

One

I step on to the bus and put the two and a half credits needed for my fare (all in quarters) into the slot. My pass expired last week, and I saw no point in renewing it since I would only be riding the bus for another week. I've been paying with cash, which is annoying since it takes the pay machine longer to process and requires exact change. Still, it's cheaper than getting my pass renewed for another whole month. The little light from the machine turns green, and the gate opens to let me through. Mercifully enough, there's an open seat near the back, on the left side of the bus. I work my way there and sit down by the window. Almost immediately I recognize why the seat was open as I realize that the woman in front of me has not showered at all. A single inhalation reveals a stench of sweat and animal urine among other things. Her odor is overwhelming, and for a moment I am tempted to get up and sit with someone else, but the bus begins moving and my distaste for direct physical proximity to another person on this bus combined with a desire not to change seats on a moving vehicle overrides my discomfort with the odor of the woman in front of me.

I try to console myself with the view, but very predictably there is nothing interesting to see. Architecture in New Shanghai is not particularly appealing to the eyes, and in the slums of District 13 it's especially bad. The raw brutalism and soullessness of new Chinese design is especially visible here. Utterly bland concrete obelisks extend upwards, creating an oppressing and stifling atmosphere. Of course, that is all defensible. When the goal is to house four hundred thousand Africans and keep them from killing anyone but each other, it only makes sense to make things as dull as possible. If you stifle the spirit of the people, you ensure that there's no possible rebellion. In that sense, the design of the district was flawless, making sure that the West African Industrial Zone wouldn't meet the same fate as Rhodesia or South Africa. An atmosphere of silent despair was a feature, not a flaw. Of course, I can't guess if the designers really wanted to account for entropy in their designs. The eyesore of graffiti was everywhere, and even the shops that were open for business had their fair share of cracked windows and worn-down doorways. Litter ruled the sidewalks and alleys, and only automated sweepers kept it from spilling into the streets. If the storefront was closed, then it had already been broken into and stripped of anything remotely useful. The intentional defilement of the buildings shifted them from being depressing to disgusting. Everything looked run-down and miserable, like a nuclear war had destroyed the city some years ago and no one really noticed or cared.

I once wanted to be an architect in high school. I read a few magazines about the topic and followed a few blogs on the matter. I know a little bit about it. Maybe I should have followed up on that passion instead.

The bus comes to a halt, and I can tell from looking out my window that this isn't a scheduled stop. Traffic is light in District 13 so I'm not expecting that to be a factor either. I look out the front and see that some street people are out in the road, confirming my internal predictions. From the looks of things it's a pair of scrawny Africans dressed in loose T-shirts and shorts with the man holding the Universal Standard Credit symbol on a piece of cardboard in his hands, and the woman, probably pregnant, holds a pair of empty soup cans in hers. Technically they're in the middle of the road and we could pass them, but I'm guessing the driver doesn't want to risk it. I can't tell, since the bus driver sits in

a little blocked-off box on the left-hand side of the front and I never interact with him. I know that technically running over a native, especially a street person, isn't that big of a deal but the WAIZ administrators want to get the number of Chinese-caused African female fatalities down in time for the next UN report, so drivers are encouraged to err on the side of caution when a woman is involved. We stay in place for the next five minutes before a pair of street police rides up on their bikes and drags the couple back to the sidewalk. I'm guessing that either the driver reported the obstruction or a monitor drone caught it. Either way, my path to work continues, because that's all that matters in this city.

Life is cheap in New Shanghai. We're not as heavily industrialized as some cities in the WAIZ, since we're on the coast and trade is just as important. Maybe that's why the city is a cesspit of unrestrained nihilist greed. The entire WAIZ started as a way for the elite of China to exploit their working poor. Then they realized how much of a demand there was for labor, and opened the borders to exploit the working poor of the western world, too. America loves it- we send our poor and uneducated, anyone who can't go to a major university and get a real job, and in return they send back all sorts of cheap consumer goods. Prices go down, and so do unemployment. And the workers who leave are strictly out of sight, out of mind. Either they come back with enough money to live the American Dream, or the WAIZ swallows them whole.

I'm about two steps from becoming the latter. I'm just another cog in the machine. I wake up, I go to work, I make money. Since it's not enough to save for anything valuable, I spend most of it, then I go to sleep, setting myself up to repeat the endless cycle. I work from eight to six, 50 hours a week. I'm only as good as my output after all, whether it be how much I'm producing at work or how much cash I'm producing for merchants. For all intents and purposes, I don't have a life of my own, I'm just running around and doing things to make other people rich. I don't exist. I'm not even alive.

I know I'm not the only one with such a miserable attitude. I'd imagine it's actually the norm in New Shanghai. After all, how else do you describe how much crime there is in District 13? Deprivation and despair are the parents of anti-social behavior. The police don't even care that much- the District is just containment for the poor and stupid natives. It's not like there's any legitimate business for them to do- there's no industry to be found in the district, just housing and basic commodity shops. The UN doesn't care that much about what they do to each other, after all.

A man flies by on a bike. I watched him steal it a few weeks ago. I frown at him from behind the window. I am unhappy.

Smash cut to work. I'm a metalworker in District 16, one of the city's main industrial zones. My plant assembles parts for cars that are built over in a plant over in District 5. It's honest work, I guess, but it's not really valuable or fulfilling. I can't get over the fact that I don't even build a real product, I'm just making parts of a larger machine. I don't really feel like I'm important or valuable. I can't justify my own existence at the plant.

