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Play by the Rules
An Allegorical Response to the Contemporary Problems Faced by the Print Journalism Industry

By
Thomas Koonce Sanders III

A thesis submitted to the faculty of The University of Mississippi in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the Sally McDonnell Barksdale Honors College.

Oxford
January 2010

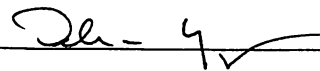
Approved by



Reader: Professor Tom Franklin



Reader: Dr. Kristen Swain



Reader: Dr. Debra Young

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my family, without whom I would enjoy far less opportunities in my life. Your love is unmatched and your continued support never goes unnoticed. Thank you so much.

I would also like to thank my Honors College professors and mentors, especially Dr. Young and Dr. Samonds for always being in my corner even when I deserved far less. Your willingness to help me in times of need is unlike any faculty members I have encountered during my stay in Oxford. Thank you.

ABSTRACT

PLAY BY THE RULES

My purpose for writing this type of thesis is to be to engage the reader first and foremost. Any attempt at allegory or personal opinion is immediately lost without an entertaining and believable story. I sincerely believe that the best pieces of writing are the ones that inspire change rather than just advocating it. As with any work of fiction, hopefully the readers can find some amount of truth in the storytelling and apply it to their lives. In the case of *Play by the Rules*, even if the allegory seems brittle, I also hope as an author that readers can at least relate to some aspect of the storytelling. While writing this thesis I have found that there is a significant difference between appreciating an author's symbolism and fabricating hazing allegorical illusions. I can appreciate the symbols that I have created, but I don't value their worth above the literary worth of the characters. The allegory offers an interesting wrinkle to a story that can stand alone without it. The worth of the story should not dependent upon the believability of the allegory.

However, I do realize that the believability and strength of my thesis as a whole depends on the characters' journalistic representations. On an allegorical level, realism was the most important aspect of character development for me. Humans are far from perfect and my characters should therefore represent real, glaring embodiments of imperfection. This approach may have made the characters more difficult to relate to or cheer for but it should also make the reader appreciate small changes in attitude or perception. As outlined in the Afterword, Ty can represent the current state of journalism.

His transformation serves as a plot device to illustrate certain symbols as well as fuel the engine for a well constructed undergraduate thesis.

I feel like I am taking a big risk defending a creatively-written thesis with a journalism degree, but if the journalism department has taught me anything, it's that the backbone of the industry is all about taking risks. Trying to balance fairness with authority is a risk, balancing human rights with the right to information is a risk, and so is deciding what information is pertinent and what is defamatory or vulgar. The right to information and freedom of speech are two of the most hotly contested topics in the public realm, and therefore I am willing to defend my choice to take a creative risk in the name of the first amendment.

FORWARD
PLAY BY THE RULES

While researching various possible thesis topics within the realm of journalism, I realized that only one topic really encapsulates the spirit of the industry: innovation. From the invention of the telegram to the arrival of high-speed internet, mass media professionals have never shied away from technological progress. We have absorbed, adapted, and thrived for decades in order to provide one of society's most valuable and relevant services.

Information fragmentation, along with economic hardship, now threatens the livelihood of the industry that, against all odds, survived radio, television, and the internet. The burden of innovation falls to my generation. History will not provide the solution, nor will trudging through our ancestors routines make a square peg fit into a circular hole.

Journalism first and foremost remains a business, no matter how noble it's intentions. To devise a specific evolutionary plan for all media organizations to follow would be impossible and presumptuous. Instead, I contend that creativity be the solution. Blend the brittle structure of reporting with the beauty of the arts. Do not pander to or patronize the masses, but rather let them make logical connections for themselves. Journalistic purists will likely argue that reporting and creative license belong on different pages of the newspaper. I argue that consumers do not *need* to purchase newspapers anymore; therefore it is our responsibility to reinvasion the entire process and make them *want* to purchase our product. Hard news will always enjoy the spotlight, but

in this world of unprecedented connectivity, mass media should be the gatekeeper, the first place consumers turn for information instead of the last.

As such, for my thesis I have constructed a fictional short story that serves as an allegory for the problems facing the mass media industry and the actions needed to rectify the current state of affairs. The characters, situations, and themes are carefully constructed and will be discussed in further detail in the Afterword. Although in no way a traditional thesis, I hope the review board recognizes my work as a step toward becoming part of the solution, rather than dwelling on the problem. Enjoy.

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Play by the Rules

I

During slow days at the bank, Ty could actually hear the overhead clock ticking. The white counter tops with green trim were supposed to give the customer a friendly, professional impression of Premiere bank. A courteous staff and clean banking environment are essential for any successful financial relationship; his employment packet had said so two years ago. It felt more like a hospital room to Ty.

The morning crept along unusually slowly for a Friday. Two deposits right after opening, a few cashed checks, and a withdraw by a big woman with greasy fingers and nine acrylic nails. Ty immediately glanced over at Meryl the branch manager to see if she recognized the customer, seeing as the resemblance was undeniable. Meryl did come over and complement the woman's "perty necklace" while Ty counted out one hundred and fifteen dollars. A strange amount of money for any person to deliberately take out considering the drive-thru ATM only dispensed multiples of twenty, which meant that big mystery woman needed exactly one hundred and fifteen dollars and was willing to come into the branch office to get it.

His mind often drifted from thought to thought ever since his one year stint for distribution and illegal weapons. The cops saw an opportunity to pin a major felony on a well-to-do kid from the suburbs and jumped on it. It wasn't like he really needed the money. A few deliveries here and there got him in with the right people, and the right people could always afford to give up some good product. A couple courtesy lines were

almost expected off a good kilo of Colombia's finest. Of course by the time it reached his hands it was more baking soda and baby laxative than pure Colombian coke, but who was he to turn down a few free bumps? Getting caught with two kilos got his name in the paper alongside a frustrated picture of his father pushing through a sea of reporters. He wasn't the one distributing the actual powder; just the poor sucker unlucky enough to get pulled over by the K-9 unit after changing lanes without signaling. The cop wouldn't have searched the car if not for the pellet gun painted black sitting in the back seat. Even with his father's connected lawyer, the DA insisted on a one year deal, or a promise to pursue ten to fifteen at court. The gun wasn't even loaded.

She has to be buying drugs, Ty thought. Probably two grams at sixty a gram with five knocked off for buying in bulk. Two grams isn't exactly moving much product, though, so maybe she's getting a friend price. He wondered who her dealer might be. She walked out the door a step quicker than when she came in. Her excitement was building, Ty knew it. She had places to be.

The clock kept ticking as the glass door creaked closed. Meryl's Christmas music played faintly from her office; loud enough to hear from the teller counter but too soft to make out the song. Ty surveyed the room again. The gray tile floor mirrored the composite gray ceiling. A small, uncomfortable backless lounge stared at him from across the room, next to the customer popcorn machine. Ty imagined getting rushed into the room on a stretcher and being pushed onto the lounge, his mouth foaming and toes shaking. Silent Night playing in the background. The doctors stand above him, their heads eclipsing the sharp halogen lights jutting from the ceiling fans. They talk about their investment

portfolios, their car problems, and, eventually, how much potential this young man laying on their operating lounge once possessed. The lights burn brighter and Ty's breaths taper off slowly like a dynamite fuse.

The front door opened with a DING! Ty snapped his head across his body to see another customer quickly hobble in out from the December morning. She went to a different teller. Ty quickly blinked twice and mopped the sweat off the back of his neck, shaking his head ever so slightly. He surveyed his workspace, trying to avoid eye contact with the wage garnishment letters he had started receiving. The bank paid him well enough to stay afloat, but personal expenses were usually out of the question. After rent, utilities, a cell phone and the occasional weekend fix, his check book dipped into the red more often than not. Meryl would usually waive the overdraft fees, but everyone has their limits. She had known his father for years, first as his secretary then eventually branch manager. She cried when Ty went to prison, then cried again when he came home, and even once more the first day he started work. When the collection agencies contacted her about possible wage garnishments against Ty, she told them that he was a good boy with a good heart who just needed a break. They garnished him anyways, but Ty did appreciate the effort.

Instead he stared at his only framed picture, full of his high school teammates celebrating after the State semifinals. He could still remember everyone's names, even the coaches and trainers. College would come and go, but that was the memory he kept frozen in time. Those days felt simpler now. Worry free. Like setting off fireworks with friends on the 4th of July, beer in hand, the sparkling lights connecting the stars above with eerie precision and grace. He missed the smile on his father's face after the ballgames were

over. “You play well down the stretch and you'll have your pick of scholarships come next fall,” his father used to say. Winning felt good, but pleasing his father, the self-made banker from the rural South, felt great. Addicting even. Perhaps even more so than the willing stare of a beautiful young woman. The team would go on to win the championship, but Ty always liked that first picture the best.

Lunch hour taunted him with every tick of the second-hand. Meryl apparently had finished her morning physical count in the vault early and decided to mingle with the tellers before break. For some reason Ty couldn't understand, his addiction problems made him the prime resource for all supplement concerns. He fielded questions on everything from aspirin to vitamins to painkillers, as if a love for booze and blow made him the resident Premiere physician.

“Ty, honey,” Meryl whined, “I got a quick question for you.”

Ty immediately started shuffling papers, hoping some very pressing work might jump off the scattered pages.

“I saw a commercial the other day on *The Price is Right* for powdered fiber that you just add to water and mix up like a milkshake. You know, to stay regular and fit.”

The other tellers glanced over with sideways smirks. Ty could feel his sweat glands start churning again.

“I just don't know if I get enough fiber in my diet. Anyways, you're always taking bathroom breaks, so I figured you might know which brand to recommend. Hope you

don't think I'm putting you on the spot, hun, I just want to make sure at my age that I'm doing all I can to keep my body nice and clean.” Meryl flashed her warm smile.

Ty instinctively glanced down toward Meryl's bottom half, spotting a long, winding panty line that stretched across her thighs and around her hips out of view. He wasn't sure whether to laugh or cry.

“I'm sure whatever commercial you saw will work just fine, Miss Meryl,” Ty squeaked out. “I'm taking off for lunch early.”

