

Andrea smiled her wet white bricky smile. "You're taking a vacation?" she asked. "Oh, that's wonderful. I love that for you."

G stared at her teeth, like he usually did. She had huge horsey front teeth that he wanted to lick. They shone like a waxed floor. One of her incisors faced forward at a weird angle, so it looked like she had three front teeth, and he often fantasized about reaching into her hot mouth and twisting the tooth until it was right. G had had braces as an adult, as soon as he could afford to, and now his teeth grew perfect and straight from his gums. The process had been painful, which he had enjoyed. The constant ache had reminded him that the errors were being corrected.

He was at Andrea's place downtown. She occupied the whole third floor of a tired old brick building whose solid construction had borne the burden of the scorpion-heat sun for at least a century. Her floor was a long rectangular box divided into smaller boxes. Some of those boxes were for doctor things and some of those boxes were just for her, like her bedroom and other stuff.

Earlier he had gone across the street from his trailer to the bar church where the syndicate did business, and he had found Choke (5'7", female, Central Asian, very fat, 45) and told her he would like to take at least 7 days of PTO, effective today. At first he'd been worried. He was one of two full-time mercenaries the syndicate employed, and since he never talked to the other guy he hadn't been sure whether he even got vacation, but Choke had only said *okay*. G had never taken time off before so he had three and a half months saved up. Choke sent him off with a promise to call if she needed him.

Now he was with Andrea, to have his borgs recalibrated firstly, and secondly to say goodbye. He always visited Andrea first whenever he left for a job. He didn't like going without her. She made him feel like bread did: warm, full, physical. With Andrea G's mind lived in his nerves, the flesh ones and the machine ones all tingling alike, and sometimes when they sat and ate together he kicked his feet in contentment.

"I'm going to see my mom," G said. It came out easy, because it was true.

"Oh, that's so nice. That's so lovely, G. How's she doing?"

"She's fine."

"How's the... is she well?"

"She's okay. They're fixing it."

"That's good to hear. I'm glad you're going to see her. That'll be good for you. It makes me happy." She smiled big like a cartoon, the lines of her mega-mouth clean and neat.

Andrea, who was G's doctor and also his favorite person in the world, made her emotions like neon fangs, wore them so bright and plain on her face. Maybe she did it for his benefit. Andrea always said exactly what she was thinking and what she meant, and she never lied either. She gave it to G straight. She understood him and he understood her. She bought him things like plants and wall art.

She pressed a sticky sensor to the bare skin right above his heart, making him shiver. Her fingers so close to his chest. She had a snakes' den of other wires plugged into the calibration jacks of his borgs, him the egg in a weird electric nest. A few more sensors. He wanted to press forward into her soft hand but straps bound his limbs and chest to his white chair. Heat sloughed off of her like asphalt.

"Open up, honey," she said, and he did, and she pressed a rubber bit into his mouth, pushing his tongue down. She fiddled with the dials on her display, and then: "Three...two..."

A big glorious shudder forced his whole body into a spasm. He strained against the bonds, feeling their material pulling from the chair, fighting his power. Every nerve sang with feeling. He didn't call it pain, because it felt good, but anyone else would say it hurt like a bitch. His fingers clenched, unclenched, he shook without restraint, body dancing with energy. He moaned *OOOOOOOOUUUUURRRRRRRRRRRRRHHHHH*. The sensation shuddered, three more heartbeat-pulses of a shock and then it went away totally, leaving him raw and fresh. Andrea's gloved hands pulled the rubber from his mouth and his tongue fell limp out, hanging there slack, and he drooled on his chin a little. He blinked one-two-three times and shook his head. He sat, fuzzy and cute-warm feeling, while she unstrapped him. He started to kick his feet.

"My other cybernetic patients hate that," she remarked. "But you're my little freak, ain'cha?"

"I like how it hurts," G said. The words oozed from his mouth like mud.

