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Finalist - The Fifth Act

Charlie Bullock
Yale Law School

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The Fifth Act

Charlie Bullock

So this happened back, like, four or five years ago, when I was working for a temp agency in Chicago. So like early 2022, I think. Maybe late February. And it was about 8:30 p.m., and quite dark, and I came home from work (work, that week, was at some Graphic Design firm in Logan Square) to find my roommate Brian sitting on the metal stage of a DDR cabinet and crying.

I should note at the outset that “DDR” is Dance Dance Revolution, a pioneering series of dance and rhythm games that were quite popular in America as recently as the early teens, and that continue to enjoy healthy sales to this day in Japan and New Zealand. And I should clarify that I don’t mean that Brian was sitting and crying on a DDR *pad*, like, the foldy plastic things that you can buy for forty bucks and plug into your Xbox. Brian is serious about rhythm games; Brian has two first-generation arcade cabinets from 1998, which weigh like 440 pounds each. I know how much they weigh because I helped him move them into our two-bedroom Pilsen apartment,¹ which luckily is on the first floor but which not so luckily does not have a communal living space so much as it has like a communal hallway between the front door and the kitchen, which hallway is *almost* wide enough to allow a pedestrian of average width to comfortably slip by the two arcade ‘cabs’ and get to his room.

Anyways. Brian was crying a little bit. Okay, not super surprising, he’s a sensitive guy. Most people, having gotten up at 6:30 and walked through the slush in ratty

¹ I’m a helpful person. Extremely eager to please. It gets me into trouble sometimes.

Converse hi-tops and taken a bus to a train to a warehouse to manually assemble and pack and address the envelope of the same set of glossy brochures 900-odd times, and then taken a train to a bus to a roach-infested apartment with low ceilings, would have sort of patted Brian on the shoulder as they awkwardly stepped over him en route to their room. I could have done that, ordered a pizza, gotten high in my bed, and played chess on the internet until I passed out, and that would've been the end of an uneventful day.

But this all went down during one of my periods of halfhearted religious mania. I've told you about those before, right? They started right after I freaked out and dropped out of grad school, and I indulged them on and off until the 2024 election cycle started up in earnest and I got really into politics instead. But for a while there I was going to this vaguely culty little storefront church twice a week, and I was occasionally making these sort of grand charitable gestures. Like one time I ate just potatoes for two weeks and gave the money I would've spent on food to the Schistomiasis Foundation. That sort of thing. It was only years later that I realized that my 'episodes'—as Brian called them—were really just a complicated and sublimated form of self-harm.

So when I saw Brian in bad shape, and realized that sitting down to talk to him about it was both the right thing to do and also the one thing in the world that I was most averse to doing,

I forced myself to sit down on the metal platform next to his, and leaned back against the bar, and closed my eyes, and wordlessly held out my right hand, palm-up. And after a few seconds, Brian looked up at me, reached into the 30-rack of Pabst Blue Ribbon that he had open on the floor next to him, and handed me a can. The beer was warm,

and kind of gross, but once I took a sip we were drinking together, and that meant that he was allowed to unburden himself to me.

“What time’s your work tomorrow?” He asked.

“Supposedly 8. But I don’t have to swipe in or anything, it’s just I can’t leave until I get my shit done.”

“How’s it going over there?”

Alarm bells went off in my head. Eight months before, when I’d come home with a broken leg in a cast, Brian had been kind of miffed at me for interrupting his game so that I could get through. I don’t think he ever did learn how I broke it. He wasn’t really an interested-in-your-day type of guy.

“It’s not terrible. I have to stay standing up all day but I get like 16 an hour.”

Brian nodded and sniffed. He’s kind of chunky, and he always wears loose black jeans and an XL black polyester button-down with stylized flames or anime characters on it. Today it was blue flames. His wallet has a chain on it. I took another sip of beer.

“Ezra?”

“Brian.”

He took in a deep, shuddery breath.

“Ramona broke up with me earlier today.”

This was unexpected. Brian had never mentioned ‘Ramona’ before. “Dude, that sucks. Is Ramona... the redhead with the glasses?”

