view of John Street. I had no phone extension and no Bell email address. But I had a temp visitor badge and a chair from someone who had moved on.

My executive producer showed me the budget software. The only hesitation he expressed when hiring me was over the “system”. I told him I adapted to software quickly, and it wouldn’t be an issue. He never seemed convinced. Maybe there was another system that he was concerned I wouldn’t adapt to. The wrap report was the easiest part of the job. Math doesn’t play games. Math doesn’t try to classify you.

His desk was two down from mine. He worked with headphones on, buried in his screen. I was taking it all in. If fifteen-year-old me heard about this he might not believe it.

I saw it on the wall of TVs. A video I produced, a video I was in. That was me—driving a G-Wagon in a rap video on MuchMusic while in the actual Much building. No one noticed but me, in a surreal moment of clarity. Sitting there watching, I knew. If they had let me in—that meant it was liquidation time.

I wasn’t on the clock like everyone else on that floor. I put in a few hours, then took the ferry to the island.

I took out *The Ducksworth*. I sailed her out of the lagoon (you’re not supposed to have sails up in the lagoons). Then across Toronto Harbour and through the Eastern Gap (you’re supposed to traverse the channel under power).

Then the open waters of Lake Ontario. There was a stiff westerly breeze. I trimmed the sails, tied the tiller, got the boat balanced and holding course. According to the app on my phone, I broke the hull speed, hitting 7.5 knots on a surf.

I walked up on the bow and stood sideways on the boat like a giant surfboard. Powerful, graceful. At 2:30 on a Monday afternoon, she was the only boat out there.

When a good wind blew, I let it take me.

* * *

The ferry schedule was the deadline. It framed my day.

If you miss the boat, you bleed money. The water taxi is twenty bucks a head. I didn't have the budget for chaos. I lived by the clock on the terminal wall.

I still had the Queen and Bathurst office, a brick box above a Starbucks. It smelled of stale coffee and a faint eau d'alley dumpster. It was the grind, the place where I turned people's dreams into line items.

I set up a production manager to work at my desk on a music video and walked four blocks east to the desk waiting above the old Speakers Corner—where reality warped.

TV screens faced the street all playing another video I produced.

There I was. This time wearing designer sunglasses and a pink bunny costume—sharing a joint with a rapper in an asylum waiting room. Pedestrians walked past, ignoring it, while the broadcast version of me blew smoke at the camera.

Terminal Status: broadcasting.

Inside the box, a player. Outside the box, I wondered if I had lunch money.

After a few hours writing the commercial wrap book, I hit the gym, worked up a sweat, and let the water wash off my double life.

I became a connoisseur of showers.

There was the gym shower on the mainland. Tile, bleach,

the metallic smell of other men's ambition. You showered there to get clean enough to go fight the city. It was a tactical shower. High pressure and hot. In and out. Flip-flops on. The floor was a petri dish.

Once in a while I'd get a good condo shower.

Then there were the island showers.

They were a different species of plumbing. The public beach showers were concrete and spiders. They smelled of lake water, mildew, and wet cement. The water pressure was decent; the temperature was not. You didn't shower there for pleasure, only to get clean. You washed off the city—the exhaust of Queen Street, the static of the Much building, the lie of the G-Wagon.

Sometimes I'd jump in the lake first, then watch the sand swirl down the drain, sand my home was parked on.

That was the protocol. You watch yourself drive a luxury car on a wall of TVs, then you run for the boat because you're broke. You burn the city off your skin in a gym stall. And then, at night, you cross the black water, clear the leaves off the deck, and let the Island silence rinse the rest of it away.

Clean clothes were kept on the boat and in a suitcase in the office. I did laundry at the marina on the island where I'd work on my laptop over breakfast. The work was budgets and logistics. I coordinated shoots. Called rental houses. Approved expenses. A production needed a Corvette and a mansion on the Scarborough Bluffs. Another one needed an upright piano we could light on fire in a grass field.

The job didn't care which side of the harbour I was on.

Downtown: Fresh shirt. Coffee meetings. Budgets with

five-figure line items. Phone calls with talent managers who spoke in street slang. Meetings with executives who spoke in DEI corporate doublespeak.

Then back to the island. I'd sit on the ferry's upper deck and watch the skyline shrink. Once across, I'd unlock an old beach cruiser I found months earlier. By the time I reached the boat, I was nobody again. Every time I approached, I'd see the mast from a distance and think, *Yes. It's still there.* It was precious.

When I missed the last ferry—which happened more than a few times—I'd go back to the office hammock. What bothered me most was not being able to check on the boat.

Wake at six, shower at the gym, and walk back into the building like I'd arrived from a condo in Liberty Village.

If anyone ever asked where I lived, I'd casually say, "Queen West, and I have a little getaway—a sailboat on Toronto Island." I'd let the dream fill in the blanks.

NOTE_6

THE INVITATION

The iHeartRadio MMVA nomination came in an email.

Best Hip Hop Video. My first production. We lost to Drake's *Hotline Bling*, but my name was on the list. No plus-one.

One night in June, they shut down Queen Street for the event. Barricades. Screaming crowds. Lights swept the pavement. I walked past the cameras, flashed my wristband, and went inside.

Bodies filled the venue. Sponsored bars. I drank beer and watched people. Said hello to a few directors I'd worked with.

I chatted for a while with the guy who hired me the most. He'd previously told me he didn't have room for any more white friends. But that night he was pretty friendly. We were watching from the inside. Between us and the crowd on the street—a sea of red. Celebrities walked the carpet. We watched them. The horde of screaming teenagers watched them.

The dream had come to life. I almost let it mean something.

Mostly, it meant I was useful.