A big part of the problem there is that I'm not a part of the union. Union guys get all sorts of perks. They make enough money to live in District 14, Americatown. Everything is nicer, and they can even save money to go back to America after a few years, or even just send it home directly to their

families. They get plenty of protection and benefits, and the union will cover the costs of any certification course. They work a typical American 40 hour workweek instead of the more Chinese 50 hour workweek us non-union guys get stuck with. Of course, you can only get in the union if you're invited by another worker. That doesn't happen to me, since I'm pretty much invisible around the workplace. I stick to myself and don't talk to anyone. I'm familiar with a lot of the other guys, but sometimes it feels like they all blur together as some sort of amorphous mass of denim and flannel. I'd say that it's my fault for being shy, but I'm trying this new thing where I don't automatically blame myself for everything that doesn't work out.

So far, that new method is working out pretty well. I got my two week's notice 13 days ago, making today my last day. I'm not too upset ago. It's not my fault that I'm being laid off. Car sales are down, budget cuts are in place, and I didn't have Union protection or welding certification. I'm just a guy who was in the wrong place in the wrong time. Plus there's the silver lining that I wouldn't need to keep saving money for getting my welding certification. Besides, I have a plan for what I'm doing next. So with all of that in mind, I can spend most of my last day on the job working by myself on the lathe. There's a lot of comfort there, I can just trim the edges of the metal tubes we use on my own and not worry about anything else. It's a comforting distraction from all of the things that have gotten me stressed out.

Around 5:00, the union guys start to go home. Me and the other non-union guys essentially have the last hour to finish up whatever we were doing and close up the shop. I enjoy this last hour a lot more than I do the first nine. The other non-union guys do too. One of the little unspoken secrets is that no one is actually working on anything for the company in the last hour- we're all doing pet projects. Most of the time we're teaching ourselves how to use machines that we'd otherwise need courses to use. I taught myself to weld that way.

My personal project, and the one thing I'm taking away from all of this with pride, is my mask. It started as an aluminum welding mask with two eyeholes. It was originally going to be thrown out, since the lens on one of the eyeholes was cracked. But I snatched it from the trash pile, figuring it would be fun to craft. I've been shaping it with some cutting and trimming and sanding and even hammering, and now it's taken on a sort of skull-like shape to it. It's not any good as a welding helmet at all, since I've taken out both lenses. It looked a little tacky at first, but I've come to see it as badass, if not just because it's the end result of quite a few hours' worth of labor. I'm really proud of what I've done with the helmet.

Of course, this time I'm not terribly interested in spending my time sweeping all the metal shavings up. Today is my last day. What can they really do to me for leaving early- fire me? It would be a bit late for that. So I spend thirty minutes finishing up with the batch of tubes that I need to trim, then I already call it a day and prepare to head home. I slide the mask into the bag I brought my lunch and water in, along with a simple claw hammer. I'll need that hammer for later.

I wear a particularly smug smile as I walk out the door towards the bus stop. In my mind, this menial theft of tools is a victory, a net gain over a company that is already walking away with thousands of hours of my time and has made plenty of money off of my labor. From a strict perspective, they

should have won. However, right now I am content. And because I am content, I am victorious. I suppose there is some philosophical writing that covers my outlook. I was never really into philosophy in school. I thought it was above me. I could look back on how I was wrong to think of things in that sense. But right now, I'm in too much of a good mood.

As I take the bus back home for the last time, I can't help but do some minor reflection on how all of this went wildly different than how I planned it would. My original goal was to establish myself in New Shanghai as a skilled and respected machinist. I'd make a decent living, get some good money, and eventually move back to the states. With my skills established, I'd start my own specialty mechanical shop, and I'd be set in terms of my career. It seemed like such a simple, flawless plan, but so many things went wrong. I couldn't get the right job, I couldn't get in with the right crowd, so on and so forth. Nothing went the way I hoped it would.

The bus is being held up by another street person. This one is a white guy, with long knotty hair, a big bushy beard and ill-fitting clothes that are much too small for him. He's screaming at the bus to run him over, put him out of his misery. I'm confident that street police are already on their way to pick this one up. I can't really resent him though. If it weren't for my perseverance, or more realistically, my stubbornness, I'd wind up being just like him. Hell, even though materially we're nothing alike, I suspect that spiritually we may have some things in common. We're both lost souls that the city forgot, people that nobody cares about up until we start blocking traffic or ruining something that's nice for someone else. I chide myself for how boring that reflection is. I sound like a disaffected high school student.

I live on the second floor of the Kersey Complex, another utterly drab and dull building that is very difficult to pick out from the others. My primary method for identifying it is a neon sign on the side overlooking the freeway that advertises Coca-Cola. Advertisements make for a good method of navigating the city, I've learned. Aside from that, my building is utterly unremarkable, which I find to be incredibly depressing.

As I cross the threshold into my apartment, a sudden sensation of joy and relief washes over me like a wave breaking on the shore. Of course, this is not related to my apartment itself. I am convinced that there are hotel rooms larger than my apartment. My living room bleeds into the dining room, with the kitchen only separated by a measly counter. Off to the side, there is only one bedroom and one bathroom. There is no pantry or closet, forcing me to be careful with managing how many material possessions I own. The design is what some call "economical" and others call "stifling." I frequently flip between the two in my thoughts on my living space.

Rather, I am overcome with an immense degree of satisfaction for two reasons. The first reason is that my apartment is in pristine shape. Keeping things nice and orderly is my own personal form of rebellion against the anarcho-tyranny of New Shanghai. By keeping everything clean and in place, I give myself some peace of mind every single day when I get home. The second, more present, reason is because I am struck with the sudden realization that I am free. I no longer have to go to work. My time presently belongs to no one but myself. I can do whatever I want with my free time now. There is a

certain weightlessness that comes with freedom, as if a heavy burden has been lifted from my shoulders. There is a spring in my step, and I feel renewed.