Brian shook his head, morosely. I tried to remember all the girls from the Chicago DDR community that I’d seen at the get-togethers he would sometimes host on Saturday afternoons. None of them stood out.

“You haven’t met her.”

“Ah. I’m real sorry to hear it, man. How long were you guys dating for?”

“Almost three weeks.”

“Oh. That isn’t so bad, then.” As soon as I said it, I mentally kicked myself. *This is why nobody likes you, Ezra.* Brian kind of sob-laughed once, forcefully, as if to say “you wouldn’t understand.” I sipped my beer.

“She say why she was doing it?” I finally asked.

“I asked her to marry me.”

“Oh.”

“When you know, you know, you know?”

“Yeah, so I’ve heard. But she, uh, didn’t know?”

“Not her. Her father.”

I took another drink and scratched at the little patchy almost-beard I was cultivating. This sounded interesting, but it also sounded complicated and dramatic and exhausting, and I was *extremely* tired.

“So he, what, he forbade the banns, as it were? Not a big fan of yours?”

“Nuh-uh.” Brian sat up, and bit the first knuckle of his index finger. This was a habit of his when he was upset or anxious. “Screw that guy. He’s a freaking *cop*.”²

“Sounds like it. Not very progressive of him. Still, you’ve got to respect the filial piety aspect—from Ramona’s end, I mean. Don’t see that too much these days.”

Silence from Brian.

“Maybe he’ll come around once you’ve known her a bit longer?”

² Brian didn’t mean that Ramona’s father was actually a police officer; in those days, Brian was a committed anarchist, and in his circles ‘cop’ was commonly used as a particularly venomous term of abuse.

More silence.

“Well, time heals all wounds.” I patted him on the shoulder and stood up as if to go. No such luck.

“Ezra?”

“Yeah?”

“I need a favor.”

This was not good. “Shoot.”

“Do you know about bourgeois values?” Before I could respond, he continued. “Steve—the dad—he’s got bourgeois values. He’s very into, like, paying taxes or whatever.”

“Okay.”

“And Ramona has sort of absorbed his whole approach.”

“That’ll happen.”

“So we were going to get married, right? It was a first-sight type of thing. Happened very quickly. But she wanted me to talk to Steve and Karen about it first. And she made it seem like it wouldn’t be a problem. So I went to dinner last night at their giant house up in Winnetka, and Steve started grilling me about this and that. The subject of employment came up.”

“Uh oh.” Brian made his living (such as it was) by going around at night with a set of tools and taking locked bikes apart so that he could sell their parts on the internet.

“So I told them that I was a paralegal, right? Figuring that this would score me points as far as bourgeois respectability was concerned. And that I could pull it off, ’cause my cousin Aiden is a paralegal so I know a little bit about it. And then Steve asked

me what firm I worked at, and I kind of panicked, and the only one that came to mind was that one with all the billboards. Sussman and Cole. "

"In a wreck? Need a check?"

"Yeah. Call us at 333-3333."

"Quick thinking. Good stuff."

"Yeah, but as it turns out I didn't actually come up with it off the top of my head, exactly. 'Cause Ramona is Ramona Sussman. Which makes her dad Steve Sussman."

"Of Sussman and Cole?"

"Yeah. But I didn't connect those dots until after he connected them for me."

"You were a casualty of the power of suggestion."

"Yeah. That."

"Ow."

"So he asked for an explanation or whatever, and then when I didn't have one he got really pissy, and we exchanged some heated words and I left, and then today Ramona texted me that, like, she'd always love me but she wasn't gonna be able to see me ever again."

"Oof. Sorry."

"But of course I can't just let her go like that."

"Oh, I don't know, sometimes—"

"Decisive action is called for."

"Really, I think—"

"Now, I've thought it over, and there's no percentage in pretending that I didn't lie at dinner. That won't fly. But I haven't talked to Ramona about Illegalism yet, really,

and she doesn't necessarily need to know the deets of my praxis until after she's had the chance to read some Stirner and really get her head around the theory."

