

The Fall and Rise of Anakin Carber

stockholm

(episode 4: "Don't Mention The War")

**Read the complete novel now,
available in print and on Kindle,
from [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)**

Kian Kaul

SPECIAL EXCERPT FROM FIRST EDITION

© 2011 by Kian Kaul
All rights reserved.

ISBN-13: 978-1460949658 ISBN-10: 146094965X
LCCN: TXu 1-672-475

All rights reserved. Published in the United States.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, businesses, organizations, places, events, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

www.stockholmbook.com

1SKH004 "Don't Mention The War"

The receptionist handed me a small stack of the previous day's mail, most of it glossy post-consumer paper with 'limited time' offers to register for seminars and a few invitations to 'personal rebranding' parties. The one ugly duckling was a small, private letter hand-addressed to me care of the production company. The printing was scrawled, offset too far to the right. The return zip code was somewhere several miles north of my hometown, a post office box with no name at the header. The envelope felt thick. I squeezed it and estimated maybe four folded sheets of paper. I held it up to the light and pulled the envelope's face taught. More badly handwritten blue ink became faintly visible.

Across the reception area, partially blocked by a divider were three avocado-colored couches and a small table with trade magazines from last month that I correctly guessed was all purchased from Dünce, but I never brought it up to the office manager as he'd gotten me that new chair and I didn't want to embarrass him. The pair of legs propped on top of the table slid back and down, clicking its pair of heels on the stone floor. A breath later and a slightly-overweight, but immediately friendly, young woman in her late twenties emerged from behind the divider, still holding a thin trade publication in one hand and a smartphone in the other. She approached the desk with patience beginning to show strain. Did not look at me. The receptionist seemed to be expecting her, raised one finger and adjusted her headset.

"Hi. Hi. Yeah. Uh...", she cocked her head toward the girl and raised her eyebrows.

"Jenitka. Hayes."

"Yeah, I have a (voice rising) *Jen-it-ka* Hayes here to see you. From..." Another round of raised eyebrows.

"Horse & Stable."

"Yes, Horse *and* Stable. Both. Okay, I'll let her know."

She pressed a button on the multi-line phone base. "Karen'll be down in just a sec."

Sensing a break, I angled toward her. "You're with Horse & Stable? I worked on the campaign."

The receptionist quickly intervened. "Jenitka Hayes, this is Anakin Carver. He works here."

"What did you do on the campaign?"

"I did the piece with Natasha von Ottmann."

"Oh, the smashing things one?" She now faced me with her entire body, eyebrows slightly higher, cheeks taken on a flush.

The receptionist broke in. "Karen should be here any second. Anakin worked with Jean-Michel, our senior ACD who wrote and directed the primary piece."

"So, you work in-house here?"

"I do. I came on about six months ago."

"Where were you before this?"

"Freelancing, mainly... did some part-time consultancies."

"Really?"

"Yeah, you know, making the rounds."

Karen burst through the door shining a shorter, brighter and more jagged hairstyle directly in our eyes and daring us to say something. She and Janitka made their pleasantries and said all sorts of things girls say to each other as they left the building. I turned back to the receptionist.

"Kristen."

"Yes?"

"You know everyone in the building, right?"

"Of course. Who are you looking for?"

"Not just by name, but office numbers, titles, parking spaces?"

"Yeah, all up in the vault." She half-guffawed and pointed to her forehead.

"Maybe you can help me then. I think I've forgotten my job title. Do you remember what it is?"

She forced laughter and restacked a pile of promotional DVDs on her desk. "*Dee-rek-tor-eh*."

"What?"

"Dir-ek-tore."

Look of confusion.

Her voice became strained and lyrical, "Herr Direktor. Monsieur Spielberg. Senior Jorge Lucas. Stanley Kubrick, *joon-yur*. Jean-Luc Good-work-today." Her shoulders twisted back and forth as she spoke.

"What's Michel's title?"

"Same as yours, but senior."

"Actually say it."

"I think Noah's line is ringing."

"He's out of the office today."

"Hello, Noah Dallen's office."

I raised my right hand, which I'd been hiding beneath the surface of the reception desk and revealed my cell phone, holding it up to my head to talk. "Yes, hi, can you tell me what Mr. Anakin Carver's job title is?"

She took a deep, painful breath. Any façade of friendliness had dissolved. Her jaw jutted out. Her freckles seemed to burst forward from her face. "Uh, asshole?"

As I walked toward the bar it started drizzling. The street was filled with headlights reflecting off the sheen. A bicyclist passed me a little too closely. I was roughly nine blocks away from the ocean. This was how every night should begin.

I handed my business card to the doorman and he waved a small device across the surface of the paper, its infrared light showing through dimly. He nodded and handed it back to me.

"Sign in to your profile and mark your location once you're inside and you get free parking until midnight."

