

The Unnamed

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I lean inside the narrow alcove in the darkness between streetlamps, unseen by the parade going past. They hoist their hero onto their shoulders and, amid shouts and waving banners, bear him down Thirty-Fourth Street.

Lance Parker has won the skateboarding championship for a second time. He is thirty-eight-years-old and has never done anything else since the age of ten. He is very good at that one thing. He never learned to read, not that it matters when a fourth of Congress is illiterate. He signs his endorsement checks with an X that is trademarked and copyrighted, having but a single serif at the upper left, although some days he gets it backwards or upside down or both, so all variants are likewise trademarked and copyrighted.

In addition to amassing a great deal of money and estates and properties around the world, Lance Parker is envied by every male on the planet under fifty and is in the sexual cross-hairs of every female who is not a lesbian—and even some of them. For the third year, *Vapid Magazine*—Where Everything That Doesn't Matter Matters™—has declared him Man of the Century though the greater portion of it lies ahead. I hope the honors run concurrently, not that we'll have to look at his mug plastered everywhere for the next three hundred years.

More than any recent assignment, I relish sending Mr. Parker into the wild blue hereafter.

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We are the *Bez Nazvaniya*, the Not Named, so secret and secretive an organization even we do not know who we are. We few members in America escaped automatic birth registration in the National Identity Library. We recognize others of our small group because we neither send nor receive: we were not implanted with the natal transponder. No one is certain how anyone escaped the tentacles of the NIL bureaucracy, but nothing is foolproof. Fools are so ingenious.

It is too bad we've had to resort to vigilantism, but, unable to enforce any standard of intelligence or decorum in public life, we do what we can to keep America from getting any more stupider and cruder. At times it seems a losing battle uphill both ways.

Bez Nazvaniya had its inception in the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics as a secret citizens' organization who sabotaged the secret police—first the NKVD and later the KGB—through misinformation, clever set-ups, and plain old tattling. No one is more inclined to believe lies than a liar. After the dissolution of the USSR, the members of the Not Named dispersed, setting up uncounted chapters and doing battle wherever ignorance and inanity hold sway, which is to say, worldwide.

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I turn down Sixth Avenue heading south to *The Church of the Holy Communion*, the club at which I have been informed Lance Parker will celebrate his victory with five hundred of his closest friends. The crowds on the sidewalks congeal as I get nearer. There is an excitement in the air—part electricity, part pheromone—that used to accompany the sighting of a person of consequence. No doubt the crowd are sending and receiving messages near the saturation point of the antennae to bounce the waves back and forth. Distilling all half-million missives to the essence of their originality, they likely say, “Lance Parker is the greatest.”

The eyes of all are upon me as I breeze past the red velvet ropes and no-neck bouncers. I do not need to be connected to hear what they are wondering: *Who is he?* I would be ripped to pieces with bare teeth if they knew I got past them all on a phony pass from a color-blind *Bez* artist. Better still, I do not satisfy their silly male dress code, though it is unclear from context whether it is the male or the code that is silly.

To be properly attired for this venue
each male must exhibit at least three
items from the following:

Skinny jeans with ripped knees
Desert boots
Horn-rim spectacles
Fedora hat
Hasidic beard
Ubangee earrings
Queequeg tattoos

I am pleased not to be sporting a single one of them. I think it is asking a lot that *The Church of the Holy Communion*'s clientele know and understand the references. The warning is surely not meant for tonight's crowd since most wear all seven items on the list, with several more identically unique items to spare, such as braided wallet bungees, nanos, and nose rings. The women dress so similarly, it is difficult to tell the genders apart, not that it seems to matter.

A purple haze of smoke from every herb known greets me at the entry. It is the former narthex of this fabulous pile of stones, a 19th Century church constructed from blocks of brownstone. I am directed downstairs to the “VIP Crypt” which I enter through the priest's compartment of an elaborately carved confessional with sufficient pinnacles and spires to resemble a Gothic pincushion. The staircase is made of wood, with rickety railings and a bench seat on each of the ten landings. It groans and sways with each footfall. At the third landing I contemplate climbing back upstairs, but I am on an appointed mission. I take my assignments seriously.