Here, Brian gave me a sidelong glance, as if he was daring me to challenge him. Instead I gave a kind of weak smile. I'm not really the confrontational type.

"So. Given that I lied. I think that Ramona and/or her dad could be convinced to come around if I had, like, a quote-unquote good reason for it, bourgeois-values-wise. Right?"

"I guess."

"I'm thinking maybe I'm in witness protection."

"Dude—"

"Think about it. It's perfect. A snitch is basically a cop, and people who live in big houses in Winnetka love cops. And Steve can't really investigate, because he might blow my cover and ruin the feds' case, or whatever. So Steve's, like, *legally obliged* to stand around like a dumb sheep and accept what he's told without question. Which!" Brian raised a finger triumphantly, "is what he's been conditioned to do anyways. By *society*."

"Sure. Sounds good, man. Look, I better be getting to bed."

"And this is where you come in."

My heart sank. I realized for the first time that I had a headache, and that my feet hurt, and that I wanted nothing more than to sleep for about twelve hours. I sat back down and finished my beer.

"I need you to talk to your girl at the ATF for me." Brian said. "The ex-girlfriend."

"What does Marielena have to do with this?"

"She's a fed, right? And I need to be a fed."

“Brian, she’s like an HR person. She handles employee records and stuff. She can’t get you into witness protection.”

“Look, what does her email address end with? It’s got the atf.gov or whatever, right? That’s all I need. One email from her to Steve being like, look, Mr. Pearsey is a critical part of a highly sensible case, I’m not supposed to be sending this but he told me how much he loves your daughter and I made an exception. Then we’re in the money.”

“She’s not going to do that. Definitely not for me. And it wouldn’t work. Sussman could just google Mari’s name and see that she’s not an agent or whatever. And I’m pretty sure that the Chicago field office of the ATF doesn’t run a witness protection program. And Mari could probably get into trouble for using her work email like that. And—”

“Ezra.” Brian interrupted me, and, for the first time that evening, looked me directly in the eye. “What would Jesus do?”

And it’ll tell you a lot about the kind of shape I was in, psychologically and spiritually speaking, that I didn’t doubt for a moment that Jesus would have hit an ex up out of the blue to help his jackass roommate trick some poor girl into a hasty and ill-advised marriage. In retrospect, of course, I realize that the ethical arguments for the course of action I ended up taking were so thin as to be almost non-existent, but at the time I saw only that going along with Brian was by far the least pleasant course of action available to me, and naturally assumed that it was therefore a moral imperative.

“All right.” I stifled a yawn. “I’ll text Mari tomorrow.”

“About that.” Brian looked a little guilty. Alarm bells went off in my head, again. Brian is not a ‘looking guilty’ type of guy. “I was pretty sure you’d be on board, so I kind

of reached out to her already. You're meeting her at the Falcon Inn at 9:30. I told her it was a matter of life and death."

* * *

Forty minutes later, I was sitting at a table in a dive bar and nursing a Sprite.³ Brian had stayed outside, insisting that it would be weird if he sat with me. I suspected that he had a professional interest in the bike racks near the IIT engineering campus, a couple of blocks away.

Mari came in around 9:45, which meant either that she'd gotten a lot better about keeping appointments since we'd dated or that Brian had really spooked her. She was dressed more or less like she had dressed when she was in college—hoop earrings, and a button down tucked into acid-washed jeans. She had cut her hair short. It looked good on her.

"That haircut looks good on you," I said as she put down her purse and sat down across from me.

She looked at me disapprovingly, and then she looked around the bar disapprovingly, and then she looked at me disapprovingly again.⁴ She didn't acknowledge my compliment. I started to think about how my right foot was wet and cold because the rubber sole of my sneaker had a crack in it that was letting water through when I walked through the slush outside, and about how I should probably get a new pair of shoes, and what kind of new shoes I should get, and about how tired I was,

³ I try not to do more than one standard drink a night, except on special occasions. Family history of unpleasantness in that direction.

⁴ Mari's look of disapproval is something of a specialty, and she has never been shy about breaking it out when I'm around.

and at some point I kind of zoned out⁵ and didn't really hear what Mari said when she finally said something.