Almost immediately I drop down on my couch, and practically sink into it as I succumb to relaxation. In spite of its flaws, it feels like it is made of the most comfortable material in the world. I am not even tired, but I close my eyes regardless, and exhale to express my contentment. I stay like this for a few more moments, simply savoring my newfound freedom. I know it cannot last, but for the present moment it feels incredible. I open my eyes, and decide to remove my mask from the bag and examine it. Right now, the mask represents freedom. This was something that I made on my own time and with my own hands. I constructed it without any guidance or instruction. In that sense, it is mine and mine alone.

I smile at the mask, and I feel like the skeletal face is smiling back at me. I am acutely aware that my future is linked to this mask. It is vital for the next part of my life. Because of this mask, I will be able to escape this hellish city and move on with my life. I will be able to start again. I will be reborn.

Dinner is oven-roasted chicken breast with vegetables and mashed potatoes. As far as food goes this is more complex than what I normally make, and more expensive, too. But a little bit of luxury to celebrate my freedom is a good thing. I want to celebrate, I want to be happy. I'm not used to being happy, so I want to get as much as I can from the feeling while it lasts, because I know it will almost always end. Oddly enough, I would have thought this would be more upsetting, since this sort of meal is the kind of thing Luna would make for me when we were dating in high school. Ordinarily thinking of Luna would fill me with an unspeakable rage and at times would leave me shaking. But for some reason, right now I am content to ignore her evil, and relegate her to being a part of the past.

Luna was my high school sweetheart, her name product of weird hippy parents. I still wonder how parents as kind as hers created someone as nasty as her. She was a beautiful girl. She was short and plump, but with flowing brown hair that would often be tied back in braids, a wonderful pale complexion, and a smile that would brighten the world. I was madly in love with her, and utterly devoted to her. There were times when I told her I would die for her and was utterly sincere about it. Of course, she never once reciprocated the affection, instead settling for the most mundane of compliments. Even in school our relationship was one-sided. Luna had a cruel streak to her, and knew how to control me by withholding affection and appreciation whenever she was displeased. She also knew how to use guilt to control me as well, making me feel awful for wanting anything from her. She played me like a puppet.

I moved to New Shanghai for her. I deliberately chose not to go to college because she couldn't afford it. I came here and toiled away for a year, while she stayed back in the states and rode the cock carousel until she found a boytoy who was already rich, one who just paid for her college. I know all of this because of a letter she sent me, bragging about everything. In the end I was just her puppet, a small-town boy for her to use and exploit until he had no more usage for her. For the next year I was haunted by dreams and fantasies of murder-suicide. I was alone and miserable in this desolate hellscape of a city. I managed to get help, at least for a little while, and eventually found some peace of mind. But that familiar madness still haunts me in the recesses of my mind. Haunted by that miserable little slut

that decided to ruin my life just for her own material gain because she could and all I want to do is just- No. That's the spectre of abuse talking. I take a moment to remind myself that I'm better than that just like my doctor told me and refocus my thoughts.

But that's all the past. I'm leaving that all behind along with this cursed city. I'm going to free myself and move on with my life. I've spent the past couple of years spinning my wheels and going nowhere. That will all change tomorrow night. I've decided that already. Everything is in place, all that remains is just waiting it out, and then the execution. As I finish up my dinner, there is a sudden lightness about me. For some reason, going over the past felt like me casting it off. It is another weight gone. As the evening progresses, I am only becoming freer.

I decide not to take one of my nightly walks around the neighborhood in favor of staying home and going over my plan for tomorrow night. Of all the weights left on my psyche, anticipation for tomorrow night is the greatest. Regardless of what happens, my life will change forever. I will either leave the city of my own will, or I will be leaving it on a train to the nearest prison. The third option, of course, is that I leave his mortal coil altogether. That's an incredibly dramatic way of phrasing it, but I've always had a flair for the dramatic. Maybe I should have been a writer. I clean up after my dinner, making sure the dishes are carefully washed.

As I go over the plan at first, I am covered with anticipation. This is all very real, and by this time tomorrow night, I will be out in the streets putting it into action. I am eager and willing to get it going. By the third time I go over it, I am hopeful, thinking about all the things I can do with my new life after successfully pulling it off. I could do anything with my life. My only restraint was my imagination. By the seventh time I go over it, I am considering everything that could go wrong. I am putting my future on my line. I am putting my life on the line. If my plan does not succeed, I will be dead or in prison for the rest of my life. The incredibly high stakes of this fill me with dread, but I resolve to keep reviewing my plan, making sure it is committed to memory. By the tenth time, the fear has given way to solid resolve. I will not fail. I cannot fail. I am a skilled machinist, and I am precise in both planning and execution. And besides, this is all that is left in my life. I have committed to this course and have no way back. My own feelings no longer matter, only my ability.

By the fifteenth time, I can see that it is 9:00. It is time for bed. I brush my teeth turn off the lights, make sure my door is locked, and then head to my bedroom where I draw the blinds and change into my pajamas before retiring to my bed. I adjust the alarm clock on my smartphone for 7:00 tomorrow instead of 6:00. The gentle hum of cars on the freeway passing me by helps lull me to sleep, as I finish the last day of my ordinary life.

Two

I wake up at 7:00, already in a good mood because I've gotten an extra hour of sleep. Before anything else, I start my day with some basic stretches. From there I transition to push-ups, followed by sit-ups, and then some squats. I took up exercise as a means of combating depression. They say idle hands are the devil's workshop, and I don't disagree. Lethargy is the enemy; it opens the door to depression and madness. Even the oppression of routine is still a safeguard against mental decay.