"But I'm at a meter spot, like two blocks from—"

"Right. The meters are all networked in this district. They bill through your profile."

Which explains why I couldn't find a coin slot. "But, how do they know who—"

"Good evening, ma'am."

The interior was smaller than it looked outside, or rather proportioned differently; a broad train car design with small bar areas located at different places in each 'car'. The back section seemed to function as the VIP lounge while the front carried the

opposite comparative social weight. There were far less people in the back, but far more interesting by the looks of it. Rest-rooms were located directly in the middle, that 'car' becoming a sort of neutral territory where all social classes mixed. I discerned all this within the first ten seconds of walking into Gnosis, but never figured out any possible significance to the venue name.

The VIP room was almost totally unoccupied. I found my group in the second-to-last car, with spillover into the middle, but that was mainly administrative staff and assistants. Jonathan was across the room from where I was standing, being orbited by several satellites. The closest to the planet's surface was our head of online strategy, who was literally hanging off of him with one hand while she took pictures of herself with him using the other. The remaining two were Noah and someone else I didn't know. They seemed to be forming a protective barrier around our new executive creative consultant. He spotted me immediately and gave me the once-over, from my collar down to my shoes, then away, then shoes-to-collar. No eye contact. I was wearing pinstriped slacks, black loafers, a fitted, collared shirt and thin linen blazer.

I was poked, from behind, on my right shoulder, by what I later realized had to have been Jenitka Hayes' left breast. Protocol was already a blank page and I'd only just arrived.

"Hey."

"*Wh-at's happ-en-ing?*" She asked very loudly. The music underscoring the party was fairly meek electronica and I had no problem overhearing conversations anywhere in the room. "How's it *go-ing?*" She'd steadily increased volume.

"Good. Just got here."

"Yeah, me too." She was in the middle of what I guessed was her third drink.

"Cool."

"Have you seen Archer?"

"Not that I know of."

"Good!" She laughed.

"Have you seen... (anyone's name) ...Jean-Michel?"

"That guy?"

She pointed toward the bar. Jean-Michel and several other staffers were gathered in a tight cluster. Circulating through the room were talent agents, model/actors, representatives of sales and marketing firms, directors of design houses, assorted freelancers and people I didn't recognize and/or couldn't immediately place in the caste system.

"I have to give him back his... (small object) ...keys."

Her face fell. "Oh."

"Car keys." Didn't help. "I left something in his car earlier today."

She nodded and looked elsewhere. There may have been an auditory reaction.

"We carpooled to a meeting across town. You know, for the environment."

She smiled. "Yeah, we all have to do our part. It's just fair."

"Exactly. I'll catch up with you." I forced myself to reach forward and make contact with her arm using the palm of my hand. My heart rate increased dramatically and a stiffness immediately formed between all my joints.

I dropped two dollars on the bar and picked up my vodka gimlet. I was near enough to the group from work to interact, but not so close as to appear to be part of the cluster. Jean-Michel was talking about his recent trip to Denmark as the coordinators and account people listened with rapt attention. Evidently he was Scandinavian this week.

I decided to interrupt. "Did you know information is stored holographically in the brain?"

That brunette girl from the creative services department angled more toward me than toward Michel. "How do you mean?"

"According to a book I read, information isn't stored in specific areas of the brain. Rather, each part contains the whole non-locally."

A few more of Michel's crowd had transitioned their attention away from the benefits of nationally mandated employment assignments and toward a new theoretic model of perception. He'd paused his presentation briefly to analyze the

threat, but continued with the most minimal of stutters. "We don't know what you're talking about."

"It's a fairly recent theory that the entire universe is actually experienced holographically. Spatial relationships are a product of how our brains experience and organize the information composing reality."

"There's this movie I saw a little while ago. Just like that." The woman who handles our music clearance had turned to listen to me and Michel had now stopped talking entirely. He was looking at me with an expression I'd begun to notice being directed at me more and more; eyebrows slightly raised but also furrowed, mouth slightly open, chest forward, shoulders back, upper-lip tightened against the teeth and nostrils enlarged. The closest comparison would be a dog's head grafted onto a primate's body, looking at someone they didn't trust holding up a piece of food, while experiencing a minor fight-or-flight response.

"How do you know about holographic theory?"

"Just a book I read."

"In college?"

"No, just a few months ago."

"But you heard about it in college?"

"I didn't go to college."

"What?" Now he was angry.

"I'll lend it to you. It's a great book. Did you know that distance is created by the way our brain interprets light reflecting off objects? We're actually not seeing the objects around us, we're seeing the light they refract! It's cool."

Michel's head jerked back slightly. One of the younger women turned back to him. "Did you get to volunteer at any worker collectives when you were in Copenhagen?"