With the calibration finished, G stood up, dressed and made to leave. Andrea walked him out the door to the elevators. She held his hands in hers, said goodbye, and just before sending him off changed her mind, went back inside to light some incense, was waving it over both his shoulders in a purity ritual, her Sanskrit mumbling like flower petals opening and dying quickly, then *ding* the elevator coming up yawned wide to birth Chex.

5'9", male, Central Asian. Brother to Choke and useless. Andrea set her incense down and clapped all giddy when she saw him, dragged him from the elevator by his spiky dog collar and kissed him hungry and deep. He laughed into

her mouth, wavering on his feet like a drunk kid, and when she pulled away he said "Woof." Oh, G hated him.

Chex was Andrea's very serious romantic and sexual life partner and self-styled pet dog. He'd trashed himself early on with salvia, back in that three-year period where salvia had been It, and now he rode his shitty stupid bike everywhere collecting and selling scrap metal. He didn't need the money because Andrea gave him an allowance in exchange for dog service. She was clipping the leash onto him now. She was scratching him on the head and behind the ears. G hated it and wanted it. Blood pooled in his dick. He hated Chex. He wanted to be the dog. He pulsed all over and his skin itched with sweat.

G said a final goodbye to Andrea and Chex nodded curtly to him as he got in the elevator. On the way down he parsed his thoughts. He tried to understand, as he often did, why Andrea had chosen Chex, the fucking useless idiot, over him. Visually, sure. Chex had a thin, soft body, little bit of stomach, arms like sticks, a scratchy dead-grass beard, dark furry arms, big globular eyes and a placid face that seemed frozen in the same robot expression. He was weak and feminine-looking and permanently embarrassed in a way that G could admit was erotic, made you want to fuck the light out of his eyes through his ass, and G would've if Andrea was watching and enjoying it. But he contributed nothing to her life, the freeloader, and G, he made good money, real steady money, and plus beyond that he was built big and tall like an immortal mechanical bull. If you were a woman in Candybar City, did you want a tiny yappy dog or a big growly fuck-off muscle dog? Who did you want trailing you on the leash in the evenings, when the city killed the streetlights and the wild moon brought its smoke-dark to smother the day...? *Grr grr grr.*

Outside the old building with its time-rubbed decorative brick, G sat in a windowsill. He leaned his head on the glass. Hot. The sun smiled at him. Strong mid-day heat cradled his body like a hug. The air was pregnant with vapor, thick and wet like a thundercloud, breathing like drowning. A cicada landed on his foot. He kicked it off. It moved to his thigh. He snatched it real quick and burst it between his teeth, swallowed it right down, and replaced his mask and now he was smiling under there. The insect tasted like fat and potato chip with a hint of young, mealy banana. Andrea would approve. Cicadas were good for you. Cicadas had a higher protein-to-calorie ratio than steak.

His talk beeped through crackle-static. He fished it out his pocket and clicked the button. Choke. "G, you're still in the city, right?"

"I am."

"I have a quick job before you leave..."

The man lived in the Victorians, a cluster of ancient peel-painted houses that hugged the filthy Ohio river just off the downtown strip. In the warm, happy heat, mask drying his air out, G cut his bike down the bumpy brick of Main, pulled into the Victorians, where all the streets were named like trees, Cherry, Sycamore, Oak, and found a rotting white house that leaned nervously over its porch. He was looking for a 6'4" white male. Threat level minor, Choke had called the guy a junkie. Avoid collateral damage except under duress. Avoid witnesses. Low-level grunt jobs like this didn't bother G. He got paid hourly, and it was a lot. Sure, the syndicate could have saved money by outsourcing, but they owed G minimum 40 hours a week, excluding holidays. Besides they didn't want him bored. One time Choke had said: "We don't want you bored, G. Gotta whet that appetite. Don't want you cooped up in that little trailer. You're Big Dog; we know you like the hunt. You get me?" And he hadn't understood what she meant but he hadn't asked.