“What?”

“Your shirt is inside-out, Ezra.”

I looked down at the sleeve of the long-sleeved blue T-shirt I had on. Sure enough, the seam was on the outside.

“So it is. Good call.”

“Have you been wearing that like that all day?”

“Yeah, I guess I have been.” I smiled at her. She didn't smile back.

“Come on, that's pretty funny.”

She looked at me disapprovingly, again. “Your roommate said that this was about a, quote, ‘matter of life and death.’”

“Yeah, well, I mean, he's kind of, uh, prone to hyperbole. It's actually pretty minor. I just need—or, Brian would appreciate a small favor from you. Me and Brian. Brian and I.”

“Brian is really weird. You need to get some normal friends.”

“I like Brian. He has interesting hobbies. He and I both like to eat at Harold's.”

Mari gave me the fourth disapproving look of our two-minute interaction. I decided that it was time to cut the bull and get down to brass tacks.

“Do you happen to be familiar with the Swan of Avon's views re: the course of true love?”

“Ezra, please don't.”

⁵ I zone out a lot. It used to annoy Mari a lot when we dated. But, you know, *c'est la vie*. I have other good qualities. I try not to get too down on myself.

“He was of the opinion that it never did run smooth. For aught that he could ever read slash hear by tale or history.”

Mari rolled her eyes and smiled at me.⁶ “Aw. Hey, that’s sweet. That’s really sweet. Hey, you’re great. I’m flattered. Really. But I think that our thing kind of ran its course when I was in college.”⁷

She didn’t add “and when you were in grad school,” which was very kind of her.

“Oh, not—not us.”

“What do you mean, ‘not us?’” Mari glared at me, disapprovingly.

“Ah. Well. Have you ever read Coleridge’s—”

“Ezra!”

“Sorry. Sorry. I’m pleading Brian’s cause here, sort of. Here on his behalf. He got engaged recently, actually, but the other day the relationship hit what, uh, what I guess you could describe as a sort of snag...” I explained to Mari, briefly and without including Ramona’s name or any of the other more incriminating details, what had happened and what Brian wanted her to do. When I finished, she looked at me with an expression that betrayed less than wholehearted approval.

“Why on earth would I do that?”

This seemed like a pretty fair question. I thought about it for a second. “To facilitate the sacred and eternal union of two arguably beautiful souls, currently languishing without hope?”

“Absolutely not.”

⁶ Disapprovingly. Don’t ask what a disapproving smile looks like; it’s impossible to describe. But trust me, she gave one.

⁷ Mari was a couple of years younger than me; we’d met on a dating app while we were both going to different schools in Chicago.

“Because it’s what Jesus would do?”

Mari gave me a look of thrice-distilled ultra-pure disapproval.

“Ezra, I will thank you not to use the Lord’s name in vain in my presence.”

“I don’t mean it facetious—” Before I could finish my sentence, Mari got up, but instead of leaving she went to the bar. I watched her order a gin and tonic, point over at me to indicate my tab, look disapprovingly at the bartender when he informed her that I didn’t have a tab, pay with cash, and return to the table. She drank about half of her drink in silence, while I zoned out and thought about how tired I was and how I should find the time to read more Chinese sci-fi, because I had really liked the novel I’d finished the weekend before. Eventually Mari said something that I didn’t quite hear.

“What’s that?”

Visible disapproval. “I *said* that I would send something.”

“Really?”

“But it’s not going to be easy. An e-mail from a random ATF official is a stupid idea, obviously. I’m going to need to write an official-looking letter on our stationary, and sign it with my boss’s boss’s signature block, and advise that this lawyer guy should under no circumstances contact our office because we’ll deny everything. And I’m going to need you to help me write it, so that it sounds right.”

“You would do all that for Brian?”

Mari finished her drink, and started to stir the ice at the bottom around with the little black cocktail straw. She was avoiding eye contact with me.

“Sure, why not?” She eventually said.

“That’s fantastic.” I stifled a happy yawn, and glanced towards the door. “I really can’t thank you enough. I guess I’ll—text you this weekend? And we can work on it?”

