

The Betrayal



By Sidney Secular

September 13, 2023

“Even the Devil himself presents himself as an angel of the Light.” – 2 Corinthians 11: 14

“Where there is no freedom, there is no truth.” – Jose Lezama Lima

I will tell the story of my people. I will tell it, even though it is forbidden, even though the few of us who remain are no longer even allowed to call ourselves a people. I will tell the story, even though it is now told only in whispers, whispers which, if brought to light, are immediately denounced as heresies, proscribed utterances, crimes punishable by ruin or even death. Such is the world that has been created, the one into which we were lured, like gullible and foolish children wandering into caverns, a place of nothingness and damnation that we have now bequeathed to the rare children who remain of our progeny. I will tell this story, tell it for the sake of those who may follow after us, though almost no one will now submit to hear it, or tolerate hearing it. I will stand up under the mantle of lies under which they have buried us, and I will scream our truths for the innocents whose world that we, in our recklessness and foolishness, so perfectly and zealously destroyed.

I will tell the story of my people, a people now irrevocably damned.

THE ARRESTS

It began as many tyrannies begin, quietly and incrementally, with few signs of what would later follow. In the beginning, a smiling peace shepherd would visit your home, bringing two cups of coffee, one for you and one for himself. He would ask to sip his cup at your kitchen table, and would chat with you about impolitic comments you'd reportedly made. The conversation, under hanging planters and with morning sunlight streaming through the windows, would be slightly unnerving, but friendly in its nature, coming from someone so grandfatherly.

Two years on, the peace shepherd would reappear, sans the coffee. He would have a companion officer, who would neither smile nor speak, and undoubtedly was there to serve as a witness to any unacceptable opinions you might utter. The duo would have a list of questions, specific in determining your politics and worldview, and the largely silent male or female companion would write feverishly as you spoke, this time with your answers being more wary, your having sensed that things were ramping up.

A year after that, they would wade as a five man team into a restaurant crowded with diners and waiters, and drag you out by your hair or your ankles, while the dining clientele, growing suddenly silent, watched without one word of horror or dissent. There was even a videotaped incident – quickly vanished down the Media's memory vortex – in which a troop of peace shepherds had entered a dinery, delicately removed a senator's napkin and fork from her hands, and then carried her out by her belt, like a piece of luggage.

In that case, like many others, the other diners had said nothing, with the exception of a small phalanx at the most expensive tables which had stood and politely applauded, like circus clowns wearing tuxedos, as the senator's rump, suspended midair, had been carted out the door.

It was through an intuitive wisdom that the public had learned

to be silent in such situations, most without even once being officially ordered to remain silent. Intuition, as they sometimes say, involves one's instincts. No orders had been necessary; people had over time learned to self-censor, to be timid in what they said or were construed to have said. And in an almost symbiotic ebb and flow, the first warning signs of approaching raids were usually offset by declarations of altruism and tolerance, along with affirmations of commonly held beliefs about freedoms and rights. All of the latter were merely a means to an end, and the end goal was that the people would speak and obey only the words allowed to them and scripted for them by their rulers.

Some of the misdeeds resulting in the peace shepherd visits were indeed violations of the rule of law. Increasingly, however, many were imaginary or feigned misdeeds, invented by the bureaucrats in power. And some, very visibly as time progressed, were sins fabricated by the highest hands that ruled in government, Media, and academia, with the sole goal of creating political education and acquiescence to their omnipresent power.

Marissa Ball and her husband, John, had received both of the first types of visits, the visit by a single smiling peace shepherd, and a visit by a second unsmiling duo. Being a mother and wife, Marissa did not want to see what the third visit might bring across their threshold. Like the people around her, she began to be censored by her own fear. What any person said inside their home might be safe; what was said in public was never certain of being safe.

Even so, Marissa and John had already passed the Rubicon without even being aware of their ankles getting wet. It was true that, troubled by the murky rumors of their times, Marissa's husband John had begun fronting for her edgy and sometimes anti-establishment artwork, by pretending to be its creator, but they had still foolishly believed much longer than most of their peers the notion that individuals could

still talk and write and paint in ways that the powers that be were duty-bound to tolerate, the powers presumably being duty-bound because they needed to keep up the pretense of being the guardians of a free society. In time, however, sensing intensifying storm clouds, the couple had engaged in several spirited catfights over her art's potential for bringing notoriety and risk, and John had left her in peace only after she had agreed to his assumption of the role of being the creator of all of her essays, sketches, and paintings. Her reputation as an artist had been a more or less fledgling one, and they had childishly believed such a transition would go without notice by the authorities. With an even greater hubris, they had also believed John's position as a public comptroller afforded them an added layer of protection helpful in shielding them from public or government opprobrium.

Like many others, they were entirely mistaken in these conclusions.

It had all been true to a point in time, but, even so, afterward, when they should have sensed the direction of the winds, she and John had on too many occasions spoken their minds about various sensitive issues, making their swapped identities and John's job into thin beards indeed. Marissa's wise mother, herself not even perceiving the real extent of the danger – and despite having witnessed more than one political upheaval in her own lifetime – had first humorously described them as “a radical duo of two, consisting of two too-free spirits.” Then, as political chaos and conflict had increased in the city around them, she had become more serious, and had begun to warn them with pleading eyes that they were in jeopardy of being labeled as reactionaries or counterculture dissidents, for which a pound of flesh might one day be paid.

In the context of all of these things, it thus did not come as a complete surprise to Marissa when five peace shepherds tumbled through the back gates of their garden one afternoon,

just as she and John and their child Nate had seated themselves on the lawn to report some wisteria. The shepherds had burst through the wooden gates in the lower garden, slamming the doors open with unnecessary force, shattering the gate's planks and almost causing the shepherds to fall into the terrace, now overgrown because even the lowly gardener had quit during the Media firestorm which had ignited after one of Marisa's drawings had been vilified by the local press.

The painting had not been one of the works she had imagined would create a flashpoint. It had been a depiction of a line of women meandering into a warehouse, most of them naked or in a state of partial undress. There had been a sign, reading "To the Baths" alongside the trail of women, and there had been a caption, with one woman saying to another, "I would argue that when you get down to the reality of things, the influence that government actually has on our day-to-day lives is really quite marginal."

The Media had responded to a studio showing of the piece with howls of rage and denunciations contending the image was inappropriate, insensitive, vulgar, and a myriad of other transgressions of both moral and political natures. A few critics indignantly referred to it as an example of "historical appropriation," or "victim narrative appropriation," though the latter terms never became defined to an extent satisfying to Marissa's comprehension. A few critics had kindly opined the piece was intended to reflect public alienation toward a centralizing and more heavy-handed government bureaucracy, but most pundits had simply ignored the piece – hoping to kill it via obscurity – or had loudly denounced the work as tastelessly seditious. The selective silence of additional critics, based on either their fear or their disinterest, had not mattered; a fuse had been lit, and, for reasons not completely clear even to Marissa, her genre of art with similar themes was thereafter labeled and referred to as "Dispossession Art." The best interpretation of the

“Dispossession Art” label contended her artwork was intended to convey that some better and more civil world had been lost and governmental authorities had degenerated into authoritarianism.

But such an explanation alone was too dangerous a statement for them to be left in peace. No one had asked Marissa or her husband – again, the latter being the pretend creator of the art – what message the art was intended to convey. By this point, no explanation would have prevented the shepherds’ boots from arriving.

The raid was preceded by several seconds by a quiet surveillance drone, which had positioned itself sixty feet above Marissa’s garden, to record the event for official records. This was normal protocol, and occasionally, due to some bureaucratic screw-up, such drones would arrive too early for raids, giving suspects time to notice their presence and flee the premises. Marissa had once been at a garden wedding, and one such drone had appeared above the buffet tables, causing the guests to flee in a panic; amusingly, it had turned out to be nothing more than a calzone delivery for a family in an adjoining residence.

Such good fortune was not in evidence on this day. In the moment when the shepherds burst through the garden gates, in that particular minute Marissa realized how slow she and John had been in losing most of their remaining delusions about governmental benevolence. But, perhaps because she was disoriented, in the moment of intrusion she found herself mostly befuddled with odd thoughts. *We should have planted weeping willows*, was the first incongruous thought entering her mind. Her second focus was the embarrassingly feminine bird cry of alarm coming out of her husband, as the peace shepherds tackled him and pinned him to the grass. Nate, eleven years old, took it all in with widened eyes, immobilized by his own surprise. Nate’s nanny, Hope Larsen, was just exiting the house’s patio doors when the ambush

commenced, and her tray of tea glasses and a plastic container of potato chips went sprawling across the patio's brickwork. The glasses had shattered across the bricks and into the tiny coy pond, scattering shards of glittering glass into which Nate had then fled, screaming, with naked feet. Seeing John being tackled, the three of them, Marissa, Hope, and Nate, had selfishly turned to run into the house, only to find other peace shepherds already emerging serenely from the interior to block their path.

In seconds, there was no escape.

The Fitzhughs, an amiable middle aged couple in the end unit of a nearby row of townhouses, had emerged onto their back deck in response to the noise created by the splintering lumber and Nate's shrieks. After a staccato of barks from the leading peace shepherd, they obediently retreated back into their own house. One of the women shepherds then carefully and maternally ushered the women and child onto lawn furniture and bandaged two small cuts on Nate's feet, engaging him in the kind of cooing routinely used by adults to keep children calm in such situations.

Marissa recognized the faces of one or two of the peace shepherds, and saw with relief they were local people, and thus, perhaps luckily, not members of the Federal Office to Combat Misinformation. Referred to us "FOCOM" or, in the vernacular, "Fuck-em" agents, on the infrequent occasions when that particular genre of agents would arrive on someone's doorstep, their faces would usually be covered by visors, and their hands equipped with truncheons. Nonetheless, everyone in the garden – and most of the faces now peeking from the neighboring houses' curtains – had known the moment the back gate had begun splintering why the squad had arrived and what the intrusion portended.

Marissa went calmly to Nate, ignored the woman doing the bandaging, wrapped her arms around his shoulders, and

whispered reassurances. In doing so, a truly grounded thought had entered her consciousness.

I have brought all of this on us, she thought.

"It will be alright," she said instead to Nate. "They have not come to hurt us."

"No, no," the female peace shepherd said, reassuringly, in a pointedly maternal tone. "Of course not."

John was cuffed, and members of the squad then went through the house, collecting the artworks from tripods and shelves. The visitors give no sign in their cheerful chatter between themselves – all of it completely audible through the house's open windows – that they were aware of Marissa being the actual creator of the pieces. They also gave no sign they felt there was anything incongruous about being inside someone else's home, turning it upside down.

Marissa and John had not had time to hide Nate away, as they had once planned; the precise choreography of the raid suggested it had been skillfully strategized to prevent such concealments. The lead shepherd instructed John be removed to a chair located amidst the glass shards, and the remaining three detainees were ushered away from him to a secondary spot, a bench under the yard's only juniper tree.

Marissa recalled how it was on this same bench that John had finally told her how in reality he did not like her art, that he actually found it disturbing and offensive. He had never spoken so frankly before, and it was apparent he was having second thoughts about their safety.

"My art is what I believe to be the truth," she had said, "though often it is just my disgruntled observations of the times we live in."

"Some truths and commentary are best left unspoken," John had

responded.

"Why?" she had asked.

He had pondered the question for a moment before speaking.

"Let's pray we don't find out."

Over time, John's anxieties would subside and then bubble back to the surface. "You'll get their attention," he would matter-of-factly caution, referring to the authorities. "Make your art, but keep it off their radar."

"You are a scaredy cat," she had responded, with pretend amusement. "I'm not just some haus frau with a hobby. There's conviction in what I do, and a right to pose the questions I'm posing."

Very quickly, however, it had not been easy even to get the smallest of private studio showings; the modus operandus of the government and the Media, its unofficial mouthpiece, became ostensibly to intimidate the citizenry, including studio owners, into thinking about their personal welfare and reputations first, facilitating a reluctance to engage in anything resembling political incorrectness or public dissent. To make dissent was to go against popular sentiment and moral codes, was to risk screeching mobs arriving at one's front door, mobs needing no government directives to assault and vandalize the targets of their outrage. Popular sentiment, government, and Media had all merged to become one.

A month before the raid, John and Marissa had been resting together in the garden's hammock, when John had begun whispering into her ear.

"You are whispering," she observed, thinking to humor him.

"Because Mrs. Ianuzelli's gardener is next door," he had replied. "And because I think I need to mention something: there's now an intermittent clicking on our phones."

"Get out."

"For real. And there's been an unmarked white van at the end of the street for the last two weeks."

"Bullshit," she said, loudly.

"Everything I write on the computer becomes hieroglyphics within three days."

"Then you're not saving the files properly."

She remembered now how she had looked squarely at him and laughed, but their conversation did not proceed further, as the next door gardener had risen above them behind the fence to busily prune a tree.

It was not the usual gardener Mrs. Ianuzelli usually employed.

Now, with the raid in effect, the shepherds had methodically searched their house and had returned to the ground floor, stacks of Marissa's canvasses in their arms or under them. The lead shepherd had stepped onto the patio to signal for John to rise from his chair, and he did so, meekly. He'd sat alone, unguarded, while the search had been conducted. Long ago, people had stopped fleeing peace shepherds; it had been an exercise in futility. The lead shepherd now waved John into the house, presumably to direct him out the front entrance and into the back of a vehicle.

It was all perfunctory. As John turned to follow the shepherd's instructions, he looked back at Nate, Marissa, and Hope, smiled in a visibly weak display of bravado, and signaled the "I Love You" sign with his fingers. The "I" was made by holding up the index finger. The "L" was made by shaping the index finger and the thumb into an "L." And so forth.

It was an intimate ritual in their family, a customary part of their departures, and completed in less than two seconds.

Watching, the shepherd patted John kindly on his shoulder, and pressed him toward the front door.

And then John was gone. It was all business-like, formal, performed speedily and mechanically, of course, to outrace the pain to arrive in its wake, like a profound reverberation.

Marissa, Nate and Hope had then spent a year and a half waiting for John's return, a return that never transpired. Their inquiries about him yielded official unsigned letters intended to be non-responses, or they gleaned grey rumors floating in snips of housewife gossip, rumors informing him that he and others had been enrolled at a reeducation campus hundreds of miles to the west of the city. Visiting government offices, they could inquire all they liked, with or without hysteria, with or without anger, without or without the influence of well-positioned bureaucrats or relatives, but no other information was ever culled from the purposeful murkiness.

Ever.

In the beginning years, some numbers of people returned from the rumored reeducation campuses. The inmates would shuffle home haggard and exhausted, with tales of brutal labor conditions and grueling indoctrination sessions. In recent years, by all appearances, few people were returning, and by the end of their own one and a half year waiting period, it was being rumored that no one of any stripe was ever allowed to return home. No one, no piece of luggage, no item of clothing, not even a letter. In an attempt to find something out, Marissa and Hope had identified and gone to one of the specific detainee collection points, a large retail warehouse, only to be sternly ordered away with barks and threats. No precise knowledge of the exact destinations of the departed people could ever be determined; there were only a few distant metallic echoes of some bureaucracy going through its machinations, partnered with the whispered speculations of

intimate friends, uttered only in late evenings stupefied by liquor and cigarette smoke.