Meryl squinted and pushed out her chin, nodding slightly. Ty grabbed his coat and scarf and moved briskly toward the door. Melted snow blazed a trail along the tile floor from the counters to the door. Yellow caution signs warned patrons not to walk too quickly, but someone would fall before the day was over. Someone always fell, Ty just wanted to make sure it wasn't him. A cold air rushed across his face as he slowly navigated the wet floor, making him shiver. A man with black eyes and a black beard stood in the doorway. Their eyes met once Ty looked up, then the man's lips curled with a seedy satisfaction. Ty shivered again.

“Well look who I found, my old friend Ty Stevens. I heard you were working at your daddy's bank but I had to come see it for myself. You look good my friend,” the man said loud enough for the entire branch to hear.

Ty nodded and started to move past the man through the door. “Yeah, Amos, it's been awhile. How've you been? I haven't heard from you since the bust.”

“I know. I know. Things have been hectic, as usual.” Amos followed him out the door into the cold, down the front stairs to Ty’s Honda. “Always business to be done. You know how it is.”

“Yeah, well, I thought I knew. The inside of a cell kind of changes your perspective. But I guess you wouldn’t understand that.” Ty reached for his car door before Amos put his hand on the window, keeping it closed.

“Hey now, buddy, we all knew the risks. You knew exactly what you signed up for. But I didn’t come here to fight with you, my man. Or to dig up the past.” Amos spoke loudly and confidently but still had that nervous twitch Ty remembered. “I got some business to discuss with you. Something big. Where you headed to lunch?”

Ty stared for a moment, wondering why the hell Amos would come to him with a business offer after all that had happened. Amos was wearing nicer clothes than Ty remembered and even wore a gold pinkie ring. His teeth also looked straighter than before, but Ty couldn’t be sure. The wind chill blistered their faces. Amos wasn’t the reason Ty went to prison, they both knew it, but anger flowed through Ty’s body like the drugs they used to use together.

“Up to Patrick’s Roadhouse for a burger, I think. You got thirty minutes.” Ty opened the door once more while Amos smiled and told him how glad he was to find him here and that he wouldn’t regret it. His teeth definitely looked better than before.

II

Drinks came first then the food. Water and a burger for Ty; two beers and a steak for Amos. Ty sat patiently as they sifted through the pleasantries that old friends rely on to postpone the truth. Amos talked about the woman he was sleeping with and the new apartment he had bought. Probably lies, Ty thought to himself, his mind drifting further into the past than he cared to venture. The scar on Amos' hand reminded Ty of the night in college they both blew five grams in ten minutes. Amos started punching walls and pouring drinks on people, daring them to do something about it. Ty just stood there and laughed and chewed on his lip and listened to his heart race.

“So tell me about yourself, T.Y. How's the new job? You got a place of your own? Anything on the horizon?” Amos spoke without looking up from his steak. His beer glass neared empty, and Ty wondered whether he would order a third. Before Ty even got a word out Amos had raised one finger in the air toward the waitress, his knife still in hand.

“I've been working at the bank for about two years now, since I got out. It's not great work but it's honest and I get a paycheck ever week. You know how it is.” Ty immediately regretted that last part; Amos had no clue how it is. “It's not much but it's enough for me right now.”

Amos nodded and chewed, finally looking up to thank the waitress for his latest beer. Ty wondered why exactly he was sitting here with this man on this day. Between Amos' behavior and thoughts of returning to Meryl, he was quickly losing his appetite. Ty

spotted a group of suited young men at the bar laughing and clinking their beers together. He knew they couldn't be much older than him and wished he knew what they were celebrating. A big successful business meeting perhaps, or maybe a bachelor party on the horizon. Some ballgame dominated the flat screens in the restaurant. Boys a few years younger than himself running and jumping for millions of dollars a year. He remembered the rush he felt after every big play. The screaming fans, the smell of the grass. Girls that other kids only watched from afar. He never imagined anything could make him feel better than those days.

“They can't be paying you much. Any schmuck can put money in a drawer, right? No offense,” Amos said with meat in his teeth. Ty squinted. “What I mean is you're probably looking for a little extra spending money, what with Christmas coming up and everything. Am I right?”

Ty hadn't asked Meryl if he'd be getting a Christmas bonus this year. He figured that she would let him know eventually. His father told Meryl last year not to give him one, that “all he's earned is the right to shower alone and shit when he feels like it.” Ty hoped that he had earned more this time around, but wasn't exactly expecting much.

“I'll survive,” Ty lied. One of the teams scored on the flatscreen and the bar started cheering. “What you got in mind?”

Amos grinned. “As you can probably tell, I'm on the up and right now. They call it networking. Meeting new people, shaking hands. You know, making moves and doing deals.” His head swayed with each sentence. “I've picked up some work from Mickey

lately. Logistics mostly. You know, deliveries, pick-ups, the occasional muscle deal. Whatever he needs done.”

“Mickey Click? Seriously? You're working for Mickey Click now?” Apparently he had gotten the name because the “click” of his pistol was the last sound you heard if you crossed him. That was, of course, if you were lucky enough to avoid his other less creative tactics. Rumor was that Mickey liked to dabble in new ways of persuasion before resorting to the “click.” Amos said he painted an “M” in some poor guy's chest with hydrochloric acid, then carved a “C” in his back with a dull Swiss Army knife. He had acquired his skills while dodging Protestants in Belfast during the 1980's. Ty always thought that Click might just be a family name. “How’s that working out for you?”

“It's all talk mostly. I think. T.Y. you can't be afraid of people if you want to move up in this world.” Amos' new found confidence felt misplaced, but Ty couldn't deny the truth in what he was saying. “Anyways, Mickey has some work lined up for sometime this weekend, either tomorrow or Sunday, and he's looking for some fresh blood for the job. It's a two-man delivery, across town to Little Korea I think. They're keeping this one close to their chests, but the pay's going to make it all worth it. What do you think?”

“You're offering me a slice of a delivery? Seriously, after everything that’s happened?” Ty’s eyes bounced from corner to corner of the restaurant. “Mickey’s going to trust us with his product? You expect me to believe all of this?” Ty's face felt flush and warm. His legs bounced up and down as he waited for Amos to tell him it was all a lie, that there was no job and no money. It was his first natural high in almost a decade.

“Wouldn’t be here if it wasn’t true. He actually asked me about you by name.” Every single hair on Ty’s arm rose in unison. “Yeah, well not exactly by name. He asked if I still kept in touch with the banker’s kid who did time for drug running.” Amos’ face slowly flushed red. “Bottom line, he wants to set up a meeting. Said he’s looking for the kind of guy who isn’t afraid of some serious work. This could be our big break, T.Y., I’m telling you, it could be.”

Ty reveled slightly in his new street reputation, though he knew a second offense would mean serious jail time. Multiple felonies might even count as a third strike. The respect did feel eerily intoxicating, especially from someone like Mickey Click.

“I still don't know,” Ty said coyly, “it sounds like a big risk. What's he looking to spend?”

“Don't know for sure, we'll hear a number when he calls to set up the deal. It'll be big, though, it always is. I'm talking five figures or more. This shit ain't little league anymore buddy, we're in the big leagues now. So I'm going to tell him we're a go?” Amos wasn't chewing anything anymore. Ty glanced back at the guys at the bar. They seemed so innocent all of a sudden. Moves were being made, deals getting done.

Ty's leg stopped bouncing on cue. The thought of more prison time haunted him daily. But then again so did the thought of staring at the ceiling every morning in bed before work. “Tell him I’ll be at the meeting, but I want to know what exactly we’re getting into.”

The rest of the day crept along with a strange excitement. Customers blended together at the bank, except for one. A young boy with his mother came into the lobby dressed in a suit, like he was on his way to church, or a funeral maybe. Most children either hide under their parents' shadows or make a direct line for the popcorn machine. Ty sometimes thought he could predict the child's entire life just by the way he or she behaved in the lobby. Nervous children would be nervous for life. Always scared to drift away from the safety and subjugation of their families. Curious kids would be independent, have a zest for life but get in with the wrong crowds. They would love with reckless abandon but eventually learn only to lust. But this boy, this small adult, he examined the room from floor to ceiling. He picked up a pamphlet on mutual funds from the deposit station and gracefully glided across the room, past the popcorn machine, to the lounge. His jacket slid off his shoulders, down his arms to a peaceful rest on the wooden arm of the lounge. He lied down, face up, pamphlet in hand, ankles crossed, totally unafraid of the bright lights above. Ty thought he could make out a smile from across the room.

“Billy,” the mother hissed, “get your feet off the furniture. It's time to go.” She flapped her fingers like she was waiving at herself.

Ty grabbed a lollipop out of his jar and handed it to the mother without saying a word. She passed it to the boy with smile, his jacket now back on. “What do you say?” “Thank you.” She also turned to Ty, “Thank you very much.” Billy put the lollipop in his pocket. “My pleasure,” Ty managed to eek out.

Darkness engulfed the parking lot by closing time. Meryl squeezed Ty's arm on the way out the door and told him to have a safe weekend. His mind jogged through different scenarios during the ride home, up the stairs of his building, and into his apartment. The space heater roared with a turn of the knob. Its metal springs burned a hot orange through the aluminum frame as the hum of the fan filled the quiet night air. Ty sat on the paisley couch his grandmother had given him out of her garage after his release. His father had sold most of his clothes and furniture, so even Cold War era remnants helped. His mother had managed to hide his 1978 Fender-Strat and even bought a new case with purple velvet interior as a Christmas present last year. "Just between us," she winked. He couldn't play much, just a few riffs and melodies, but he still pulled it out of the closet whenever life's realities resurfaced, which seemed to be more often than ever lately.

The stack of bills on the glass coffee table top grew with every passing week. Ty thought about how excited he became whenever a letter came for him growing up. Letters once meant money, or at the very least a greeting. Adult version letters also meant money, but he didn't get excited anymore.

His closet door opened up into the side of his bedroom door, highlighting the apartment's superb architectural design. A few months earlier after losing his five team parlay bet, Ty had swung open his closet door without closing the bedroom door completely, leaving a nice crescent moon shaped indentation in the wood.