The club is a cavernous speakeasy with mirrors along the back-bars and on the ceiling, and a polished chrome floor. A handful of candles illuminate the entire place. There is a din as thick as the smoky atmosphere emanating from a band that call themselves *Joie de Fevre* making

a noise they call “When Enough’s Not Enough.” The crowd go wild: it is their national anthem. It is played endlessly at a volume that would be painful had I not inserted phony nano earphones so I would not look too conspicuously out of place.

While the bar serves alcohol and theobromine, vendors in tall, elaborately feathered hats walk among the crowd selling pinwheels, Veritas™, wiggies, and eyeballs. Each penny charm is placed on the patron’s tongue as though it were a communion host. By the look in the eyes of everyone I encounter, no one has abstained. I feel freakish, as though I had a grotesque physical deformity that all are secretly muttering about in their circuitous world. I am so incongruous I am invisible. Lance Parker’s adorers walk into me as if I were not there.

I catch a glimpse of our hero over the shoulders of the milling crowd. I come upon a couple who are actually speaking—or rather, shouting—to each other. Their nanos must have malfunctioned. I tap my own fake earpiece and remove it, and insert myself into their conversation.

“I wonder if the band know anything else,” I say, addressing both the man and woman.

They nod and smile with the sincerity of mannequins with a fresh coat of paint. They focus on me as though they’re looking at my doubles, one at each shoulder. I am discombobulated, wandering through a dream that belongs to someone else. I speculate whether it is some sort of contact high.

“I wonder who will win the championship next year,” I remark.

The couple, whom I name Punch and Judy, look horrified, then perplexed, as though trying to decide whether they should contact the proper authorities or join the party. Judy taps Punch on the upper arm and he pats her back, a little harder.

“Maybe I will win it,” I say.

Punch and Judy are again in a quandary as to whether or not to run. They look me up and down in my black Nehru jacket with red buttons and piping. I’m convinced the American chapter of the *Bez* could use a fashion adviser. Or is this the jacket I got at the second-hand shop on Avenue A called *Suit To Kill*? Perhaps I am so far out of fashion that I’ve circled the globe and returned at the front of the line.

The couple choose instead to laugh out loud—at a shrill volume that can be heard above the bass din of the band. The musicians hear it, too, and stop torturing their instruments.

“What’ll it be?” one of them asks, looking at the three of us.

I have no idea what he means. The crowd continue their gyrations even though the music has stopped. Judy slaps Punch on the upper arm and he pokes her back, a little harder. They lean into each other and put their heads together.

“How ‘bout ‘Bang! Bang!’?” Judy suggests to the musician, who is clad in clear vinyl suit and is naked underneath.

“You got it, bitch. Right after the break.”

The band has granted a song request. Their music, now on auto-pilot, is broadcast through everyone’s nanos. That explains the crowd’s continued rhythmic twists and turns and bumps and flips. It looks ridiculous, but I am nearly a hundred years older than anyone in the crypt. There would be something wrong with me if I liked the music and dancing of a group so impossibly young.

I bid adieu to Punch and Judy, who smack each other playfully, and then me, both at once. I wend through the reeling, whirling crowd, working my way ever closer to the Man of the Century. It feels as though it might take that long to reach him. I am bumped and jostled and my feet continually stepped on.

The band saunter up to the stage. The throng stop their dancing pantomime in perfect unison, as though their power cord had been yanked. It is odd to see such military precision in a demographic that dislike the military. They turn their attention toward the musicians, creating gaps and serpentine passages of which I take advantage, advancing by feet rather than inches.

The crowd press closer together and march toward the stage like a single multi-legged organism. There are fewer than a dozen people in orbit around Lance. I spiral in like a missile locked on its target. The small group laugh on cue all together. No one but Lance seems to notice me. Is it possible he is not high, that he does not use penny charms?

The band untune their instruments and assault us with a crescendo like a car crash. I reach for my phony nano earpieces. The musicians launch into their mutilation of “Bang! Bang!” I am looking Lance Parker in the face, one that has been extensively retouched. It smiles.

I reach into an inner pocket of my long jacket and draw out a silver revolver made to look like a cigarette lighter. It is another bizarre *Bez* touch. I am beginning to understand their peculiar logic of doing something so unexpected that one would feel silly noticing it, much less reacting to it. I point the shining gun at his sternum.

“Bang! Bang!” the band, and everyone in the place, shout.