He didn't answer right away. Remy had joined the group and was blinking next to Michel, who was now taking a fairly impressive gulp of the drink Remy had brought as a friendship offering.

I did a sharp-angled robot dance right where I was standing. It wasn't warranted by the music, at all, but I generated a beat in my mind and moved accordingly. Michel

didn't know how to respond to this. No one laughed or seemed to enjoy it.

Remy was looking around the room with quick motions of his head, like a bird, sipping his drink through a straw. "It's really strong!" He suddenly exclaimed.

For a seemingly long period no one had anything to say. People looked at their handheld devices and even at other groups who were in the midst of conversation, flirtation and drinking. Some of the girls from the second floor danced together.

"Hey Remy, what're you drinking?" I laughed. "You probably get that all the time, right? If you had a friend named Martin you guys could just walk up to the bar and not say anything. You guys would just be like, yep."

He seemed startled and looked to Michel before answering me. "It's a Sex on the Beach." And sipped again.

Of course it was.

Nothing really interesting happened until Natasha arrived a while later, agent or manager in tow. By this point we were all supposed to have moved to our assigned train cars, by rank of importance, as provided in the invitation sent to our profiles. But hardly anyone actually had. I was supposed to have been in car four, just able to stand in the threshold of the VIP car while execs mingled several feet away. Almost close enough to touch.

I watched Natasha from where she seemed to emerge from the crowd in the second car, almost in step with the new Full Time Villain single filling the club, gliding and snaking through clusters of people not in our party, some recognized her, others pretended not to. Her manager walked several steps behind with his head down, face lit by the screen of his phone. She was wearing skinny-fit jeans, a vintage boy's polo shirt with the collar up and a brown suede pea coat. Odd, but true. As she approached her fuzzy boots came into view, also brown. I didn't get the impression she was here to stay through the night.

If anyone was paying attention to me they may have noticed a sudden, anomalous reaction when Ms. von Ottmann literally threw her arms around Jonathon's neck, while exclaiming his name. I couldn't actually hear her, but I read her mouth

movements. Their hips bumped slightly at the end of the hug as she turned and his face seemed to swell as all the nearby faces displayed admiration.

I borrowed Remy's smartphone and loaded an encyclopedia. I couldn't remember how Alexander of Macedonia had purportedly solved the famous Gordian Knot challenge. Some historians argued the sexier story of Alexander withdrawing his sword and striking at the knot, untying by means of simply severing the rope, others suggest he more likely pulled the pin from the carriage on which the knot was tied. Either way, they could all agree it was a triumph of lateral thinking. It wasn't for nothing that the thirty-something Gaius Julius Caesar was seen to have been crying in front of a sculpture of Alexander in a city in what we now know as Greece. When questioned he is recorded to have said, *"Do you think I have not just cause to weep, when I consider that Alexander at my age had conquered so many nations, and I have all this time done nothing that is memorable."*

I couldn't decide if I more admired Julius Caesar or Octavian (later known as Augustus Caesar, adopted posthumously). All three men had conquered the known world by their early thirties, one died soon after, one was murdered by jealous acquaintances and the other lived a normal, human lifespan and ruled in relative peace and prosperity.

II.

The night was evidently winding down as the DJ had programmed 10cc's *"I'm Not In Love"*. Janitka Hayes shook my arm. I looked up from my glass of seltzer water and lime that looked identical to a vodka gimlet, listed on my profile as 'favorite drink'.

"That's Natasha von Ottmann over there."

I looked up in the direction she was not exactly pointing. In the fifth car Natasha and her manager or agent or whomever were standing with Noah and Karen. Jonathon was a table or two away with a woman closer to his age and several other executive types from the office.

"Yeah, I saw her."

"Aren't you going to go say hello?"

"I did. I saw her outside having a cigarette. We talked for, like, seven minutes."

"She smokes?"

"No, I was smoking. She was just outside."

"Anakin, you smoke?"

"No, it was a misunderstanding. This music makes me want to steal a car and drive around Miami Beach running over pedestrians and shooting indiscriminately."

"Yeah, I feel the same way about most '70s rock."

"Oh no, I really like the song. But that's my intellectual association with it."

"Okay."

She touched my arm and I let her. I knew I had to do something in return, so I looked up at her, making eye contact for... six seconds? It was enough to see her look back and forth between my eyes, the slightest quiver present. She leaned in and spoke into my ear,

"I'd invite you back, but I'm sharing a hotel room. You know..."

I nodded. "Hey, that's cool. No expectations."

She'd written her number on a napkin and slid it over to me as she picked up her purse and jacket.

I cued something to say, as Natasha seemed to look in our direction, then away again. "Have a great flight."

She smiled with an obvious dissatisfaction. I set my drink down on the napkin and slid it away from me. Several minutes later one of the bar backs, the one with the weird hair, took it along with all the other glasses on the table into a neat stack, nearly two feet high and walked all the way to the sink without toppling over. Incredible.