Mari bent the straw in half, and then used both hands to try to bend it in half again. Her nails had recently been painted a sort of midnight blue, and they looked really nice. The straw wouldn't bend neatly the second time, and she looked at it disapprovingly.

“What does Shakespeare say about free lunches, Ezra?”

“I don't know that he ever mentioned them,” I said, feeling a little apprehensive.

“Do you know why he didn't mention them?”

“Is it because they don't exist?”

“It's because they don't exist.”

I smiled weakly and waited for her to continue.

“I'm going to need you to run an errand with me.”

This was a bit odd. It was hard to imagine that I, of all people, could be of any use to Mari, who had always been really responsible and well-put-together.

“What can I help you with?”

“Do you still have your UChicago I.D.?”

“Sure. It gets me ten percent off at the Harold's Chicken on 53rd and Kimbark, whenever I'm in Hyde Park.”

“How often are you in Hyde Park?”

“Well, it's been about a year since I moved out. But you never know.”

I got a disapproving look for that one.

“I need you to help me check out a book from the Regenstein.”

“Oh. Sure, I can do that. I'll take the green line down there tomorrow after work, if you'd like. Text me the title, would you? So I remember it.”

“I actually need it tonight.”

I put my head in my hands and massaged my temples. “Is the Reg even open this late?”

“The first floor is open ’til 11 on weekdays. We can make it.”

“But the stacks? The circulation desk?”

“It’s not in the stacks, it’s in Special Collections. And when I said ‘check out,’ I meant, like, kind of informally borrow. Your I.D. wouldn’t scan anyways.”

“That doesn’t sound super legal.”

“Neither does impersonating an employee of the United States.”

I sighed. “I just really don’t know. I was on my feet all day, and I’m kind of out of it. I don’t really know if I have it in me tonight.”

Mari looked at me with a look that didn’t contain anything like the usual amount of disapproval. She seemed a little forlorn. She had always had really good skin.

“As a favor to me?”

Outside of the big *Nighthawks* windows of the bar sleet was coming down, and in the bright white glare of the street lights Racine Avenue looked particularly unbeautiful. I thought for a little while about how much better I had liked the warm yellow sodium lamps they’d had when I was a kid, but how actually sentiment aside it had been good policy to replace them, because I read somewhere that the LED’s are like sixty percent more efficient or something. Then I thought about a favorite memory of mine, from a time when I was six or seven or eight or nine, in which I was sitting in the back of my family’s car with my sister, coming back home late at night from some kind of event. The roads and sidewalks were all yellow from the street lights, and my parents were up front talking to each other quietly, and at some point I fell asleep and woke up the next morning in my own bed, with no recollection of having been carried inside.

Eventually, Mari said something that I didn't quite hear.

"Screw it," I replied. "Sure. Let's go. Just let me call Brian first, let him know that I'll be back late."

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The University of Chicago, and its storied Joseph Regenstein Library, are in Hyde Park, a neighborhood about seven miles south of Pilsen. The best way to get there from where Mari and I were was to take I-90. This was roughly the same route that Mari had taken to come visit me when she was going to the Illinois Institute of Technology, and she still drove the same red Prius that she'd had back then, so there was a pleasant hint of *auld lang syne* to the drive; I thought about mentioning this to her at one point, then thought better of it and looked out the window. I noticed an aggressively tacky billboard advertisement for the law firm of Sussman and Cole looming over the freeway; two guys in suits with big jaws and extraordinarily large upper bodies were smiling toothily above the big red Comic Sans letters of the firm's famous slogan.

"In a wreck? Need a check?" I said out loud.

"What?" Mari didn't look up from the road.

"Nothing."

Eventually, we pulled onto 57th street and parked by the curb, near where the Regenstein Library rose up all blocky and brutalist. I yawned nervously as we walked towards it. Inside, the pudgy and disinterested security guard—"Raymond," per his name badge—asked for "I.D.'s, please," and Mari looked at me expectantly; I dug through my wallet, came up with my old card, and presented it, trying to hold it so that my thumb obscured the expiration year. Raymond barely glanced at it before gesturing us through.