The exquisite irony is not lost on me—or on Lance, who smiles a tiny smirk, as though a wider grin might crack his face. He glances down at the gleaming pistol and then at me. If he has

bodyguards, they ought to be fired. I pull the trigger. A white-hot flash shoots from the cigarette lighter, encircling us. The club and everyone in it vanish.

* * *

I am known in the *Bez Nazvaniya* as “Teacher.” Since even I must not know who I am, I call myself “Shakti-Pat,” a Sanskrit word meaning the conferring of awakening upon others, as a teacher might transfer knowledge to a pupil. My everyday name is Patrick Shacktey—*Shacktey, Pat* on my faculty identity tag—so everything dovetails nicely. The other reason I am called “Teacher” is because I visit the intended victims as children, gaining their confidences as a teacher before I do them in. I feel I should open a *King Herod Day Care Center*.

I am regarded in the organization for my ability to travel backwards in time—and forwards if the need arises. Despite my attempts to train others in the *Bez* how to accomplish this, my skills as a teacher are abysmal. I am the only one they can call upon when the cultural or social damage has been so severe that the culprit must be eliminated before he has embarked upon his harmful career in a position of influence.

To me, time travel is simple since time itself is an illusion. While most physicists and philosophers might disagree with me, I am convinced there is only one point in time, one moment, one instant: *Now*. So, getting from *Now* to *Then* is as easy as standing still. The hitch, however—and everything has a hitch—is that traveling in time does not permit simultaneous traveling in the other three dimensions. Where you start is where you’ll end up.

There is no point in my calling myself other than what I am: I am an assassin. While it might be a facile argument to justify the murder of one to protect the thousands, it is still murder, and it is, to me, even more heinous when perpetrated against a child, however much a monster he might devolve into.

One night I stood over an eight-year-old Adolf Hitler with a long knife against his throat, convincing myself it would be immoral *not* to dispatch him when the lives of millions depended upon the merciful stroke. Trembling and sick to my stomach, I slid the knife across the tender flesh and watched his blood spurt onto the blue flowered wallpaper. I had bad dreams for months both backwards and forwards.

As it turned out, when little Adolf did not grow up to be big Hitler, it created a political and social vacuum that was filled by an even worse monster who actually accomplished all the goals of National Socialism. It made me wonder whether *der Führer* was a leader or a follower, the maker of his age or merely its embodiment.

General Plenipotentiary Heinrich Himmler proved a more than adequate replacement. Being slightly saner than Hitler, he was a more formidable leader. For one thing, he listened to his advisers. In consequence, three-quarters of the world fell to the Nazis, and the Third Reich

did indeed last for a thousand years. One of the few havens for the world's handful of remaining Jews was in Persia: another of this changed history's ironies.

The *Bez Nazvaniya* wanted me to put things back the way they were. Luckily, my sense of timing in traveling through time is quite precise. I appeared at the scene of the youthful Hitler's execution and stayed my own hand. I had two seconds to spare and the young tyrant, in his striped pyjamas, never saw two of me. My entering his room with a knife disguised as a letter-opener is never mentioned in "Mein Kampf," so the incident must have left no lasting impression.

I am pleased the *Bez* decided not to order any further assassinations on this scale of importance to world events. It hadn't worked getting rid of Joseph Stalin, either. In the nine decades during which I have been traveling through time, I have come to understand what a fussy piece of work history is: how a tiny alteration now creates shattering changes down the road. The muse of history, Clio, has a very wicked sense of humor with a tendency to finely-wrought ironies. There is no tampering with the outcome the Fates have ordained, even if arrows must fly backwards to hit their target.

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I needed only to touch Lance Parker to convey both of us to *The Church of the Holy Communion*, back to the time it was a church and the only people in the crypt were quiet souls who thought they'd remain undisturbed throughout eternity. Forever's not what it used to be.

Lance and I reappear in the crypt twenty-eight years before, when he is a boy of ten.

"Don't shoot me, Mr. Shacktey," he screams. "I didn't do it."

"No, but you will."

"Huh?"

The boyish Lance—well, the even more boyish Lance—screws up his face and looks up at me, his eyebrows curling like question marks. I am sorry to say that he is cute. I cannot resist tousling his mop of brown hair.

"You will lower American culture several notches, my boy. We cannot allow that."

"My Aunt Dotty used to say, 'You can lead a horticulture but you can't make her think.'"

"Stop that. She's not really your aunt."