It was then, just as a permanent despair was taking root, that on an unexpected morning – what joy – a random and unusually oversized postcard would arrive in some collected person's relative's hands, attesting miraculously and in a familiar handwriting how the departed loved ones were all in good spirits and good health. One neighbor, receiving such a card after a year, and recognizing his wife's handwriting, had promptly fainted from the excitement.

Yet to Marissa and her household's unrelenting disappointment, no such card ever arrived from John.

To maintain calm, the Ball household had purposefully and promptly reverted to its mundane domestic routines, with Hope continuing to arrive to perform childcare and to instruct Nate; he had received a school banning two weeks after John's arrest. "For the greater welfare of the public school system" was the reason given, in a letter signed "Avery County School Board." The letter, like the responses to their previous inquiries about John, contained no individual's name, phone number, or signature. Such diktats regarding anti-social elements had become commonplace, and no pretense of redress was permitted or possible. These orders and decrees, disseminated on imposing looking stationery, had even garnered the slang nickname of "Faceless correspondence."

With the passage of time, Marissa was almost comfortable again with her spindle and her canvasses and her craft projects, mostly kitchen art, which she and Hope had trundled in a wheelbarrow to the city's farmers market and flea markets and sold on a stylishly draped card table. They had done so well with the sales that they had even had business cards printed up, announcing the arts and crafts as being created by the "Kitchen Kitsch Company," and their products were of such good quality that even during food shortages, when craft

sales would predictably lag, they still were easily able to barter some of their items for the baked goods and farm produce sold by other vendors. This became even more important when Marissa's teaching credentials were also revoked – also in connection with John's detention – and she could no longer teach part-time art classes at the local university. She was not surprised by this development; it followed the predictable course of action the government normally pursued in situations like her own. Their household perhaps would not have survived at all if her father had not previously left a bequest allowing her to pay off the mortgage and meet most of their living expenses. With such blessings, and by throwing herself into her craft work, Marissa was able to place ample food on their table and still pay Hope a modest salary. They had even managed to occasionally to sneak out into the city without surveillance drones following them – usually three, one for each of them, following in an evenly spaced trail behind them at a distance. When this happened, they would also, with great pains, take extra efforts to stay out of the range of the omnipresent video cameras found on suburban house porches and street lanterns, and, by using back alleys, visit local amusements, including an amusement park and a marshland nature reserve on the outskirts of the city.

The danger was that, after a time, for many people the drones and cameras became no more noteworthy than birds in flight or perched in a yard tree. And, lending itself to an inclination to disregard them, was the fact that their surveillance often appeared to be fickle or arbitrary. Sometimes the blinking red eyes were present everywhere, intimidatingly. Sometimes they did not appear to be present at all. Sometimes a drone was visible above every fifth person in a park. Sometimes trails of them followed entire families. And sometimes no drones were visible anywhere, for a week.

Perhaps partly because of their presence, Marissa and Hope in time closed ranks to form an ersatz partnership of their own,

and Hope's loyal companionship in time evolved into a source of great strength for both mother and son. The girl was an ally, but also the truest form of a bon vivant, one who in the past had regarded all of life as a celebration and an adventure; she was a perpetually mirthful smile framed perfectly by a pageboy haircut, the strands of which wandered and floated like angel wings with a mind of their own. She was a muse, a sprite, a free spirit. They came to find her constant good spirits and the sound of her carefree laughter to be tonics, a delight to any human blessed by her presence, and these rays of sunlight were everywhere in their home even after the arrest – all because of this young woman. Hope neither worried nor exhibited temper; in her mind, every human on the planet was an unmet new friend, and she greeted every predicament and every stranger with an unclouded and unjudging openness and optimism. Even the peace shepherds who periodically checked up on them were charmed, no doubt partly because she would shower them with home baked cookies distributed in pastel napkins. They would stand and wait their turn to receive the cookies, like children, and Marissa, knowing the importance of cultivating their good favor, would smile benignly, thinking all the while behind her eyelids of the household's limited finances.

Like the shepherds, Marissa found herself overly allured in ways she had not expected by Hope's youth and vibrancy and unworldly innocence. Hope gave no evidence, even for one moment, of abandoning their family, and Marissa found herself increasingly enamored of the girl as they labored side by side. She soon determined that none of what she saw in the young woman was pretense – it was all real – and in time she could not imagine a life without Hope's presence. In additional time, perhaps because of John's absence, and to Marissa's own surprise, the feelings had coalesced into something more unmistakeable in their clarity and their intensity.

She realized she loved Hope, and was herself radiating, like Nate, whenever the girl was in close proximity. Marissa determined she must not make her child worldly too soon by demonstrating inappropriate affections for his nanny, and she stuffed her emotions out of sight. There was no need to illuminate those recesses; Hope was most safe in the role of spritely companion, the sympatico free spirit whose abundance of benevolence overshadowed that of any personality they routinely encountered. And Hope, wonder of all wonders, despite the arrest, and despite the retreats of many of their former friends, had proved that she would always love them back, showing it in the labor of her hands as her fingers kneaded bread or traced the sentences in books being read to Nate.

As the trio waited for John's return, they became aware other errant individuals nearby were being visibly routed into some of the reeducation campuses. On rare occasion, tiny groups of the unfortunates could be seen downtown in the city's streets, either early or late in the day, being chaperoned on foot or transported in vans to the collection points. The trio acknowledged this, and also the fact that in the Media, bureaucrats and pundits were sometimes growling more loudly. The world still turned, the sun came up each morning, one's daily ablutions still needed to be performed, and their day-to-day rhythm of life helped confirm that society's machinery was still humming and God was still in his Heaven.

The little family carried on, an oasis of normalcy and good spirits in the larger world. Their abode was a place where life was still worth living, whatever fate might befall others, and whatever tumult or mundaneness transpired outside their doors.

Or so they had thought. When the shepherds had arrived the final time, one late afternoon, this time for both Marissa and Nate, their arrival still felt oddly improbable. The shepherds spoke in confident but unthreatening tones, and

afforded ten minutes for them to gather clothing. They followed the instructions, while Hope, showing no signs of panic, had stood by the front door, weeping silently, with a demure but empathetic expression on her face. Hope asked to accompany them to their destination, and had been firmly but diplomatically told to stand down; one of the intruders announced she needed to remain in the house for an interview, and it would then be searched again and sealed.

On this particular day, Marissa had just finished another piece of dissident art, despite Hope's admonishments not to make anything further. The piece was sitting in a portfolio case on a foyer table by the front door as Nate and Marissa were being evicted. Marissa had nodded toward the portfolio for Hope to destroy it, and Hope had nodded back. No words had been necessary.

One sour looking shepherdess had helped carry their suitcases. At the front door, the lead shepherd stepped forward, and deftly removed a gold brooch Marissa had not noticed was attached to the lapel of a jacket she had grabbed from her closet. It had been sent to her many years earlier by an aunt in Johannesburg, who had married a Boer there.

"You don't want to wear this on the train," the man said, smiling encouragingly, but pocketing the jewelry. "There are convicts on some of the trains."

This new information was mildly unsettling, but their fears were allayed again when they noticed another shepherd manning the transportation van was a former neighbor, a handsome young man hardly more than a child himself. He nodded to them, but then returned to using his own handkerchief to wipe mud spatters off the coat of another passenger, an ancient man who should have been too old to be a detainee.

Marissa and Nate boarded the van without looking back. To Marissa's relief, the shepherds had shown no initial interest

in the portfolio in the foyer, possibly because it was too visible in plain sight. Instead, they had headed for her library shelves, and were busy examining the titles and making a pile of some of the books and some remaining art canvasses.

Hope, mourning their departure or perhaps anticipating an interrogation, could be heard emitting a soft wail behind the house's front door as the van's doors closed on them. Marissa was uncertain, as it was unlike any other sound they had ever heard Hope make.

FIRST NIGHT ON THE TRAIN

At the train platform, incorporated into the western exposure of a railroad warehouse, there was no small crowd of people, many of them with luggage of some kind, but many with only the clothing they were wearing. The surveillance drones that had monitored their apprehensions hovered sixty feet above the train platform, some in clusters, indicating that entire groups or households of people had been collected. The drones gathered no particular attention from the people on the platform, and as new detainees entered the station, would reposition themselves in their holding patterns above the humans. The holding patterns were at alternate heights above the humans, but at uniform distances from one drone to the next, creating an almost aesthetically attractive pattern, like lights skillfully strung on a Christmas tree.

A train with ten passenger cars paralleled the platform, and it occurred to Marissa that their shepherds were waiting for the cover of nightfall to conceal the train's departure. She and Nate huddled in a corner of the platform, under the warehouse's eaves, where she drew comfort from studying her child's face. It was a refined face, too delicate for a male, the face of a pianist or an artist like herself. Under his shock of brown hair was a set of too-serious brown eyes, eyes underscored by a small smattering of boyish freckles, but eyes that had already seen and comprehended more than was wise

about the world in which they lived: he had already begun asking questions that were no longer permitted. Even before his school expulsion, he had begun going silent when presented with portions of the liturgy all young people were required to recite in classrooms and in the remaining churches.

He had been called Pooh Bear when he was born, mostly because he had loved the Winnie the Pooh stories as a child, but also because they'd told him he'd made voluminous amounts of pooh as a child, which was true, and as mountains of diapers had evidenced. At the age of eleven, he would still pretend false outrage when they used the Pooh Bear name, and it would all usually dissolve into laughter, though as a toddler some of his temper tantrums over the nickname had been surprisingly violent.

"I wish Hope was here," Nate said, eyeing the other huddles of people around them.

"Me too."

"Will they hurt her?"

"No," Marissa lied. She was not sure. She had no clue about any of this business. She only knew it would have been better if their collection hadn't occurred.

The number of people not wearing traveling clothes and not having baggage hinted that those particular individuals had been plucked from offices or houses unexpectedly. A middle aged doctor was still in his white hospital jacket, his uniform and his hair rumpled. He was going amongst the passengers, asking if any were injured, and this suggested some manhandling might have occurred when he was collected himself. His spouse, looking bewildered, was juggling both a shoulder bag and a tennis racket, but nothing else. She was one of the few local people Marissa recognized in the group; the woman was a prominent academician. As Marissa studied her, the woman got down on her knees next to them, sorting

through the contents of her purse to see what tools remained in her possession. It could not have been comfortable kneeling on the concrete floor, but there was an urgency about the activity. Marissa recognized the couple as Doctor and Mrs. Templeton, from an expensive neighborhood in the hills above her own street.

Also studying Mrs. Templeton's purse inventory was an elderly Asian woman in a wheelchair, her greying hair dyed black. She was wearing a kimono under a poorly protecting leather jacket, and she was without an attendant. They later learned she had been there all day on the platform, initially alone, calmly playing solitaire on a lap table balanced on her knees. Taped to the lap table was a small note card, the kind people might use to collect strangers at an airport. It read: "Mrs. Ethel Kamuro." This created the sense in Marissa that the woman had already been dropped off somewhere else in transit, and then collected a second time for the train standing patiently beside the platform.

Mrs. Kamuro smiled benignly, then pointed downward to the note. "I am Ethel," she announced, "as you may have guessed." She smiled at Nate, who responded by directing his gaze at his shoes. She extended a playing card to him, and he placed it back on her lap table, in response to which she feigned a pout.

It was impossible to know just what anyone knew or had guessed about their common predicament, or what any particular person's mental state might be. Nearby, weaving his way in and out of the knots of people, was a young blond man, rumpled and unkempt looking, his head poorly bandaged from some injury, murmuring to himself as he tottered with an odd gait from one group to the next. The unsteady gait hinted at a head injury which might have impacted his brain, and Marissa noticed he was being studiously ignored by her fellow passengers. As he drew close to her own group, he murmured, fixing his attention on them: "In the end...."

"Pardon?" Mrs. Kamuro said, placing her hand behind her ear.

"What's that?" a nearby elderly black man with an aristocratic nose and an outdated blue fedora ventured. He had himself been wandering stiffly back and forth across the platform, perhaps dispelling nervous energy. He now held his arm out toward the young man, not to offer assistance, but to keep him at a distance. "I am Professor Amari Miska from the Agricultural College. Do I know you? What do you need?"

The young man drew closer to them despite Professor Miska's extended arm. His clothing and an unmistakeable odor made it apparent he had soiled himself.

"It is important to remember," the young man repeated, with great solemnity, "that in the end, God murders all of us."

The Asian dowager made a clucking noise in response.

Professor Miska began to shoo the man away, the way one would shoo a small child, but without waiting for a more emphatic dismissal, the young man turned on his heel and staggered toward another group, where he received a similar subdued response.

"Deranged," Mrs. Kamuro commented.

Professor Miska grunted reluctant agreement.

Shepherds floated respectfully in and around the knots of people, reorganizing luggage, scribbling messages on note pads, and tidying the small messes and confusions stemming from any group of humans who go on a journey.

"I amI have no idea why I was brought here," Professor Miska mused to their impromptu small circle. "There is no logical reason why I have been brought here. It is madness for them to be snatching people up in the middle of the day or night. Madness. Nuttiness." He covered his forehead with one palm, as if experiencing embarrassment. "The whole world

has gone goofy. I don't know what has happened to it all. When I was young, I enjoyed pretending to act crazy in a world that was sane. Now that I'm old, and I get to pretend to be sane in a world that has gone mad."

The Templetons stared first at the professor, and then at the rest of the group blankly.

"It is rumored," Mrs. Kamuro said, "that sometimes people disappear completely after a third visit from peace shepherds, regardless of the reason for the visits."

Such a comment was inexplicable, and Mrs. Templeton was quick to take exception. "We've had no such visits," she said, "and it is the official position of the government that no shepherd visit can reduce a Social Credit Score by more than ten percent."

Social Credit Scores had become the metric for a citizen's status and privileges; they were a cumulative financial and social rating for individuals appraising their financial and reputational and civic worthiness, based on compiled and computerized data. It was widely held that only a few bureaucrats were privileged to fully comprehend how the information for the ratings was collected and maintained.

"I also have never had any visit from a peace shepherd," Professor Miska said, "aside from yesterday's visit.

"Nor I," Mrs. Kamuro said. "But it is still a rumor."

"Perhaps a clerical error brought some of us here," Marissa said, in an effort to be comforting, "or perhaps they have somehow begun casting too broad a net, picking up people by mistake."

"Possibly," the doctor said.

"If that's true," Marissa continued, "I'm sure eventually they'll straighten it out."

Professor Miska again slapped his forehead, but made no further lament.

Mrs. Camera was studying them all intently. She was not senile, as Marissa had at first suspected. "Someone earlier today was speculating these collections are connected to some kind of racial purge, but – " she waved her hand around the platform to include all of the throngs of people, which included individuals of color and even individuals conversing in foreign languages, "obviously, that is not the case."

"There is no telling what is happening," Professor Miska offered, his voice sounding uncertain. "These kinds of things aren't new. It could be a political purge or a racial purge or a combination of both. Or there may be something else occurring we aren't in a position to comprehend. And it's entirely possible some of us here may be here for very ambiguous reasons – maybe just for saying the wrong thing at the wrong time, or being in the wrong place at the wrong time."