By 7:15 I am in the shower, and thanks to the water being either too cold or too warm, I'm out by 7:20. Still, I am thorough in my wash, and try to make sure that my skin is clean. I'm not terribly interested in looking radiant or beautiful or whatever those fancy soaps advertise. My primary goal is simply to not be grimy or filthy. From there I quickly shave my face. I've never really been able to grow good facial hair, and I don't think it really suits me at my age. It's best to keep myself clean-shaven for now, if not simply because everyone else in District 13 looks like they spent their lives in the woods. I comb my hair into place, making sure it looks decent and presentable. I dress myself with a nondescript t-shirt and a pair of jeans. Really, all of my clothes are work clothes. It's not like I really have a personal life to speak of. I do have a nice faux-leather jacket for casual wear. I can't afford real leather, but the jacket looks nice, and that's what ultimately counts. By 7:25 I am dressed and ready for breakfast.

My breakfast is more drawn out since I have the time to do so. Ordinarily I would make myself something nice only on Saturday or Sunday, but today I feel obligated to treat myself. I make myself an all-American meal of bacon, eggs, and fruit, with some milk to wash it all down. It feels very quaint for an unemployed machinist in an industrial hellscape. Getting eggs is easy enough, but getting good bacon in New Shanghai is surprisingly difficult. Still, the meal has a good deal of nutritional value to it, meaning that I have enough energy to start my day without getting tired. Lethargy is the enemy.

Smash cut and I'm on my morning walk. I used to jog, but I've learned that jogging is frowned upon in District 13. If you jog, everyone assumes that you're from District 14, where all the white people live. At work, we'd call District 14 "Americatown." Out here, everyone just calls it "Little Rhodesia." That used to be a term of resentment, but it's much more neutral now. The natives prefer white immigrants to Chinese ones. After all, it's not white people who throw them on a train to prison for blocking traffic.

But back to my main point: jogging isn't a good idea. The last time I ever went jogging, I got mugged. The muggers figured I was from District 14, and thought they could shake me down for cash. When they found out I was as poor as they were, they actually apologized. They didn't take anything from me, they just punched me in the gut. But after that, they apologized again and said they only hit me to keep up appearances. Those guys really didn't have what it took to be muggers. They weren't mean enough, they had too much empathy. I wish I had told them that, maybe they would have quit before they tried to mug another guy and got killed for it. But I guess that was the way life goes. They played a stupid game, and won a stupid prize. What a shame.

I could go on forever about how the poverty of District 13 is unbearable. It's far worse than any major American ghetto, at least from what I've seen. Some of the larger complexes are just massive slums with barely any running water at all, let alone hot water. The Chinese don't care. It's the city's

dumping ground, and I mean that almost literally. If the universities of District 7 are supposed to house the city's best and brightest, then District 13 is supposed to be containment for the city's worst.

There's a great anecdote that explains District 13 perfectly. Some years before I moved here, there was a problem with street people in District 13 literally shitting on the side of the roads. For whatever reason, the city government is really anal about the city streets, hence the automatic street sweepers and the armored police that pretty much exist to patrol transportation. So this was something they actually cared about. It was a really big deal. One politician proposed making public defecation punishable by 15 years in prison, minimum. Not to be outdone, another proposed making it punishable by death. Another politician decided to top that and flat-out advocated for immediate extrajudicial murder for anyone who took a dump on the side of the road. That got a lot of international attention and criticism of New Shanghai, which really shook up the government. As much as they'd have love to have all the street people shot and buried in a ditch where they can no longer hold up traffic or stink up the roads or just generally be an eyesore, mass killings would be bad for business, not to mention possibly encourage more anti-colonial terrorism. So in a PR move, they pass the Public Hygiene Act, which has two parts. First off, they fund the creation of publicly accessible toilets, available on almost every city block. Second, they make public defecation punishable by a mandatory minimum ten years of prison. At no point does the idea of homeless shelters or anti-poverty programs get a single mention. A little while later and virtually all of the politicians involved in the program are found to be taking bribes from the Triads in exchange for turning their heads from only god knows what.

That's New Shanghai in a nutshell: The people who pay can do whatever they want, and the people who don't get ten years minimum for answering the call of nature in the wrong place and should be lucky that they weren't shot on sight.

I pass by my old gym. It closed down just a few months ago, couldn't pay the bills. I used to go there on the weekends to work out. I had a membership and everything. I mean, I'm personally not a bodybuilder. I personally value performance over appearance when it comes to training goals. But even then I only did a light workout, since I couldn't afford to seriously strain myself. It's a damn shame that it closed, since I used to feel really good about working out there. I didn't really know any of the other guys there, but I was comfortable enough to make small talk with them, something I didn't even have at my job. I miss lifting weights. I used to feel really good about myself after a session there.

I also pass by the place I've got targeted for later tonight, the Bullhorn building. It's a run-down multi-story apartment building, much like the Kersey Complex. The Kersey is a little bit taller than the Bullhorn, but is infinitely seedier. As I pass by, I recognize the guy out front by the door. He's a drug dealer of some sorts, since I've passed by him making a sale in an alleyway before. I don't know if he lives in the Bullhorn or not. I don't really care, since his apartment isn't my target. I avert my gaze from the Bullhorn. I don't want the dealer to think I'm staring.