"Is too," the boy smirked. "That's not a real gun. The Colonel used to have one. It's a cigarette lighter."

“Is not,” I retorted, reduced to arguing with a ten-year-old on his level. I point the shiny chrome revolver toward another arched chamber in the crypt and pull the trigger.

The blast is deafening. The smoke and shattered stone dust linger in the air. I managed to shoot the nose off the recumbent figure on one of the stone sarcophagi. I was sure it was only a clever cigarette lighter. It is another example of the *Bez Nazvaniya*'s unpredictability. Their props—their properties—are all Schrödinger's felines. One is never quite sure how things will work or how things will turn out. I like to think they make my insertions into history as messy as history itself, and so my edges are not too obvious.

“Wait. Colonel who?” I ask the boy.

“Wait. How'd we get here?” he asks simultaneously.

“You first,” I tell him.

“My uncle, Colonel Tom Parker,” Lance tells me.

“Oh, go on. Are you telling me you're related to every famous Parker? How about George Safford Parker then?”

“Great-grandfather, inventor of the fountain pen.”

He grins so charmingly I nearly overlook how disingenuous he is being. I am not going to let this little bastard get the better of me.

“How would you know? You can't even read, much less write.”

“Who's fault is that, Mr. Shackley?”

“You're not going to lay that one on my doorstep, Master Lance Parker.”

The boy infuriates me in a way I am powerless to shrug off. I point the silver revolver at his chest. He smirks, which causes me to involuntarily squeeze the trigger. I hunch my shoulders, expecting the deafening reverberations. A tiny flame jets about an inch from the end of the cigarette lighter made to look like a revolver. Lance laughs.

“See? I told you, Mr. Shackley. Just like the one the Colonel had. So how'd we get *here*, Mr. Shackley?”

“Our field trip, don't you remember? We must've taken a wrong turn. I wonder whether anyone even misses us.”

At last, the youthful Lance Parker appears afraid, as though he has caught a glimpse of his teacher's blackened heart. I hope the stark candlelight accentuates my century's worth of wrinkles and that my strange jacket, black with blood-red piping, adds to the sinister effect.

"This place is pretty creepy, Mr. Shaktey. Could we go now? Please, Mr. Shacktey."

His fear and frailty wrenches my heart. Yet I take delight in it. I wonder how different am I from the monsters I have been sent to eliminate on behalf of the human race.

"Do you know why I am here, Lance?"

"Not really, Mr. Shacktey."

He looks up at me without guile. Tears form in his eyes.

"You're going to kill me."

This is no ordinary boy of mediocre intelligence or standard-issue bravery. He deserves the truth. I put my hand on his shoulder to reassure him, of what I am not certain since I am about to kill him. He is trembling, and struggling to contain it.

"I have been sent to prevent you from doing great harm to American culture."

"There's an oxymoron for you. Are you going to blow up Hollywood, too?"

I laugh, probably the last thing I should have done.

"What will I do that earns the death penalty, Mr. Shacktey?"

"You will become the most famous Parker of all, more famous than fountain pens and rock 'n' roll impresarios and sardonic quips laid end to end."

"How? What do I do that makes me famous?"

"You become a celebrity, Lance, a skateboarding champion."

"Cool. So what's the crime? Do I run over a *Times* social critic?"

Again I could not refrain from laughing. His delivery is impeccable and his remarks cogent. The boy is no mere mimic. His wit, though perhaps inspired by his purported Aunt Dotty, is his own brand.

"I'm sorry, Lance. I was wrong about you. Why aren't you this clever in class?"

“Because the other boys make fun of me whenever I raise my hand. They call me a sissy. They think it’s cool to be stupid.”

I motion for him to sit with me on the carved stone bench in a shallow niche along the wall. I sense his reluctance, and clear the shattered stone powder from the seat, giving it a pat.

“You can trust me, my boy. If it’s any help, I was somewhat against dispatching you. The punishment did not fit the crime. But the organization works because we members are loyal and obey orders, even if we do not agree with a particular cause.”

He sits down and squints up at me.

“I see,” he said. “Like the commandant of Auschwitz.”

“That’s a bit harsh, Lance. I was only sent to eliminate *you*.”

“Après moi, le déluge.”¹

“You can’t possibly know French.”