The doctor's wife, Mrs. Templeton, tightened the collar of her jacket. Such notions, whispered in some places, were visibly agitants for her. "I hardly think things have come to that," she said, "where mere disagreement would be a criterion for getting collected. Isn't it possible all of this is exactly what we're being told is happening – that we'll attend reeducation seminars and then go home when they're done with us?"

Professor Miska squinted at her. "Maybe," he said. "But if you really believe what you're saying, I think it's more likely you've been living a very sheltered life."

Mrs. Templeton pursed her lips, but did not come back at him.

Marissa lowered her voice in speaking. "It may be dangerous to commit to any theory," she said. "Let's all just wait, and hope to figure it out." She formed and launched the words, but

even as she spoke them she sensed their hollowness and lack of utility.

They were approached by a mousy bald man in horn-rimmed glasses, who had overheard snatches of their conversation and appeared from nowhere. "I also have no idea why I was picked up," he said. "Two men appeared beside my office desk, and they'd already been to my apartment and packed a suitcase for me."

"There must have been some reason," Mrs. Templeton offered.

"There isn't any for me," the mousy man said. "I, like what you were saying, am completely apolitical. All of my financial obligations are in order, and I have never even had a jaywalking ticket."

Mrs. Templeton sighed. "There is still the rule of law," she said. "When people are being brought here or get summoned to report here, it cannot just be occurring in a vacuum. I think they're targeting people they believe to be dissidents; it explains why another family on our street was picked up last week. If I'm correct, my husband and I shouldn't have been picked up, and we'll be released in time."

"I like your optimism," the mousy man rejoined, sounding unconvinced, "but I'm not sure I share it with you."

A prematurely greying young woman, still possessing a cherubic face, and holding a slumbering baby, had been standing steps away, and summoned the courage to join them. □She was dressed in a too-large man's trenchcoat, her mostly blonde hair pulled back in a hastily and thus poorly constructed bun, and she had been rubbing her face. It was the behavior of someone rubbing a rash, but when she spoke, it became apparent the rubbing was a nervous response. This impression was compounded by her voice, which was a few octaves too high. "My name is Dossy," she said, and, busily pulling back the fabric covering the bundle in her arms, added, "and this is Baby Theodore." The

circle of people tightened, to peek at the sleeping baby, slightly unnerved by its presence, but also demonstrating fascination with its helpless frailty and beauty. "I'm just a haus frau," the young woman said, "but it's my opinion everything is going to shit. There is a line in a poem by Yeats called 'The Second Coming.' The line keeps playing in my head. I'll quote it for you: 'Things fall apart; the center cannot hold; mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.' " She paused to position the baby's blanket to again shield his face. "And boy, did things fall apart on me, folks."

"Tell us," Professor Miska urged.

The young woman was eager to oblige. "It was supposed to rain all day yesterday, so my old neighbor took one of my nephews to a matinee along with some of his geezer buddies. It was some silly science fiction movie about an epidemic, the kind of bread and circus nonsense used to distract people from looking at their own problems or seeing what's really happening in the world. When they all came outside after the show, they went to a kiosk selling Italian ices. There were some thugs there, and they claimed the old people were forcing their way into the line. But it was just a pretense to assault and rob them. The thugs went to their cars and pulled out machetes." She began with the rubbing again, and the expression on her face became memorable. "My nephew called me, screaming in terror for his mother. I went immediately, but no one was there. There was only rubbish and blood and fabric on the sidewalk."

"Fabric?" Marissa asked.

"Shreds of umbrella fabric. I talked to a witness, and he said in the middle of it all there had been clouds of shredded umbrella fabric floating down from the air." The young woman paused, struggling to compose the next thought. "I called for peace shepherds, and they came and were very comforting as they took me to their headquarters. Then, this morning, they

brought us straight from their office to this train."

The group digested this information, attempting to decipher it.

"I have not heard of levels of violence like what you're describing," Marissa said. "Not since the real estate confiscations all those years ago."

A decade earlier, the government had addressed housing shortages and wealth inequities by confiscating the homes and land of some of the ultra-wealthy. The confiscations were met with only token opposition. Perhaps heartened by this, and compelled by perceived needs, the bureaucrats had expanded the definitions for the wealthy classes and had begun grabbing properties belonging to the upper middle class. In time, the confiscations were expanded to political dissidents of any and all stripes. The thefts had only in the last stage resulted in some pushback, some bloodshed, but as the resistance had intensified, the Media coverage, correspondingly, had diminished, until there was no way to accurately comprehend what was happening at all.

"I still don't connect what all of us have to do with one another," Dr. Templeton commented. "They can't just be randomly grabbing people up."

Mrs. Kamuro waxed philosophic. "In my household, we perceived the realities indicating these are troubled times. We decided to live as inconspicuously as possible, in order to avoid trouble. We figured if they saw us as being passive and irrelevant, no one would bother us. We didn't even put election signs on our lawn, and we expressed no political opinions about anything."

"But logically, you must have done something, at some time, to get their attention," Mrs. Templeton ventured.

"Or perhaps it was not a strategy fated to work," Marissa

ventured.

"Maybe nothing was going to work," Dossy said. "There's a sidewalk covered in blood in High Pointe to support that conclusion."

The mousy bald man, a confused look on his face, had absorbed all of this banter without good humor, and pointed toward the passenger cars. The discussion had made him visibly uneasy. There was no sign of anyone being on the train, but he waved them toward the steps of the next-to-last car. "I can see the train's doors are open," he said, "and we can go ahead and board." He then went down the loading platform, advising other knots of passengers – some only now arriving at the station – of the opportunity to board."

The behavior hinted he was more than a passenger, perhaps an infiltrator, perhaps a functionary of the station.

Their newly acquainted group assisted one another in the boarding, with an occasional hand offered by shepherds. Their overseers seemed entirely unconcerned about the prospect of anyone attempting to flee the station, and they were unremittingly cheerful in their helpfulness.

Dossy's mood inexplicably brightened as they lined up to board. "I have gum," she announced turning in the line to regard Nate, and drawing out a tiny package from inside the baby's blanket. "Want some?" She extended her hand to him with a smile. He accepted and thanked her, and as he did so, the doors on the other side of the warehouse-like station opened and some of the day's remaining light flooded brilliantly into its interior and across the platform, an omen that the sun was still a part of their world.

The passengers entered the car and grouped themselves with people they had met or had recognized on the platform. The members of their own small group remained in close proximity to one another. After getting them seated, the shepherds

brought in and sequestered in the back of the compartment a dozen men who appeared to be criminals. All were unshaved, and most but not all were wearing prison uniforms, making the final conclusion about their identity anyone's to make. The criminals were accompanied by two Alpha male shepherds, and purposefully segregated by empty rows of seats from the rest of the travelers. It was perceived that the convicts made no attempt to interact with the other riders, or even to interact amongst themselves.

The train cars had once been upscale passenger cars with tinted windows, with some of the windows having small dining tables beneath them, each table flanked by two chairs. Although it was not a normal meal hour, the shepherds brought boxes of veggie wraps and bottled water into the car and distributed them. At the front of the car was a lavatory and a luggage storage section, where there was now a modest collection of suitcases and satchels. In juxtaposition to these accommodations, the criminal passengers, perhaps in reflection of their status, were completely without possessions of any kind and were positioned in a poorly lit segment of the car.

The passengers had only assumed their seats for a few minutes when the train began gliding forward on its journey. With the movement, most of the shepherds absented themselves from the compartment, climbing a circular stairway to a second level above them. To everyone's surprise, after a few more minutes, even the Alpha male guards for the convicts vacated the car, descending up the stairway to join an indistinct chatter of their comrades on the second floor.

As the train gained speed, it rounded a long curve. One of the passengers pointed out the scenery behind the curve, in order for them to see the long trail of drones dutifully following their train cars, the same drones that had hovered above them back at the station. All of the drones were following in a precise line, at precise distances from one

another. One, for reasons known only to its creator, straggled at a distance behind the rest of the line, making attempts to keep up. In any other situation, the image might have been amusing.

"Along for the ride," one old codger muttered. "It's going to be left behind if we go any faster."

In the absence of the peace shepherds, the passengers' conversations continued in the same informal, disjointed and chaotic manner as they had unfolded on the station's platform. And travelers take liberties with their thoughts and words that people anchored in their homes and jobs are more reluctant to express, most probably because those engaging in a journey believe their words will end up discarded along the roadway.

"I would wager that the convicts know to remain in their seats," someone observed.

"Or maybe they understand they're better off by obeying," Marissa said softly.

"What's the difference?" the Professor Miska asked.

"None much, maybe," Marissa replied.

"I miss Hope," Nate said, restlessly.

"You will see her again," Marissa answered.

"She shines, doesn't she, Mommy?"

"Yes. Magnificently, my beautiful boy. And she will shine again for us, soon. We just need to be strong for right now."

Mrs. Templeton was applying lipstick. "I have heard a few rumors myself about these trains," she said. "They say on the first trains there were even small enameled vases holding flowers." She stowed the lipstick away in her bag. "Thank

God the nut with the load in his pants got on a different car."

Mrs. Kamuro extracted half of a veggie wrap from her mouth. "See?" she asked, holding it up. "They would not be feeding us and providing tables if there was anything to worry about." Marissa and one or two others attempted smiles. Smiles were not plentiful in this place, and the old woman was gratified, thinking she'd made an accomplishment. "Does anyone have any idea exactly where they're taking us? Is it not wise to worry?"

Mrs. Templeton, the academic, avoided the question of their precise destination. "Of course there is nothing to worry about. The rule of law is still intact. Wherever we go, there will still be peace shepherds and orderliness. I have faith in such things."

Two children nearby took out a boxed game from a suitcase and began playing it on one of the tables. A coiffed woman, with the appearance of some kind of matriarch, perhaps to calm or occupy herself, continuously sorted and organized the game pieces as the children played. Her relationship to them was never clear; it was possible she was their grandmother or a great-aunt. Nearby the gaming table, spouses and single people made conversation with one another exactly as they might make on a city tram.

Dossy situated the baby in a carrier on a table top, and turned to address their informal circle. "What I told you was not my first experience," she said. "My niece was conscripted into a labor battalion over a year ago, and I went with my brother to look for her. It was the strangest thing, it was as if she had completely disappeared. Through a miracle we were able to identify and go to two of the duty stations – where she was said to be – and at the second spot we were almost forcibly snatched up by shepherds. We got away by the skin of our teeth."

A row behind them, some passenger eavesdropping in the car harumphed. "Those are not the peace shepherds of our childhoods," a gender ambiguous voice objected. "They gutted their ranks long ago, and disarmed them, to better replace them with apparatchiks and thugs."

"And the ultimate point of that achievement would be?" Mrs. Templeton asked.

"To better control the rest of us after destabilizing the country," the voice answered.

Mrs. Templeton had moved on from the lipstick to a compact. "Wouldn't destabilizing the country be counterintuitive?" she countered. "Wouldn't that ultimately just make living conditions worse for everyone?"

The voice began to speak again, but Marissa interrupted it. "Not if they think it would help them build what they think they're building. And part of achieving that might be to repopulate the peace shepherds with blindly serving drones."

"The bulk of them are never armed," Mrs. Templeton persisted.

"And, unarmed and defanged, apparatchiks or not, one can conclude we don't really need to fear them."

The disembodied voice was not deterred. "Being defanged," the voice responded, "has simply made them more robotic. They are no one's friend. I once saw some of them pursue a man down a riverbank. He had a heart attack and died, and to keep the mud off their clothing, they sat on his dead body to eat their lunches, until a morgue van arrived."

"Sounds like an urban myth I've heard," Dr. Templeton commented.

"It's true. I saw it," the voice insisted.

"Nonsense," Mrs. Templeton said flatly.

Marissa was busy observing Dossy, making commentary about the baby's blanket and helping her to readjust the hair clasp from which her hair kept escaping. She noticed the girl made eye contact uneasily, and instead fixed her gaze on other passengers' clothing. Marissa also observed an occasional involuntary but disconcerting widening of the girl's eyes – as if she was sporadically in a state of alarm – which, along with the pitch of her voice, reinforced the impression of someone whose sanity might have been stretched too far, like a rubberband about to snap.

“It is preposterous that things have come to this,” Dossy said, shaking her head at Mrs. Templeton. “The primary function of a government is to promote stability, and this government sometimes appears to do the exact opposite. It sometimes seems to be dismantling the things most familiar and important to us.” She turned to some of the nearby passengers who were not a part of their improvised group, soliciting their agreement.

Two suit-attired gentlemen across the aisle were still manicured and well groomed, hinting a possibility of intellectual depth, but they stared at the girl and her group dumbly. It was obvious as the intended recipients of the girl's comments that they did not comprehend them, or were reluctant to agree with them.

An animal, when a potential for danger is communicated to it, often becomes temporarily immobile.

“Do most of us not see it?” the Dossy insisted, glancing around the car, doublechecking to confirm no shepherds had returned. “The environment these so-called ‘authorities’ have created is either a purposeful creation or a massive dereliction of duty, at its very best. As they've consolidated their authority they have thoroughly politicized the shepherds, our courts, the Media, the schools, the immigration laws – even what's left of the churches. Is it

any surprise it has all come to this, a day when we've been gathered up for real or imagined misbehaviors and crimes that only they had the liberty to define? For ill-defined 'misbehavior' not punished in any country still considering itself free?"

"My child and I have not been charged with any offense," Marissa offered, hoping to maintain the conversation in calm waters. "I would be interested in knowing if most of us arrived here without receiving charges."

This inquiry got the attention of both of the suited gentlemen, and they leaned forward nodding. Around the compartment, over half of the other passengers did likewise, slowly at first, with their raised hands encouraging others to follow suit. There was the impression of a larger number of people being able to do likewise, but being cautious.

The car's occupants contemplated this revelation. One or two passengers and the mousy man encouraged silence by making low, cautionary shushing noises. The revelation of such an insight was itself, under the new order of things, bordering on something akin to forbidden.

A tattooed young man, seated behind the suits, even so made no effort to be silent. "I don't belong here either," he announced. "I don't understand any of this. I was charged, but the charge makes no sense. They charged me with crimes against the common peace." The young man wore a jaunty black anarchist's hat, a sleek and well-tailored looking cap, until one perceived that it was actually a pair of carefully sewn men's underpants, with the manufacturer's brand name purposefully visible on the waistband, now converted into a headband.

"That is a very broad and ambiguous charge," Professor Miska observed.

"Such a charge is meaningless," the doctor agreed, fidgeting.

"It means nothing. Or anything," the tattooed boy answered. "I think it had something to do with me complaining about nepotism in the city's park service, where I worked. I think they responded by mining their email archives and pulling down politically heated emails I'd sent to friends many years ago. They mined the archives like they were searching for gold, and even told me they were going to do it. Within less than a month, they'd brought me into custody."

The train clattered underneath them, trundling over a bridge.

"They found my brother by hunting him down using a DNA database," the coiffed matriarch supervising the children's game said, unexpectedly. "My brother was a tall mountain of a man who fought in three wars. I didn't even know such a thing was possible. I didn't even realize any kind of 'hunting' was occurring. And if there was a 'charge,' I never heard what it was."