Smash cut and I'm at home, eating lunch. That's a ham-and-cheese sandwich with a side of apples and fruit juice to drink. While I do so, I meticulously go over my plan, simply to commit it to

memory. The goal of my plan is to obtain a large sum of money relatively quickly, and then use that money to leave New Shanghai and return to the US, where I can start life over again.

The crux of my plan revolves around an apartment on the fifth floor of the Bullhorn building. According to a conversation I had overheard between some guys at the gym who had worked there, the apartment was in fact a studio for shooting porno. More specifically, it's for shooting "Mandingo" porn, which is really big in China right now. Mandingo porn is basically a subgenre of interracial porn involving a very large, muscular black man and a comparatively small, petite Chinese girl. Supposedly the appeal of it is that it's extremely taboo, the ultimate in decadent degeneracy that, in their minds, is essentially only one step away from full-blown bestiality. Pornography, of course, is illegal to produce, distribute, purchase, possess, view or display in China. The WAIZ has similar, but not identical laws. However, thanks to the magic of bribe money it turns out enforcement of these laws in the WAIZ is lax, so it becomes easy for pornography to be produced and distributed abroad. I suppose the fact that their illegal interracial pornography is imported as well gives it a more exotic feel, making it even more luxurious.

The studio, as I've taken to calling it, is supposedly only inhabited full-time by one man, the producer. He lives in the apartment, and manages most of the business. However, it will often host the various actors- usually muscular, good-looking single (or unhappily married) neighborhood men who will later brag about their sexual prowess to their friends later in the locker room. It also sometimes hosts the girls, who are brought in for filming and later taken out under the cover of night, but almost never left alone at the studio for an extended period of time. That means that for all intents and purposes, it is relatively unguarded.

Underground porn is a lucrative business, but not a legal one. That means that the producer should have a good degree of cash on hand, since money laundering via banks is a tricky business nowadays. He could be using CryptoCoin for digital distribution, but he would still have to keep the currency stored on a hard drive somewhere in his house. Very easily he would have to have a few thousand credits worth of liquid assets, all mine for the taking.

My plan is simple: I wait until sundown to enter the Bullhorn building, since I know from overheard conversations that no filming is scheduled for tonight. I use the hammer to break into the apartment. If I have to, I knock the producer out with the hammer. From there, I raid the studio, primarily for cash, but also for a hard drive if he looks tech-savvy enough. After that, I get out of the apartment, head back home, and then figure out how much money I've made and what to do with it.

The one thing I can be certain of is that I'm leaving this city behind once and for all. I don't know where I'll go once I get back to New York, but the important part is that I get out of New Shanghai. I have some estranged family that I can contact, I suppose. Both my parents are dead, having been killed in a car accident. But I could still get back in touch with the uncle who raised me, I'm pretty sure he's still employed as a high-school gym teacher. There are also his kids, my cousins: one is probably still in college working on becoming an accountant, another is an aspiring artist out in the city. They might be willing to help, I suppose. If not them, I'm sure I could find someone else. Rural New York is very tight-

knit and community-oriented. I could very easily be a prodigal son returning home. Besides, it's all irrelevant if I don't actually get my hands on the money first.

I spend the rest of the afternoon assembling my outfit and getting ready. After going over a number of possible revisions based on not being seen, I finally decide on what I want to wear. I eventually decide on a pair of black cargo pants, with a dark blue T-shirt. On top of the shirt is my jacket, which is also black. Theoretically, the night will be my ally. The outfit is complimented by some standard steel-toed work boots, and some knit gloves. To conceal my face and really put the outfit together, I have the mask that I've made. I accessorize with my old gym bag, where I keep my tools. Obviously, I plan to carry the loot in the bag as well. Not fashionable, but overall an incredibly effective outfit.

I do some basic stretching while in my outfit, in part to get accustomed to it and understand the limits of what I'm wearing should I need to go for a more unorthodox escape. It doesn't hurt to be prepared. I'd rather feel silly for being over-prepared than feel stupid for getting caught. I have no intention to spend my days rotting in a prison cell. My goal is to leave the WAIZ, not trap myself in it forever.

Smash cut to dinner. I've heated up a TV dinner for myself, and I find it relatively satisfying. The truth is that I'm actually a very poor cook. My only real concern is that my meal is relatively nutritious and tastes fine. In that sense, the TV dinner will suffice.

There is a nebulous anxiety that hovers over me as I eat. The idea that this very well may be my last meal as a free man certainly weighs heavily on my mind. So many things could go wrong tonight. The studio could have security, possibly even armed security that I would be no match for. I could have gotten the wrong apartment, and as a result will be terribly out of my element, all my planning being for nothing. Alternatively, someone could spot me breaking into the apartment, which would also disrupt my plans to a great degree. My planning can only cover so many circumstances; there are too many factors which I have no control over. I find that frightening, to say the least.

For a brief moment I consider backing out of my plan. I could very easily just give up and come up with something new tomorrow that will be significantly less risky. It would be incredibly easy for me to stay within the safety of my own apartment. But I remind myself that it is too late to back out now: I am already unemployed. My rent is due next week. I have no time for hesitation. I must remove any barriers holding me back. There can be no more delaying, no more pondering, no more wasting of time.

The time for action is now.

Three

As I head down the stairs to the Kersey Complex front door, I take a few very deep breaths. I'm grappling with my anxiety here. I know that from here to the Bullhorn building I'll be tempted repeatedly with the prospect of doubling back. Once I reach the building itself, I'll be in a position where I can't retreat, and as such the argument posed by these invasive thoughts will lose any weight. For everything I can't prepare for, I can at the very least assess my own strengths and weaknesses well enough, and work to counter them.