The guitar leaned against the far left wall of the closet under his work shirts. The ceiling had a loose wood panel tucked away that Ty shook free when he needed a good hiding place. The space was no taller than an outstretched hand, but, as far as Ty could tell, as

long as his bedroom floor. Maybe longer. Perfect for hiding product, he had always thought, just in case his old life ever came knocking. For some reason he never thought it would have been that day.

Ty sat up in silence most of that night. On his couch, on the toilet, eventually in his single bed. He didn't expect a phone call from Amos, but wanted to be sharp just in case. He tried to force down some spare ribs his mother had brought by the day before. A public broadcast documentary on the Beatles helped his mind wander and settled his stomach for at least an hour. Ty knew it must be late when the rumble of service trucks replaced the infectious chatter of neighborhood drinkers and smokers. In a strange way he admired the lives of America's blue collar workforce. On some days at the bank he imagined bouncing up and down to the grooves of the roads from inside a box truck with an elevated cab. On top of the world, he thought, only coming down to do the jobs civilization needed to stay civilized. Cold beer on a Friday night just tasted better after a hard week's work, or so he always assumed.

The frost on the windows melted under the glare of the midday sun. It would come back later than night, but for now it retreated to the sill, to the beckoning of the day. Ty figured he caught a couple of hours sleep around sunrise, just enough to make his eyes crusty. He expected that today was the day he finally looked in the rear-view mirror, unsure if he would ultimately like what he saw.

He made a pot of coffee but barely took a sip. His white painted walls oscillated in his peripheries while he stared into a crack in the glass window. A distinct coldness draped across his palms. Some nameless, faceless dealer had once told him that the best way to

avoid paranoia after smoking was deep breaths and warm hands. “Increased blood pressure and heat lost through the hands and feet are the two most common reactions to stress and paranoia. Cut out the symptoms and you cut out the nasty feelings, bro. That's a fact.” Ty always thought drug dealers could change the world, own a Fortune 500 company, cure cancer even. The devil may have convinced the world he didn't exist, but the dealer convinced the world he could be contained. Ty knew it would never stop, so why pretend like it might?

III

Bzzz...Bzzz...Bzzz. Ty's heart doubled in rhythm. Never had a phone call felt so daunting, like a child called into the principal's office. His cell phone lit up the corner of the room as it danced across the table top. The stack of papers still sat motionless from the night before, and more letters would come soon. The letters always came. *Bzzz...Bzzz...*

“Hello?”

“Ty, it's me, hope you got a good night's sleep,” Amos' voice curdled through the microphone. No familiar pleasantries, no child-like empathy.

“Yeah I guess. What's the word, are we still on for this weekend?”

“The boss wants a face to face meeting with both of us in one hour. If he likes you, we should be moving product before the sun goes down. Home in time for some of that shitty Chinese takeout you used to get.”

Mickey Click in one hour. Thousands of dollars before dinner. A few hundred cops profiling hundreds of thousands of drivers. Better odds than in Vegas, but all it takes is one.

“I'll come pick you up in half an hour. Wear a coat, no gloves, no scarf. Don't hide anything. If you carry a knife for God's sake don't bring it. No sunglasses either. You got all that?”

“Yeah I got it. You told him this was just a meeting, right? No guarantees til’ we hear the deal.”

Amos chuckled, like he coughed through his nose. “Meet me outside, don't be late. And Ty, you're doing the right thing, just play by the rules and you'll be fine. See you in thirty.”

Amos' white Pontiac still smelt just like Ty remembered it: a distinct mixture of cigarette smoke and Hugo Boss cologne that Amos left sitting in the middle console, sprayed on by the ounce it seemed. The faux-leather dashboard peeled away in almost perfect symmetry. He imagined a Rorschach test administered to crazy people. Ty thought he saw a rabbit being chased by a dog, or maybe two machine guns pointed toward the window. All the while Amos was babbling about how the first thing he was buying after this score was a new car. A black Cadillac, with suede seats and a sexy British voice in the dash to tell him where to turn. All white interior. The works. Not one of those rice rockets or two tone candy painted Chevilles like the Japs and blacks ride around in. Something classy, like out of *Scarface*. Ty wiped his eyes and looked up. The city hummed all around him like a movie soundtrack without music. They were crossing over the South bridge into the suburbs.

“Mick lives out here, now?” Ty asked quietly.

“Over by the Baptist church on Bresslyn's where we're headed. He's got an office in the same building as some dentist. Dr. Long I think. Does some fine work if you ask me.”

Amos clicked his front teeth and ran his tongue over the glossy fronts. "Oh and don't call him Mick by the way. Those Irish bastards don't appreciate that for some reason."

Ty's stomach bubbled. He could see Dr. Long's white fiberglass sign inching closer and closer. *Turning frowns upside down since 1982*. Ty's leg bounced up and down, at first to the beat of the song on the radio, then twice per beat. The car's brakes squealed to a halt in a parking space behind the building in the employee lot. An icy brown sludge formed along the edges of the spaces. Footprints in the ice told unknown stories of men and women scraping out a life they could be proud of. Or maybe lives they felt ashamed of. Ty didn't see any blood stains. A good sign, he reasoned. And the parking lot backed up to a small strip center that housed a computer repair store and a sandwich shop. Another good sign, in case he felt like running.

The bitter afternoon air shocked his ears and nose. Small beads of moisture around Ty's hairline hardened in an instant.

"This way," Amos nodded toward the black tinted door. He blew in his hands and rubbed them together as if saying a prayer. Ty put his hands in his pocket and followed closely behind making sure not to slip and fall. Amos held the door open for both of them.

The front room was larger than Ty expected. Much cleaner, too. The carpet exuded a fresh, subtle scent that put Ty's mind to ease for a moment. Two plush leather couches against the wall framed a golden brown coffee table adorned with intricate vertical carvings. Brightly colored impressionist murals accompanied the sofas, each framed with simple black siding and overhead flood lights for effect.

Amos hung his own coat on an ornate gold plated hat rack and ordered Ty to do the same. A man in a black leather jacket and black denim jeans sat behind a plastic desk with long metal legs guarding a staircase. He glanced up at Amos and Ty without moving his head even the slightest bit. Amos threw the man a “How ya doin’” and casually made his way toward the couches. The top of the desk was empty, save a reading lamp and yellow legal pad. The man's creaky swivel chair whined and twisted as he rose. Ty watched him silently move up the stairs and out of sight.

Ty took a seat adjacent to Amos. The bubbling in his stomach had moved south and now felt more like a burning. He thought he could make out the faint sound of a drill buzzing from behind the wall. Cavities, he assumed, or something worse.

“You nervous?” Amos asked without looking over. He looked much older to Ty than before. His lips, his beard; the world was changing, and Amos had changed with it.

Ty didn't feel like small talk. “I guess so. Just ready to get in and get out. How long do you usually wait?” Before he could finish his own question the thump of boots descending the stairs filled the room. The man in black appeared first, still silent, then returned to his swivel chair. A second man with a scar on his cheek emerged soon afterward. Amos shot up, Ty followed suit.

“Marco,” Amos exclaimed as if they were old school friends, “it's been too long. Mickey mentioned you were coming back in town soon. Got tired of all those margaritas and senioritas already, I'm guessing.” Amos laughed hysterically and stuck out his hand.

Marco glanced down at it then back up, peering at Ty. “This the guy?” Marco droned. Ty

tried to place his European accent for a moment but quickly returned to the room.

Marco's hairline reached broadly across his forehead, though all of the hair had been shaved. He also dressed in black: jacket, collared shirt, slacks and belt. "Classy," Ty imagined his mother saying, "but not elegant." Marco's wad of tobacco protruded like a cancerous cyst from his cheek bone.

"Yep, this is Ty. The banker's kid," Amos said, smiling, his hand still dangling in the air. Frustration briefly washed over Ty. He sent Amos a look of contempt.

Marco smoothly drew back the bottom corners of his jacket with his wrists and took two steps backward toward the staircase. The black handle of a pistol quickly dangled in plain view then retreated back into Marco's jacket. Ty clenched his palms and tried to stand up straight.

"Demetri," Marco droned again, flicking his head toward Ty and Amos. The man from the desk casually rose and strolled across the room with a groan. "Arms up," he said. Ty obeyed. He had been searched before, but this time felt more uncomfortable than he remembered; palpable even, like stepping into a dark, dank basement. Demetri finished the search and returned to his seat. Ty convinced himself that the entire room could hear his heart beating.

"Follow me," Marco ordered. "Do not speak unless spoken to. Mr. *Cleek* is a very busy man. I suggest you act accordingly."

Ty's eyes widened as they reached the top of the stairs and entered the office. The walls shone bright with various mirrored award plaques and honors. *Distinguished Civitan*,

West Holland Rotary Club; Honorary Board Member, Friends and Fellowship

Foundation; Martin G. Joyner Award for Outstanding Community Patronage. A few more hung in the far corners of the office and behind Mickey's head, but Ty could not read them. Another unknown man sat, legs crossed, behind Ty's and Amos' seats. The chairs and master desk appeared supple with leather conditioner. A mounted dagger set and two antique pistols in fiberglass cases occupied different sections of the walls. Books of all shapes and colors lined the shelves of the matching wooden bookcases. Ty spotted a white marble statue of two long, slightly bent columns after he took his seat. A woman's legs, he thought, but somehow even more beautiful.

Mickey glanced up at the visitors and hung up his landline. Ty tried to sit still. Amos slouched in seat and casually picked his nose with his thumb. Marco stood still as a stone adjacent to Ty. Much less beautiful than the legs in the corner.

“Ty, my boy, it’s been too long,” Mickey's thick Irish accent surprised Ty. Even more pronounced than he remembered. “You look much older than before.”

Ty shifted his body weight and grinned sarcastically. “Funny, Mickey, I was just thinking the same thing. Quite the new place you got here.” Amos shot to the edge of his seat.

“Wait a minute, you two know each other. This whole time? Both of you? You got to be kidding me,” Amos sounded both shocked and relieved.

Mickey reclined, smiling. “Aye, one of my most loyal associates, isn’t that right?”

Mickey always could bend the truth, Ty remembered. “I did some legwork for him,” Ty

said aloud, eyes still on Mickey, “just a few runs on the weekends, mostly. That is until, well, you know.”