"And why are you here?" Marissa asked politely.

"As an escort for my grandchildren," the matriarch answered.

"And why are they here?" Dossy asked.

"Not a clue," the matriarch answered.

One of the suits who hadn't spoken was now bold enough to speak. "Someone mentioned violence. We heard rumors last week of some kind of massacre in a resort town, north above us on the coast. A resort town, where a vacation wasn't what some visitors got."

Mrs. Templeton was determined to be stubborn. "When societies undergo duress," she said, "these kinds of rumors always surface. Most people today don't have any clue about anything going on outside their own little worlds – most people have fat, dumb and happy syndrome. They only care about paying the rent or what's on the television. They lack even the

intellectual depth to verify facts, and instead engage in prattle.”

The circles under Dossy’s eyes were darkening with the day’s dimming light. “The authorities going through computer archives and studying ancient emails and websites you’ve visited is called ‘data mining.’ The irony of it is how a lot of forbidden thinking today wasn’t considered heresy just a few decades ago. Now a lot of things aren’t permissible to say. But it might explain why many older people seem to get collected first.”

The second of the two suits also felt motivated to speak again. “I would agree the threshold for getting picked up isn’t high any more,” he said. “A shepherd called me into the boss’s office and then came to my desk and filled a cardboard box with my work things. I thought they were only going to fire me, but they showed up yesterday at five in the morning, pounding on my bedroom window. And here I sit.”

“Data mining is a technology they’ve used for many years, now,” the other suit said. “For decades they’ve been able to do that. And even things you were certain you posted anonymously thirty years ago, they can now find it all and locate and track you, sometimes just through identifying individual characteristics of your writing. Writing has specific identifiers, just like fingerprints, and the technology to locate any author has become very precise.”

Dr. Templeton and Professor Miska made guttural sounds simultaneously. “That certainly makes my blood run cold,” the professor said. “Who even knows what they wrote or didn’t write, thirty years ago?”

“These things cannot be admissible in the courts,” Mrs. Templeton opined.

“Apparently, they have made them admissible,” Professor Miska said. “If they bother admitting any evidence or doing any

charging at all. I know, then, maybe why I am here," he continued. A troubled expression clouded his face. "I wrote a customer book review on a retail site, and it offended some power that be, either someone in the government or someone at the retail company itself. They sent me an email notifying me all of my book reviews had failed to meet what they called 'community standards for etiquette,' and they deleted not only all of my book reviews, but even all of my other product reviews, for things like sink strainers and doormats. They notified me by email and provided an email address to contact if I wanted to make an appeal. I made an appeal, but heard nothing. That was just a few weeks ago, and I was picked up yesterday."

"For something like that?" Mrs. Kamuro queried. "This can't be."

The professor continued. "Yes, yesterday they showed up. They showed up like automatons, shuffling along behind me as I walked down my own street. They almost looked bored by the process; they didn't even seem to have any enthusiasm for grabbing me."

"Now, now," the mousy man interjected. He had been nearby the whole time, deeper in the compartment. "We are panicking one another. We are jumping to conclusions. We are promoting our own hysteria."

Marissa ignored him. "I suspected such things were possible," she said "when my computer graduated from auto-correcting my grammar and spelling and also began auto-correcting entire phrases and even complete sentences I had written. And that started several years ago. A month before I was apprehended, I found a way to override the auto-corrections. And then at some point....computer cookies or something.....the monitor would start flashing warnings about it being impermissible to correct the auto-corrections."

"You were on their radar," Mrs. Kamuro suggested.

"Christ," the tattooed young man said.

Dossy laughed, half-heartedly. "It would almost be funny if it wasn't so disturbing."

"Disturbing?" Professor Miska said. "It's surreal."

"My husband and I have never written anything remotely resembling subversiveness," Mrs. Templeton said. "At the most, it was just some grouching about things."

"Maybe that is all it takes now," Marissa said, thinking of her canvasses. She considered bringing up her art, and then did not do so, eying the mousy man uneasily.

Behind them, a man who had never uttered a word this entire time, began to cry. The coiffed matriarch supervising the children at the gaming table had begun snivelling also, a game piece she had been organizing suspended in the air above the table's surface.

"You have done nothing wrong, any of you," Marissa announced, in an attempt to be reassuring.

Dossy looked her full in the face for the first time. "Is that true? Look where I am now. Look where we all are."

"It will be okay," Nate offered to no one in particular, from the game table, where he'd gone to observe the games. He'd wanted to agree, to reassure himself also.

"What a pack of lies we've lived," a prisoner blurted out in the back of the car, having gotten the gist of their conversation. "They've created an echo chamber of lies for us to live in, one where we all live in confusion, and where neither dissent nor obedience matter, because either can ruin your life."

"No," Mrs. Templeton stated, bluntly.

"Or perhaps end it," the prisoner added.

His companions mumbled for him to be quiet. It was too grim a pronouncement. Most in the compartment could not acquiesce to such a conclusion.

"Was anyone here actually charged with an offense like sedition or treason or a violent offense?" the professor asked, looking around.

"I was charged with 'Felony Wastrel,'" the prisoner said, intruding once again. "I have no idea where they got that from. I am not even sure what it means. A man who was in the cell with me was given an even weirder charge –" he strained to recollect it, "– 'Felony Sedition.' He had no idea why."

"The fuck...." Dossy said.

"Language," Marissa admonished, in a maternal tone. "Remember, there are children here." She directed her next comment to no one in particular: "This cannot be possible."

"The country is ruined," the prisoner said, undeterred by his comrades. "It has been erased."

"Mrs. Templeton's rule of law, anyway, if all of this is true," Professor Miska said. "But even if some of these terrible things are actually occurring, we should still pray some semblance of the rule of law is intact."

"There is no law," Dossy responded. "The law is now whatever our handlers define it to be."

"There is still a functioning constitution," Marissa said, glancing at Mrs. Templeton. "We have to believe that."

"If it's not there," Dossy said, "we appear to be encountering something else."

"Totalitarianism," Professor Miska opined. "And all of it achieved without a shot ever being fired."

"That would mean we are the same as cattle, being herded," Mrs. Templeton said. "And I am never going to believe it."

"If it is true, what should our response be?" the anarchist in the underpants hat asked.

"Response? It means you're forty years past doing what you needed to do to miss this train," the prisoner said, from the back of the car, more forcefully than he'd spoken before.

The discussion without warning pivoted, sharply and abruptly. The matriarch organizing the game pieces at the window table was now pointing in Marissa's direction. "Hold up," she said. "Now I know where I recognize you from. You there. You are Marissa Ball, the wife of John Ball, the artist. He was the one who made the genre of art called 'Dispossession Art.' The subversive stuff the television was screaming about not long ago."

"Dispossession Art," the mousy man echoed, squinting at her from afar. "Yes, I think so. Is this really who you are? "

"Maybe you –"Mrs. Templeton said, hesitating, "– will put the rest of us in danger by being with us."

"Maybe you brought all of this on our town to begin with," the gaming table matriarch added.

Marissa retreated into herself; it felt like falling head first down a well. Her art's reputation, to her surprise, had found its way into the compartment, and even here there was an unforeseeable resentment unmuted by her husband's pretense of being her art's creator. She had not expected such notoriety, due to the brevity of the infamy her art had inspired. The fires of public indignation had ignited, then sputtered out just as quickly when her art had been vanished by the Media

from view.

"That slop was vile," Mrs. Templeton hissed. "What purpose did any of it serve?" She repeated the matriarch's refrain: "And how many of us may be here because of people like you, idiots who only needed to hold back from stirring the pot?"

The mousy man and one or two others appeared to tepidly agree. Nate, sensing the mood in the car had changed, left the gaming table and came to sit on Marissa's lap, facing into the gazes of their accusers, something she herself found she could not do. It was uncertain to Marissa if Nate had drawn near to her for security, or if he was bravely attempting to insert himself between his mother and the strident voices.

The doctor looked at Marissa in amazement. "I still don't get it, I don't get it at all," he said. Then, perhaps trying coming to her defense: "How can a painting cause someone to be brought here, especially if they are by someone's spouse?"

"The government must have brought her here," the mousy man answered, pretending to be helpful. "I remember. They designated all of the art as reactionary art, and she was in the same household with it."

There was a cacophony of voices.

"But why?"

"Not a clue."

"What an asshat thing to get arrested for."

"How can they make arrests for such things?"

"Why would they not?"

"In my time, we wrote and painted and said what we wanted," Professor Miska interrupted. "It was not long ago. Nothing was forbidden, and now —"

"Because they can!" the prisoner barked from his distance.

The clacking of the undercarriage of the car increased on an upgrade. No one waited for Marissa to defend herself, and no defense was immediately offered.

"Leave her the hell alone," Dossy said. "It has all fallen apart. We're caught up in a net, some victims, some supposedly perpetrators, some guilty, some innocent, some nothing definable at all. Some maybe just because they were in the wrong place at the wrong time."

"Surely all of this has an end purpose," Professor Miska said. "An end goal. We may be caught up in this, logically intended victims or illogically, but there has to be a final purpose, a goal."

"Power," the prisoner rumbled.

It was the appropriate time for Marissa to speak. It seemed they were now waiting for her to speak. She could not reveal herself as the creator of the controversial art, because her situation was too precarious, but she did not perceive any real danger of them harming her, not while her child was sitting on her lap. She summoned her courage. "I make no apologies for any form of art or expression or writing," she said, "Not in a free country. Our society has obviously imploded in some way. All things human have limits. All things human can disintegrate. We got too arrogant, maybe. We got foolhardy, while things came apart under our feet."

Her words seemed to encourage a reflective calm. It was a relief, after the group's chaotic and meandering babble.

Dossy wasn't buying it. "I don't believe for a minute all of this is accidental," she said.

There were at least no further comments after her summation, only the noise of the train's rattling metal. Dossy leaned

forward toward Marissa, both cradling their offspring, and looked into her eyes, then speaking as if they were having a private conversation. "What do you think will be the final end of this?"

"I don't know," Marissa said, "but I believe we will quickly find out."

A pre-recorded intercom voice spoke to announce that the passengers were to use the lavatories and then attempt to sleep. The two peace shepherd who had arrived with the convicts descended from the upper level of the carriage, to orchestrate the sleeping arrangements on the floors and in the seats. They went through these motions for both the convicts and the civilian passengers alike. They then left the compartment and the interior lights swiftly dimmed.

Both the civilians and the convicts followed the instruction to sleep, arranging themselves uncomfortably for the night, and letting the lurching motions of the train pray them into a fitful ether.

FIRST DAY ON THE TRAIN

They woke in the morning after a few hours of stiff and unrefreshing slumber, and for some, little sleep at all. They found the train had skillfully and undetectably eased to a full stop. Peering out the windows, they discovered they were in a small grasslands town, beside a weathered station. Next to the station was the truncated statue of some local founder, with nothing remaining but the statue's pedestal and the founder's feet. The writing engraved on the pedestral had been chiseled into pock marks. At the base of the statue some daring or unrepentant upstart had placed a rapidly fading bouquet of English Lavender, trussed together with a matching piece of purple yarn. Aside from the floral tribute, and their own beating hearts, there was no visible sign amongst the settlement's sparse and weathered structures of any human

presence or activity.

To the direct west of the station rose the remains of a large Tudor style residence, partially burned, partially intact, with a pavilion by its side styled in the same architectural details as the house. The residence was likely some prior town official or luminary's home, and the pavilion, showing lesser signs of damage, was partly occupied by two dozen picnic tables, with the remaining portion occupied by a jungle gym for children. Around this and a few other town buildings there inexplicably swirled a wet and acrid haze, the scent of which could not be attributed to humidity.

Without anyone verbally acknowledging it, they instinctively knew the charred holes in the structures, and most heavily in the residence, were signs of a rare but purposeful resistance effort; either that, or some prominent citizen had greatly annoyed some distant military bureaucrat. They decided peace shepherds would probably not have been involved in this scenario; the collateral damage to the pavilion suggested someone, in pursuit of criminals or dissidents, had demonstrated few ethics by deliberately damaging a children's playground.

They were ushered off the train, almost chivalrously, by fewer than a half dozen peace shepherds, led from the cars to the pavilion, shuffling in the morning light, murmuring as they went, but taking care not to make any utterance easily construed as a complaint. Professor Miska stumbled during this passage and lost his glasses; the peace officers helped him to his feet, brushed him off, and placed his spectacles gingerly back on his nose, although they'd fallen from his pocket and not his face. "Sciatica," he explained to his helpers, and then, because he had first raised his left arm in a defensive gesture, as if to ward off an expected blow, he offset the gesture by saying, "Thank you, very kindly, folks." The peace shepherds murmured back in kind to him. "We are all human here," one of them intoned, "and we all get

old sooner or later.”

As they approached the pavilion, Marissa noted that the drones following the train had positioned themselves in formations above the structure, though any surveillance of the detainees through its roof would not have been possible.

The passengers in just minutes had gathered at or around the structure’s picnic tables, the edges of some showing signs of intense carbonization. A red haired man with freckles and the animated green eyes of a zealot arrived in an army vehicle and parked beside the pavilion and stepped before them. His hair and freckles reminded Marissa of some of the wooden childhood puppets of her mother, which had been bequeathed to her, and were sitting at home on Nate’s bedroom shelves. Home, she reflected, already felt like a million years ago. The redhead surveyed them each warily, his eyes scanning back and forth evaluating the group, eyes set in a young face, but one in which any innocence and softness of youth had vanished. There were noticeable lines around the lips and the bridge of the nose, and they suggested a man who had little humor and had not weathered life easily.

The man did not introduce himself. He made no sign of noticing the ruins of the house behind him, or the damage sustained by their sitting place. It was no doubt irrelevant to his mission.

“Ladies and gentlemen – and little ones –” he announced, “we will be stopping at this site briefly to have breakfast and regroup.”

A teenaged girl with a mop of blue hair and a nose ring appeared with a box of cheap pastries, lumps of sugary damp flour tasting mostly of something akin to ersatz maple syrup. In a second box she presented an urn containing poorly warmed coffee. A woman with children began to request something different for them to drink, but then lost her confidence, her

voice becoming plaintive and faltering. It was possible to assume, through the lethargic movements of the site's peace shepherds, that the urn and the pastries were part of a ritual previously performed at this location many times. There were, even so, a few grateful groans of relief from the passengers; aside from the veggie wraps the night before, some people had reportedly not eaten in one or two days, and they all sat silently as the sun began to rise, mothers cooing to their children, feeding them with sticky hands in the absence of utensils. To the little ones, one of the peace shepherds also handed out small foil pinwheels, the kind mass produced in Asian factories and purchased at convenience stores. The distribution of the pinwheels, which Marissa had a nagging suspicion might have come from a store looting, also had an aura of being ritualistic.

When the passengers had finished eating, the redhead rose from his folding chair, one occupied at a distance from the group. He had neither eaten nor imbibed during their breakfast. "The first order of business," he said, "is in the way of an announcement. Our records sometimes get in a jumble. Are there a Mr. and Mrs. Nathan and Marissa Ball here today?"