G stashed his bike down the street, crept the perimeter of the house for cameras, none. Dude was poor or wanted to look like it. He had the Willwind and a machete tucked into the slot on the outside of his boot. He felt like having fun, so he hauled himself up to the sloping roof of the porch, jumped and swung up to a rusty metal balcony outside a second story window. He closed his eyes and tapped the right lid twice, right over the pupil, a numb plastic feeling. He opened up to red and blue and yellow and green—his heat lenses. No hot life in the room through the window. He tapped the glass, a sharp cold fingernail sound, so old and not reinforced, unlikely to be trapped. With his glass-cutter he made a pretty circle in the center to reach his hand through and flip, careful careful and slow in case of alarms, the latch. A pause, listening, but nothing. He slid the window gently open. He liked this old architecture. These ancient houses felt like distant cousins to trees, sprouted from dry weedy dirt lots, their termite-riddled boards wet and tasty with secrets. Anyways he didn't want to hurt the building. Keep Candybar Beautiful.

The house was like a large box with a pyramid of an attic topping it. The top floor was divided into five different boxes. One of them was the long rectangular hallway that he entered when he left the window room. His mark did not take care of the space. Dust and bad, cheap stuff crowded the floor, rusty metal parts that could have belonged to industrial machines, bicycles, hand tools, the kind of thing Chex liked to forage for. It smelled burnt and pissy. Toe-heel he slunk through the house like a mantis. Nobody was alive upstairs, but come downstairs he saw a flash through the crack of an open door. He listened for voices, body-shuffling, breathing; he reckoned only one person in the room. So he whipped the door open and

"Oh, they finally sent someone," said the 6'4" white male slumped in the corner. He sat on a lumpy mattress with a blue-and-orange checkered quilt. He had a shriveled, dried-fruit look, a left-on-the-side-of-the-road kind of street trash kind of man. "You ought to go ahead and get it over with." His words flashed through the dirty air like light, white and wide and peaceful.

G took the words still and stony, though they sent a little shock through him. The man knew why G was there and didn't seem to care. Junkie, like Choke had said, okay. He took the Willwind out.

The man laughed. "You're a big stone cold motherfucker, aren't you? Oh, man, what a way to go. What a way to go. Guess I did it to myself...guess I did..." and he trailed off, quiet and hoarse at the end. "Go on," he muttered. "I'm ready." His eyes slopped across the floor. He had big dark wet eyes and long thick eyelashes. His face was plastic-still. For a second G thought he saw a wince pull the corner of those raw chapped lips, but then nothing. The man looked back up at G, and the skin around his dark eyes wrinkled, his brows went a little together, and suddenly the dirty yellow light carved the picture of agony into his face, like a statue, and then G understood something but he didn't know what it was, only that the understanding had reached him, a brief touch of sunlight, and then buried itself in a dark deep place that G didn't have words to describe...

The man made G's throat tight. He was weird. So before he could say anything else G shot him in the head.

Years of experience made it a clean kill. All the blood and brains and shit starburst onto the wall like usual. It smelled like blood now. The body was limp. G didn't have to deal with it. He was hungry. He left the house and went to the tiny corner store a few blocks over, the only place with food in the Victorians, and bought an apple.

G shot out of downtown on I-69, which made a dead-leaf curl along the sludgy Ohio bank before rolling north. He stopped at the market again. He bought more seedbread. At the paste stall he bought a big jar of cricket powder, which made a paste when mixed with water. He bought a 10-pound bag of deer jerky, a bag of dried beans and corn, and another 12-pack of kelp noodles. He ate one of the slices of bread. Later he could eat one more slice of bread; he was allowed 2 a day.

Then north, past the wall—last time for a week—and to the church, to register the job complete with Choke. He pulled off the highway to the parking lot and left his bike next to the weathered blue sign: Noble's Chapel. The removable letters on the white part underneath spelled out *1 BB WHISKEY*. The old door croaked. People looked at him and then quickly looked away.