My cell phone buzzed with a text message, "cheer up." I didn't recognize the number, though I figured it must have been hers. How she'd gotten mine I had no idea, but when you're in entertainment your personal details become commodity. I texted her back, something about the certain parts of the campaign being "too undergrad philosophy" and not enough "Ian Curtis". This is true at least according to the 'sent' folder in my 'messages' directory.

One of the in-house editors, not that psycho Remy, was now talking to me and kept slapping me on the shoulder. Apparently, not immediately congratulating Jonathon on a campaign well executed was tantamount to suicide and no less than three times I was advised to, "play the game while I was in it".

"Have you ever wanted to just become a garbage man?"

"Nah, I don't speak Spanish." He laughed and sipped his pint of something light and frothy. "Oh, come on, you wouldn't be happy doing that. Let me tell you something, you're one of the best Associate Creative Directors we've had in the last couple of years."

"Hold on, what's an associative..."

"Your title. Associate Creative Director."

"What the fuck does that mean? Is that my job title?"

"You're asking me?"

"What's your title?"

"Senior Editor."

"And my title is Associate Creative Director?"

"Far as I know, yeah. And it's gonna stay that way unless you—"

"When did you hear about this?"

"I dunno. When they brought you on. Don't you know your own job title?"

I shuffled in my pocket for the business card I'd used to gain entrance to the club. Sure enough it read, 'Anakin Carver' and then in eight-point font, 'Associate Creative Director'. I showed it to him. He squinted and nodded.

"Yeah, that's what I said."

"But I've been handing these out to people for months."

"Good. Gotta get your name out there. Build your brand. Next place you work you'll be full Creative Director. Remember me, huh?" He laughed and sipped again. He was pacing himself.

"Right. 'Course." I was glancing from him to the ground to the bar to some legs in front of the bar, back to him.

"Hey, you got any coke?"

"No, sorry. I don't drink sodas."

He forced a laugh this time. "Ha, you crazy jerk! Coke?!" He shook his head and hurried away.

All this time I'd been something beginning with 'associate'.

Jonathon was wavering, slightly. I raised my glass to toast him while saying, "Hey, congrats on the campaign." It took a coordinated effort to actually clink them together.

"*Ana-kan!*" He took a fairly large drink of what looked like a domestic lager.

"So, what's next?"

"Next?" He looked around. "Fucking sleep until noon and eat some ribs. And not in that order! Necessary..."

I followed his behavioral cues, which wasn't easy as he punctuated everything he said with the same faux-serious look before either resuming neutral or bursting into laughter.

"Listen," he said, "there's going to be some... restructuring in the department. Changes in-house." He raised a finger to his lips and exhaled with more force than needed to say, "Shh!".

In the three months he'd been with us (I'd actually assumed he'd been there longer and was merely on vacation when I was brought in) our executive creative consultant had enforced hourly-itemized work entries through our profiles, fairness training workshops, awarded Camp San Andreas the contract to supply all our electronics and computers, and was now talking about further 'restructuring'. The one time I'd asked for his creative advice, at the near-insistence of Noah, he'd sent a cryptic reply one hour after leaving the building. Fifteen minutes after that I was back in Noah's office, gathered around his monitor with Karen and another staffer I couldn't recall, trying to decipher the forwarded message;

"In regards to your piece, it must forgo a lethargic gestalt unity in lieu of a playful juxtaposition transcending the obvious with the loquacious curiosity of child-like cipher. Imagine the Taj Mahal composed as an opera by Roy Lichtenstein. The Isley Brothers constructing a Viking ship, but remixed by Little Boots. Please revise three different versions for approval. Hope this helps, J-rock."

"Look, he's a great guy once you get to know him."

"I'm sure he is."

"Anakin, you haven't been with us long enough to start getting difficult."

"So you know what he's talking about?"

"It seems pretty obvious."

"What does it mean, then?" I folded my arms and then unfolded them so as not to appear difficult.

"Look, you're the creative, not me. I'm just the paper-pushing management. You have to figure out what he wants for yourself."

Karen snapped her fingers toward me. "Show me what you have."

I handed Noah my script. It was a sixty-second advertisement announcing three sitcom reruns joining the evening lineup of a local cable affiliate, somewhere in the mid-west.

"Alright..." Noah had exhaled and fallen into his chair. "Let me call him."

Forty minutes later, Noah's assistant called me to let me know Jonathon wanted me to come to his office. As I approached the closed door his assistant materialized, literally out of nowhere, to let me know Jonathon was gone for the day. While walking back to the elevator I'd spotted him in the mini-kitchen drinking milk directly from the carton.

"How would you like this piece to be different?"

