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THE BROOM CLOSET

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Early on, he tried to orchestrate sense from the details, except in this life, there weren't no cherries, no June bugs, and no lime-green _____.

In no way am I delusional. I should reassure you of that. Because, really, who wants to read the ramblings of the mad?

Now of course there are clever people who will reinvent themselves at the first scent of public reproach, but any genius worth his electric salt finds any half second of self-reflection nothing but a commotion. Simply, in the way of introduction, it's this – say it loud and slow, and pause like you should between words: I'm criminal.

Both of these: Smart. Reprobate. Both of these have been clapped on me for the appeasement of your hunger for simplicity. Whereas you might manifest yourselves over a ripe bowl of chili football Sunday, I'm busy dwelling on reconciling incompatible theories of the way and when we are. All day I'm fast at it – spackling a unified theory of the universe in the mildewed tile of historic inquiry, while this sweet peach of a country is busy grouting its hairy bathroom floors; and while people, maybe you, carry on testifying to their monthly creditors, I'm

finding new and improved ways of stealing the better part of their hard-earned.

But let's share a hearty laughter, together, now. For it was to the reimbursement of this last leisure that I had been summoned to an interrogation. Fact is I was caught stealing an obscene amount of money. Again, it's unnecessary extravagance that I should dress this up – “Excuses,” my savage, handy father liked to howl at the tops of his nurturing swings, are, at best, “the rewards of victims.” Simply, there's only a small class of men with the fabric and flair to pull off such a stunt, and even to an old club of goats such as this Authority must swell with, Some Luck Must Bubble. The only plausible explanation for why they picked me first.

So we'll laugh, together, now.

It was eight in the morning when I floated up to the hard light of ordinary day. Out of my own will, too. Truth is, inescapably, they invest a large, shameful portion of the budget on surveillance, and so flight for my kind is an unnecessary deposit on the same measuring stick of bosh.

Still, this particular address was something, *something* different from the rest. Usually, it's in some fluorescent, cinder-blocked and over-budgeted mausoleum

of justice, where usually two careerists – who swear afterward in cheap drink they've added their own panache to the process – have a usual good go at me until my lawyers devotedly amass and steal me back. Then – those smug clerics of mine – alchemize what is in essence a straightforward process – blame, prosecute, punish – into a biblical chronicle of conditions and consequences: *and if this happens, then we'll do this; and if this happens, then we'll just have to do this; and oh, behold, if this happens, we'll move for a mistrial.* My job, then, was only to outlast the lifespan of a holiday breakfast. And to best do that, I figured, I would amuse myself by playing them as easily as sugar raised children.

And you would have laughed. Heartily.

However.

Now, first, let's quickly dispense with the building. We'll call it nondescript. That is, I know, a literary cop-out, but to shape words for the geometrically insipid – it's another block to fill a city, for all you must know – only adds time and insult to every sentence, mine and yours equivalent. Suffice it to say, it had a door. Brown and metal. Two dents at knee level. It opened easily.

Inside, the first metal step rose from the clean cold concrete. I climbed, I suspected, the scale of two floors, the tinny stomp of metal struts, supporting tubes and handrails hammering out a shortening octave of a metallurgist cantata. I thought, with my appointment time come, to amuse myself at playing down the scale by simply returning back down a few steps, but instead – banish sense! – the pitch rose higher. I stepped up, and of course the pitch rose; I stepped down, and the pitch again rose, naturally, and of course. I continued this bewildering jig, just to forsake believability, until in the middle of the flight a step more was to crack a soup ladle against the copper toes of a gift idol. I was five steps to the top, but a strut more would have pinged a high-pitch scream into tiny ear lacerations, and so I double-stepped, twice, and only raised the squeal by two. The last step: it was silent, like the while of peace you struggle to remember that must have happened before a massacre.

A sign on the top door bore the scrawl of a cheap pen; it began in ink and finished in scratch: *Push to Shut*; and so I pulled. And then, a terrible offense: a light that's intensity must have usurped the last of the day I left outside. (And pity for them.) It was made to point tactlessly at any with the misfortune of entering the lobby.