The misidentification of her son as her husband signaled to Marissa that there was confusion about their identities and their presence. She rushed to mentally calculate. *They are uncertain as to our identities*, she thought. *They're looking for a married couple; they're not even sure if we're present in this group. Don't speak.*

She said nothing.

"I repeat, we are looking for a Mr. and Mrs. Nathan Ball," the red haired man said.

She again did not answer. Nate started to move, where he'd been sitting beside her, and she used her arm, which was wrapped around him, to hold him firmly in his seat.

"Last opportunity, those passengers are asked to come forward."

To her relief and genuine surprise, the other members of the group also said nothing, even the ones who had identified her and expressed resentments toward her. Not only did they not render her up, but they even purposefully looked away, so as not to identify her by making eye contact. Only the mousy man's head bobbed up, staring at her quizzically. It was possible they were protecting her, but it was also possible they were too exhausted from preceding ordeals to speak up and finger her.

The human body and mind, when weary and bewildered enough, often respond by doing nothing.

The redhead Xed off something on his clipboard. "Whatever," he commented. He ran both hands through the buzz cut hair on the sides of his head, as if washing his hands of the matter.

"We are now going to allay the concerns of your relatives and friends back home," he said, "by writing a few postcards to them." Several members of the audience in the pavilion shifted uneasily, but none displayed visible signs of approving or disapproving of the request.

"We are going to hand out an over-sized postcard to each passenger, and you are to write no more than four very brief paragraphs or sentences: four brief paragraphs. The first paragraph must include an opening salutation: 'Dear Whomever.' The last or fourth paragraph must include at its end a closing salutation. For example: 'Love, from Papa.'" The redhead now held up his index finger, to stress what followed. "Note that aside from the two salutations, none of the four paragraphs is to include more than three sentences. Note how the cards have already been stamped for your convenience, and have on them some very beautiful images of this province you're currently passing through, including

the local breweries. In the first paragraph, following the 'Dear Whomever' salutation, you are to write that you are well and your journey is progressing safely. For example, you can write that you are in good health, that you have just had a generous breakfast, that you are halfway toward your destination at a reeducation campus, and that there is absolutely nothing to worry about. As an aside, we would greatly appreciate if you would state something to the effect that your peace shepherds are treating you kindly. Note, aside from those requests, you may write whatever you like in the other three paragraphs, using good judgement. Your purpose in writing these postcards is to tell the truth, to calm your relatives' nerves, and to offset rumor mills, some of which have been damaging public morale. Again, please note we are not censoring you, and anything you write aside from the required statements is entirely up to you, however, if any of the instructions I've given is disobeyed, your card will simply be discarded. It will never get mailed out."

The redhead's instructions were obviously a recitation from a script, rote, a parrot's mouthings, but some of the passengers grasped at the cards as they were distributed, clutching at this remaining connection to home. As if to emphasize the ritual nature of their exercise, a canvas poster containing the writing requirements was unfurled, and suspended between two support beams at the front of the structure.

With Nate leaning against her, Marissa mulled the instructions. Her head was in a muddle from sleep deprivation, and the instructions had been hard to follow, perhaps formulated to purposefully keep the passengers off balance. She would write to Hope's small studio apartment, as the address might not have been indexed in any data base. She chose her words in advance, then wrote:

My Dear Hope: We are being treated well on our journey and it has been a smooth train ride so far. Our peace shepherds are helpful and being kind to us, helping when we stumble.

We live in difficult times, and none of us is promised tomorrow, which is why I ask for your compassion and understanding when you read the sentences to follow. In the year and a half in which John has been gone, you should know that I have come to love you. I was happy being a mother and a wife, but I still came to love you early on, and I know myself well enough to know that in some ways I will always love you.

I have asked myself if it would be possible for me to continue forward in my life without ever telling you this, and the answer is that I cannot. I have told you what it is necessary for me to tell you, to be a full participant in my own life, even at this late date. I thank you for this unbeaconed and unexpected joy you have gifted to me.

Give our love to John's Aunt Mildred, and tell her to take it easy on the aerobics, since at her age, it is possible to overdo things. We are at peace, and we wish you every blessing. Above all, stay in possession of these thoughts. From our Hearts, Marissa and Nate.

The cards were collected and removed to a table where some of the peace shepherds studied them.

After the collection, the passengers were waved back toward the train. In departing, the angle of their approach to the train platform was different, and Marissa noticed a group of uniformed Asian students methodically digging and cataloguing artifacts being removed from behind the ruined Tudor residence. The students casually but diligently ignored the presence of the train passengers, and something about their movements reminded her of both the redhead's performance and a college field trip she had once taken to a coroner's lab, where technicians in lab coats were dispassionately dissecting the remains of the newly dead. She felt, momentarily, a curious impulse of territorial resentment, accompanied by a free floating dread. Both required firm pushes to confine

them securely back into the dark corners of her mind.

Reboarding the train cars, she noticed some cars bore stenciled placards on their doors. On her own car, the word "Intelligentsia" had been inserted into a placard frame. The frames for the placards had been in place on the cars when they had initially boarded the day prior. The paper signs themselves, however, had been absent.

Inside the car, the criminal passengers had been removed. They had not disembarked at the pavilion, and there was no meal litter indicating they had been fed.

Some of the shepherds were notably less civil in reloading the train, but there were exceptions. One jovial and exceedingly young shepherd girl, a tall and finely formed Nubian princess, had taken pains to interact with the smaller children and had even tickled some of them. She carried two of them for a weary mother and waved to them cheerfully from the station platform as the train pulled away from the station. As they slid from view, she waved at the end of the platform by holding up two of the foil pinwheels, extending them higher and higher over her head as the train lost sight of her. The young shepherdess with the blue hair had stood beside her the entire time, expressionless.

The rocky terrain they traversed now appeared more desolate, though they were still occasionally veering into grasslands and timberlands. At some of the stations along the route there was no longer any evidence that any accompanying town had ever existed, aside from the stations themselves. In these places, too, there was little evidence of there having been any conflict or struggle, just intermittent wooden walls prone on the ground, or a few remaining facades of old buildings, suggesting some juggernaut had pushed the other walls of the structures flat. In a few villages and hamlets, where some of the structures had fully collapsed into their basements, small outbuildings – toolsheds, smokehouses, pigeon

coops – remained incongruously surrounding the holes, like mourners gathered around a coffin pit. Next to one such village was a large highway sign: “Welcome to Northumberland County: A Post-Racial Community for 30+ Years.” Immediately after the sign they passed by what had probably been the county cemetery, the headstones having been flattened by some whirlwind, scattered and broken like heavy loaves of bread.

This vision peaked Professor Miska’s interest. “When they desecrate the dead,” he said in a low voice, leaning over Marissa’s shoulder to peer out the window,” then a desecration of the living usually follows.”

Mrs. Templeton scowled. The professor scowled back.

In the terrain, Marissa recognized geographic landmarks informing her she was in close proximity to settlements her own ancestors had spent earlier centuries building, all the while battling disease, famine, poverty and war.

This human-induced wasteland continued for a very long distance, and then, after announcing that the commodes needed to be flushed out, an elderly peace shepherd, exhibiting only the mildest embarrassment, recruited Marissa and Dossy to carry buckets of water from a source at an approaching stop. The train pulled into a town with a very large fountain near its station, and they clambered down, buckets in hand. The Templetons had agreed to temporary custody of Nate and Baby Theodore, and from other cars, others assigned to the same task were alighting.

To their amazement, the town appeared to be entirely intact and functional. The streets held people in cars, walking, and on bicycles. Nearby, a man was teaching his son to ride a tricycle beside a feed store. On the steps of a mercantile store, some elderly men were playing a dice game. On the main street, ropes with pennants adorned electrical wires and street lamps, in preparation for some festival. And within

full view of the train was a drugstore with a old timey lunch counter, at which well dressed patrons were sipping coffee or dining, their faces occasionally glancing out the windows toward the train. At the counter, an obese woman in a sun dress waved one hand in their direction, gaily, as if welcoming old friends.

A shepherd directed them to fill the buckets in the fountain, and to return them to the hands of helpers inside the passenger cars. As they did so, a tiny gaggle of curious townspeople edged closer, eyeing them, but not speaking.

A church organ in some nearby around-the-corner church began playing, so unanticipated it caused both Marissa and Dossy and the other water carriers to startle.

A local, a handsome brunette woman, also in a sun dress, sporting a button nose under a broad brimmed hat, noticed their reaction. "It's Sunday," she said. "It's the closing anthem at the Anglican church." Her hat had an embroidered lace headband, into which were tucked a trim of small yellow canary feathers.

"We still have religious services in these parts," another of the locals, a teenager, ventured. His was possibly the boldness of someone immature.

"Very good," Dossy responded, without commitment, perhaps worried about annoying the shepherds.

"Where do the trains go?" the brunette asked.

"We are told they go to reeducation campuses," Marissa answered.

The brunette looked around to see who was within earshot. Seeing no shepherds nearby, she persisted. "Where do they really go?"

"We are not sure," Marissa answered.

"People have stopped returning from those places," the teenager commented, perhaps too openly. He was tall and gangly, with a heavy burden of acne, but on a face finely formed and surely destined one day to be considered magnetic. His mother, from a porch swing in the distance, noticing the interactions, began calling him to supper. Her summons attracted the attention of a shepherd, which Marissa and Dossy and their visitors only now noticed sitting on a wooden folding chair affixed to the roof of one of the passenger cars. They had not noticed the observation posts previously, most likely because the chairs had been prone on the roofs of the cars during most of their journey. The shepherd signaled with a sharp horizontal motion of one hand that the conversation with the townspeople was to cease. The gesture was not emphatic or forceful, merely an instruction. It was understood nothing else was supposed to be necessary.

The brunette ignored the gesture, smiling and waving cheerfully back at the shepherd poised above them. "Something for the journey," she said, producing from her purse a rectangular box of gummies, the over-sized kind you buy in theaters. "For your children."

"You know we have children," Marissa observed.

The brunette hesitated.

"How?" Dossy asked.

"They always send mothers with children to fetch the water," the brunette said.

"They're not like the prisoners," the teenager said, looking furtively at the train. "Because they have kids, the parents never try to escape."

Marissa shoved the candy box into her pocket, and then, after reentering the passenger car, knew enough to look inside it, extracting a slip of paper.

She had no sooner done this when the rooftop shepherd appeared, hand outstretched. "Give it," he said. She handed him the empty box.

"There were only a few gummies in it," Dossy explained, reseating herself beside Marissa, "and we were still hungry after the skimpy breakfast."

"Not much of a gift," the shepherd sneered. He rattled the two gummies still in the box, then ate them.

They waited for the train to be in motion for half an hour, before Marisa nodded toward the breezeway exit. They moved slowly around the other passengers, Baby Theodore in Dossy's arms, and Nate being held by Marissa by his wrist, despite his age.

"The paper," Dossy said, once they were outside.

Marissa produced it. On the back of a dry cleaning receipt, written in a hasty, small script, with the words spaced too far apart, no doubt for emphasis:

Don't stay on the train.

They did not speak for some time, but stood, the wind scattering their hair, watching the scenery roll past. In one drab hamlet they spied in the distance behind the station house, rising, still grandly, two wooden steeples. Thinking they would see intact churches, they craned their necks as the train curved around the settlement, only to perceive that, oddly, only the steeples of the houses of worship remained and the sanctuaries, like the main bodies of many of the structures they'd seen previously, were gone.

"Centuries of building and sacrifice and suffering, all gone in minutes," Marissa concluded, reflecting on what they were surveying.

"The Holodomor," Dossy said.

"What?"

"That was when the Russians flattened the Ukraine's agricultural villages, to starve them into submission and collectivize their farmlands. Five million Ukrainians died."

"I am unfamiliar with the word," Marissa said.

"The Holodomor. They later tried to remove it from the history books, to conceal what they'd done. And it wasn't the first time it happened, and not the last time."

"Awful."

"None of this is new," Dossy said. "It is the history of our species. The Turks did the same as the Russians. Thousands of churches and monasteries and towns in Christian Armenia, scoured out of existence, forever, by the Ottomans. An entire civilization, obliterated from the face of the earth, with no trace of it remaining, and no mention of it permitted. It's a pattern humans have repeated again and again. All of human history is a history of purges, replacements, displacements, and slaughters. It's the entire history of human beings, and we have forgotten it."

"History is surely more than that," Marissa countered.

"Then you're fooling yourself. History. It was the slaughter of the Romans in the Kingdom of Pontus, 80,000 women and children butchered on their knees in their own temples by the soldiers of King Mithridates. The men were killed first, because only most put up a defense. It was the slaughter of a million Tutsi civilians by the Hutus, in Rwanda, leaving hundreds of thousands of them scattered in piles along the highways. It was the Uyghurs of China, slaughtered in their mosques and suffocated in their barracks. They were not Chinese enough, alas."

Marissa reached across the breezeway railing and touched

Dossy's sleeve. "You are no haus frau. Tell me who you are."

"I was a history teacher before I got married," Dossy responded. "They didn't like it when I wouldn't follow the teaching scripts, and they fired me. The scripts were all soft forms of propaganda, brainwashing, and then, after a few years, it wasn't very soft." She studied Marissa. "And who are you, actually? What are you pretending not to be?"

"I'm a dissident artist. The art attributed to my husband was actually mine. I never wanted to be a dissident, but I found myself in that role. In the most simple terms, I'm someone who has made commentary in a time when it's now forbidden."

"Did you know you were making dissent?"

"Yes. My failure, if there was one, was in not understanding the consequences."

Dossy chewed her lower lip. "I am pleased to meet you. The more dissent the better."

"Moot as it appears to be?"

"Fuck them," Dossy said. "The pathetic thing is that there hasn't been any real resistance. You and I are the resistance. Which means there isn't any. Which means we are doomed."

"It's that dismal?"

"Yes."

"Surely, no."

"Yes. We've put ourselves in an inconceivable position. And if there's one thing I've learned about history, it's that we learn nothing from history."

Marissa searched for some straw to grasp. "We must hope maybe this is all something other than what it appears to be." She

sat down on the floor of the breezeway, drawing Nate to her lap. She rested her chin on his head as he sat there, too old to be sitting on anyone's lap, but a reassurance to her nonetheless. Softly, like a ventriloquist speaking into a dummy, she sang into his hair.

"It is exactly what it appears to be," Dossy said. "All of human history tells us you're practicing wishful thinking. Human beings always think they're risen above their nature, until history returns to remind us of our hubris."

"I am not disagreeing," Marissa said. "The richest part of it all is how we placed ourselves in this predicament; we maneuvered ourselves right into it."

"Do you think it was mostly intentionally....or through stupidity?"

"Both. It is occurring with intent, but with lots of determined help from the stupid amongst us."

"I will admit I have often come to the same conclusion myself."

Nate had returned to standing at the edge of the breezeway and began urinating onto the scrub brush through which the train was moving. The ends of the belt of Dossy's trenchcoat were grasped by the wind in the breezeway, sending the ends dancing out beyond the railing, as if waving to someone or something.

The train skirted around a shrinking lake, then entered a low trestle to cross an inlet at the far end of the body of water. In a clutch of trees on a thin peninsula, not remote from the rail tracks, the tree branches reached gracefully down into the water. Under one group of branches floated an indistinct and colorless form, close enough not to miss in their line of vision.