“Why not? Maybe I can’t read, but I have ears. And in a place like New York, there’s a new lesson around every corner. The whole world is my school, Mr. Shacktey.”

I smile at him. I thought of this diminutive wise-cracker sitting beside me as my ventriloquist’s dummy. Now I am not certain which of us is the dummy.

“I feel very ashamed, Lance. I was wrong about you.”

“I’m sure if we work on it we’ll think of some way you can make it up to me.”

His playful smirk makes me regret my apology. I take the cigarette lighter out of my jacket pocket and toy with it distractedly.

“So why did this Committee of Public Safety want to do me in, Mr. Shacktey?”

“Because they feel you will inspire people to drop out of school, and quit their jobs, and leave their families to pursue a sophomoric vision of fame as the cure for life’s ills. They are convinced you will lead millions of people to make very bad choices.”

Lance snatches the chrome cigarette lighter from my hand, turns it on me, and pulls the trigger. There is a scorching flash of light.

¹ “After me, the flood.” A remark attributed to French monarch Louis XV, though it remains doubtful he said it.

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We are back at the bar in *The Church of the Holy Communion*. I am startled. I'm not sure how he figured out all he had to do was touch me to send us back to when we started. The same smirk, now practiced and refined for nearly three decades, greets me.

“But do I lead them or do I follow them?” he asks.

I cannot utter more than a few words, shouting above the music, before my voice gives out. I motion to my former student to follow me to the multi-sex toilet where one can at least carry on a conversation at a reasonable volume, though the walls thump and the floor vibrates.

“This will not look good, Mr. Shacktey: a teacher taking his student into the washroom unaccompanied. Yes, I knew it was you before you reached the bottom of the stairs.”

A pair of faint dimples form at each end of his smile. I see why he is an object of universal desire. I find it is his intelligence and quick wit that makes him attractive.

“So, do I lead or follow?” he asks again.

“I have similar questions and concerns, Lance. Every time I went back to kill the Dear Leader, his followers barely noticed, carrying on perfectly fine without him and perpetrating most of the same mischief.”

“Thank you. That has been my contention, too.”

“But your fans look up to you, Lance.”

“Did I ask them to? I know that's a cop-out, an easy remark. To whom should they look up instead? Their illustrious Congresspersonages? Their compassionate church leaders? Their honest men of business? Their inspiring educators?”

People of all sexes file past us to the toilet stalls. Lance keeps his back to them. We stand in a corner near the hand sanitizers—the zappers—which no one uses. And certainly no one sees me, the 132-year-old fossil.

“Where are my five-hundred closest friends now when I could use one, Mr. Shacktey? My fans have lined up for the next attraction, that dreadful band I am supposed to like. Then they will bounce off to the next promise of excitement in their miserable, bored lives. That is not my judgment. It is theirs. What they confide in me is embarrassing.

“I am not real, Mr. Shacktey. I am a celebrity, an empty sack full of others' expectations and aspirations, with no life of my own. I have been created by managers and agents. I do not

exist apart from the perceptions of others. I would give anything to disappear and never be heard from again, to take back ownership of Lance Parker from the impresarios—and from the fans.”

“But why did you have to go along with it?”

“It was fun—at first. I got my first contract and endorsement checks at fifteen, when I could barely read or write. I bought my friends whatever they wanted. My promoter, a Nieuw Amsterdam Dutchman by the name of Andreas Cornelis van Kuijk², decided I should remain illiterate, to be more appealing to my fans. But van Kuijk, and all my backers, determined I should *never* grow up or get smart. Their corporation, Peter-Pan Enterprises, sold stock in me—the me of their making. And if I wanted to quit—or grow up—they were already grooming three replacements. The darlings must have thought I’d never heard of J. M. Barrie.”

My head is spinning. Everything he says is crammed full of references and witticisms. I feel I need a translator. Lance Parker has gone, in the course of an hour, from the man I gleefully shot to the man I would do whatever I could to help.

“Skateboarding is my relaxation, my meditation, my gym. I never intended to become an international champion. I thought it would end in a month or two. I figured I could always tell my fans how much I derived from reading Proust in the original and go up in a puff of theatrical smoke.”

“Why didn’t you?”

“I do not use drugs, Mr. Shacktey. I never did, but I completely understand addiction. I am addicted to the admiration of strangers who do not even know who I am.”

“So, how are we going to fix the problem, Lance?”