Obliging necessity I drew back so violently I nearly ejected an arm. It was tempting to have a good look at the cause – like staring down a pistol in the universally silly hunt for its reason – tempting, to hatch out at least one eye the way people do when their spouses or siblings or maids slot-pull the blinds open: it really is, I should say, a not entirely unfavorable testament to the shrewdness of the vulgar to sacrifice an eyeball for the sake of simple curiosity.

But I wouldn't. Any self-respecting thinking man wouldn't so recklessly waste his oldest, if not now his most quaint instrument, so I entered in the logical supposition that the room was there. I entered blindly, you'd say, but in rebuttal I'd say it was in good theory.

"Mister..." I heard, with the last syllable stretched in query for a name.

"I'm here to answer a few questions," I explained.

"Of course you are," was the abrupt answer. "And now that we've settled that nasty slice of business," it continued, "would you care for a partially hydrogenated genetically engineered biscuit?"

I stood numbly, eyes tightly shuttered by the light, thinking, uselessly, that this dim receptionist must eventually sense my predicament.

“They’re more like partially hydrogenated genetically engineered cookies,” it said, “but too bland to be called cookies. We received them from next door, without any real occasion, so it’s not really awkward that we had nothing to return for the favor.” I could hear the rhythmic sound of crunching. “They must not cost much, anyway.”

I considered the biscuit. Taking one would opportune a moment of intimate contact, a chance for sublime retribution by the back of my hand, a go-to ploy when I find it advantageous to collapse a body and soul into a debilitating cocktail of nerves, fallen far and away from a wish to ever again impose itself externally, least of all upon me. It is a truism of any social species that crumbling someone else’s spirit will advance one’s own by the comparative regression, a process finely accelerated by a slap, a stern slap to send a warm body shivering in pain.

“You should come in,” it said, “that light is really unnecessarily intense,” and so as to emphasize the receptionist’s negligence, I walked still farther into the room minus the luxury of vision. The severity of the lamp grew to a buzz as I pressed on, and I could tell that I was outpacing the eye of the light as the blast in my eyelids subsided to an angry ember.

It wasn’t, though, until I heard the glass crunching under my heels that I cared to take a look. Across the floor lay crushed light bulbs, old television tubes, broken LCD screens, and serpentine, crushed fiber-optic cables, coiled and spiraling to powerless and terminal vertices. Immediately beneath me, though, in the dimmer light and at the end of the receptionist’s knobbed and crooked arm, was a tray of half ravaged biscuits.

“They’re cheap; I’m sure that’s the better part of their invention,” he explained, “but it was still a kind offering, coming as they did without occasion.”

Now given what I’ve told you so far, I feel I can admit I was something in the proximity of unnerved. But let me defend myself.

For all needs and practices, there develops a ritual. All rituals reassure the waking, eating masses of their daily renewable lease on mediocrity. A fine place to hang your hat and wait out a life span. At the fifty percentile of this shortened scale sits a man who begins with the supposition that his day work is meaningful, that it contributes to the common weal of himself, his family, and, hell, of all people like him, everywhere, and extending three cheers into the future. Then with his hands wiped clean of the day and the last chores shrugged off to next week, he’s free to slot in a

cooked meal, a watery beer, and hours of the peep-show media. It is in the break of this ritual, the coitus interruptus of his 401K, that panic whips it neck: a layoff, a power outage, a roll onto the grassy median and mulberry tree, an unpaid holiday. Which is why it helps to be self-employed in the business of exploiting others in a world of archaic notions of consequence. So yes, “unnerved,” but accustomed as I was to shifting playing fields, I took it all in stride.

“Pray tell,” he said standing before me, the receptionist in the oversized, mismatched pinstripe suit shorn of its arms and rolled up above his platform shoes: ostensibly as protection against the glass and metal on the floor. “Please,” he said, rolling over another biscuit with his garden-tool hand, “what do you mean, ‘archaic notions of consequence’?”

I took this in. I wasn’t aware I was thinking aloud.

“Oh, it’s these cochlear implants,” he explained. “It dictates your thoughts to words I can hear by the telltale saccadic twitches of your eyeballs. Neat,” he said. “It’s another idea you people will have. We get them all here, sometimes in advance.”

Again, I took this in. I supposed I was rattled more than I would have confessed to a mirror, and that in fact I had been thinking aloud.