Amos took a moment to make the connection. “So you got taken down with his coke? I always assumed it was Billy’s or someone else’s. This is wild, man. Why didn’t you ever tell me?” Ty ignored Amos’ plea.

“A mighty fine shipment if memory serves, too,” Mickey said, slightly indignant, “but I’ll hand it to you, boy, you kept your mouth shut and did your time. Now if only you had the sense to keep from getting caught in the first place.” He laughed out loud and took a sip of a brown drink in a scotch glass. Ty knew ratting on Mickey would have been a death sentence even if the D.A. had offered him a better deal. “Tell me, how’ve you been?”

“Hanging in there, I guess. Got a pretty good think going over at Premiere. Working on a few things, trying to line up a few deals, get back on my feet, you know how it is,” Ty said. He couldn’t deny that his version of the truth sounded better.

“Well you’ve come to the right place then. Big things are on the way, and I’m going to need some lads I can trust. You still got a good head on your shoulders, I assume?”

Mickey's glare left Ty surprisingly at ease. He didn't want to let Mickey down, but not out of fear. Ty never considered himself to be a criminal; Mickey neither. Just businessmen. Criminals prey on fear and weakness; they slit a man’s throat when mercy is just as effective. Businessmen take advantage of their opportunities.

“Good enough to get the job done, I think. Don’t ask my father that, though.”

Mickey tilted his head to the side. “Everyone has their demons, son. Successful men are the ones who can keep them in the past. Don’t you go forgetting that, you hear?”

Ty spoke up quickly. “Yes sir, I made a mistake and had to live with the consequences.”

The pre-packaged answer felt comfortable in his mouth. “I did my time and now I’m looking for some help getting back on my feet.”

Mickey stood up and unhooked a sparkling silver frame from a slice of wall partially hidden by one of the bookcases.

“Whatever you need done, Mickey,” Amos blurted, “we’re your guys.”

Mickey handed Ty the frame. *Hardeman County Sheriff's Department would like to thank Mr. Mickey Click for his continued support of our offices and dedication to preserving the moral integrity of the city.* Signed, Police Chief Mike Sanders and Mayor Bobby Williams. Ty peered over the edge of the frame at Mickey.

“I’m not sure if I understand,” Ty said. He could hear Marco spit tobacco juice into a coffee cup. The faint whine of drilling also crept through the floor.

“You know I have a good relationship with certain people in this town,” Mickey said sternly but proudly. “I can appreciate a kid like you having the guts to walk into my office looking for work after all that’s happened. It’s hard making something of yourself. Nobody respecting you, nobody giving you a chance. Your father, the banker, I’m sure he hasn’t warmed to the situation right away, eh?”

Ty decided that was a rhetorical question before fully realizing just how vulnerable he really felt. Mickey went to hang the frame back onto the nail in the wall.

“A college man like yourself should be the one giving orders instead of taking them.” Ty wondered if he should be angry or happy. He settled with nervous. Marco gripped the top corner of the chair by Ty’s left ear, then spit again.

“I’ll do whatever I can for you,” Ty cried out automatically. Amos stared at the floor then up at Mickey.

“Glad to hear it,” Mickey said calmly after a deliberate pause. “You always were a good kid who caught a bad break. But you know what’s at stake here. Nothing’s changed but our waistlines.” Mickey casually fingered a long, red cylinder with black residue as he spoke. The apparent explosives dangling wistfully amongst the room of men complemented the gravity in Mickey’s voice well. Amos’ head still faced upward, but his eyes had turned to Ty. “Stay, and I take it you’re prepared to grow up and do business like a man.”

Ty had never been spoken to so boldly before. His nervousness felt boyish and weak now. Taking this job meant power and influence, two traits even his father couldn’t ignore.

“As I said, sir, I’m here to do business.” Ty couldn’t remember if he had actually said those exact words or not. Something he couldn’t explain had pulled the words out of his mouth and into the air for all time. Mickey grinned and sat back in his chair.

“In that case, I need a delivery made to Little Korea. I’m doing business with the Asians, now. Crazy bastards if you ask me. Mainly deal in weapon sales. Guns and explosives mostly, even the occasional blade set.” Mickey led the discussion dynamite still in hand like a conductor’s baton. Marco coughed and shuffled his feet. “But they’re looking to expand, which is where you two come in. I need you to make a delivery. Right at eighty thousand worth of product.” Ty imagined the mountains of powder to be delivered and felt the hairs on his arm stand in attention. They would need a bigger car. “You drop off the goods to a personal residence and bring me home the black bag they give in return. Follow me so far? Good. Come back here in one piece and I’ll cut you two in for a quarter of the net.”

Ten thousand dollars each for one trip across town. Amos flashed his glossy white teeth wider than Ty ever remembered seeing before and mumbled some sort of thanks. Ty bent forward and scratched his head, trying to shield his excitement. The bank counter seemed so far away.

“The deal’s already been set up. They’re expecting you in...” Mickey checked his gold watch, “one hour. The Asian’s aren’t too jumpy but, just in case, Marco here will equip you with a small back-up plan.”

Ty had nearly forgotten about Marco altogether. “Do you have something for our boys, Marco?” Ty heard the distinct click of a chamber hammer pulled taut and released. The burn immediately rushed back into his groin. Over his shoulder a black pistol with matching suppressor appeared. Marco finished wiping off the grip with a white square handkerchief and handed the weapon to Ty, followed by the loaded magazine. “Is no

potato gun.” Marco warned sarcastically. Ty stared down the barrel toward the floor like he had examined dozens of guns in his life.

“Mickey is this really necessary? I never took a piece on any of the deliveries before,” Ty said.

“As I said,” Mickey’s voice immediately hardened, “they’re going to be armed, so you are, too. You’ll be transporting a lot of my money, and I want to protect my investment.

“Bring the cash back here immediately after the transaction, and don't pull that thing out unless you plan to use it. Any questions?”

“I think we got it, Mickey, sure do, in and out shouldn't be a problem. Grab and go job, just the kind we like, right Ty?” Amos said.

“How am I going to bring in such a big chunk of powder without looking suspicious? That much product must weigh more than ten pounds.” Ty asked, ignoring Amos.

“Think smaller, my boy,” Mickey said with eyebrows raised. “Think smaller. Marco will fill you in with all the details. See you boys soon.” His warm tone took a dive toward the mischievous. Mickey gently set the red stick down on the table then lifted the phone off of the hook and began dialing a number.

Ty followed directly behind Marco toward the stairs, and Amos directly behind Ty. A thick wooden paddle with the engraving, *Talent, Conviction, Success*, in bold burnt letters hung above the staircase door. Ty's father and former coaches used these kinds of words. He remembered the impromptu dinner meetings about his future. Suggestions became

recommendations which became threats. The glare of a father whose unconditional love mired in emotional toxicity, whose every action and breath in this life was “for the good of his children.” Talent, conviction, success; words that meant nothing to a man fighting to keep food in his belly and a clear head on his shoulders. Words like these were reserved for the lucky few whose actions carved out a little piece of happiness in a world filled with cruelty. No matter how many chests and backs needed carving along the way.

The pistol felt surprisingly comfortable in his hand. He understood the basics, like how to load the magazine and turn the safety off. The suppressor weighed down the nose of the gun and smeared black residue along Ty's shirt when he pushed it into his pants. Amos began babbling again about cars and money.

“Quiet,” Marco said with surprising inflection. The three men walked into another door attached to the lobby that Ty had assumed led to the dentist's office. No impressive art, no leather couches. Just a small metal table and a large wicker basket full of assorted fruit and tall flowers. A single bulb illuminated the gloomy closet of a room. Marco slammed the door behind them and shoulder checked Amos on his way to the basket. Ty wished he had loaded that pistol upstairs.

“The pills are vacuum-sealed and packed in sheets at the base of the basket. Do not remove the contents of the basket looking for them,” Marco snarled. “Your contact will be expecting this basket as is, so don't touch or eat anything.” He shot Amos a daring glance. “Bring the money straight back here after delivery. Park outside and wait for someone to come outside. Do *not* walk into this building with the money. Do I make myself clear?”

A disturbing chill draped over Ty's neck and back. "You said the pills are packaged in the base of the basket, under the flowers and fruit?" Marco's visible impatience nearly derailed Ty's train of thought. "What, uh, what kind of pills exactly do you mean?"

Marco's thin lips curled in the corners for the first time that Ty could remember.

"MDMA," he said with little inflection. "Pure ecstasy. Almost million dollars street value after distribution. Mickey thinks the business of the future, so don't screw this up."

Ty nearly bit off his own tongue. Dealers and users alike always share tales of danger and intrigue around the table. Rites of passage, really. Grams became kilos and speeding tickets became intricate stories of street survival. But ecstasy, Ty knew, was a Class A felony and Schedule I narcotic. No need for folklore or exaggeration; the truth cut deeper than any man's ego ever could. In the mid 1980's, lawmakers had fully perpetuated the notion that the drug caused brain deterioration and spinal fluid leaks, hoping to scare America's youth into abstinence through fear. Every individual pill, politicians argued, contained immediate deadly potential, and as a result carries a guaranteed voluntary manslaughter charge. Punishments do not escalate into distribution charges as with other narcotics, just years added onto the life sentence. Ty could not help but wonder why he now shared a room with two burly men and a life without freedom.

Amos broke the silence. "Jesus Christ, Marco, are you for real? Mickey's never had me do anything like this."

"We can handle it," Ty interjected, "let's just get moving. It's probably getting dark.

What's the address?"

Marco scribbled down four numbers and a street name, followed by an apartment number. Poor ethnic part of town, Ty thought, which could be good and bad. He'll stand out but at least people mind their own business. "Let's go, Amos." Ty rearranged his pistol and ordered Amos to snatch the basket. Marco escorted them out of the small room and then the lobby. He opened the front door and spit one last time onto the pavement. "Come straight back" were his final words. Amos reached for his cigarettes; his hand trembled slightly.