He hands me the silver revolver.

“You’re going to shoot me, Mr. Shacktey.”

I am mystified.

“Your little *Comité de salut public*³ will also be expecting a corpse or a damn good excuse—one so good it’s believable. So we’ll get two birds with one bullet.”

² Entertainment impresario Colonel Tom Parker, Elvis Presley’s manager.

³ The Committee of Public Safety, the executive government in France during the Reign of Terror, 1793–1794.

I want to ask him to slow down. I cannot think that fast. I do not want to hurt him. I want to be his friend, his mentor—although I may have that one as backwards as the ventriloquist and the dummy.

“I don’t know if the *Bez Nazvaniya* will look at my murdering you now as better late than never.”

“The ‘Not Named’? Are they still around?”

“What, Russian too?” I ask him.

“A little,” he replies, exhibiting his trademarked dimples.

Lance has made it easier for me to pull the trigger. I must also protect the *Bez Nazvaniya*.

The shot rings out in the enormous tiled lavatory. I hear screams. Women. I leave Lance on the floor in a puddle of blood and walk slowly away.

News of the shooting of Lance Parker travels across the dance floor faster than I can make my way to the rickety staircase. I weave through a throng that are screaming, wailing, rending their garments, and tearing their hair out. The band fall silent.

I reach the narthex out of breath and out of ideas. I rush out to the street and summon an untraceable gypsy cab. Then I return to the entrance and present my credentials to the bouncers: my faculty ID card and my *Bez Nazvaniya* chrome badge, so flashy it’s impossible to read, even if they could. I tell them what has happened and that I am Lance Parker’s manager, Monsieur Louis Godiche. I will be taking him to a *very* private hospital. They nod, but I don’t hear anything rattling in there.

One of the other confessionals slides open to reveal an elevator. It must be the one for the VIP VIPs. Four men each hold one of Lance Parker’s limbs and a fifth, scurrying to keep up, cradles his head. Lance’s white shirt looks like a bloody mess.

The bouncers, barrel-chested men, hold open the heavy oak doors. One of them brushes aside a tear, a gesture that repulses me. I do not regret what I did.

I climb into the black gypsy cab and they place Lance on the seat beside me, his head against my shoulder. The car speeds off. The driver asks for an address. I give him mine on Riverside Drive, a long way uptown.

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Once we are away from *The Church of the Holy Communion* and the milling, distraught fans, I nudge Lance and poke him with my elbow.

“You’d better not bleed on this jacket, Parker.”

“That jacket!” he howls with laughter. “But I admire your pluck, Mr. Shacktey—and your quick thinking under fire. What were you doing with red ink? Was that another *Bez Nazvaniya* prop?”

“In this Post-Digital Age, we all have our devices. But I still carry my old-time red ink correction marker for the times when I see something so egregious I cannot turn aside. I must correct it on the spot.”

“I underestimated you, Mr. Shacktey. I wish I’d had you longer as my teacher.”

“I wish I’d had you longer as my pupil, Lance. Maybe now we’ll have time.”

“Is there any double indemnity rule for assassinations? I mean, is there any chance the *Bez Nazvaniya* will come after me again?”

“Not if you lie low. The news reports of your shooting and disappearance—and the description of me in my black jacket with red trim—will be enough to convince the *Bez* that you have been eliminated as a cultural threat. I have time before my debriefing to concoct an explanation why I didn’t take care of you thirty years ago.”

I instruct the driver where to turn off Broadway and we are soon outside my building, a gracefully curved Art Deco masterpiece. I pad the fare with a generous tip for the driver’s *kufi*⁴ and an extremely generous tip for his forgetting he ever laid eyes on us.

Lance dons my black-and-red jacket and the driver’s red-and-black skull cap. I hand my thick spectacles to him with the assurance I will guide him around any obstacles I can make out.

The doorman, seeing my trademark jacket filing past, does not bother to look up from his nano to see who might be wearing it. The panel behind him is already broadcasting the bizarre speculations of a pair of talking heads who think Lance Parker was abducted by an alien. It is sobering to witness what the rest of the world thinks of you. I am nearly certain they do not mean an alien from another country.

“If I’d known how easy it is to disappear, I would have vanished long ago,” Lance says as we duck into the elevator.

I unlock my door and switch on the light, waving Lance inside before the nosy harridan down the hall spots him.