“No,” he corrected, although at the time I didn’t know what he was correcting. “But I’ll take them out,” he said, “there’s something unpleasant, unsporting and antisocial about most of these devices –” and he stabbed his first and second fingers into his ear and finessed out the apparatus, spidery, and with a resolute and seemingly organic tail. Thrown coolly onto the glass crumpled floor.

“Pray tell,” he prompted again.

I played along, looking for the upper hand in this nonsense. “‘Consequences,’ I mean, of your garden variety, good and bad, which only suit the most simplistic moral taxonomies.”

“Hmm...” he interrupted, “that’s delightful and thank you for your input, and this all goes very far to explain your masterful soliloquy on slapping people in the face.”

So I thought that I must have said that aloud, too. But I played along, convinced I could teach him something, the poor guy who was obviously taking offense at my intimidation.

“Right and wrong,” I explained, “good and bad, these are fabrications. It is a cosmic arrogance of any time and people, even if it is every damn time and people, to believe that our actions upset the sensibilities of an impossibly infinite, deterministic but sub-atomically unpredictable universe, which we’ve cutely personified under various names of God. To think that this God would ordain any particular creed or morality – which under historical study is only and always that which is perpetually refined to constitute the oil of a particular age’s ruling apparatus.”

“Yes, you’re probably right,” said my kind agreeable receptionist, who suddenly found from the crumbly floor a metal box, attached to a cable, that had on its face a simple metal toggle. He asked, “and you’ve written all this down for the wellbeing of future generations?” Thus appeared that it was not beyond the style of my kind agreeable receptionist to make thinly disguised attempts at mockery. Which meant that I was reaching him, hitting a nerve, and making him upset. A trifecta.

“To think,” I continued, “that this force, who by laws impenetrable by man, spins orb from celestial dust *is* also keeping up with the taboos in vogue with the kids, singles, and demographically challenged? Even with your

Big IO Shall and Shall Nots, is He – if you insist on pronouns – who meters out the X and gamma rays of primordial holes *also* busying Himself with notching our little sins on the rings of far-flung planets?”

“Did you see this?” asked the receptionist. He held in his dewy palm a plastic pink case the shape of a vise. “It detects the presence of deadly microbes, and,” he began noodling his torso in slow, sweeping circles, “plays the Mambo.”

“So he doesn’t keep you in mind?” he asked, concentrating on the suddenly mechanical movement of his hips.

“Who?” I asked, knowing who.

“Him, or It, or She,” he obliged, dropping the musical microbe alarm and scanning the technological refuse for something else that might be working.

“Yes,” I continued, “no—look, do you suppose this cosmic, chthonic, spiritual, material ‘Him’ keeps up with who’s killing who, and why and what for and under what pretense, when planet infestation is more likely to be seen from His altitude? Or in what language the semantics suddenly bulge and curl over into a lie? Or who’s having sex with who, with what purpose and whether or not they are insured against the plumes of hell by which province’s

nuptial certificate? And ‘no other gods, no false idols,’ when singular and plural are at best confections to sweeten convenience? And must we keep the Sabbath holy? For He checks the calendar? Does He, too, receive by Christmas – which He marks of course, to stop on the way home from work to pick up a card and chocolate cake – does He, too, receive those eternally hilarious dogs-in-hats calendars in the mail?

“One moment,” the receptionist said. He had his finger in the air to illustrate the point. We waited out the moment, explored its limits, wondered alike if we had entered a new one. “Please.”

A custodian walked in. Or at least he had the dress of a custodian: Blue gray coveralls with pockets to hide God knows what and bolts and candy gum to be discovered banging the drum of a clothes drier. His wrinkles were scored vindictively by his years, his eyes were blacker than brown and beat into a squeezed-thin face, and when he came up, duty bound, expressly to my face, I could see he’d had not the time or reason to clear a few whiskers that curled over his upper lip. Those eyes, black and wet, he peered at me: they were wet with apology.

“This way,” he didn’t say as instead he coiled his fingers around the back of my arm. The receptionist was

gone, but I lurched toward the doorway through which I supposed he’d returned, and called out, “leave the door open for my lawyers!” And to maintain some semblance of control over a stranger, stronger and unaccountable anxiety, I added, “I’m going with this gentleman, this gentleman now.”