He looked terrified, traces of organic milk saturating his black-dyed beard. "You have to find ways to make it different."

His smartphone rang and I never heard about the assignment again.

The bar was nearing last call and somehow I hadn't left yet. Natasha was gone, but the male actor from the campaign was still present, hurling himself from one single woman to the next. I was actually trapped into a corner by Noah, Jonathon, Karen and two suits from accounting or legal. They were all wavering now, standing in place had become an activity requiring effort rather than a natural state. I mentally checked my posture; shoulders back, slight lean forward, head upright.

"It's all going toward direct marketing." Jonathon took another careful sip.

"But, did you see him on Wednesday? Talk about drama."

"I mean, really, we need to just go in there and make them stop pumping poison into our atmosphere. Tax them back into the Stone Age if we have to."

"Precious metals." Jonathon slurred toward the group, non-directionally. "It's moving toward precious metals." He jabbed a finger between Noah's shoulder and elbow. It sunk into his blazer and slipped a bit before wrapping itself back around the highball glass. "Noah. Make some calls in the morning."

"I've always thought pets were a real goldmine. I never would have gotten a cat if my ex didn't have one. Now I have three." Karen glanced back and forth between Noah and Jonathon, looking for immediate acknowledgement. The online strategy woman/person appeared behind Jonathon, wrapping her arms around his shoulders and taking a picture of their heads pressed together. The weight of her body nearly toppled him over.

"One interesting aspect of pet ownership is the technology."

Karen completely ignored everything I'd said. She may have nodded, but it was more likely an automatic response.

"Hold on. Hold on. Wait. What do you mean by that?" I'd captured Jonathon's attention, somehow.

"The tracking technology. When you take your pet to the vet—"

"Pet to the vet!" The online strategy/human being was giggling.

"When you take your pet in for medical attention it's likely to be tagged with an RFID chip." Everyone was focusing his or her rapt attention on me at this point. What likely helped in this situation was their inability to see beyond a four-foot focal point, cutting down on outside stimuli to distract. "RFID, I think it stands for radio frequency identification." I looked around — still with me. "They're incredibly tiny computer chips that can store large amounts of digital data as well as broadcast a location signal."

"So you think someone should sell these to pets?"

"No, I think these RFID chips are indicative of the future. Twenty years from now we'll all have these chips implanted in our bodies. They'll carry our social profiles, medical and financial records, passports, legal documents, track our movements and eventually replace cash with electronic currency transfers."

"So... you're saying I will just hand this little chip to the teller at the grocery store? What happens if I drop it? Whoops, it's gone!" Jonathon's face curled into a smile. Now everyone in the circle exercised his permission to take on a condescending air.

"Well, the chips are actually implanted under the skin. You can't remove them. Imagine all the information that's ever been collected about you, since birth, stored on something the size of a grain of rice, inside your body." Several people sipped their drinks, others glanced down at their phones. "What it means in the broader sense is that privacy is the final frontier. The ultimate commodity."

The online strategy/carbon-based life form had wandered away to photograph herself with other notable people before I'd finished my short speech. For the last few minutes I'd visually misinterpreted the person standing behind Jonathon as being her, while it was actually Natasha. She now stepped forward into the ambient light and joined the conversation.

"Sorry, I didn't hear that last part. What was that you said about privacy?" This was a game-changer. Now that she was interested in what I was saying, even Jonathon couldn't be patronizing without insulting her by proxy.

"I don't know how much you heard, but essentially I'm saying that technology will permanently alter what we perceive as being private or personal information. RFID location tracking, social networking, surveillance cameras, all the rest of it, it's eventually going to coalesce to make most aspects of our lives public record."

"Of course, if you really observe," She sidestepped Jonathon, to stand between us. "You can already see this changing how we consume media. I think it's going to happen sooner than you said."

"Well, yeah, the foundation is being built now. Slowly. Think about the current generation of pre-teens—"

One of the guys from accounting snickered.

I continued with a surprising amount of attention, "The generation growing up right now has no concept of life without social networking. The idea that they don't know what all their friends are doing at every moment of the day becomes upsetting to them. There's an expectation created that if you don't share where you are, what you're doing, who you're doing it with, what you buy, what you eat, what you watch, what brands you support, and visual records of all this with people identified by name, with the option to debate or vote on all of it, you're being anti-social." Natasha looked like she was about to say something, but didn't. "Privacy is the ultimate commodity."

"Ah, that's what you said. I like that."

"Thanks." I grinned quickly enough to acknowledge and continued, "Only the wealthy and powerful will be able to purchase small dividends of privacy in the future. The rest of us will be monitored all the time. And that'll just be the way it is. People will watch old movies and laugh every time the guy runs breathlessly through the city streets, in the rain, to find the girl. They'll be able to just look at their hand-held device to see everyone's location. Where they're likely to be going. What their intentions are likely to be, all of it."