"Look," Nate said, "A crocodile."

It was not a reptile, but unmistakably the form of a very diminutive adult or a very large child, floating face down in the water.

The two women looked at each other to acknowledge they'd both seen it. On Dossy's face was an expression destined to remain in Marissa's mind.

"Woman," Dossy said, "let me paraphrase the best I can a quote I think came from Voltaire. 'When you are in power, I speak of freedom and rights and equality and justice and compassion, because those are the language of your political discourse. And when I am in power, I take a brick and bludgeon your head until your brains ooze out like oatmeal, because that is the language of my own political discourse.'"

Marissa felt her jaw tighten. "Mrs. Templeton is right. It can't have devolved into that."

"Then your own eyes have been lying to you."

A few moments passed, with neither woman speaking. "We should jump," Dossy said, speaking into the breeze, almost to herself. "We could step off onto one of the banks, when the train slows to go up a hill or makes a slow curve."

"You cannot attempt it with a baby in your arms."

"I think I can. I think maybe it is our only choice."

"It won't work. Where would you go? If you are correct, there is nowhere left to run. No province, no country. Don't you see? They don't even bother to guard us; they don't even bother to arm the shepherds. They don't care what we do. They don't have to bother, because anything we do to resist them is pointless."

Nate had been studying them both intensely. "We could go into the circus," he offered.

"A circus is what we have become," Dossy said, looking at him with a drawn face. "I'll ask again, where is the 'resistance' that is constantly denounced? The Media talks about there being resistance, pushback, counterrevolutionaries. Where is any of that?"

"There is nothing," Marissa agreed. "And that is why you should stay here, where you are."

Dossy pointed back to the car. "Most of the people in there are too propagandized or too stupid or too confused even to be afraid. Too stupid even to flee. That too is one of the sins perpetrated against us; we no longer even have an instinct for survival." She began intensely contemplating her baby, sound asleep in his bundles; she was undoubtedly evaluating the risks inherent in making flight. "And you?" she asked of Marissa. "With the subversive and radical art? You coming with me?"

Marissa mulled the choice. "I am an artist who should have stuck to making pottery and kitchen decorations. Someone was just saying last night that the time to have pushed back is long past. We yielded at every battle."

"And the chance to change any of it has passed us by. Meaning, we've thrown our chances away." Dossy maneuvered her hands around the baby, loosening her trenchcoat belt and then securing it around the infant.

"We appear to be in a bad place, yes, but we must still hope."

"Then you have more faith in human beings than they merit," Dossy said. She was staring into the baby's face. "Yes it is a time of darkness. How did we think it would end? Did we think it would end with statues being pulled down, or books being banned, or speech codes or holidays being abolished? How did we think it would end, with every third TV channel we tuned into screaming nonstop about grievances and the need for a blood penance? Did we mistake who was getting designated as

the enemy? And all of that turmoil and destruction was just the low-hanging fruit on the tree. It was all of the easy fruit that got picked in order to culminate in what's happening now."

"You are behaving irrationally," Marissa cautioned. "We do not know for sure where all of this will take us. We will surely be left with something."

"We will be left with nothing, dear woman. Nothing except for whatever complying does for us. And I don't hold out much for that. How pathetic, when the only act of rebellion or bravery now consists of running away. It is what the sons of bitches have reduced us to."

Marissa watched with dread as Dossy began reaching for the breezeway gate latch.

"It is a wilderness here, an alien and strange place," Marissa again cautioned.

"It is what they have turned our entire world into. And what is not gone already soon will be."

Marissa's heart rose up in her throat. "Come back inside with me and the others."

Dossy had opened the breezeway gate.

Marissa held out a alarmed hand, fingers splayed. "What about the shepherds in the upper compartments? If they see you they'll stop the train. You'll injure or kill Theodore."

"They won't be watching. They're so certain there's no place to run to they don't even guard the prisoners. They don't even make the effort."

"Dossy."

The young woman had leaned out from the platform, surveying

the terrain. Marissa's desperation built to a head. "Dossy. Listen. I have seen the labor battalions doing highway construction, and some of the people were singing."

"You haven't seen any labor battalions with infants."

"Dossy."

"I only ask you not to raise an alarm."

"I can't promise it."

"Promise me."

Marissa contemplated snatching the infant, but feared being propelled off the breezeway herself.

Dossy had positioned herself on the breezeway. "Promise me, damn you."

"Do you have money?"

"Yes. And food in my shoulder bag. Just come back out and toss the bag along the tracks."

"How do you know a drone won't follow you?"

"I have heard they go on auto-pilot, whenever a train is in motion and they're following it."

"That's some risk, Dossy."

"We'll risk it."

Dossy the haus frau suddenly stepped toward her, and they pressed cheeks. It was all happening too quickly, in the nature of such things, in the nature of everything happening to them in the last two days.

"Nate," Marissa said, "Go back inside. Don't talk to anyone." She faced Dossy. "I promise to say nothing."

It was in that moment that the train slowed again for a curve, banking to the right, and the young woman, sensing it, bundled one arm more tightly around the baby, swung away from the side of the train and dropped, almost cat-like, down into the brush, landing, quite remarkably, on her feet. Despite her promise, Marissa had instinctively reached out to protectively grab for the baby, instead being left with an extended empty hand, saluting into the brush.

Mother and child had landed in a crouch, then rose erect to stand, watching the train. Marissa again held her hand in the air to wave, but no wave was returned, instead, the two padded quickly away into the underbrush. To Marissa's amazement, none of the surveillance drones peeled out of formation to follow her.

Nate had been peeking from the train car door, and leapt to the railing with a yell. "Where has she gone?" he asked in surprise. "Should we stop the train?"

"No, my sweet boy. We will say nothing."

"There are big rocks. She may have hurt the baby."

"They will be okay," Marissa lied.

"Should we go also?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because we must go wherever Providence intends to send us. I do not have the courage to make any other choice."

When they returned inside, no passenger made any mention about Dossy's absence. A few hours later, when a sleepy shepherdess lumbered through the compartments and asked with great self importance about the empty seats next to them, Marissa advised her the absentees had relocated to another car.

SECOND DAY ON THE TRAIN / ARRIVAL

They awakened on the second morning to find the blinds closed in the compartment. When they were instructed not to raise them, a mild ripple of anxiety floated through the rows of seats.

Some were relieved to avoid the morning sun, having stayed up late the night before, making a lesser effort to sleep since they'd had so little luck the night before. Some disgruntled commentary had been made by some passengers, including Mrs. Kamuro and the boy with the anarchist's hat, and in one heated moment they'd looked up to see one of the coarser looking shepherds studying them intently. He'd come into the compartment quietly and overheard some of the jabber.

"Bluster all you like," he said. "It doesn't matter to me one iota." He ruffled Nate's hair, beamed benevolently at Mrs. Kamuro, then disappeared as smoothly as he'd arrived.

The train had never stopped during the night, though it was indeed later rumored that a passenger had jumped from the train and a shepherd had witnessed the escape. Unlike the day prior, on this morning no breakfast was offered to the riders, and during the night the remaining lights had sputtered, made some metallic pinging noises, and then extinguished themselves, the result of batteries expiring somewhere. The lavatories had compounded this discomfort and become complete no-go zones, turning into overflowing receptacles. Like Nate, most of the travellers had resorted to exiting out onto the breezeways to relieve themselves, the women holding up blankets to provide a modest privacy as they crouched to urinate through the grated floor. The significance of these degraded comforts was difficult to ascertain, but the ripples of worry intensified when in the late morning they stopped briefly and most of the baggage was removed from the storage racks.

Half an hour after the luggage was removed, they glided into a station and stopped, just as before, almost imperceptibly. Peeking through the shades, on the platform was a sign, below which were flower boxes, with multi-colored chrysanthemum flowers in brilliant bloom. The sign read "Ronald D. Collingwood Reeducation Campus: Where Diversity is Celebrated Daily."

On an opposite loading platform, several passenger cars full of boys from some tony boarding school had disembarked, with all of them still wearing their uniforms, dark blue pants and burgundy blazers bearing the school's embroidered crest. Despite the circumstances of their conveyance, they looked to be in robust good spirits, and Marissa strained to discern the crest, wondering if it was for a school where John had once taught. The thought was a poor comfort from their past, something feeble to grasp onto in turbulent waters, and she was aware of this even as the memory passed through her mind. She watched almost with disbelief as the boys hooted and tussled, banging their suitcases together and scrapping with one another. Their behavior and the quality of their luggage both suggested possible levels of accommodation that had not been afforded to other passengers making the same pilgrimage, especially now when most of her own companions' luggage had been confiscated. Presiding over the boys was an ancient and harried looking dowager, probably a dormitory house mother, grey hair almost white, cajoling and admonishing with a feigned good nature.

Yet it was clear from the underlying currents in her face that she knew.

Marissa was distracted from these images when inside their own train, on the intercom system, some soothing elevator music started up, increasing incrementally in its volume. A female voice, almost certainly a recording, and reminiscent of the intercom announcements in airports, welcomed them to their destination. The voice sporadically interrupted the music

being played on the intercom, and Marissa noticed that the music playing was the same both inside and outside on the train platform, though a second or two out of synchronization, creating an odd reverberating and mildly disturbing effect.

Her hand in Nate's, she filed out of the compartment with the others, and descended the steps from the car. They descended into a huge rectangular quad, some sort of parade ground, with nondescript barracks on three sides, and the train's tracks and loading platforms forming the fourth side. There were almost no trees to be seen. Around them, extending into far distances, were one and two story military barracks with pitched roofs, fronted in some places by what appeared to be flat-roofed and nondescript administration buildings, their own roofs crowded with satellite dishes. Trucks, shuttles, and mechanized carts were parked in scattered rows along the sides of the buildings and around the perimeters of the quad itself. Above the quad, the drones had again gone into an impressive formation, spaced farther apart than at any prior viewing, but blanketing the sky from one end of the field to the other. Many were perhaps holding their positions from previously arrived trains, or trains soon to come.

On the train platform, a new phalanx of shepherds awaited, some with clipboards containing photos of passengers and sheets of paper, which Marissa surmised contained biographical data regarding the travelers. With these tools, the shepherds sometimes approached individual passengers in turn, leading them away. Other numbers of passengers were then culled from the remnant of the mass, and waved amiably into small and large knots of people promptly ushered off in different directions. The final remainder of the train's population was then apparently being formed into a group to be led away without any particular attention being devoted to its members at all. In this last group, some of the shepherds hoisted children in their arms, apparently to relieve parents of the burden of carrying them toward the barracks.

In the midst of all of this, a little girl in an orange raincoat smiled at Marissa, and she attempted to smile back. The little girl lifted a flap over one of her raincoat's pockets, and a white gerbil poked his head out, turning to and fro to observe their surroundings.

"His name is Snowball," the child said.

Marissa and Nate forgot for a moment, and smiled. In just a few seconds, the child was ushered away, leaving Marissa pausing in the hubbub and straining to pay attention to the intermittently playing intercom voice.

"Welcome to the Ronald D. Collingwood Reeducation Campus.....The peace shepherds and instructors, together with support staff, of the Ronald D. Collingwood Reeducation Campus welcome you to this destination, and we apologize for any mishaps and confusion which may have occurred during your journey. The Collingwood Campus was established eight years ago to instruct citizens regarding their civic responsibilities and rights....Social Credit Scores are compiled here, as in mainstream society, based on your cooperation and civic mindedness. Your completion of our regimen of instruction, work, and exercise will boost your cumulative Social Credit Score by an average of forty points.....While you are here we hope you'll take full advantage of our amenities, including our library, business center, and athletic courts.....Luggage will be routed to your lodgings upon the completion of sorting and recording functions.....We are happy to note that most of our guests reunite with relatives and friends within two hours of arriving on our campus.....Mail contact with relatives outside this facility will be offered within three days.....Conscientious efforts will be made to meet all special dietary needs....dining hall hours are 8 AM for breakfast and 12 noon for lunch.....We ask for your patience and cooperation at this time, and reassure you that both are greatly appreciated."

A group of shepherds approached the occupants of Marissa's train car, which had been close to the last one in the line of passenger cars. Something in particular did not escape her attention: many of the shepherds at this new location were armed with service revolvers. The travelers stood silently as a small number of the passengers were drawn aside and cuffed with zip ties. A few responded with lamentations or irritation, but most simply submitted passively to this new indignity.

Doctor and Mrs. Templeton were met by a teenaged black girl in khakis, who, to their own alarm, speedily and efficiently shackled them to one another by their wrists and then directed them away from the group, her hand leading Dr. Templeton by his free wrist and Mrs. Templeton following without choice. Mrs. Templeton made half-hearted cries of indignation and protest, which inspired little attention from anyone else, and to which the shepherdess responded with patronizing and mostly inaudible words of reassurance of the sort commonly directed at someone suffering from senility.

Mrs. Kamuro, primping with an air of weary resignation with a small hand mirror in her wheelchair, was approached by someone they recognized; it was the girl with the blue hair from the picnic pavilion. The girl handed Mrs. Kamuro what appeared to be a program or a schedule, then wheeled her, without any restraints – perhaps because flight was an inconceivable possibility for someone in a wheelchair – toward one of the administration buildings.

"I look like an old witch," Mrs. Kamuro said, peering into her hand mirror. "The train ride was not easy. It makes you question your sanity to be put into a situation like this."

Her chaperone was in good spirits. "I've always personally thought that sanity, like sobriety, is vastly overrated," the girl quipped back. Mrs. Kamuro giggled, and was wheeled away. As they receded both could be heard bantering amicably.

Professor Miska was approached by an inexplicably obsequious and deferential Asian man, sturdy but humble looking, and was led away without restraints. He turned to look back at them, and Marissa observed an expression of pity on his face.

The pretense is becoming thin, she thought.

As the crowd cleared, Marissa noticed two shepherds on what appeared to be a small rectangular orator's platform, both holding clipboards, one taller, husky, and his clipboard containing a stack of photos, the other, younger, short, and sunburned, his bald head shining in the morning sun. The taller gentleman had a shock of dark hair, nesting above intense eyes. They waved at mother and son, after consulting with one another.

Marissa and Nate began to walk toward them, hand in hand.

The two men who had been waiting for them were overworked and impatient. Both were, like most of the other campus functionaries, dressed in khakis, and the smaller man kept tapping his clipboard against his thigh. Both had sidearms and truncheons clipped to their belts. Both had had the benefit of college educations, and both were highly intelligent, intelligent enough to know that the possession of the first attribute was no proof of possession of the latter. They considered themselves underemployed, employed beneath their capabilities, and they had even, in humorous self-derision, begun to refer to themselves as "baggage handlers." The work on the trains and at the depot had been interesting and even entertaining during the first years of the reeducation campuses, at least until the rusty busses and over-filled trains had begun arriving incessantly.

"Same shit, different day," the taller of the men said under his breath, as mother and son crossed the quad toward them.

"But a lively bunch today," the smaller man said, "especially with that bunch from the fancy boys school. Maybe they should

try putting some sedatives in the bottled water on the trains before they arrive here.”