By a door of metal and dents like the one I first entered, we stepped into a hermetic stairwell not unlike those neglected at the back corners of office buildings and hotels, concrete with a weak odor of mildew and hint of human debris. We began upwards, the custodian pausing every half flight to show me the way by raising his palms, and just as needlessly, with an apology, the only word he ever spoke to me. Perhaps, I thought, it was his crack at formality, or perhaps a genuine expression of his humility. Or perhaps it was to apologize for the knee-busting climb, or the light’s growing hum for its none-too-cheery incandescence.

“Sorry,” he said at every half-flight.

We climbed, and anger began to swirl. First anxiety and now this, these were two incursions into the plight of

emotional man that I found as foreign and repugnant as feasting on leathery gorilla hands at the table of some easily offended tribal elder. I reminded myself of the rumor pooling about my old contacts, that the Authority was using 'new, exciting!' psychological tactics designed to unsettle and crack the most wizened, stone-lipped criminal. This seemed different, though. Farcical.

However.

When we reached the corridor of God knows what level, and my little apologizing custodian stretched wide his arm to open the door so that I could enter first, I thought I'd been granted a welcome injunction against imminent insanity. At last, the hall was ordinary: a floor, doors dull brown and lightly lacquered to reflect our passing, cinder block brushed white. It was tremendously reassuring, back again in a world required to sacrifice everything before that stern idol of modernity: Function. It was asked precisely and nothing more than to serve a life sentence of blockish men passing through it.

But the doors were marked with odd and mysterious combinations of letters, consonants separated by vowels as if to pretend meaning. Ours read "BroC." The custodian fumbled for the key, and then paused and tried the knob. It was open. "Sorry," he said.

The room was pitch black. It seemed not to absorb any of the flat fluorescent light of the hallway, but I entered because the custodian entered before me. He disappeared into the darkness, and immediately I fell.

I didn't trip, and I wasn't hit, but I fell immediately to the right and landed in a chair placed, it seemed, to catch me there. I contorted and searched for the doorway, for direction, for orientation, I don't know, for the last fretful glance at the light, like any animal would, but there was nothing. It was horrifying, really horrifying, to feel a true pang of nostalgia for a common office hallway. "Sorry," I could hear, faintly. Then the shuffle, the slow shuffle and squeak of footsteps along the wall.

So this is it.

I thought to yell, but this second animal urge I was able to check. Darkness is the first chapter of psychology and torture, and I wouldn't give them the satisfaction. Besides, protest in any form is only a raw confirmation of someone else's success. I wouldn't have it, I wouldn't give in, I wouldn't cry for help... but, thank God, a flame!

But just a handful. The custodian lit by a handful of fire a gas lamp fixed to the wall, irradiating a surface that dripped violet, the paint apparently thrown instead of rolled

or brushed or thought to be used in any way deliberately. He lit another, and, that my pupils by the dark had been dilated like a dead man's last bright idea, I began to make out the room.

It leaned right, a precipitous tilt, which accounted for my slip and fall. The chair, fake leather judging from the unwrinkled tightness of the material, also slid to the wall, and while it sagged in pitiable surrender, I used an elbow to stay upright. The floor was laid out in large squares, black and gray and polished smooth as gel. The custodian, still dreaming up fire for the lamps, no longer apologizing, freed another spark.

I could see on the higher side of the room, leaning like judgment over me, was a row of tall metal boxes. I didn't know what they were, but they swore in their tilt to let loose across the tile and press me quiet.

There's someone in the room.

Another lamp flared in ignition; there's someone else in the room, spot in the middle, sitting before me.

I had to laugh. It was so cheap, an easy theater trick, and I was made part of the feature. "What?" I yelled in the way of ridicule, "you just happened to be sitting there in the dark?"

"So were you," she said. Calmly.



"Turn up the lamps," she asked the custodian, and "thank you, Mr. Kropp." He did, a quarter turn at each lamp. Before he left he patted his hip to check his keys, sending them to the floor. They slid across the tilting tile and stopped like a bell under me. He stepped over, dropped to a knee, and swept an arm under the chair to grope for the keys, all the time staring blankly at me. Once they were discovered he nodded and returned to the door. I waited for his apologetic refrain, but there was nothing, his work was done.