I make sure the hammer and the mask are in my gym bag, even though I already know they are. I can't be wearing the mask while out in the streets, simply because I'd stand out and attract attention to myself. My plan is to put it on when I reach the Bullhorn building, saving myself a lot of trouble. And I don't think it needs saying that walking around with a hammer is just asking for trouble.

Opening the door leads to a burst of cool night air hitting me like a wave on the beach. I feel it the most on my naked face, the rest of my body adequately wrapped up. It comes with an overwhelming feeling of vulnerability, as I cross the threshold from the safety of the Kersey Complex into the dark streets of District 13. My mission has begun.

As I move through the streets, I follow a pre-planned route that I've sized up on many a morning and evening walk. The route is a bit roundabout, and that's intentional: it throws off anyone trying to guess where I'm coming from or where I'm going. But more importantly, the route minimizes my contact both with other human beings as well as public surveillance cameras. Avoiding the cameras is key. The less footage the police have of me, the harder it will be to pin me to the crime.

When I do see other people, I give them a rigorous mental undressing. Not in any perverted way, rather I mean a more abstract kind of undressing. I try to figure out at a glance who they are, where they're coming from, what they're doing, where they're going, and why. Ultimately the purpose of this is to establish if they're a threat to me or not. I'm on full alert, exhibiting intense paranoia. But in a high-risk scenario like this, the paranoia is more than justified. Besides, observing others helps distract me from my own anxiety. None of the people I encounter are particularly threatening. I pass a street person looting through a garbage can, a junkie heading home after buying his fix, another street person urinating in an alleyway, and plenty of other lost souls. All of them are too preoccupied with their own issues to be a threat to me.

It's only a few blocks before I reach the Bullhorn building, but the walk feels much longer than it should. Upon arrival, I circle the block once, just to make sure that the coast is clear. Ideally I would circle it twice, but I feel that it would look suspicious. So instead I simply open the door and head right into the lobby. There is no doorman, no security at all, simply a hall leading up to the elevator, with the stairs on the side. There isn't even a surveillance camera. Even though I knew this ahead of time, relief washes over me and I smile as if it is a pleasant surprise.

I decide to take the stairs. There are too many variables to using the elevator, and it puts me in a vulnerable position. The stairs may take longer, but they are infinitely safer. Speed is only essential for

the escape, not the actual infiltration. When I reach the fifth floor, I take a moment to put my mask on before opening the door. For a brief moment, I am paralyzed by the fear that the building could house more than one apartment per floor. I would be forced to choose a home to break into, and could pick the wrong one. However, by the time the mask is properly in place, the fear washes away. From the outside of the Bullhorn building, I could easily tell that there was only one apartment per floor. It was a thin building, and there was no way that someone could fit a second apartment on any of the floors.

I open the door to the fifth floor, and sure enough, there is only the elevator access as well as the door to one apartment. I sidle up next to the door and get in position. I jiggle the doorknob a bit, hoping not to make too much noise. Mercifully, it's already somewhat loose. I feel a sense of smug satisfaction, knowing that my gambling on shoddy construction work has paid off and that my job will be a lot easier. I jam the claw end of the hammer underneath the knob, and give it a good hard yank, hoping to pry it loose. Unfortunately, it doesn't work the first time, and instead I have to try again, really forcing it. In the back of my head I'm concerned about the noise, but any concerns not related to getting the door open are irrelevant. Finally, after three consecutive yanks, the doorknob comes out far enough for me to just rip it out of the door, giving me entrance to the apartment.

From my position in the foyer, I can see down the main hall into the living room, where the TV is on. I can also see a solitary figure beginning to rise, most likely the producer. Instinctually, I duck behind the corner of the foyer, meaning that he'll have to turn to see me when he exits the hall. I grip the hammer firmly as he comes, my heart pounding with every single step he takes. This has to be the most tense moment of my life, a literal do-or-die scenario. I know full well that I am about to commit an act of violence against another human being. I have already accepted it. My body tenses up, and I feel for a moment like I am made of stone.

I wait until I can literally smell the producer, or what I assume to be him, until I step out from the corner and bring the hammer down onto his head. My blow is perfect, given how he's roughly a head shorter than me. The hammer strikes him square on the forehead and he drops like a rock, clearly out cold on the ground. The anxiety that has built up gives way, and all my muscles relax as I let out a sigh of relief.

While standing over the man that I'm pretty sure at this point is the producer I worry for a moment that I've accidentally killed him. However, I notice that his chest is rising and falling ever so slightly, meaning that he is still breathing. I have no intention of going to prison, especially not if it ends with me facing a firing squad. I take a brief moment to look over the producer. While he is short he is also wide, most certainly obese. He appears to be mixed-race, a combination of black and Asian, most likely Chinese. He is middle aged, with a receding hairline and an embarrassingly skeevey mustache. In his hands he holds a whiskey bottle, meaning that what I'm smelling is most likely the booze on his breath. His clothes are disheveled, being just a greasy undershirt and stained sweatpants. Based on appearances alone I feel an immediate level of disgust for the man, who clearly has no interest in taking care of himself outside of hedonist vice. But there is no time for pontificating on the virtue of cleanliness now, I have an apartment to rob.

I step forward and put the hammer back in the bag, checking the first door to my right. From the moment I open the door, I am overwhelmed by the all-powerful “sex smell”, a hybrid of the more familiar musk of men’s sweat combined with what men in the gym affectionately called “pussy stank”. Fighting back against my disgust, I actually head into what clearly has to be the studio itself and look around. There are multiple cameras surrounding the bed, complete with an amateur lighting and audio setup. The windows are covered by heavy curtains, and the air conditioning vent is closed to keep the sound from travelling. I consider the worth of this equipment, but I also note that transporting it out of the apartment would be a major pain. I decide to write it off for now, but possibly come back if I fail to find anything else of worth.