⁴ A short, rounded skullcap worn by Muslims, also known as a *taqiyah*.

He looks around my tiny apartment and fixes on a row of my art prints of clouds. He stands admiring them for several minutes. I seem unable to get his attention until I shake his shoulders and shout at him.

“They remind me of old watercolors I saw at *The Prints and the Popper*, a quirky art and antiques dealer down on Maiden Lane. They were spellbinding, bewitchingly beautiful—like these.”

I try not to be surprised that he appreciates fine art. I repeat what I have been asking him.

“Tea or water?”

“Yes, Mr. Shackley. Please.”

I motion for him to take the sofa and fetch two glasses of water tea. I fold my legs under me and sit on the carpet.

“This is the most delicious tea I’ve had in my life.”

“Pure Catskill rainwater,” I tell him. “One-hundred percent oxidane, brought here on a comet from the Oort cloud.”

I know he understands every word, so I do not need to explain anything. At last he seems relaxed. The water tea is working its magic. But the huge red splotch across the front of his shirt unnerves me. I came so close to murdering him—more than once.

I bring him a simple white dress shirt from my wardrobe and ask him to change into it. Some of the red ink has stained his skin.

“Do we have a plan for what happens next?” he asks.

“The next Big Thing to replace you, Lance, is Sumo Jell-O Wrestling.”

He laughs. I wonder if he thinks I’m making it up.

“No, I mean what are we going to do with this living replica of Lance Parker. I can’t hide out in your apartment for the rest of my life.”

“I have a friend in theater who does disguises for the actors so they can go out in public without being mobbed. She can be trusted; her clientele rely upon it. And my financial advisor runs an ashram up in the Catskills. He can put you up until the heat is off. The monks have taken a vow of silence. You are safe with me and my friends.”

“And what of the *Bez Nazvaniya*?”

“They will be satisfied when their bugbear is not heard from again. And I will wait a seemly amount of time and resign. We will both become rogue members of the Not Named, free to choose our own identities and assignments.”

I refill our tea glasses. Lance and I toast each other.

“To our continued association as teacher and pupil.”

“Aptly put, Lance, though I do not plan to take up skateboarding. I am more than three times your age.”

“3.4736842105263157894736842105263, to be more precise,” he says, exhibiting his customary smirk.

I have grown used to it, but I do not yet find it endearing. I wonder what’s the use of being a math prodigy when every nano on the planet is a calculator. He may as well be a skateboarding champion for all the good it does anyone, but I do not want to hurt his feelings.

“About as useful a skill as skateboarding, Mr. Shacktey. You’re right. And, yes, I can glimpse what you’re thinking, usually a combination of body language and your tiny electrical impulses. I haven’t done much mind reading in a while. Not much worth reading.”

“Then you’ll know I’m offering you the sofa. I normally sleep on the floor. It keeps me spry. And the other thought is that I’m wondering...”

“...whether I’ve made arrangements in the event of my untimely demise. Yes, I have, right down to the design of my tombstone—already paid for.”

“I’ll bet I can guess your epitaph.”

“Cannot,” Lance declares with a lip as pouty as his ten-year-old self displayed.

“I’ll bet it says, *Excuse My Dust.*”⁵

“You amaze me, Mr. Shacktey. Yes, just like my dear old Aunt Dotty had inscribed on *her* grave marker.”

We laugh. Lance takes off his shoes, rolls onto his back, and stretches out his legs. The sofa is just long enough. I throw an afghan over him and switch out the light.

⁵ Dorothy Parker’s proposed epitaph for herself, from *Vanity Fair*, June 1925. She also suggested, “This Is On Me,” but it is the former that is inscribed on her grave marker in Baltimore at the headquarters of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

Epilogue

“The cure for boredom is curiosity. There is no cure for curiosity.”

— Attributed to both Dorothy Parker and Ellen Parr, but the origin remains uncertain.

“The evil that men do lives after them; the good is oft interred with their bones.”

— William Shakespeare, in “Julius Caesar.”

“Wenn ich Kultur höre, entsichere ich meinen Browning.”⁶

— Hermann Göring

⁶ While the remark is usually attributed to Göring, it appears in a play by Hanns Johst first performed in honor of Hitler’s birthday in April 1933. It translates as, “Whenever I hear [the word] ‘culture,’ I remove the safety from my Browning.”