"Let's have a look at you," she said, so I had a look at her. She, like the receptionist, wore thickly soled and black shoes. Up her broad legs her hose piled in stripes stretched black and white, and she wore a black vinyl raincoat from her chin to her thighs. She worked a small machine that was, like the chair she sat in, bolted to the floor. It had small keys and reeled out a long tongue of paper. Ah, I thought, she's the court stenographer. Something, at last, that made sense.

"Will my lawyers," I ventured, "know where to find us?" But she was busy reading the long tongue of paper. I looked at the walls and thought I saw a kind of design that

some overly ambitious design graduate must have wowed the building superintendent with, and that some subcontractor shrugged off and took his shortcuts to make it home for dinner. I could see across the room that the metal boxes, each anchored to the wall by wire, were simply filing cabinets. Likely they were liquidated from a corporate setup: they were well used, shoddy, and each drawer was held shut from sliding open by an overtasked wisp of clear tape.

I was beginning to feel like myself again when she looked up and said, “you’re quite the conversationalist.”

I glared at her. “Look,” I said, “you people and your sardonic wit is charming to the place, but it’s really adolescent and only bears rotten – look, this place is mad, you’ve really outdone yourself there, but until my lawyers arrive, I’m through with this game.”

She stared at me with the sort of weariness that begs, Where ever do I find the will? She continued, “your ideas are worth a read, I mean.”

I stared at her.

She scanned down the tongue of paper. “Your theories on mythological determinism were ambitious for a seventeen year old, but incomplete. You were young, though, and so can be forgiven. We do find amusing your

notes on divine experimentation, especially your conclusion that Earth is a lab-floor freak. But the most promising was your work on gestaltist monoism and the syncretism of Druidic beliefs and Yoruba mythology – that had pep!”

I took this in. These tasted like memories, but then I thought, Who, in a lifetime, hasn’t thought about remixing old traditions of ontology, maybe between shots or chores or after the Big Game, or during a particularly productive electrical storm?

Hmm. “My lawyers,” I muttered.

“And then,” she continued, “there was that odd bit on the toxicity of well-proportioned women.”

“My lawyers,” I demanded.

“No, no,” she said with a gray hand in the air, and then, “let’s just finish you up.”

“What do you mean?” I asked, “finish me up?”

“Why don’t you simply tell me what you think God is or isn’t. That should do it.”

I couldn’t figure out what she was going on about, in what direction, at what angle, under what responsibility or motive. It was just another strange request. But I supposed it was to fill a page of a psychiatric profile, and as it was wholly unrelated to my case, and there was this promise of “finishing me up,” I rejoined the game, and let her have it.

“God,” I began worthily, “is a red herring, a masquerade, and in his most traditional forms,” I thought this one out, “just a pool of human scent in the hunt for Truth.”

She was typing all of this on the machine, and this pleased me to no end; it was delightful and finally gratifying. I continued, pausing to think and to allow her time to get it right.

“God, or gods, or she or he, is in the total, complete space between things that don’t really exist; God is the vast, discrete nothingness; in the conception and nullification of every idea; It is the meme, the byte, the mean concept of probability; God is the total mechanism; God is the gestalt, the whole of the part; It is us, but only at its most infinitesimal.”

She paused, perhaps to get the spelling right. She looked at me. She asked, “Is that it?”

I continued. “God is not some carnival caricature. It is not judgment, not a white-robed arbiter of small foibles. It does not wear clothes!”

She looked at me. I continued. “It is not contained in any text, no matter how sacred or best selling. It is not a clock. It is not judgment.”

“Yes, I’ve got that, is that it?”

“God is,” I affirmed with a fist, “because he never was, and never will be.”

She grimaced at that one, and thinking it over, so did I. She began to stand and then paused to ask, “Is that it?” to which I raised my eyebrows, thought it once over, and shrugged, Yes.

She balanced herself against the tilt of the floor, and then carefully closed the plastic top of the machine. She walked over to the farthest filing cabinet and gingerly, with the care of a bomb squad, peeled off the tape of one of the drawers, buttressing it with her full tonnage to allow it only an inch, through which she squeezed in the roll of paper from the machine. She began to scuttle out of the room in clear, unambiguous anticipation, but she didn’t make it; the sprinkler system erupted and pin-wheeled out to a squall.