IV

The sun had begun setting just like Ty predicted. He pulled out a pair of leather gloves hidden in his jacket pocket and immediately pulled them over his fingertips. Amos lit his cigarette and smoked it in silence. Ty occasionally glanced over at his driver when not admiring his pistol, now loaded, but with the safety still on. The street lights already shone bright even though the sun still peered over the city skyline. Ty began thinking of his mother, how proud she had always been of his accomplishments. How great her hug felt after his release. Genuine love that could not be tarnished no matter how deep his impulses drug him. He decided he would live through this day, no matter what lay ahead of him, if not for himself then for her.

Amos pulled the car into an alley perpendicular to the Korean apartment building. The clock radio said that they were ten minutes early. Ty's legs began to bounce again while he cracked his knuckles. "You ready to do this?" he asked Amos.

Amos exhaled a cloud of smoke and shook his head. "I'm the getaway driver, you got to go in and make the delivery."

"Like hell you are. You dragged me into this and that means we're in it together. We both ride that elevator, we both knock on that door, and we both walk out with the money. That's how a partnership works." Ty could feel his heart rate climbing. He tightly clinched the barrel of the gun, tempted to wave it around if necessary.

“Now let's get one thing straight. I didn't *drag* you into anything,” Amos said. “Hell, you've known Mickey all these years and didn't even tell me. That's always been your problem, you know that? You blame people for your own stupid decisions, when it's your own damn fault.” Amos' face glistened under the sliver of moonlight that penetrated the windshield. “Now, you knew what you were signing up for and you heard what Mickey said. You make the delivery. He didn't even give me a gun for Christ sake.” Up to that point Ty had just assumed Amos already carried a gun.

Ty glared over at Amos, disgusted. I don't blame people for my problems, he thought, if anybody needs to hear about his own problems, it's Amos. Two minutes until delivery.

“I hooked you up with this deal you ungrateful bastard,” Amos said, indignant, “so you're going to do the legwork. If anything shady goes down, you know where I'll be.” Ty decided sometimes the best defense is a good offense.

One minute.

Ty opened his door and slammed it shut, then opened the back door, grabbed the bouquet with his gloved hands and slammed that door, too. He pulled out his pistol and rapped on the window with the barrel until Amos lowered it. “You owe *me* now. Don't go anywhere.” Ty holstered his weapon into his waistband and heaved the basket into both hands. He had to angle his head around the big purple chrysanthemums to see which way he needed to go. The hum of Amos' car engine slowly faded out of earshot as Ty turned the corner out of the alley and toward the front door. Scents of fish oils and garlic cloves accompanied the usual rumble of busy city streets. Store-front overhangs tempted patrons

with pictures of exotic entrees and desserts. Men and women moved quickly along the sidewalks with boxes and carts filled with tapestries and trinkets. A small Asian woman held the electric door open for him after Ty told her that the bouquet and basket was a Christmas gift for his girlfriend. He had slipped back to his old self quicker than he thought he would.

The sign above the elevator read *Out of Order* in English and again presumably in Korean. Ty felt surprised that someone even bothered to notify the residents; *his* super wouldn't have. Each floor level offered a new variety of suspicious glances and foreign smells. Ty silently thanked Mickey for hiding the drugs under flowers instead of a duffle bag or briefcase. Most of the women eventually smiled, and Ty assumed the men thought he was just picking up a date. He made sure his jacket completely concealed Mickey's gun.

After three floors of climbing, Ty could see his door. 42A. He stood in front of it for a few seconds, anticipating what might be inside. Green paint flakes littered the cement in front of the door and the door knob told a history of years of grabbing and twisting. Ty set down the basket next to his left foot, making sure to avoid the half-dollar sized splatter of brown liquid he spotted on the ground. He had narrowly avoided another similar spot on the staircase. After all, slipping and falling on this night was not an option.

Ty cleared his throat and pulled back his shoulders. He knocked four times. Cops always knock three. Nobody appreciates a cop knock.

No answer or sounds. The burning nervousness slowly crept back into his groin and up into his stomach. A neighbor opened a door three steps away thinking the knocking had been on her door. Ty assumed. She peered right and then left at Ty. He pretended not to notice. Four more knocks, this time stronger and better defined. The woman kept staring shamelessly. Ty glanced down at his basket, unsure of what to do next.

“Hello? Anybody in there? This is Ty Stevens, an associate of Mr. Click. I have a delivery.” Ty said to a closed door. He thought about Mickey, and Marco. Still no answer.

With a cold palm Ty grasped the green door’s knob.

The blood nearly knocked him back into the hall. A chilling stench hung heavy around three bodies, three humans beings, stripped of life by the hands of another living soul. Their frozen expressions shone brightly under the ceiling lights. Oriental art and tapestries decorated the walls and table tops. An empty shimmering red sheath adorned the makeshift mantle, flanked by matching ninja stars on either side. A small museum almost, still nearly pristine despite the surrounding chaos. Ty inched into the room, dragging the bouquet subconsciously. He fumbled for his gun. These men, boys really, sat perfectly still, unmoved since their last breaths. One in a recliner by the counter top brandished only a bowl of brown rice and a plastic fork, now cold and spread across the floor. The bullet had likely taken him quickly and painlessly, though pieces of him remained painted across the wall.

In an instant Ty scanned his eyes across the room to another body lying face down in a thick crimson puddle. Hollywood blood seemed so red and thin, Ty thought momentarily. But this man's blood flowed slowly out of his chest, up to his eyes and mouth and down to his kneecaps. A shotgun lay next to him, but no shells littered the floor.

But the third person, much younger than Ty himself, frightened him the most. His eyelids stretched taut and his mouth hung open like he wanted to scream but had no voice. More blood leaked from his frail body than the other men: some from his kneecaps, which bore two distinct bullet holes incapacitating him immediately; most, however, from his neck. Ty could only squint and glance briefly without gagging. A thick sword handle protruded from his neck, with the bulk of the blade hanging loosely out the other end. The sheer weight of the impaled blade pulled the head backward, eyes toward the ceiling.

Ty wanted to help these people even though he knew that he could not. A small bullet shell casing caught his eye near the rice bowl. By it, another brown splotch of liquid, even darker than the blood stains, sank deep into the white carpet. Ty knew he needed to take something back to Mickey to prove just what had happened. A bitter odor stung his nostrils, but was not altogether repulsive. The blood appeared fresh and the apartment untouched, except for the sword swiped from the mantle. He reached down to finger a shell casing, a 9 mm, just like the pistol in his hand, when the terrorizing shriek of a woman erupted from the hallway.

Ty ran to the door, which he had forgotten to close. The small woman from down the hall stared up at him, then down at his gun still in hand.

“You, you, you do this.” she screamed.

“No, I, I swear, I swear it wasn't me. I found them like this. I didn't do it.” The woman turned and ran down the hall into her apartment. Other heads began popping out of doors and eying the American with the gun. Ty turned back into the room. His chest throbbed from the heartbeats rattling his ribcage. A serene confidence fell over him, blanketing the panic, like when the cop had put him in handcuffs years before. For a split second he envied the men in the room, free from their sins, their guilt, their demons and pain forever. Euphoric almost, like the joy of a score.

If he found the money, Ty thought, then he would be fine. What does Mickey care about a few dead Koreans anyway, he wondered. Just as soon as the thought entered his head the truth became so clear. Someone knew that these men would have that cash today, and that same someone needed Ty to take the fall. He was a convicted felon, after all. He needed proof that he didn't murder those men in cold blood. Finding all of the casings would be impossible, and that wouldn't even exonerate him. The money was his best evidence, but as his father had told him before, successful men have to survive and adapt.

Siren wails would begin echoing through the streets soon. Ty knew he needed to leave with something tangible, something for Mickey. Some sort of evidence that he could use to bargain with. Without it, he would be placed at the scene, gun in hand, unable to defend himself.

He walked over to the youngest man and glared into his frozen pupils. The sword's blade shone red, matching its red velvet grip. The sirens would be there soon. Impulse

overmatched discretion as panic took hold of his gloved hands. Ty cleared his throat and tried to pull the sword from its resting place. The blade scraped against spinal bone like used brake pads. To gain leverage he shoved his sneaker into the chair under the armpit with his leg. Blood bubbled out of the throat and sighs of sliding skin burned permanent memories into Ty's brain. The lifeless head fell forward after release, the chin bobbing into fresh blood like fondue. He quickly wiped the blade against the man's pants. Ty held back the vomit and ran toward the door, sword in hand.

He kicked over the basket and watched oranges and apples roll across the hardwood floor. The flowers tipped out, too; only thousands of light blue pills no larger than an aspirin sat perfectly still inside an air-compressed bag at the basin. He snatched them out and took off into the hall.

Mortified stares and screams replaced the unspoken pleasantries that accompanied the fruit basket. Ty trampled down four flights in a matter of seconds. Blue lights flooded the streets and crept under the building's front door. A woman in the lobby gasped and ran back behind the elevator shaft. Ty's head darted to the front door, then back to the elevator.

"Wait," he cried out, running behind the woman. A painfully loud buzz radiated from the rafters and white strobe lights started blinking. The emergency door slammed closed in front of him. He pulled it back open with his free hand and escaped into the winter night. The cool quietness of the back alley surprised him.

A few steps later he peered down the side alley, Amos' alley. The blue and white lights lit up the entire intersection and even blinked proudly down the long deserted corridor. Ty suddenly felt like the man with the hole in his neck: helpless at the hands of a world without boundaries. No time to curse his former friend, acquaintance really, who had fled the scene and left Ty to fend for himself. At least his kneecaps were still intact.

Ty ran blindly and ferociously and without regard for direction or destination. The basements of his lungs burned with every huff of the frozen night air. The sword slowed him down, though. He knew he couldn't move fast enough with both hands full. A large blue dumpster behind a Chinese restaurant would have to suffice until morning. With one hand freed, fences, dumpsters, and fire escapes wilted under his adrenaline. He decided that night that a man had never truly lived until he had literally run for his life. A primal, instinctual animosity draped over his senses. He had run thousands of times before, or so he thought.

His hysteria refused to subside even in the back of a taxi. The pills fit nicely bundled inside of his jacket, though carrying a stiff jacket did not look completely natural. No matter. His moist skin needed to breathe and his lungs cool down.

"Brandywood apartments in midtown," he told the driver as calmly as possible.