“There’s often no bottled water on the trains,” the first man commented. “Sometimes there’s no tap water either. It makes things more difficult for us when people finally disembark. Talk about lousy planning.”

The smaller man sighed. “They say ninety-seven percent of the life forms on earth don’t have what can be recognized as a brain, and I’d say that includes most of the humans.”

In response to this, they both made humored snorting noises.

Marissa extended her hand to the taller shepherd, but he did not reach back. The smaller man adopted a plastic smile channeling his disinterest, and he purposefully avoided Nate’s gaze for some reason.

“Are you both peace shepherds?” Marissa asked, trying to rebound from the rejection of her hand.

“No,” the taller man replied, with a barely accommodating smile. “Those – with some exceptions – are more chaperone types. I know some can be overly rough and dogmatic, but they’re amateurs compared to what you’ll encounter here,” and he flourished his hand to include the buildings all around them. “Here we are actually called Peace Instructors. I am referred to as Peace Instructor Three, and my colleague here is referred to as Peace Instructor One. Our number designations reflect different levels of expertise and education. We are usually referred to by more simple titles: ‘PI3,’ or ‘PI1.’ A PI3, my title, is the highest level of expertise obtainable here.”

“I see,” Marissa said. She placed the previously extended hand behind her back. “I am Marissa Ball, and this is my son, Nate.”

"Our first order of business was to confirm that," PI3 said, politely, "and now we have done so."

"How do you do," Marissa said, without conviction.

"How do you do," Nate said.

PI3 nodded, perhaps acknowledging their greeting, perhaps not. "Because you are a special case," he continued, "we have been assigned to conduct a debriefing. We have a number of questions, to help us fine tune the operations of our campus here." He affixed a serious but unthreatening gaze on her. "We would like to know the true identity of the creator of the artwork attributed to your husband."

"Is my husband here?" Marissa asked.

"You will see him soon, depending on the answers we get from you," PI3 said. He seemed resolute in soliciting her responses. "Who was the creator of the artwork attributed to your husband?" he asked again.

"My husband."

PI3 looked annoyed. "We know that is a lie."

"It's mine," she confessed.

"Very good. The correct answer, and one we already knew. Very good."

"I am really not political," Marissa said. "My art was always intended just as social commentary."

PI3 gave her a wry smile. "Alas, you are jumping the gun. But continue to be completely honest with me for the sake of your own welfare."

She gave him the look of an uncomprehending altar sacrifice.

"You do not fully understand even now, do you?" PI3 asked.

She looked at him quizzically, compounding his perception that she did not comprehend.

"We always knew that it was your art, but you are not here because the art exists. You are here because you exist."

"Because I am seen as a dissident?"

"No, Mrs. Ball. You are here because you are you, in your glorious entirety."

A thought occurred to her, odd thoughts had been occurring to her throughout the train trip. In her head, calm voices sang slogans and spoke cliches, to which they would then pose counterarguments. In her head hummed a question which had been recurring since her husband's disappearance: *What happened to the world we once lived in? Where are the people who were supposed to keep us safe and protect us from all of this?* In her head she now heard the voice of the doctor's wife responding: *That's outdated sexist jib-jab. No woman needs a man today for safety. The rule of law stands firm. The rule of law will still protect us.*

PI1 addressed her. "Mrs. Ball, would you please state the reason why you think you've been brought here? It is important for us to collect such information."

The question confused her, and she found herself unable to give a direct answer. "If you know who I am, why can't you tell me if my husband is here?"

"We will reunite your family if you cooperate, and if he has not gone on to another destination, " PI3 said.

"If you knew I was the author of the art, why wasn't I sent for earlier?"

The Peace Instructors were accustomed to doing the questioning, not the other way around. They could nonetheless afford patience. "Usually there are more pressing cases to

process," PI3 responded. "And now, if you don't mind, we're asking you for a statement to determine if you understand why you've been brought here."

She took a calming breath. "I am unsure, but I think I am here because I am believed to have authored subversive art, art expressing unacceptable thinking, art which should never have had an audience." She summoned a breath. "For that, I truly have regrets, and I truly confess my guilt."

"Very good," PI3 said. "Then you have some partial understanding of why you became our guest. Your art is a crime, in that its intent was to disturb the common peace. Have you heard of that charge before?"

"Yes. On the train someone mentioned it. But I would defend myself by saying that if the purpose of my art was solely to make commentary, or observations, or to express unconventional thoughts, then doing so should be permissible in any country allowing its citizens freedom of expression."

"So which was it?" PI3 asked. "Was your art subversion or social commentary?"

"More in the way of commentary," she responded. "Much, much more, in its intent."

PI3 scribbled on his clipboard. "You've given the explanation I anticipated," he said. He then produced from his clipboard the postcard Marissa had written the day prior. He dangled it too closely to her nose. "We have determined your husband's Aunt Mildred, the one mentioned in this card, has been dead for twenty years. Your mention of a dead person can be construed as a warning intended for the card's recipient."

She was quick on her feet. "It refers to one of my own aunts."

"Very nice. Except our data banks show you also don't have an

Aunt Mildred.”

She slapped her hands together, as if having an epiphany. “I’m very sorry. Sleep deprivation. It is hard to think after sleepless nights on a train. I was writing about a neighbor we address with the term ‘Aunt.’”

“You are a resourceful one,” PI3 said, and then, looking at Nate: “Is this true?”

The child did not speak.

“The lies of seditionists,” PI1 commented, observing Nate. “All of your mother’s art has been on the banned list for over five years.”

Nate scuffed one of his shoes with the other.

PI3 spoke into a walkie talkie he unlatched from his belt, and the door of one of the nearby administration buildings promptly opened and Hope inexplicably emerged, carrying a box. As she neared, Marissa saw the box was actually the art portfolio she had left in the foyer of their house, their home, now only two days but still a universe and a millenium distant. Hope placed the portfolio at PI3’s feet on the oration platform and stepped back, standing at attention. PI3 left the portfolio where it had been placed.

Marissa,” Hope said, acknowledging her, but making only the briefest of eye contact. Marissa struggled to shove down a response of surprise and panic at the appearance of the girl, a girl for whom she had made herself vulnerable by expressing her love in the postcard on PI3’s clipboard.

It was only in this moment that Marissa understood that they had been thoroughly beguiled, and thoroughly betrayed.

“The name ‘Hope’ was a metaphor, I’m assuming,” Marissa managed to utter, her face turning a shade of crimson.

"I am here only as a verifier," Hope said, casting an expressionless glance at the ground.

Marissa was too unnerved by Hope's appearance to speak further, and Hope, as if some entirely distasteful business had finally been resolved, stepped forward with a stiff nod to stroke Nate's hair.

"Hope," Nate said, as if a long lost friend had been found. He had been too exhausted by their journey to exclaim when she made her appearance.

"Yes," the girl answered, looking at him with pity. "I am sorry. It is now all settled."

"What is settled?" Nate asked.

"Your coming to this place."

"Can I come with you?"

This question made Hope visibly uneasy. "No. You will go someplace different." She bent over him and caressed his cheek maternally with the back of her knuckles. He beamed upward at her as she did so. The girl then turned on her heel, fast and hard, like someone fleeing something, and speedily retraced her steps across the quad to the portal she'd exited. She closed the door quietly behind her, her pale face peering out as she made a separation from them.

These developments, accompanied by a steady, low drumbeat of some kind in the distance, warned Marissa they were surely in close proximity to danger. By approaching the orator's stand, she had achieved a better view of the terrain and the surrounding buildings. At one angle, across a backdrop of the barracks, visible in a not remote distance, a line of young men, completely naked, stood waiting patiently, with the beginning and end of the line obscured by the corners of two of the barracks. A large cloud mass kept concealing the face

of the morning sun, making the weather feel harsher and more primal, but she could still see clearly, and recognized the young men as being the ones from the boys school. It seemed like just moments ago they'd been cavorting on one of the train platforms. Some of the boys were not much older than Nate, immobile in a line of naked backs and buttocks, all of them appearing disturbingly vulnerable and awkwardly feminine from the back. Across this strange backdrop, unexpectedly and slowly strode a pasty and gangly older man with a shock of blond hair, followed by a boy of exactly Nate's age, obviously a father and son, and both as equally naked as the others. Without knowing how, Marissa intuited that the destination of these two had been changed by some process, and was not the same as the one shared by the boys in the line.

It occurred to Marissa that these images were incarnate versions of one of her own artworks, her drawing of the line of naked women, the drawing that had first ignited controversy for both her art and her household.

The quad was clearing of people. As it cleared, the drones behaved strangely. On rare occasions, a drone would follow a person being chaperoned to some secondary location, following along behind both the passenger and his chaperone, floating above the barracks until disappearing out of sight. Most of the surveillance devices, however, as passengers were removed from the field, floated slowly down to earth and turned themselves off. Soon there were countless numbers of them on the ground, an unending flung out black contagion, resembling over-sized locusts. Their red eyes were watching, blinking, guarding, one moment, and then suddenly black. A man in a motorized service wagon had appeared and was carefully scanning the grounded devices with a hand-held tool, then storing them in the wagon.

A remote shout of distress from some unseen passenger on the quad brought Marissa away from her thoughts and observations, urgently directing her to attempt to connect with her captors

on a human level. She must attempt to connect with their intellects or their hearts or both.

"Gentlemen," she said, "has it occurred to you that our founding national documents, our constitution, do not allow for what is happening in this place?"

"We're not interested in discussing the founding documents," PI3 said.

"Why not? Hasn't it benefited you to live under their protections?" Her comments were visibly impromptu, but she could think of nothing else.

"I wasn't consulted when they wrote the documents," PI3 responded.

"Even without their protections, you surely believe, don't you, that we should be able to speak and write and paint and live in freedom?"

"Freedom is not license to do whatever we like," PI1 interjected, "and order must be maintained or all social order is at risk of being destroyed."

"That is true," Marissa acknowledged, thinking fast, "but can you see how in troubled times things always go full circle, whatever political winds blow, to become the kind of authoritarianism we all say we hate?"

The men cogitated, momentarily, on their response. "Some things earn destruction," PI3 countered. "Wouldn't you agree?"

"Perhaps," Marissa continued, "but then let's talk about how countries get destroyed. Despite our problems and divisions, all of us were once one people. We shared a common history, a common language, a common future." She searched desperately inside herself to select the correct words. She decided to fall back on some of Dossy's observations. "You take a

country down by destroying its values, its history, its heroes, its courts, its police, its rule of law. No sane country dismantles itself in the way we've been dismantling our own. And if the destruction doesn't work – or in tandem with the destruction – in some chapters of history we human beings have even graduated to erasing humans themselves.”

They were listening, albeit impatiently.

“We have dismantled what we once had here,” Marissa continued, undeterred. “I remember how things were before. We didn't have perfection, but what we'd built was beautiful and good in many ways. It was the best thing humans had created up until that time. Everything human is fragile, like our lives themselves. All societies and human institutions have fault lines, and some of us have agitated those fault lines to achieve one goal: power and control. Everywhere, they have separated us into a hierarchy of oppressors and victims, the better to divide us and control us.”

She was mildly encouraged by their attention. “There was nothing wrong with what we had,” she repeated. “It was evolving on its own terms, just as it was, and turning everything on its head has brought us to where we are now – this place.” She paused, so as not to use too stark a term, “What you call a ‘reeducation campus.’ If this is what was intended to replace what we once had.....,” her voice trailed off, “then you don't fully comprehend what you've destroyed.”

The men shifted their weight. The interview no longer felt amusing.

“You know what I'm saying is true,” Marissa said. “Many of the people who were with me on the train didn't even know why they were being transported.”

P13 was willing to parse words, for the sake of the child. “I am afraid the conflict has now devolved beyond any such discussions, my dear. And in many ways, it has even been

reduced down to the color of your uniform.”

She furrowed her brows. “Uniforms? That makes no sense,” she said.

He owed it to her to flesh out his explanation. “I will assist you.” He would still choose his words discreetly, for the sake of the child. “In difficult times, in times of conflict, things usually get reduced down to their most basic elements. Things have currently been reduced down for most of our arrivals to the color of their uniform, and, as some of you have come to suspect, the color of your uniform is now the color of your skin.”

Marissa caught her breath.

“Do you understand me?” PI3 asked.

“Yes, dear God. I guess I do. But the remaining passengers?”

PI1 jumped in to elaborate, “Many people of other backgrounds have also needed sanctioning. Some made unwise alliances. Some just refused to obey. And some are just the collateral damage to be expected in situations like this. Things get chaotic. They get messy.”

“As you have probably discerned,” PI3 added, “it no longer takes much to end up on a collection list.”

Her mind struggled to digest all of this information. It was what on some level she had known, but had refused to know.

“We have studied your work, Marissa,” PI3 continued, addressing her for the first time by her first name. “We have a hard time believing you did not suspect it would come to this.”

She exhaled slowly. “I suspected, but never believed it,” she said. A tremor passed through her, visible in her shoulders.

"Unfortunate," PI1 commented.

This condescending comment annoyed PI3. "Shut up, asshole," he said to his compatriot.

In Marissa, fear now began to well up in her bosom like a wave, threatening to snatch her reason away from her. This she could not allow, as the child was watching. He would take his cue from her, and he was exhausted but absorbing each detail of their conversation. She knew intuitively that it was now time to grasp at any prospect capable of saving them. She remembered Dossy's mangled quote from Voltaire, and heard it playing in her mind.

"Do you know Voltaire?" she asked, weakly.

"It is not a band I'm familiar with," PI3 said. "And we need to finish up our questions before you and the child are sent on the next leg of your trip."

"We will have different destinations?"

"Correct."

"You cannot separate a mother from her child. How do I know he'll be okay?"

"You don't. You'll have to trust that we're not going to harm innocents. That we will opt for reeducating them."

She noticed the men, at the approach of a truck, had tensed. They were perhaps accustomed to erratic responses when their debriefings began concluding.

"My maternal grandmother was Jewish," Marissa said.

Both men stared at her.

"I believe I am a lesbian," she added.

PI3 winced. "You have mixed up your wars, my dear. No Allies

are coming in this one.” His words were spoken almost as if intended to soothe her.

“I will not leave my child,” she said, firmly.

“You will and you must,” PI3 asserted.

“I cannot.”

“We can’t let things get ugly in front of him.”

She ignored the obvious implication of the comment

The truck drew near, began to make a U-turn, then reversed to back up to them, already bearing passengers in its open truck bed, a dozen middle aged people, sitting on benches folded down from the low interior walls of the bed.

“You will board this truck,” PI3 said, stating the obvious. “Our debriefing is almost done. As you long ago surmised, the existence of hate art became a political act. Then the existence of those who created such art, and the existence of those who viewed it and agreed with it. And finally, we have reached a point where a political act is constituted by the mere existence of many who simply exist.”

“This is insanity,” Marissa said. “Existence is no political act.”

He did not respond.

“This is madness.”

PI3 tilted his head in a manner suggesting finality. “There is one last question we are required to ask on our questionnaire.”

“Christ.”

“What are the most important things you’ve learned from this adventure? We know your opinions from your so-called ‘art,’

but what are the most important conclusions you've come to?"

"You are expecting more confessions? More apologies?"

"No."