The boss leaned in. "Enjoy it while it lasts. These budgets will go away soon. But tonight is a good night. All we need now are some whores."

I didn't judge. I stood there.

He walked away. I ordered another drink.

No one invited me to the backroom section or any of the afterparties.

I checked the time. I had a ferry to catch.

NOTE_7

RECEDING FUNDS

It was getting cold on the boat. I left it on the shore until late fall, then stored it on the hard in the Port Lands. That winter I often stayed with a girl I was dating. The office, the gym—they were still my autonomy. If I needed an exit from the office or her place, I'd discreetly sleep on the boat in the yard. And I did at least once.

The desk at Bell was long gone. They'd stopped calling when I turned down a Dairy Farmers of Canada commercial. I didn't want to do an ad for a cartel.

In the spring the boat went back to the lagoon on the island. I sailed her often that summer. I bought a small outboard, which was a big upgrade.

MuchFACT was smaller that year. I did a video here and there. CBC gave me money for a mini-documentary, then wanted me to edit the real story right out of it. I stopped responding to their emails.

Commercials and TV shows were a logical progression. I

sidestepped—started writing screenplays. Maybe I could make a movie and become the hero in my story. I got a grant to work with a credited screenwriter. The hero's journey, the inciting incident, and the first act break. I was taught all stories needed that structure. It was another system. I complied.

NOTE_8

THE FLOOD

The rain didn't stop for a week.

The lake rose. The lagoon breached its banks. Water covered the paths. Carp swam under the park benches.

It didn't need to be a problem, but it created a logistical liability.

The authorities came. Safety vests. Powerboats. They patrolled the perimeter of the lagoon with cameras and tablets, documenting the flood zone and the vessels on the shore.

I was navigating the flooded path toward the boat when I heard them. "There's one."

I could stay hidden, but the boat no longer was. It became legible to the system.

They placed an orange sticker on the cabin hatch.

NOTICE TO REMOVE VESSEL WITHIN SEVEN DAYS

Removal required under Flood Hazard Mitigation regulations.

The informal rules stopped working. You can't stay low-profile when the tide carries in bureaucracy.

I moved the boat twice. Maneuvered to a new tree. Tied off in the reeds. But the enforcement sweep didn't stop. They were cataloguing everything.

The grey zone was closed.

I put the boat on Kijiji. That one hurt. I thought of it like ripping off a band-aid. That's not what it was.

Lot #0818 | 1973 C&C 25-ft sloop; 5-hp outboard | \$1600

NOTE_9

THE NON-INVITE

The 2017 iHeartRadio MMVA nominations were announced.

Three nominated videos: Best Post-Production, Best Hip Hop Video, and some other category.

The invite never came.

I checked the spam folder. Checked for mail at the office. Nothing.

My contact answered. Same guy who'd walked me through the process the year before.

"Hey—I'm calling to check on the invite for the show."

"I figured that's why you were calling. It's a tight room this year. They're limiting it to artists and directors, no producers."

"My work got three nominations."

"I know. Great work. But the list is locked."

The nominations were receipts. They closed the loop. But the access was gone. Noted. The money was drying up and

they weren't going to need people like me. By 2018 the MMVAs were over after 28 years of awards shows.

That first day at the Much desk—my work on the screens, my face in the video. It was already clear: the party was almost over.

NOTE_ 10

QUEEN STREET

The grant portal didn't open again. MuchFACT stopped processing applications. The money moved on. My phone stopped ringing. No emails. The work evaporated.

I walked out onto Queen Street. My rent partner was moving his things out—including the hammock. The streetcar went by. I stood there for a moment. The city kept moving.

NOTE_11

WRAP BOOK

GENERAL LEDGER

PAYMENT TERMS

Net 30 from production house.

GREY_ZONE FINANCIALS [Savings Unreported]

Sleeping in [REDACTED]

[REDACTED] women with salaries

Skipping meals

Not registering or insuring [REDACTED]

Tying boat to a [REDACTED]

REVENUE CONCENTRATION

Year 1 (Mid 2015–2016): 9 videos

Year 2 (2016–Mid 2017): 8 videos

SHEET A: OVERVIEW

PRODUCTION PERIOD: 2015-2017 (2 years)

TOTAL VIDEOS PRODUCED: 17

TOTAL BUDGETS MANAGED:.....\$572,000.00

TOTAL PRODUCER EARNINGS:.....\$46,520.00

SHEET B: OVERHEAD TOTALS

Office rent (2 yrs):.....-\$3600.00

Shed rent (1 yr):.....-\$4800.00

Gym membership:.....-\$1083.00

Mobile phone / Internet:.....-\$3560.00

Ferry tickets / Water taxi:...-\$2375.00

Food & drink:.....-\$28,410.00

Miscellaneous:.....-\$2992.00

Asset acquisition (boat):.....-\$1300.00

Outboard engine:.....-\$300.00

Boat sale:.....+\$1600.00

Car sale:.....+\$300.00

Total costs:.....-\$48,420.00

Total income:.....+\$48,420.00

TAX OWED AFTER ADJUSTMENTS:.. ██████████

TAX REBATES:..... ██████████

FINAL BALANCE:.....\$0.00

NOTE_12

AMENDMENT

Lot #0819 | The narrative | Status: repossessed.

Arthur's gavel has stopped swinging, the monk's bell has finished ringing, and MuchMusic is a ghost. The record stands.

And you, thumbing the pages. Noting the margins. Bidding on the sections that contain heat. Maybe you wanted the spy to be more than a security clearance. The abbot to be more than a man in a robe. The boat to be more than logistics.

There is no clean tag. Only a chained pen.

Lot # ██████ | The Reader | Condition: unreported.

* * *

Record complete. File accordingly.