The first floor of the Reg is mostly one huge room with a bunch of armchairs and tables, and a few rows of public computers. There were a few undergrads studying in the armchairs when we came in. From what I remembered of the brief period when I had done a little archival research, the Rare Books collection was stored in a sub-basement, accessible from the main library by a few flights of concrete stairs behind a door that was usually locked. It was locked that night, as Mari discovered when she headed straight for it without saying a word to me and turned the knob almost hopefully. I followed her over and stood a few feet behind her, checking nervously to see if anyone was watching us.

“I think you have to, like, ask for a book, and then they bring it to you to look at in the Research Center. I don’t think random students are allowed down there,” I told her. She stayed facing the door, not bothering to look back at me. Pretty soon, the young library employee who was working the circulation desk halfway across the room stood up and walked towards us.

“*Mari*,” I whispered. No response.

The librarian approached Mari from behind and tapped her shoulder lightly.

“I’m sorry, but only the first floor is open right now,” she said.

When Mari turned around, she was wearing a frantic expression that seemed very out of character for her. She spoke in a breathless, panicked whisper.

“Please! My husband’s dissertation defense is *tomorrow*. And he’s just heard from a reliable source that there’s a chapter in a volume down there that—” she looked at me.

I looked at her dumbly for a second, and her eyes flashed disapproval at me. I fumbled around in my head for something to say. “—That completely preempts one of the central points of my argument.” I hoped that that sounded right.

The librarian—or library employee, or whatever she was—was about my age, and she had frizzy hair and a septum piercing. She didn’t look particularly moved by the news about my defense. She turned to me. “Sir, the earliest that you’re going to be able to come back to request to look at a volume from one of our Special Collections is going to be tomorrow at nine A.M. You should feel free to use the first floor study areas until the building closes in one half-hour”

Mari collapsed to her knees, fell against the door, and starting sobbing ferociously. She even beat her closed fist against the painted metal a little. It was a surprisingly convincing performance; tired as I was, my first instinct was actually to be worried for her before I recalled that it was, in fact, a performance. Then I remembered that I was part of the act, and tried to look as if I was too stunned and devastated to even process my grief and reach the point of tears.

The librarians of today—even the very senior ones, but especially the young reformers and modernizers of the already-extremely-reformed-and-modernized—are for the most part extraordinarily helpful people. They’re distinguished from the other employees of local governments and large bureaucratic institutions by a belief in the vital importance of their jobs, and they resist their inevitable obsolescence⁸ with a cheerful ferocity that most people reserve for confrontations with the grim fact of mortality. But they weren’t always so. The novels and films of generations past are

⁸ At the hands of, e.g., automated search functions, e-books, digital piracy, and generalized artificial intelligence.

replete with librarians of a different sort—a race of petty tyrants, blue-haired and sullen-eyed behind their pince-nez, prone to shushing and utterly devoid of sympathy. This woman—septum piercing excepted—was a throwback to that earlier ancestral stage in the evolution of her species.

“Ma’am, is *not* my responsibility to fix the problems that your husband’s irresponsible research practices have created for him. Frankly—”

Mari tried to interrupt her, and got about one syllable out before the librarian raised her voice and continued. “—FRANKLY, I am *shocked* that anyone would even *think* about doing basic archival research at this point in the process. I am going to assume—*charitably*—that you have both been deranged by the pressures of the dissertation process, and I am going to recommend that you return home at once.”

Towards the end of her little speech, she actually raised a finger and physically shook it at us. Some deeply ingrained atavistic instinct told me that this meant that it was time to leave, but quick. I took Mari’s hand and helped her up, then led her away.

“Ezra!” she hissed at me.

“Shh. Come on.”

I took us towards the door by a circuitous route that wound past the information desk. A kindly-looking middle-aged woman was sitting behind it, looking a little worried for us.

“Excuse me, ma’am—do you have a couple of paper clips that I could borrow?” I asked.

“Sure, honey. Big or small?”

“I’ll take large, if you’ve got ‘em.”