"Will it make a difference in whatever is going to happen?"

"No, Marissa."

She answered calmly, but without hesitation. "I am now aware we brought all of this on ourselves. We caused this to happen. We even aided and facilitated it, through our own foolishness."

"Anything else?"

"I have learned what you have just taught me, that existence can be a political act."

"Anything beyond that? A summation, for our records?"

She detected the pointlessness of sophistry. And then she said what no one else answering the questionnaires had ever said:

"I have learned that only a radicalism and a violence as brutal as your own could ever have saved us."

They were impressed, albeit rankled by the insult embedded in her conclusion. PI1 reached out of habit for his truncheon, and then, seeing dismay entering Nate's face, resheathed it. He was not without a heart, he had children of his own.

"You must leave the child now," PI3 said.

"I need to say good-bye to him. You would not deny it to me."

"Of course not."

She understood, completely. She reflected again that she had known previously, yet had refused to know. Even in the

numbness of understanding, she was able to summon her child to draw near to her. At the far ends of the quad there were still a few clusters of disheveled people culled from the rest of the original passengers, being sorted through by their handlers. Some of the adults were also saying good-byes to children. She drew Nate close, and cupped his face in both of her hands, staring into his dark eyes. He did not comprehend what was happening, and it was a small mercy for which she was grateful.

"Do you remember," she asked, "the story we used to tell about how to best say good-bye to someone? The story I told you when Daddy left us? About how it was better for it to happen quickly?"

"Yes. I remember. The story about the taxis?"

"Yes."

It pleased him to gratify her with the story. "You call the taxi and then make happy talk until the taxi comes. Then it arrives, and you jump up and run outside to the taxi, and it all happens fast, so fast that there can be no tears."

"Yes."

"I remember."

"It is what we are going to do now," Marissa said. "It's what we're going to do right now. And the best way to go forward when someone you love leaves for a while is to just keep marching. Do you remember me telling you that?"

"I remember."

"It's what we will do now. I have to go away on my own, and you need to keep marching. I need you to be brave, and to obey the instructions of the adults while I'm gone."

A look manifested in his face, one she had not seen before.

She also detected his own internal psychological scramble to quell panic. He was being brave.

She knew her next words would be the most important.

"Do you know, Pooh Bear, that before you and your daddy came to me, I never noticed when trees or flowers were in blossom? Do you know that those blossoms never brought me joy, that I never even saw them, until I knew the joy that the two of you brought into my life?" She was not sure, but it appeared his upper lip was turning slightly purple, as it had sometimes done on cold days when he was little. "And you have been my greatest joy of all," she said. "My greatest joy in all of it, all of it, all of it. How greatly God has blessed me."

Nate looked bewildered. "Did Hope bring you this happiness also?" he asked.

"Yes. Very much."

The truck's gate had been lowered by PI1. She removed her hands from Nate's face, stooped lower to kiss him on the forehead, and scrambled onto the truck. PI1 had stepped forward to offer his hand to her in boarding the truck. She did not take it.

The other passengers were huddled in the front of the truck bed, near the cab, but they were overhearing her farewells. Without exception, they looked away. Marissa did not join them to sit near them, but sat near the gate, her eyes still fixed on Nate's face, a smile on her own. As the truck pulled away, she held up her right hand and signed the "I Love You" message with her fingers.

He signaled back. She continued to signal, slowly, resolutely, until the truck rounded the corner of a building and vanished from sight. In the time it took the truck to traverse the quad, her hand never stopped signaling, and her eyes never broke their gaze on Nate's face, even for a moment.

The drone that had been above Marissa's head did not follow her. It floated down to Nate's feet and shut itself off.

When the truck was entirely gone, PI3 and PI1 returned their attention to the boy.

"It's a shame," PI1 said, "She had nice tits."

PI3's lip curled. The personal nature of the comment, especially in front of the child, rankled him. "I'm getting tired of reminding you to shut up. She was probably worth a hundred apparatchik worms like you."

PI3 then knew right away he had said too much, spoken too angrily. The worm started to speak, then decided better.

"Where is my mother being sent?" Nate asked.

"She's gone to get on the right side of history," PI1, the worm said. "What do you think about that?"

The child looked troubled.

"What is wrong, Nathan?" PI3 asked.

The boy felt safe in the quad's open expanse. "My father told me something before he left," he said.

"What."

"Something he said I was too young to hear. He said it just before he got collected."

"Spit it out."

"He said when they tell you to be a team player, it means you're about to get raped, and when they keep telling you to get on the right side of history, it means eventually they're going to kill you."

PI3's jaw initially dropped, but he then countered by flashing

a broad and good-natured grin. "Strange words, for a little man like you," he said. "But somehow, I think I like your father."

"You need not worry," PI1 added. "Your mom will be just fine."

PI3 gave him a look.

Nate's mother was gone. The three of them stared at her portfolio on the platform, as if collaborating in their thoughts.

"Do you know much about this lady's art?" PI3 asked of PI1.

"Only what's in the records. Only how she got some bankrupt studio owner to exhibit some of it at his last showing. I also remember initially some of the drawings had words."

"Like what?"

"Words. Titles. In the end, none of it even had titles. I guess they knew it wasn't safe. But the first paintings had titles and even captions and dialogue bubbles and things."

"Didn't know that," PI3 mused.

"Yep. It was around when she stopped titling the pieces, that's when the paintings became known as 'Dispossession Art.' One interpretation was she felt she had been dispossessed of the right to use language as a means of expression, and only images were safe. Eventually even the use of that definition got banned by the speech codes, because it was deemed as reactionary."

"I don't think what you're mentioning was the kind of dispossession the lady had in mind," PI3 speculated. "I think you're wrong."

"I do remember the file says the Media had a firestorm during

the exhibit, and there was picketing at the studio showing the art, followed by an arrest of the studio's owner. There were denunciations, from senators to social luminaries to man-in-the-street mailmen and stuff. The studio got shuttered after a molotov cocktail bounced off its plate glass window, landing on a sidewalk and burning two picketers.

"We could have a look," PI3 suggested, nudging the portfolio with his boot.

They pulled the art from its sanctuary. It was only a single large sheet of paper, having a comic book format: on the sheet were nine over-sized squares in total, presenting some kind of story, three squares lined up in a row at the top of the page, three squares in a row in the middle of the page, and three squares in a row at the bottom. Each square or frame depicted the same classroom in an elementary school, populated by students and one teacher, posing for a class picture over successive years, the teacher remaining the same person, but the faces of the students changing year to year. On a small placard in the front of each student group was listed a class year, and indecipherable squiggles presumably representing writing further identifying the class. Behind the students was a blackboard; to the left of the students stood the female teacher, and on their right side there was a window. The human characters in the comic strip were painted in a style that was a hybrid of something between cartoon-like images and the images in a child's elementary primer. Through the depicted window a tree was visible in all of the scenes, a tree which changed throughout the years in the progression of the comic strip, reflecting the changing seasons, like summer, winter, and the spring.

In the first of the nine frames, the class year listed was 1934, and the children depicted were all as white as an angel's ass: auburn-haired girls in frocks with their hair in pigtails, Rhine maiden blondes, and mischievous looking boys in blue jeans and sporting cowlicks. In the second

frame, the year was listed as 1950, and a distinctly brown child is peering in through the class window. In the third frame, listed as 1964, the silhouette of a soldier with a bayonet was visible outside the window, behind the swarthy child, and in the fourth frame, dated 1969, several black children were present in the group photo, including the one who had been at the window, all of them smiling alongside their white classmates. In the remaining frames containing various year dates, the presence of children of color in the group could be seen to accelerate, becoming more and more exotic: burkas appear, hijabs, sculptured dreadlocks, hoodies, shrouds, turbans and other exotic clothing. The English alphabet listed above the blackboard is joined by other foreign alphabets, as well as bulletins and announcements in foreign languages. The teacher herself could be seen to become more exotic looking, utilizing a bronzer, makeup, and an Afro wig, perhaps, to fit better into her evolving student milieux. The impression created was of a racial and cultural metamorphosis going on in the fourth, fifth and sixth frames, and in the seventh frame, a white child was depicted standing outside the classroom's window, peering in. In the eighth frame, the silhouette of the soldier with the bayonet appeared again outside the window, standing behind the white child, and in the ninth and final frame, no one was peering in through the window, but there were also no white students remaining in the image, and the tree outside the classroom window was presented as metaphorically dead, barren, and leafless, in a frozen winter.

The time period covered by all of the images, as listed on the various class photo placards, was a span of only 70 years.

PI3, visibly offended by the piece, shoved it back into its case and dropped it to the ground. "Replacement Theory shit," he said. "Created by racist shits with an absurd sense of privilege. This stuff deserved to be banned, because it was meant to crap with people's heads. And no wonder, looking at

this, why she stopped using language as a medium.”

PI1 nodded vigorously. “I will make sure we destroy it after the political officer studies it.”

“We won’t bother with him,” PI3 responded. “Better to just trash it.” He studied PI1’s face, noting something reluctant in his expression. “What? Spit it out.”

“Nothing. Just a little hard to argue with the factual nature of the piece,” PI1 offered.

“Factual?”

“The truth is the truth, right? In a single modest life span they pretty much saw the world they knew get erased. By the time all of the dust settles, it will take some luck even for any remnant of it to survive.”

PI3 shrugged. “The truth is whatever the people in power say it is. And you heard what she said, about them bringing all of this on themselves.”

“I’d say they had it done to them, from the look of places like this,” PI1 said, with an uncommon candor.

“This your first campus?”

“Fifth.”

PI3 grunted. The grunt signified nothing and everything, all at the same time.

“Let’s be serious,” PI1 ventured. He was feeling too comfortable. “If there was a morally compelling reason to obliterate everything they knew – the world they were born into – it isn’t something I can see.”

PI3 launched a long gaze across the quad. “Words like those get fools in trouble. For one world to be born, another must die. It has always been that way, and always will be that

way. They just failed to figure it out.”

PI1 clenched his jaw, visibly. A question had been resting for years in his own mind. “Are you sure you and I are going to remain, when all of the dust settles?”

This particular question was entirely beyond the pale. “You’re asking the kind of question that can get you a seat on a truck,” PI3 observed.

In this place, it had long been determined even the watchers needed to be wary of being watched. The bigger man, feeling hurried, waved his hand toward the far end of the quad at a group of trucks, then held up two fingers, to signal something in particular. A truck pulled from the group of vehicles and lumbered toward them. “We need to wrap things up,” the PI3 said. He thumbed through the papers on his clipboard again, as if not to miss anything in the contents. A look of surprise crossed his face. He inexplicably waved away the truck approaching them, and instead waved again, holding up three fingers. A separate truck started up and moved in their direction in response.

“Something unusual?” PI1 asked.

“Do you know who young Mr. Ball here really is?”

“A boy whose mother makes racist art?”

“Not entirely.”

“How’s that?”

“He’s also the son of John Ball, a descendant of Martha Ball.”

“Whozzat?”

“The mother of George Washington.”

They were, for just a second, but only a second, impressed.

PI3 used his pen to circle some data on the papers, accomplished with a few quick flourishes. "He has the blood of George Washington flowing in his veins. I'll be damned. Have we had a visitor like him before?"

"A few," PI1 answered. "A month ago some of James Madison's descendants came through during my shift; they'd actually been picked up at a family reunion they'd been holding at Montpelier."

"That's almost funny," PI3 said. "What did you make of them?"

"Mostly a lot of dried up old women, except for two blond twins in a double stroller. Those little guys were really cute. It was a hoot: the old ladies actually began quoting the constitution to us, and even the twins were quoting pieces of it."

"Gawd."

"Then some old queen began a panic, yelling they were in danger, and they gave up on that angle fast. It ended up turning into the usual stuff, a lot of yammering about God and Jesus."

"It makes true believers, I've noticed."

Both men continued surveying Nate, a blend of curiosity and reluctant respect. It felt like a special formality might be appropriate for the moment. Thousands of others with freckles and serious eyes had proceeded him, but few with a recognizable pedigree. Nate, oblivious to their scrutiny, perhaps regressing to earlier years, busied himself by pushing small piles of pebbles together with his shoes.

The second truck lumbered into proximity, and like its predecessor made a U-turn, then slowly backed up to them. On the back tailgate, like the railway cars, was another placard, but this one was metal, soldered firmly into a metal holding

frame, and engraved "Special Handling Lorry." The use of the word "Lorry" was somewhat incongruous for the truck's environment, but perhaps indicative of the truck or the metal placard or both having foreign origins. Inside the vehicle were two guards with automatic weapons, keeping watch over a popular Midwestern evangelist, someone whose name the men did not recall, but even they recognized from TV documentaries. The preacher's clothing had had its pockets ripped off, and the glasses he wore were missing one lens.

"This is not a taxi," Nate observed.

"Indeed it isn't, child," PI3 answered, paternally. "But you need to board it. It is not a long journey after this."

Without additional prompting, Nate climbed onto the back of the vehicle and seated himself beside the evangelist. The evangelist reached out and clasped Nate's hand, and Nate allowed it. The boy waved to the two instructors as the truck pulled away, and the men, for reasons known only to themselves, responded to the gesture. The pleasantly gabbing female voice on the quad's intercom system had stopped chattering as the quad had finished clearing, and the elevator music was playing again. Someone, notified of an incoming train, slowly increased the volume. It was a familiar Christmas tune.

*The colors of the rainbow
So pretty in the sky
Are also on the faces
Of people passing by
I see friends shaking hands
Saying how do you do
They're really saying
I love you..... 1*

"In the end, it all reduces down to this," PI3 commented, as the truck turned a corner and vanished. A final drone above

the men's heads glided noiselessly down to their feet and switched itself off. Another small flock of the airborne devices at the far end of the quad were also descending, as the last travelers there were being dispersed.

The men watched the proceedings without particular interest.

"Is this where I comment about the banality of evil?" PI1 asked.

"Ours or theirs?" PI3 responded.

The men's early shift was ending. From some far place, there was the sound that a truck's lift makes when it descends quickly and abruptly whumps on the ground. It was followed by resonating mechanical noises of indeterminate origin, long whirring noises, and then the groaning of some secondary machinery, pounding metal upon metal like a broken juggernaut, grinding away at its machinations.

I will tell the story of the destruction of my people, and the destruction of the sunlit world we once occupied. I will tell it, even though it is now spoken of only in whispers, whispers which, if brought to light, are denounced as damnable, forbidden utterances, crimes punishable by ruin or even death. The primary function of any government is the preservation and protection and perpetuation of the nation-state and culture that placed it in power. The failure to perform this duty is the most magnificent of all treasons, and one for which politicians should be rousted out of the beds of their old age and their genitalia fed to their still-living mouths.

Because of our fools and our traitors, our destruction was achieved in a single human lifespan. Because of them, no one mourned our passing as a people, and no one was ever intended to mourn it. We did not find the path to utopia promised by our fools and traitors, but instead a path to what some of them intended and others did not: the path from which no

steps can be retraced, the path to our extinction.

1 – “What a Wonderful World,” by Bob Thiele and George Weiss, 1968

© 2023 Sidney Secular – All Rights Reserved

E-Mail Sidney Secular: Success_Express@yahoo.com