To my immediate left is the entrance to the living room, with the kitchen and dining room branching off from that. There is nothing of any worth to be found in the entire section barring the TV, which is far too large to take out. I do however decide to leave the TV on, as hopefully the noise will cover up any noise I make.

Continuing in my counter-clockwise investigation, I open the door to the room across from the studio and realize that it’s the bathroom. Oddly enough, I find it incredibly relieving, like I’ve stumbled into a safe zone. Perhaps it’s because the bathroom is genuinely clean and smells nice. Amusingly enough, I can smell a genuine air freshener, which I determine to be on the sink counter. I get a grim chuckle at how awful the bathroom must be for even the occupant to determine that something must be done about the odor. The bathroom is lacking a medicine cabinet of any sort, meaning that there aren’t any valuable drugs to be found.

The next stop is the producer’s bedroom. Unsurprisingly, it’s got that similar sex smell, just like the studio. I’m not sure why I wasn’t expecting it. Of course someone involved in the production of pornography is going to be sexually active. I suppose the foreign nature of the smell is just off-putting to me. Maybe I should have figured out how to convert my mask into a gas mask.

I choose to focus on the desk directly in front of me. If there’s any loot to be found, surely it would be there. Covering the desk itself are stacks upon stacks of DVDs, alongside a desktop computer. The computer tower is rigged to both an external hard drive as well as what has to be some sort of mass-DVD burner. The external drive is what interests me, so I disconnect that and stuff it in my bag.

Rooting through the drawers reveals a bunch of different things. There’s a gun which I make sure is unloaded before putting in my bag alongside the boxes of bullets. I also find a ton of what I assume has to be drugs, and so I put them in the bag too. In a different drawer there’s a bottle of pills, and they go in the bag too. Finally, I get what I came all the way here for: a large stash of unmarked credit bills, all in little white envelopes. I’m grinning like a maniac, overjoyed as I pocket what I assume is the producer’s payroll in the bag. Almost immediately, I feel far safer and more secure in my future than I’ve been in a long while.

Zippering up my bag, I decide that I should get out now, before the producer wakes up. However, before I can even leave, a small cry erupts from my immediate left. I turn around; instinctually ready to

throttle the first thing I see to cover my escape. However, I don't see anything other than the producer's bed. More specifically, I see a large bulge under the covers. Someone is in the bed.

My eyes follow the bulge down to the foot of the bed, where I see a small foot poking out from underneath it. I take a step forward, and the foot retracts, the bulge moving to the head of the bed. I walk along the side of it, curiously following it. From where I am, I have the better position. I could very easily get the drop on whoever was under the covers, although I suspect that I will not exactly need to.

My suspicions are confirmed when, at the head of the bed, a young girl's head pops out. I can't place her age, but I guess that she's around four or five. She looks distinctively Chinese in her ethnicity, although her skin is a bit more pale than the average child's. Thinking on the fly, I bring my finger over the mouth portion of my mask in a shushing gesture. She doesn't respond, instead she just gives me a blank gaze. Her eyes are hidden behind her messy, short black hair and they have a glassy, empty quality to them. It unnerves me for a reason I can't quite place, and immediately the idea that she may have a gun intrudes on my thought process. Reflexively, I take my free hand and pull back the blanket. To my shock, she is absolutely naked, not even wearing pajamas or undergarments.

So many things occur to me at once that I'm overwhelmed, far too many to process. I can already tell that my mind is starting to slip; too many ideas are popping in my head. There is a stench of sex in the room and a naked girl on the bed and drugs of all sorts in the cabinet and this is an illegal porno studio and the girl hardly responds to anything and is absolutely terrified by me even though she doesn't look like it because of those dead eyes but I can see it in the- Okay, no, I'm starting to lose it again. I take a moment to try and focus my train of thought. I know what the conclusion of all of this is. I just need to say it.

She's been raped.

I didn't even say it aloud, and already my gut tightens and I begin to feel ill. The stench of the room fills me with a sense of nausea. It becomes unbearable, as unspeakable images enter my head. I start to feel dizzy, because this is just getting out of control, this is absolutely deranged, I didn't plan on this, there was no way I could plan for this and now I have no idea what to do because there's no way there can just be this one girl alone there just had to be others but even if she was just the one that was one too many and the studio is home to some seriously sick shit and- No, no, no, I'm doing it again! I try to re-focus myself, get my bearings, reach out to the arm to prop myself up. My body is shaking. I've got to get a grip. I need to focus.

I change topics mentally to a second, but all I can think of is the Producer. There is rage. Rage that he would do something like this, that he could commit an act so disgusting, so repulsive, so hideous, yes, he is truly a monster. And to think I only robbed him for necessity! He's vile, hideous, loathsome, demonic, monstrous, everything about him repulses me, he has to be stopped, no, he has to be punished, no, no no, he has to be destroyed. Yes, he has to be destroyed. I reaffirm my posture and conclude that I must destroy this vile creature.

I reach down to my dropped gym bag and reach inside. I want to use the gun, I want to use it so badly that I even grab it, but I know it'll make too much noise and give me away. I let go of the gun and move over to grab the hammer. It feels so good to grab, to hold. It feels kind of warm, even. I pull the hammer out of the bag and look at it. It's just an ordinary claw hammer, but looking at it is incredibly calming. It gives me the resolve to get up and walk back into the hall.