The driver looked over his shoulder, "Is everything okay, son? You're sweating." He glanced down at Ty's lap.

"Yeah my girl's husband came home early. Big guy. Navy guy I think. Had to run down the back stairs." He tried to chuckle but could barely catch his breath.

The driver frowned and shook his head, then faced the windshield again.

“Adultery is a very serious offense in the eyes of God my friend. Hopefully this teaches you a lesson. A young guy like you doesn't need to be breaking up families. You need to be starting them. Brandywood you said?”

Ty agreed and leaned back against the cloth seats. He felt truly relaxed for the first time in years. Eyes closed, he imagined his childhood bed, fully made with clean sheets. He felt pretty sure he could still hear sirens in the distance.

His apartment had not changed since he met Amos outside of it a few hours before. A line of shirts and pants and a belt and two socks and two shoes and a jacket and a gun and a bag of pills led directly to the bathroom where Ty sat under the hot water. The cold tile shocked his back skin momentarily but warmed up soon. Salty dirt and another man's blood flaked away into the drain.

Water damaged floor boards creaked along Ty's usual path from shower to dresser. The remnants of a night of crime lie motionless. Pieces of memory floated in and out of his mind. Ty wondered briefly what the second man looked like, the one face down. Maybe he was handsome. Then he wondered if any of the men had families or girlfriends or wives or children. Tonight will be the worst night of their lives, he thought aloud. Police will call them victims. News stations will dub it a gangland murder, a drug deal gone wrong. Neighbors will never forget the white man in the hallway.

He knew that Mickey would be very disappointed. More than disappointed, really. No money wouldn't sit well, but violence is always bad for business. Ty knew the look all

too well. His father had mastered it long ago, first after ball games when Ty didn't "show up to play," then after he lost his scholarship, and eventually during his bond hearing. Tears built up behind his eyelids and his nostrils filled up quickly, but Ty bit his tongue and shook his head.

Bag in hand, Ty rushed into the closet and stashed the drugs in the ceiling. The gun, too, in case the police came knocking. He turned around and clicked off his overhead light, wondering how a drug that causes euphoria was causing him so much trouble. Even at nine o'clock at night his bed never felt so perfect.

Dreams waltzed around in his sleeping head that night. Pieces of one vision would blend into the next like watercolors. Yet only one specific dream hung in his memory until morning when he would wake up in wet sheets. A blend of recurring dreams, he decided.

One of many in a large crowd, his persona raced through different rooms and obstacles, dodging the pitfalls, leading the pack. The rooms had two stories, with the upstairs comprised only of balconies so he could look down at even more racers below. Ornate banisters and aging crimson wallpaper decorated the rooms like an abandoned hotel. Soon he had broken free from the crowd, running blindly from balcony to balcony, until finally he leaped out of the building onto a baseball field. Coaches yelled at him from the dugout, an unknown man stared at him from the bleachers. The ball came to him, but he could not throw it. His arm froze in time as screams and grunts filled the air. A child now stood next to the unknown man, crying silently, blood stains down his shirt. Ty's eyelids rose instantly, but the natural light of the morning sun lasted only an instant.

“Good morning, boy.” Marco hissed, pistol in hand. “Did you really think we wouldn't find you?”

Ty readied his story to his lips. Murder, betrayal, robbery, rice on the floor. The truth is always the best defense, it had to be.

“Marco, you got to believe--” But the pistol butt had already struck him across the forehead, faster than a snakebite. Darkness enveloped his vision from the outside inward until he lay helpless at the feet of the man in black.

V

“Ty, Ty man, Ty is that you?” This voice echoed along the walls. Ty peeled open his eyes slowly but found no light. “Ty wake up. Wake up, man.” A few nudges accompanied the second round of echoes. “It’s Amos, man, wake up. They must have hit you pretty hard.”

Amos. Ty knew the name. He was positive. “Amos,” he groaned.

“Yeah buddy it’s me. Mickey and Marco got us tied up, man. We got to do something quick. What the hell happened in that apartment, man? Where’s Mickey’s money?”

Ty felt the coarse needlework of burlap on his face, which took him back to Halloween as a kid throwing candy into a similar bag. *Mickey, Marco.* More names. “Where are we? What time is it?”

“I told you man we’re tied up in Mickey’s place, you know, where we picked up the goods. It’s got to be Sunday afternoon by now, but how the hell should I know, it’s pitch black in here.”

The memories still felt like a dream, but apparently had been real. The blood, the guns, the drugs, and now the darkness. Later the staircase, the fire escape, and the empty alley. He remembered.

“You bastard.” Ty screamed, kicking blindly in Amos' direction, “you left me there. You left me there to die or get picked up. Where were you, getaway driver? Huh? Where the hell were you?”

“Hey, now, T.Y., you were in there way longer than you were supposed to be. This was supposed to be in and out, no questions asked. Then the sirens and blue and whites started coming. Was I supposed to stay there and let us both get pinched, tough guy?”

Amos' story felt too easy, too predictable to Ty. Like he had been rehearsing for hours in his own head.

“Also I didn't know you were going to shoot the place up like you did. Didn't know you had it in you, honestly. It's all over the news.” Again too easy, but why would Amos set him up? Maybe Amos really did just piss down his own leg and run away. Ty really expected nothing less.

“I didn't shoot anybody. I walked into a damn bloodbath. Those guys were already dead and the money was gone, if there ever was any money in the first place. I need to talk to Mickey and get this straightened out.”

“Don't know if talking's going to help much. You cost the man nearly a hundred grand, after all.” Ty felt sure he had the strength to strangle Amos if his hands were untied.

Ty sat motionless, thinking about his first meeting with Mickey nearly six years ago.

“What do you know about Stonehenge, son?” Mickey had asked. “You mean the rocks

over in Europe? Well, um, not much I guess. I know they're old and tall, but that's about it."

Mickey shook his head. "Kids these days just don't appreciate their own history anymore," his voice abruptly hardened and his eyebrows lowered. "I'd say you're partially right. Stonehenge is quite old and it is in Europe. England actually, in county Wiltshire. Some of this world's first men built Stonehenge as a temple for the dead. A place to celebrate death and the passage to the afterlife through cremation. These people had no sense or scope of the world or human potential. They lived simply, as hunters and gatherers, and respected their dead."

Mickey had paused and leaned forward again. Ty noticed Mickey's golden cufflinks for the first time protruding out from underneath his jacket pocket. His manicured nails complemented his Italian gray suit and silk purple pocket square. A sizable gold ring looked completely natural on the ring finger of his right hand.

"But that all changed with the dawn of the copper age. Metal working led to a whole new purpose for men. A man's life became about possessions; about owning as much as possible. Survival alone was no longer the goal. A successful life meant accumulating as much as possible, and dying with more than your neighbor. Personal wealth created social dichotomy, and the world would never be the same."

Mickey had paused again and leaned back. He adjusted his ring. Ty waited in silence.

“Instead of burning their dead, these people began digging holes. Places to bury a man with his possessions. Eventually, over time, Stonehenge became obsolete. Do you understand what I'm saying?”

A sliver of light finally appeared under the door frame sometime later through the burlap sack. Amos was right: they were tied up in Mickey's closet room; the metal table still sat just feet ahead of them. Heavy footsteps accompanied muffled words outside their room. Ty's heartbeat remained steady.

The door flung open and crashed against the wall. Light filled the room, instantly lifting Ty's spirits. Tell them exactly what happened, he thought, and everything will work out fine.

Five noticeably large fingers wrapped around his bicep to pull him to his feet. Marco, Ty knew it; he could smell the sweet stench of fresh tobacco leaves. Piercing halogen light momentarily blinded him after Marco tore the bag off of his head. Both hips and thighs went flush with much needed blood.

“Sit,” Marco ordered. Another man in black pulled Amos to his feet but did not remove the bag. Ty kept his face down and eyes on Marco's shoes. When the light reflected just right Ty could make out an obvious stain around the soles. Mud or dirt would have flaked off in the ice. The black leather around his toes and arch shone brilliantly, but the rubber soles told the real story. Ty looked up and watched Marco spit a mouthful of sticky brown saliva into his cup. As soon as Ty's eyes widened, Mickey appeared in the door frame.

“You know, son, I really thought I had you pegged. A man my age doesn't get surprised too often anymore, just ask my wife. But you, you really showed me something. Not many men in this city would have the balls to steal from me. Aye, if it wasn't my money I might even offer you a full-time position.” Mickey laughed out loud, Marco echoed. Ty sat silently trying to judge his best opportunity to interject.

The laughter quickly faded. “No, no, I didn't see this one coming. Especially from you, son, after all we've been through. But it *was* my money, and for keeping it from me, I'm going to need something of yours in return.” Mickey reached into his suit pocket and emerged with a hammer of some sort in one hand, a long red stick in the other.

“Mickey you got to believe me, it was a setup.” Marco slapped him violently in the back of the head. Mickey pointed the hammer at Ty from across the table.

“Go on, boy. Entertain me,” Mickey said, his head tilted to one side.

“I did everything you told me to do. Nobody came to the door, so I walked in. Blood was everywhere. Two of them were shot and one had a damn samurai sword sticking out from his neck. A neighbor saw and called the cops. I got out of there as fast as I could. It all happened so fast, I just dropped the gun and ran,” Ty lied, panting. Mickey's careless glare hung in the balance.

“Do you know who Alfred Nobel is, boy? He was a Swedish chemist with over three hundred and fifty patents to his credit. Three hundred and fifty ideas worth protecting. Amazing, really. Also the namesake of the Nobel Prize as I'm sure a smart boy like you already knows. But I tend to like him for a different reason.”

By this point Mickey stood and slowly walked while he talked. Ty imagined movies where the hero always escapes the clutches of evil, but wasn't sure if he was the hero.

“He discovered the explosive power of nitroglycerin. Dynamite, my boy, and the world would never be the same again.” Mickey, now hovering overhead, pointed the exploding stick toward Ty’s mouth and peeled back Ty’s upper lip with the claw of the hammer. “I would suggest you choose your words very carefully from this point on.” He pulled back the dynamite.