"Okay, those are the facts, maybe, but how do you feel about all of this?"

"I'm not sure what you mean."

"Well," She shrugged, "Simplistically, I guess, do you think it's a good or a bad thing?"

"I think it's..." I took a sip. "It's neither. It's just the way it is."

The edges of her mouth bent up quickly and flattened out again. "I think some of that is true, or maybe already true. It's helpful for me to be able to quickly connect with people who want to hear what I have to say. Like, last month I was in Costa Rica touring beaches and I was able to make short video documentaries on my phone about local pollution and clean-up programs and upload to my profile. You know, back at my hotel where I could get a signal."

Karen sort of lurched forward as soon as I finished speaking, "Oh god, I hate that, when you go abroad and you can't get service. I need to check in, like, all the time!"

I nodded as a sort of response so I couldn't be accused later of ignoring her and continued my conversation with Natasha, "And people interested in what you were doing were able to immediately find your videos, right?"

"Well, yeah, but I'm able to find people too and I can check their profiles to see if they're doing what they say they're doing or if they're just trying to, you know, network or whatever. It's useful."

"So you aren't just creating content, you're sort of monitoring how it's used?"

She hesitated, as several impulses seemed to flash through her eyes. Or maybe it was just the ambient lighting effects and my own notions. She may have suddenly remembered to call her publicist back or that her landscaper would be late in the morning because of the rain. "Well, maybe I mis-spoke. I'm not, like, a policeman for sustainability or anything. I think these tools will improve things in a lot of ways. We just have to wait for the changes to settle in, if you know what I mean. It won't be so bad." She smiled and it felt genuine.

I nodded instead of speaking. One of the women from accounting set her drink down without finishing it, "God, I feel like throwing away my phones."

Karen stepped forward, aiming herself at Natasha. "What phones do you have?"

"Oh, I have a smartphone for work and then just a simple camera-phone for personal."

"Yeah, I've really been wanting to simplify and just get one device for phone, messaging, organization, my profile..."

As I drifted away, the ecosystem closed in to seal the gap. Natasha and Karen each took a step toward each other, over where I had been standing. I placed my glass on a table next to a candle that was nearly now a cup full of molten wax. I could smell the wax very strongly for some reason. The house lights faded up, slowly as an anthemic Brit-Pop song from the '90s surged through the bar. It flowed into my body, revitalizing my senses and vastly improving my mood. I felt like I was in one

of those dreams where you know you're dreaming and you can fly and alter reality with only your will.

III.

Three days later, within the space of the four hours before lunch, Noah had been 'let go', Karen had completely moved into his office and Jonathon had been made partner. Mainly on the strength of the Horse & Stable campaign, according to industry sources. It had been Karen's decision to hire me, probably because she thought I was gay, so essentially this was either good or neutral for me. Either way it wasn't entirely negative. I'd worn that shirt to the meeting that seems to make me look gay, though I don't know why and no one could ever give me a quantifiable reason. 'It just does' is the closest attributable cause I've been given.

For the first few weeks I felt I didn't understand the business I was in and had no idea what I was doing. When Karen and Noah kept saying they were looking to 'bring on another director' I'd assumed they'd meant a live-action shooting director. Which turned out to be a large part of my job. Possibly sixty-five percent. When they'd asked me to write copy, pitch concepts, supervise editors and designers and attend creative meetings it felt natural. They used slightly different language from what I was used to, but once I'd decoded the industry vernacular I had no problem communicating my thoughts and ideas. They were incredibly happy I'd accepted their offer of 50k a year with limited medical and dental. What they didn't know is that I'd woken up that morning in a hotel room without a working toilet I'd rented by the week.

I had lunch tentatively scheduled with Natasha in four days. I'd left two messages on her voicemail, but gotten no response. Both times the system message was a genderless automation reading out the individual digits and a generic "is not accepting calls at this time" explanation. I didn't know if that meant the entire account was not able to accept phone calls or that my number had somehow been blocked.

When I'd bumped into Natasha out in front of Gnosis, the night of the party, it had already stopped raining so I couldn't offer to walk her to her car with my umbrella. I had less than two minutes to operate before the valet returned with her car and things became awkward.

"We should have lunch."

She looked up at me before she answered. "Okay." Her voice had a natural huskiness in the lower-register, beneath her normal tone. It was too subtle to have heard inside the club, above the bass-heavy music.

I hadn't actually planned this far, so I was forced to improvise. "I've been craving French food lately. And I have something to tell you about."

"Oh, really? You can't tell me now?"

"No, not here. Spies everywhere. Microchips, remember?"

She laughed. "Yes, spies everywhere." I couldn't tell how genuine it was versus contrived now that it was just me and her. It was late and I'd had more drinks than I'd planned, though my ratio of alcoholic to non-alcoholic was a respectable seven over three. "Do you want my number?"