Noble's Chapel did more drink business at night. Wannabe mercenaries swarmed north on Friday evening to schmooze, if they had the right name to drop, and it got loud and annoying and a little stinky in there. Rookies drank like pigs. They liked to talk to him. But in the daytime you had a quiet crowd of official-business types, real professionals, mostly experienced freelancers. These people ignored G as a rule. He didn't know why, but it didn't bother him. He strode past the bouncer; he didn't have to bother with the weekly passcode. His footsteps went *thud thud thud* into this tiny warm foxhole of a space, decorated with curling smoke and the smell of stale beer and dust. Six males and one female between the ages of 25 and 40 clustered around chipped-gloss tables, sitting on short-sawn pews. It was a big box with a few littler boxes shoved up against it. Noble's Chapel had been a poor church in its ancient heyday and they only had one stained-glass window; now spears of dusty blue and yellow light roved sad and slow over the wood of the bar, at which G ordered a tall glass of green tea from Hattie (5'6", mixed-race, female, huge pink hair.) She kept it in stock just for him. Green tea was a healthier alternative to coffee.

He knocked on the door to Choke's office. She said come in and he did. He sat. She asked "Done deal?" and he nodded and then he thought about it a second and then he said

"He was funny."

"Funny how?"

His Adam's apple squeezed up towards his mouth. His stomach prickled. "He knew I was coming, but he didn't care or do anything."

Choke snorted. "Yeah. I'm guessing suicide by syndicate. He knew what he was doing."

"What did he do?"

"You know I can't tell you that, Big Dog."

G sat stone-silent. Then: "He wanted to die?"

"Safe assumption. The man had a sad life."

"Sad how?"

"He was just some grunt, you know. Never gonna accomplish anything. Chained to the drip because everything else in his life was meaningless...this is bothering you, isn't it? Don't you worry about it. He got what he wanted."

"Okay," G said.

He left the office and he left the church and he left the parking lot on his bike and then he drove his bike across the highway overpass up to the warehouse and parked it and then he got off and went inside his trailer with all of his

groceries. He set everything in the kitchen. He noticed a lack of Novak in the kitchen or the living room or the bedroom, and he noticed the bathroom door was closed and, in fact, locked. He knocked. Nothing. "I know you're in there," he called. "I can hear you breathing."

After a few seconds the door swung open. "How? Do you have some kind of neural implant? That shouldn't be possible." Novak was shirtless, his body slender and soft like an elegant creature, chest scarred, and he had dried sauce on his face. G noticed the bottles and jars and silverware littering the space. Novak's backpack rest against the toilet. He had been holed up in here. By the amount of food it looked like he'd eaten, G guessed Novak had locked himself in as soon as G had left in the morning.

"I was lying. It's a trick I use. I don't like breaking down doors. It's too loud and I can't lock them again if I need to. Clean my bathroom."

Novak just looked at him for a second. His face twitched and his eyes darted around.

"There's foaming bleach under the sink," G added helpfully.

Novak sighed in this hollow rattly way that made G imagine a tiny piece of his soul leaving through his lips. He said "Sure thing, man. Sure thing."

While Novak cleaned G shuttled back and forth from the trailer to his bike, arranging all their supplies in the trunk in neat stacks so that nothing would shift around when they got up to top speed. The work of organization rocked him into a meditative state. The man he had shot returned to him. *Go on I'm ready go on I'm ready go on I'm ready...*

G was not a killer. He was an operative of nature. All the death happened on the other side of a glass wall from him, the wall that opened for his bullet. When he pulled the trigger it was not his action. The syndicate did that. G was only getting paid. You had to understand how it was, G thought. The men the syndicate killed weren't good people, either, most of them killers themselves, animals in the same ecosystem. G balanced things out. He maintained the health of the food chain, or something. If he didn't do it the syndicate would get someone else. No way to stop it.

*But but but but but.* But now he had a deep-stomach lurch feeling, like he'd upset the equation when he shot that man in the head. He didn't know why. The miserable look of him meant nothing. What was another sad dead asshole? He hadn't snuffed out a special flame. He hadn't committed a great act of evil. Only killed that man, there one second and gone the next, and it meant nothing. G reminded himself that it meant nothing. It didn't matter at all. He noticed his flesh hand flashing cold with sweat, shaking. He rubbed it off on his pants. He

forgot to breathe for a second, making him dizzy, and then he remembered again and it was fine. He ate a second slice of bread.