“Sir, I know it sounds crazy. Cops were on the way, Amos can back me up on that. I had to run, through alleys and fences and whatever else got in the way. The basket was too heavy, but I grabbed the drugs. They’re at my apartment, I swear to God, we can go get them now. I never would've made it out of there. I even looked for the money before I ran but it was gone. I swear, I swear on my life it was gone. Someone beat me to that apartment. It was a setup. I think, I think it was Marco.” Ty immediately regretted his last words. Marco's fists came down on him quickly and brutally, more times than Ty even tried to count. Shots to the bridge of his nose made his eyes water and nostrils drip blood onto his pants.

“Enough my friend,” Mickey told Marco, who looked reluctant to obey the order. Mickey glared down at Ty, then to Amos. “Amos, what do you think about the way things have played out?”

“Mickey, all I know is that Ty walked into that building with your drugs and your gun, and now bodies are everywhere. I really don’t even know why you got me tied up like

this. I always been good to you. Loyal, you know. I even got away last night when the cops were on the way. Sounds like this guy stole your money but I had nothing to do with it, you got to know that.”

Mickey nodded to Marco who pulled out a much larger pistol than Ty had received.

“Funny thing is, I believe you, I believe every single word,” Mickey said to Amos. The roar of ignited gun powder echoed painfully in Ty’s ear. Amos’ body hit the floor quickly and awkwardly, except for his skull, which was the last to fall. Fresh blood swirled along the walls and floor like a tie dye shirt.

Ty began gagging impulsively. A stream of saliva inched out of his mouth and down his chin, but that was all.

“Did you know that I wanted to be a dentist when I was a young lad?” Mickey turned his glance back on Ty and sounded unfazed. “The Egyptians believed the teeth were a gateway to the soul. I always liked the thought of that. You know you can tell a lot about a man by the way he takes care of his teeth. It’s a character thing; a self-respect thing. Mouth care takes time and effort. There’s no magic fix for bad teeth. You can get away with a few years of neglect, but eventually you have to just grind them down and put on fakes.” Ty ran his tongue across his own set, secretly thankful for each one. “Do you follow me, boy?” Ty assumed the question to be rhetorical. He could taste blood in his throat.

“Of course Mum and Dad were too poor to send me to dentistry school, but that’s not to say I haven’t picked up a few tricks of the trade along the way.” Marco grabbed Ty by the

hair and yanked his skull back causing his jaw to hang limp under the bright light.

Mickey pulled the hammer overhead.

“I hate to see things come to this, my boy. I really thought we could work together for years to come. I respect a man who makes the most of a situation. So rejoice,” Mickey exclaimed. “But I’m afraid I can’t forgive a man who steals from me.” Mickey cocked the hammer back suddenly. Pressure and pain ignited Ty’s bottom gums. His teeth felt scattered and reminded him of nightmares from his childhood.

“I can get your money,” Ty heaved out with a hefty breath. Small droplets of blood flew off his tongue. “I can get it. I know I can.”

Mickey frowned sardonically and retreated. “So you admit that you have it, eh?” He reached back with the hammer again.

“No, not yet at least. I can get you sixty thousand dollars,” Ty blurted desperately.

“Sorry, boy, but a call to Daddy won’t help you here. We can’t be having ransom money floating around, now can we?”

“I work at a bank. I can walk into the vault and get your money, with interest. I know the branch manager, she’ll get me in. I can put the money in a bag and walk out the front door and hand it to Marco.” Ty’s desperate story sounded more believable with every word, even to him. Mickey lowered the hammer and walked toward the door. “You’ll get your money, just please don’t hurt me or my family.”

Now across the table, Mickey sat legs crossed looking at the walls. “Now tell me exactly why you wouldn't just call the police the second you walk in the front door?”

“The cops will pick me up, but I can just tell them that some guys had been casing the place for months and kidnapped me because of my record. Mr. Click, sir, why would I betray you twice, knowing exactly what would happen to me if I did?” Words and solutions flowed from his mouth in perfect harmony with blood spatter. “And by the looks of it, the cops wouldn't believe me even if I fingered you for the job. An ex-con trying to bring down a community leader?”

“So you just want to walk in, take the money in broad daylight, walk out and hand all that cash to one of my men? Is that your plan?”

“They can park across the street at the movie theater. No cameras and lots of traffic. I'll just walk the money straight to the car and wait for the cops to get to the bank. It'll work.”

The blood on Ty's face started to dry with each word. Mickey's tapping fingernail against the metal table broke the silence. Ty wanted to look over his shoulder. He knew exactly what lay behind him, motionless and calm.

Seconds turned into minutes as Mickey quizzed Ty on bank protocol. Neither man had ever considered how simple an inside job could be with the proper alibi.

“Alright, alright... I'll consider this... *Wild West* plan of yours. You Americans really are always looking for the quick fix. But hear this, if anything goes wrong, anything at all,

then this hammer will only be the beginning. Are we clear, my boy?" He rose and slammed the door behind him. Marco looped around Ty and sat leaning against the table.

"Think you've got it figured out, don't you?" Marco's distinct accent sounded strange in such a small room. "After you go through with this...mockery, I suggest you never step foot back in this building again. And if ever insult me with *accosations*, I may not show such forgiveness next time." Marco aimed his pistol at Ty's head then dropped it toward his heart.

"But it *was* you. You stole that money. You set me up. The gun, the sword, everything."

Marco raised one corner of his lips. "My father once tell me, 'Yield to temptation, for it may not pass your way again.'"

"But why the sword? Why not just shoot all three?" Genuine contemplation seemed to drape across Marco's face, like a long forgotten name was dancing on the tip of his tongue.

"Poetic justice, I imagine," Marco said with a chilling disregard. "Sleep well." Then the door slammed once more.

Hours passed in darkness. Mickey and Marco had forgotten to re-apply Ty's own mask. Amos' lifeless body didn't flinch even once. Ty thought about taking off Amos' mask to close his eyes but couldn't find the strength. His own body told him morning had to be within reach, but he couldn't be certain. One of Mickey's men dragged Amos' lifeless body through the door at some point in the night. Ty sat propped in the corner thinking

about Marco's last words to him. Bank robbery sounded much more feasible when the hammer was raised at him. Maybe Marco was right, though. Could he really blame Marco for getting his own payday, even at his own expense? A better life hung out in front of them all like fruit on a limb; only the bravest and smartest would know when to grab it.

Taking the money would not be the hardest part, Ty decided. Maybe the easiest actually. He'd thought about robbing his father's bank thousands of times; walking in with a serene confidence, pitching some story to Meryl, walking out with stacks of money that nobody would ever miss, really. He needed a story to tell the police, something with specific details that would exonerate himself but lead the detectives astray. People would be reluctant to believe him, a convict with a drug problem. Newspapers would devour the story. He imagined his father's painful stare from behind the glass of an interrogation room. Forever pegged as a criminal, both in the eyes of family and the community.

Barely audible voices and footsteps woke Ty from whatever sleep he could muster. Like clockwork the door unlocked and opened up to reveal Marco and an accomplice, followed by Mickey. Marco carried some sort of structure in his right hand as he took steps directly toward Ty. He bent over and pushed Ty's pant leg up to his kneecap then began wrapping the structure to his shin and calf muscle. Marco finished adjusting and stood back up with a secret smile.

"What's this?" A legitimate question, Ty thought.

“A small insurance policy, my boy.” Mickey replied. He wore another gray suit that day with a green tie and orange pocket square. “A nod to my Irish brethren if you will. Nothing fancy, nothing glamorous, just a few sticks of Nobel’s finest to keep you focused.” All three men in suits smiled in unison. “Either we do this today, as is, or I start collecting a tooth for every day I go without my money. Unless of course you have a new idea?”

“Mickey come on,” Ty cried out desperately, “after all we've been through. You know I wouldn't do anything to screw you, especially not now. This could go off while I'm getting the money. Anything could happen.”

Mickey scoffed and ignored him, or pretended to. “Just in case you start feeling flighty, boy. A bank vault is quite a place. You can find yourself and lose yourself all at once. And we wouldn't want you losing yourself now would we, lad?”

Ty thought about the man in the world with Mickey's initials forever stuck in him, slightly envious.

“Let's just get this over with,” Ty moaned. He glanced over at Marco with a new expression, somewhere between apathy and fear. Unsure if he deserved either, really.

“You've said that once before, let's pray this time you mean it,” Mickey said. “Marco will take you by your apartment to retrieve my Ecstasy and clean yourself up.”

The next few hours paced along like a dream. Slightly whimsical but still fluid from scene to scene. Ty opened his ceiling to drag the pills into the morning light. A black

silhouette of the silenced pistol made Ty's heart double in rhythm. He glanced quickly at Marco who was scoffing at the clothes in the closet. "Clean off the filth, boy, and meet me in the hallway. I wouldn't bother that ankle if I were you." Marco said, beckoning at the dynamite. He snatched the pills out of Ty's hand and gave him five minutes to clean his face brush his hair. After one final stop to return the pills to Mickey, the car rolled to a halt somewhere in the movie theater lot. The driver handed Ty a black duffle bag which he stuffed under his armpit. Marco held up a small rectangular object with an antenna and black button, smiling.

"Hurry back, now, friend," Marco said as Ty pushed himself off the car seat.

Walking to the bank door felt easier than Ty expected. A serene confidence bubbled inside. No more thinking about the future; life was happening around him without possibility of escape.

VI

At first nobody noticed his arrival. Tellers smiled at customers and handed over cash. A child walked up to him with a bag of popcorn and asked what happened to his face. Ty clenched his palms and spit out something about falling down. The dynamite hung heavy on his leg and made his calf drip with sweat. Meryl walked out from behind the counter with an unusually big smile for a Monday morning, even for her.

“Ty, good morning sweetheart, how was your week--? Oh goodness gracious what on Earth happened to you? Are you alright?” Her vocal concern shined an unwanted spotlight on Ty. Tellers and customers alike peered over to catch a better glimpse.

“Meryl, this is very important. You need to listen to everything I say. A couple of thugs came to my apartment over the weekend, tied me up, and attached this to me.” Ty whispered the last phrase gently and pulled up his pant leg, revealing three sticks of red dynamite with a small antenna and box clipped to the side.