The fanning circles of water at once spirited away half the flames of the gas lamps. I launched into the cold wet drenching and grabbed the arm of my dearly departing stenographer. Bells were ringing and the loud torment didn’t help, and she didn’t quite yell to compensate, and I didn’t quite hear something about “sprinklers in hell,” but by her smile I could tell it was a joke. I must have looked utterly damned because she grabbed my shoulder and with a

welcome and highly due dose of human sympathy, yelled in my ear, “Listen!”

“What!”

“Listen, the faster you clean this up, the quicker we can turn you and your soul over!”

I recoiled slightly at the absurdity of what I thought I had heard, which gave her enough time to leave and to lock the door behind her. Which is about when the first cabinet drawer let loose and burst behind me.

The spray had been weakening each wisp of tape, and the cabinets, one after another in a cannon eulogy, slid open to their limit, and by the force exploded the full of their contents into the air, paper geysers of folders and files everywhere. I went for the door, and rattled it in the highest register of panic. The lamps were all extinguished, folders and paper whirling down from aeries in the darkness, and falling in plastery piles around my legs, my chest, my shoulders, my neck. “This is it,” I was tired of thinking, and I thought it all ridiculous—to think, entombed in paper *mâché*.

I remember most the relief of feeling the shift; it was tectonic and godly. All the paper, with me in it, at once slid down the tilting tile and through the wall, hinged to open

like a garbage truck. Everything fell a two story flight. Perhaps more, I couldn’t tell; knocked senseless or in shock, I’d left pain to another age.

I’d landed in a vast, empty hall, stretched in three directions over the curvature of something immense and baffling; the paneled ceiling, the polished floor, and the infinite wall at my back were blinding in a monotony of white. It was devastatingly pure, uninfected. I was the only mark in the place, the stain, spot and blotch, mismatched and gravely embarrassed, surrounded by piles of wet paper.

The place was belittling. Echoic in its hush. Most disturbing, it was utterly without immediacy, function, or the slightest scuff of humanity. There was just, placed in front of me, a small cardboard box. I picked it up: it was a small cardboard box of generic white trash bags. I lobbed it at the wall.

Alone, and sensing that time was wholly mine to waste, I sat down in the files and opened one to read. Entitled “Swear Words Practiced At Age Fifteen,” it contained a list of vulgar and senseless phrases. In another I found “the Refuge of Cynicism At Age Fifteen,” containing a panegyric verse on the creature comforts of pessimism. “The Politics of Insults At Age Thirty-Two” was a maundering tirade, emphatic and out of context. “The

Epistemology of Separation at Age Twenty-One,” a tidy rant on the shortcomings of friendship and dating. There was one half of an argument, but all of one speaker, having to do with a purposefully missed mid-term. A transcript of a telephone call where divorce was romantically defended. An essay on poetics that distended a metaphor from start to finish. A treatise on empire that ended with uncertainty. There were the theories of disproportionate retaliation and child development. Policy recommendations to restore the priest classes and the perishability of capital, both satires way too obvious. There were wish lists of innovations, compendia of ideas in progress, and long lists of working titles. All mine. Complete with the “God Is and Isn’t” speech, my epilogue and my rest in peace:

Piled around me, wrinkled, soaked through, as meaningful as a paper cut, there was every word and idea that I had ever thought, written, or tried in conversation.

I looked again at the box of generic white trash bags. I sat there and considered cause and effect. In those minutes my eyes adjusted and I could see, just behind the box and flush in the wall, two doors. I put down the papers in my fists and cleared a path.

I opened the first and found a closet, an orderly arrangement of cleaning products: mops, powders, disinfectants, dustpans, feather dusters. Towels, sponges, rags and brushes. Sprays and rubber gloves.

I closed the door, and opened the second one. It swung open into empty space, an abyss, a vacuum, a cosmic repository, a trash bin divine.

“The faster you clean this up,” she had said.

I opened the closet and grabbed an arsenal of brooms, mops, sprays, powders, brushes broad and fine, and with the bags began to collect, wipe and throw out to space all the files of paper. I scrubbed well and clean the last of me from God’s hard white porcelain floor, and waited.