I nearly said something incredibly unfortunate about 'just copying it off the call sheet', but didn't. I'd handed her my phone and she'd clicked the keys and handed it back. "I don't know how to save it. Here."

"I'll call you soon." Or text, do I text? Why didn't I just message her profile? She must have a profile, it was now mandated by Federal law. I felt a panic at not implicitly knowing the contemporary communication procedure. Who the hell calls people any more? Had I just violated some amendment of the social contract? Did that even make logical sense, or was it the drink talking?

"Cool."

I stood there as she walked away, about to press 'cancel' once she'd turned her back, as the number was already in my phone. Before making contact with the plastic button I realized the number she'd typed in was completely different from whatever had been on the call sheet. I glanced up to catch her look back for a moment, swing her purse to the other arm

and continue walking past the valet stand to the curb where a late-model hybrid-electric SUV was idling. The die was cast.

Gnosis was nine blocks from the ocean, but I'd only found parking five blocks away in the opposite direction. The main drag was nearly deserted by this point, by Federal law, every third car was a flex-fuel taxi painted an identifying color. The only lit storefront was a massive supermarket. A grand archway functioned as the entrance to the mini-mall's parking area. There was metallic clatter as a lone man in an orange vest forced a train of shopping carts against the curb, preventing them from spilling out onto the street.

As I approached the entrance the ambient urban sounds blended with the treble-heavy music playing from thin overhead speakers. The shuttle-doors opened and I was enveloped in the sound of REO Speedwagon and the unsympathetic stare of fluorescent light. It was unforgiving. I was sober enough to properly navigate through the store, but still tipsy enough to really, really enjoy the music. Out of fourteen brands and flavors of toothpaste, only two weren't offering discounts if the purchase was posted on a profile. Each aisle I passed caused a different personalized coupon to appear on the small screen of my phone. As fast as I could delete them they appeared.

The song ended and another began in a badly timed cross-fade, which ruined the end of the first song and didn't make me welcome the next. What I really wanted was a moment to process my feelings about the first before the transition, but no one involved with the closed-circuit music programming had bothered to ask. I strolled past hair conditioners toward the end of the aisle where personal care violently intersected with meats. What I really wanted was to take a picture, or even a series of pictures of the meats aisle; the rows of red and shining plastic wrap. It was magnificent and there were no crowding shoppers to ruin it for me. No clank of Model Pc120 metal cart against cart, muttered apologies without eye contact. What I really wanted was to promise myself I'd only do my shopping after 2:00 a.m. from now on.

I thought about buying some tungsten tipped screws, but I'd never use them. In the next aisle I held a bottle, or canister,

of air freshener. I'd honestly never thought about the freshness of my air until this point. Was it enough to keep the window open to encourage the expulsion of stale air while just assuming the opposing current guaranteed freshness? Evidently not, because unless the jasmine was in bloom my air would never smell the way this stuff looked and therefore promised to also smell. But, where to start? There were spray bottles, aerosol cans, scented candles, powder to sprinkle on the carpet and then vacuum up and plain old baking soda. Plus that weird and expensive organic stuff that never seemed to actually do anything. If I had a smartphone I could have done some quick research right there and then. Or I could have just accessed my profile and posted, "Looking for air freshener. What should I buy?" Then stood back and waited for the inevitable voting war and posting debates.

This was fine, to escape into a playground of irresponsibility, but I had real problems to solve. I'd promised Natasha "something" that I intended to "tell her about". And it was going to be in person, without her agent thankfully, but even at the time I was literally speaking the words I had no idea what I was saying. I kicked a bottle as hard as I could. It spun down the pavement, ricocheted off a parking meter and then just stopped and rolled a few inches and then completely stopped. Anything having to do with the campaign would automatically fall under company control and Jonathon would have to be notified and then all of middle management would first berate me and then tell me what to say at each break in the conversation. No good. If I had a script, even a bad one lying around, I would have asked her to read it while 'keeping the lead character in mind'. I'd used that before and it worked brilliantly. Just saying, "Hey, will you be in my movie?" made the entire offer seem dubious even to a layperson. But you could never, ever try that with talent backed by representation – unless you were an eccentric genius who delighted people with their odd ways and uncannily successful projects. I wasn't any of those things so artfully vague language was the way to go.

An entry-model gas-fueled SUV swerved across two empty lanes and pulled a handbrake stop right beside me at the curb. A young man in a college sweatshirt badly in need of a

haircut suggested that I was the sort of person who enjoyed the taste of other men's penises before the truck took off through the left turn red arrow. It was American made with cloth interior, from what I managed to see. The idea that had just begun to materialize was now an ethereal fog; the way dreams suddenly evaporate before you have time to find the pen that was supposed to be on top of the pad on your bedside table. Once you've wrapped your two longest fingers around it and coaxed it from between the wall and metal table leg the most fantastic experience you'd ever had was gone and you had to shower and go to work.