“Is that, is that a bomb? Oh sweet Jesus, Ty, we have to call the police,” Meryl whispered frantically. Other customers started blatantly staring and hurrying their children out the front door. Ty prayed the frantic customers didn’t spook Marco across the street.

“We can't, not yet at least. I need your vault key.” Ty didn't wait for her response. He unclasped it from her suit pants belt buckle and hurried toward the vault door. “Wait until I come out to do anything, Meryl,” Ty said over his shoulder.

He had only walked into the vault once before to help Meryl pick up a roll of pennies that had busted open.

She followed him to the door and asked what he wanted her to do. “Stay outside in case this thing goes off. Tell everyone to stay calm and don’t let people run out the front door.” Meryl shuddered and waded back out into the lobby. Ty thought of Amos, and of his own ankle. He wondered if the explosion would be painless.

Each shelf held different denominations, from hundreds down to coins. Metal siding lined the walls and ceiling and shelves. Ty could see his reflection. More beard than he usually kept occupied his neck and jaw line. A swollen nose and bruised eye socket contrasted sharply with his pale winter skin. His eyes still sat like he remembered. He poked and pulled his cheeks and ran his fingers through his short brown hair. It had been so blonde as a child, he remembered, “like a baby duck,” his mother had told him many times before.

Ty wished he could stand there forever, safe in the walls of the vault. But the black bag beckoned, and so he turned to grab stacks of cash.

With a small pirouette he faced the stacks of hundreds. The dynamite clanked against the metal shelf frame, sending an immediate wave of panic coursing through Ty's limbs. The noise, however frightening, also delivered an unmistakable recollection. A memory of his childhood, perhaps. A distinct shot of dejavu that he couldn't ignore. That sound reverberated over and over in his mind as he searched for its meaning. He remembered his birthday, one somewhere between puberty and high school school, when his father

gave him his first wooden baseball bat. Stained maple, just like they use in the big leagues. That bat never left his fingers that summer unless he was rounding the bases. He would always know the sound of his bat leaned against the dugout. Standing helpless in the vault, he pulled up his pant leg and carefully unlatched the sticks of dynamite.

Without hesitation or panic, Ty examined the bomb, then the antenna box. Fakes, they were both fakes. Long pieces of wood painted red with an old beeper glued to them. Ty could even see a few imperfections in the wood that had surfaced after the paint dried. He stood still for a moment and wondered if Mickey would have actually hammered into him the day before. Strangely, he didn't blame Mickey for anything that had happened. He didn't blame anyone.

Ty did fill up the bag with money, just like he had promised. Eighty thousand dollars stacked on top of the 9 mm pistol he grabbed after his shower at the apartment. He reattached the wooden sticks and walked back out into a silent lobby.

“Meryl, call the police. Tell them two men in a white Cadillac are driving off with a bag of money from a car parked at the movie theater, probably toward the bridge. I'll be right back.”

Ty marched out the front door back across traffic to the car. The sun felt nice and warm on the back of his neck.

Marco examined the bag, smiled at the cash, and glanced back up at Ty. “Hope you at least grabbed a couple stacks for yourself. Good luck with that ankle.” Marco tossed the

remote at Ty as the two men drove off toward the bridge. Ty immediately ran back to the bank, sure he could hear sirens in the distance.

* * *

Ty emerged from the police station right before nightfall, dynamite still in hand as a souvenir. The lines of questioning came as no surprise. Cop talk, mostly. Bureaucracy at its finest. Ty had produced a wanted felon who had apparently skipped bail months before. A murder weapon in hand and motive, no less. He wondered if Marco had even been smart enough to hide the blood money. No matter, though. The station Lieutenant praised him for his tenacity and quick thinking. His father treated him, his mother, and Meryl to dinner, then offered him a ride home. They talked a little business, a lot of baseball, and Ty told him the history behind Stonehenge.

Walking up the steps to his apartment, Ty knew nobody would be waiting. No friends or family, but also none of Mickey's men. Professional courtesy, perhaps, or maybe just an understanding between men. Ty called his bluff; he dabbled in a man's game and came out alive, on top. He didn't know exactly what he would say to Mickey, but he knew that he would say it confidently, with conviction, and that Mickey would have no choice but to respect him for it.

Ty laid the wood on the table, propped his feet up on a stack of unpaid bills, and flipped on the news. A reporter that he didn't recognize stood in front of the camera with caution tape behind her. Ty pulled his feet to the floor and rubbed his eyes.

“The plot thickens as police continue to search for clues in the grizzly murder of three Asian-American men in the Mulberry district, often dubbed Little Korea. Police are not so sure that this triple homicide was merely a coincidence,” the woman squeaked. Ty turned the volume up as high as possible. “Sources say that a large sword suspected of murdering janitor Seong Pok was actually a seventeenth century Chinese artifact from the original Qing Dynasty worth upwards of one hundred thousand dollars. Paired with its sheath, which was left at the scene, the sword could be worth over a quarter million dollars, one museum curator said. Murder in cold blood, now possible grand larceny; this story just keeps turning over new stones for investigators. Reporting live for WATV, I'm Katy Brunswick.”

Ty raced out his door and down the apartment stairs to his car parked out back. He fumbled for his cell phone and looked for a number in his address book as he pulled out into the busy street. In some forgotten corner of the cold city lay the beautiful blade that murdered Seong Pok, the blade that could very well save Ty's own life. Staring through his frosted windshield, he thought about the day, and thought about the next. He would wake up and go to work with pride, unafraid of whatever the world could muster. Phone to his ear, Ty finally knew exactly what to say.

“This is Mickey.” His booming voice did not startle Ty.

“Mickey, it's Ty Stevens. Tell me, sir, how much do you know about swords?”

AFTERWORD

My purpose for writing a piece of allegorical fiction is to prove that a university trained journalist can also possess the necessary tools needed to devise and create a story completely separate from his training if the situation demands. Flexibility and creativity are intrinsic to survival in any number of commercial fields, journalism especially, now more than ever. Rather than present a thesis which chronicled mass media's evolution and inevitably reached my same conclusion without taking any personal risk myself, I opted to avoid hypocrisy and take my own first step toward thinking about journalism differently than text books or talking heads. I hope my thesis serves as an entertaining yet informative reminder that although the current situation feels desperate for many journalists, courage and creativity above all else can indeed save the viability of print journalism.

The plot line of *Play by the Rules* mirrors the plight of the common journalist trying to find purpose and self-worth in a society that has left him behind. Ty's current situation is livable at best: he has lost the respect of his family, is stuck behind the counter at a job that barely covers his living expenses, and yearns for a time when his life had relevancy and purpose, even though that former life was plagued with irresponsibility and drug use at times. Instead of learning to survive and prosper in his new life, he continues to dwell in the past, refusing to evolve both out of fear and uncertainty. As a result, he is easily swayed back into his old lifestyle, but this time around the stakes have been raised. Ty, just like today's journalist, can no longer simply revert back to prior habits and expect success. He must learn to prosper under severe duress, take advantage of his opportunities, and ultimately adapt to a changing world to become successful.

Specific characters and situations also represent various wrinkles in the current state of mass media. Amos represents the future of the industry if no changes are implemented. He is weak, petty, fearful, and even perhaps untrustworthy. I intentionally opted to reveal only some of his motives to mirror the growing distrust and disconnect consumers feel toward journalism. For instance, Ty suspects that Amos may have played a part in Marco's set-up, but cannot be sure. Amos' victories are small (nice teeth, decent clothes, perceived reputation) and his significance in the world even smaller. Conversely, Mickey represents the future of the industry if the wrong changes are implemented. He possesses a certain amount of wealth and power, but he is also a slave to his profession. He cannot escape the confines of a life of crime, and eventually his house of cards will likely come tumbling down. If journalists opt for quick fixes for their financial woes or replace ethical balance with salacious pandering, the industry may temporarily improve, but will be ultimately as effective as a bandage on a broken leg. Journalists must think radically and creatively but never forfeit the profession's code of ethics which binds them. Although Ty feels a certain allure towards Mickey, he decides to break away from his grasp in the vault once he realizes the absurdity in Mickey's tactics. And in one final ironic twist, Ty's phone call implies an attempt to sell the sword back to Mickey, thereby improving himself financially and also leaving Mickey with murder weapon in hand. I also intentionally omitted this final transaction because the journalism industry has still yet to make any such move. Mass media is still sitting in Mickey's closet room, having teeth hammered by a stick of dynamite, trying to devise a plan to save itself.

Violence and mayhem also play integral roles in *Play by the Rules*. Marco specifically is responsible for nearly every act of significant violence, most notably his

perverse ritualistic murder of Seong Pok in the Little Korea apartments. His ruthlessness and disregard for life represent all outside forces that could feasibly limit the evolution of journalism. Radio and television were once deemed limiting factors; destroyers of journalism, really. Now the internet, with unlimited sourcing from any number of self-appointed “journalists,” threatens to fragment print journalism beyond repair. Marco also represents the business side of journalism: advertisers, conglomerate owners, marketers. These people occupy a permanent position in mass media despite any wishes otherwise by journalistic purists, which is why Marco could not be killed in this allegory. Using a pistol that Marco himself provided, Ty did manage to make the most of a dire situation. Marco’s capture serves as an antagonistic literary device for entertainment value and resolution more than allegorical truth. Clearly journalists cannot eliminate or force their superiors out of the picture altogether, but they can stand up to them and demand that balance, fairness, and truth continue to serve as the backbone of print media. Ty’s reaction to Marco’s violence in the apartment represents strategy and decisiveness in the face of a crisis. His decisions in retrospect may have not been the perfect response to such a situation, but he nevertheless protected himself and lived with the consequences. His nobility lies in his willingness to survive and adapt despite hardship.

Ty’s actions should not resonate as heroic or mythical. His situation needs to read as both entertaining and realistic to achieve a successful allegory. His flaws do not magically heal over time, nor do his decisions reflect some sense of artificial morality. Real human success depends on foresight and creativity and a healthy dose of courage. Journalism cannot strive for one perfect solution to fully alleviate the financial issues it

faces. It must have the courage to try and to fail, and, with a little luck and plenty of creativity, it will ultimately remain relevant for years to come.