I find the producer where I left him, still unconscious by the door. For a moment I consider just killing him in the foyer, but the possibility of the blood leaking out into the hall could give me away. Instead, I drag him down the hall, into the living room. Making sure no one will hear me, I turn the volume of the TV up considerably to cover any sounds I'll make.

Once I'm squatting on top of him, I don't even hesitate. I bring the hammer down hard on his head, like I was using it to pound a piece of steel into place. It fills me with such overwhelming joy, a sudden catharsis that I didn't know existed. I hit him again, and this time his whole body convulses with the impact. It annoys me, and almost throws me off my balance. I drop down to one knee and with my left hand, hold his head in place as I raise the hammer with my right. This time there's a sudden, satisfying, crunch as flesh and bone give way to the force of the hammer. I surrender to the euphoria of catharsis and hit him again, and again, and again, hammering away not just at his skull, but also the fleshy bits it supposedly protected. It's not until I recognize what has to be brain matter that I stop.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath. It's over, I've killed him. He can't hurt anyone else now. He's dead. The crisis has been resolved.

As I exhale, I open my eyes, and actually see what I've done. There's gore everywhere, blood everywhere, blood on my hands, blood on my hammer, his head is just one big red crater of red and pink, the blood is spilling out on the carpet, I probably got some on my mask, it's beyond disgusting and unsanitary. I'd seen some shit at work, no doubt. I had burned my hand a few times while teaching myself how to weld. One time a guy slipped up with a saw and sliced his arm open. Another time I saw someone knock over a gas tank and literally crush a man's foot, virtually flattening it. But this, this was far worse. It was a gruesome spectacle of gore, with the added horror that it was a dead body I was looking at, not a live one. His body was laying there, with my hammer sticking out of a large hole in the skull. My stomach tightens and turns and I automatically know what's next.

Wasting no time, I let go of the hammer, get up, and barge into the bathroom, ripping off my mask while also opening the toilet. The remnants of my dinner, and possibly bits of my lunch too, all exit my stomach out through my mouth, with some little chunks even splashing in the toilet as I wretch. But as I finish, spitting out what lingers in my mouth and flushing the toilet reflexively, I can feel my gut loosen and my stomach ease up. Vomiting feels just as good as murder: it relieves all of the inner tension and pressure.

I take a few more deep breaths after the vomiting subsides, just to make sure that I'm going to be okay. After that, I take a moment to look at myself in the mirror. My face is as pale as death right now, and my eyes seem kind of glazed over themselves. However, given the ordeal that I've just been through, that actually seems incredibly normal. Still, it seems too frail and weak. I don't really want to

look at my reflection. I slide my mask back on. I am in control. I make my own decisions. I can handle this easily. With the affirmations out of the way, I exit the bathroom and prepare to make my escape.

First and foremost, I return to the bedroom to pick up the loot. That was the easiest part of it, so it made the most sense to take care of first. The more difficult part was getting the girl to come with me—she's seen too much for me to risk having the police come to her. Besides, I'm sure it'll be a step up from her current arrangements. I open up the producer's wardrobe and fumble around, grabbing an oversized T-shirt and offering it to her as a makeshift dress. She stares at me blankly again. Why is she not cooperating? Is she still drugged? Maybe she needs a token of goodwill.

I head into the kitchen and open the producer's refrigerator. Sure enough, he has some fruit in there, so I grab an apple and head back into the kitchen to present it to her. She still stares at me, actually retreating. Am I that intimidating? Is it the mask? Or is it the fact that my hands and face are still covered in blood, that's now even gotten on the apple? I suspect that it's the latter. Perhaps it's both.

Either way, I return to the kitchen and take my gloves off, as well as my mask. I grab another apple out of the fridge and return to the girl, hoping that my smile can be genuine enough. Mercifully enough, she feels less threatened, and this time takes the apple after a bit of coaxing. I grab another shirt, one that I'm certain doesn't have any blood on it, and help slide it over her. It covers her well enough, and I feel confident in my ability to lead her out of the apartment.

The matter of the hammer is also pressing. I can't leave the hammer behind, since it's the murder weapon as well as my means of breaking in. So, putting my gloves back on, I return to the body, slowing my breathing to keep calm. There is no time for me to be squeamish, but then again, it's not so bad to look at once you've seen it once already. It actually just looks like my hammer is stuck in a big bowl of salsa, hilariously enough. I grab the hammer and jostle it a bit, making sure it's not stuck that tight inside of him. It's not, and so it's actually incredibly easy for me to remove it. I go back into the bathroom and rinse my gloved hands, as well as the hammer. It's not perfect, but it could be worse. I steal a bath towel and wrap the hammer in it, placing it back into my gym bag. I use another towel to wipe the soles of my boots, making sure I won't be tracking blood while I make my escape. Finally, I put my mask back on.

With everything taken care of, it's time to actually make the escape. I return to get the girl, who is still eating the apple. The moment she takes my hand I immediately make a beeline for the door, guiding her outside of the apartment before she can see the corpse. She doesn't make any effort to resist, but is a bit sluggish to keep up. By the time we reach the stairs, I start to slow down to match her speed.

It's only when we exit the bullhorn building that I allow myself the luxury of reflection. None of this went the way I planned it to. I killed a man, essentially without provocation. Correction: I killed him without provocation in the eyes of law. What he did to the girl, in my eyes that is more than sufficient provocation. But either way, I now need to leave town as soon as possible. Burglary is one thing, murder is another. But can I really leave now? I've also kidnapped a little girl. I can't take her back with me to

the states. I can't take her anywhere really. My only real option, at least for now, is to take her back to my apartment. At least there I can think things over...