Whatever the idea was it wasn't likely to ever come back so I decided to go with my second choice of some sort of documentary about Natasha and her work with scripted scenes and a loose three-act structure. The sort of thing people were doing now. For some reason I'd left my attaché case on the driver's seat. I picked it up and instinctively checked to make sure my mp3 player was inside, along with the – a plastic water bottle grazed the bridge of my nose. It had just recently been purchased, judging by the cool droplets of perspiration on its surface. It cracked on the brick wall behind me and emptied itself on the patch of grass and dirt.

There was one in front of my car and two behind me, blocking access to the alley. Directly in front of me the driver's side door was open, beyond that another brick wall. To get around the guy in front of me I'd had to be physically able to vault over the hood of my Ryuzaki L Class and immediately roll a sharp left, without denting the hood, of course. Plus, there was the problem of my wide-open door and the keychain auto-lock that never seemed to work.

"Nice car, faggot." Laughter from somewhere behind me.

"It really is."

"You know what this is, chief." The whitest of the group was evidently the spokesman.

"Carjacking?"

"Fuck dat. Dis here be right up cash money transashun, ya feel." One of the kids behind me, possibly the blond kid with

the skeleton hoodie was also a sitcom writer's idea of a Caribbean street thug. "Ain't no time to be hesitatin', bhatti boy."

Seriously? "Okay, let me get my wallet." I slowly turned toward the two, holding up my attaché case with my left hand. My right hand was still tucked into the outer pocket. I moved as a block, both arms and torso in coordination.

"Pick it da shit up." It was the blond kid, after all.

"Alright... alright... look guys—"

"Cock mouth kill cock!"

"Huh?"

"Me think ya chat too much, seen?"

I looked at the third kid, making eye contact. I could feel his fear radiating away from him and into my body. It was thick and milky and my limbs began to tremble while a strange calm simultaneously flowed from my center. I spoke directly to him. "Look, you can have all the cash, but I need my credit cards."

"Fuck dat!"

The third kid took a step to the side. The guy behind me had come around to join the others. I hadn't heard the sound of his footsteps. I couldn't hear anything except their voices. A thin, bright vignette seemed to fill up the borders of my vision, like a light-leak in a film camera. The blond kid in the amazingly expensive designer hoodie stepped toward me.

"Do it, faggot!" Back to his natural, American dialect.

"Okay. It's in my, uh—"

With my left hand I threw my bag over his head, into the alley. It spun, hurtling small objects everywhere. With my right hand I gripped the Buzz Baton™ and jabbed it into the blond kid's neck. I squeezed the applicator knob, sending a three second charge of one hundred thousand volts through his circulatory system.

When I looked up I could hear the voices and running footsteps of the other two kids, but couldn't see them for some reason. I knelt down and curled my fingers in front of his slack mouth. There was a faint inward and outward breath. I leaned back and allowed my eyes to refocus. The prostrate body on the ground was not the blond kid, but the first boy who'd accosted me. I replayed the memory of jabbing my taser into a pale, white neck. I tilted my memory vision upward, dirty blond hair curling

around the bottom of a pink ear. He was the closest in proximity to me, but hey – there you go. You can't argue with objective reality. I felt around for his phone, it was bulky and halfway down his shorts inside a massive back pocket. Swallowed by denim. He wasn't wearing a belt so I tore his fly open and tugged until the zipper lowered enough for me to pull his shorts and designer boxer-briefs, Arnett Vole loungewear collection, around his thighs. I took a step back, crouched, stood up again and knelt to the side. I'd framed up a perfect shot, his pimpled white ass slightly raised with one twisted arm wrapped around his unconscious face. A cigarette was smoldering half a foot away. His phone had a flash and it nearly overexposed the shot. Figuring out how to attach the photo and then CC the message to his entire address book took a few minutes. I multitasked by picking up as many of my small belongings as I could find.

My car was still open and the interior light was on. It wasn't *binging*, thankfully. There was no sound, anywhere. I waited for the 'send successful' message and then tucked the phone back into a pocket in his shorts. It may not have been the same pocket.

The local college station was playing a live DJ set which incorporated remixes of many songs I'd heard but didn't particularly like, but for some reason hearing them all together like this, while driving twenty miles over the speed limit on shiny streets, made me feel awesome. It was the same euphoria of inclusion many people feel at bars and nightclubs when they found themselves singing along, very loudly, to some awful single from two years before. The same single they used to tune away from when it came on the radio (once an hour). I needed to buy new earphones for my mp3 player, several ball-point pens and... I couldn't remember the last thing.