She opened one of the drawers behind the desk, removed small handful of paper clips from a box, and handed them to me. I smiled my thanks and waved good-bye. But instead of heading out, I walked over towards the single-user bathroom, with Mari still following me.

“What now?” She asked.

“One second.” I opened the bathroom door and slipped in. It was pretty much as I remembered it; clean, shiny tile floor, relatively low particle-board ceiling, porcelain toilet and sink. I put the toilet lid down, sat on it, and checked my phone. There were a couple of texts from Brian asking what was up, but nothing that couldn’t wait. I put the phone away and massaged my eyelids with the heels of my palms until I saw spots, and thought about how nice it would feel to fall asleep where I was, just for a minute or two.

Then Mari banged on the door, and I went over and opened it a crack.

“Is anyone watching?” I asked.

She looked around. “Not right now.”

“That librarian chick?”

“She’s sitting down. She has her back to us.”

“Come in here.”

“What?”

“Come on. I have a plan.”

I let the door close, and then stepped to the side so that no one would be able to see me when it opened again. Mari tiptoed in and shut the door behind her, then reached back to lock it.

“Leave it,” I told her.

She looked up at me, surprise mingled with the disapproval on her face.

“Check it out.” I carefully climbed up onto the tank of the toilet and stood there for a second. It didn’t shatter under me, which was a relief. The ceiling was low enough that I could reach it, palms-up, without fully extending my arms; I carefully lifted the particle-board ceiling tile directly above my head off of the girders it was resting on and pushed it aside.

Mari had picked up on what I was doing. “Can that hold your weight?” she asked.

“I think so. As long as we spread it out. Fortune favors the bold. Come up.”

“What is this supposed to accomplish, exactly?”

“Probably nothing. Come on up.”

She stepped up onto the toilet, a little nervous, and then up onto the tank with me. There wasn’t a lot of room for both of us. She smelled really good. I thought about telling her that she smelled good, and then thought better of it, and then made one of those saddle things with my hands. She held on to my shoulders and shakily put her foot in it.

“Okay, you have to kind of—press down with your foot, and like *step* up. And I’ll lift at the same time. And when you get up there, make sure that you, you know, spread yourself out. Don’t stand up.”

She stepped, and I lifted. She didn’t go straight up, and at first I was fairly sure that we were both going to fall and break something, but by the time she began to tip over she was already head and shoulders above the ceiling, and she steadied herself by putting her arms out. I put one hand on the back of her calf and kept the other and pushed her the rest of the way up, and she managed to clamber away fairly successfully.

“All right?” I asked.

Her disembodied voice came back all echoey from somewhere a few feet to my right. “It’s *so* dusty up here.”

“Can you give me a hand?”

I could almost hear her pondering the question through the suspended ceiling.

“No.”

Well, that was that. I was pretty thin back then, but even so I was pretty sure that the girders would give way if I tried to do a pull-up on one of them, and anyways it wasn’t at all clear that I still could do a pull-up, even in ideal conditions.

Hmm.

Just then, the handle of the door turned. I almost shouted “Occupied!” just as it was starting to swing open. Whoever was on the other side quickly closed it. I didn’t see a face, which I hoped meant that no one had seen someone standing on the toilet.

There’s no adrenaline rush in the modern world comparable the one you get just as you’re being walked in on in the restroom. I imagine that the kamikaze pilots of World War II’s Pacific theater must have felt something similar as they began their final meteoric descents. After the door closed, I was officially amped up enough to give the ceiling a try. After crouching as low as I could without risking a slip on the slick porcelain of the tank, I exploded upwards in a credible imitation of a standing high jump, and managed to get both elbows above the ceiling. After a few leg-wagging moments suspended in mid-air, I managed to get a knee over and pry myself into the plenum space above the drop ceiling. The girder that I levered myself up with bent a little, but didn’t break; the whole thing made ominous sounds as I scrambled on all fours to the side and lay down, trying to distribute my weight as evenly as possible.

“Where’s the thingy?” I asked Mari.

“What thing?”

“The thing. The tile. For the ceiling.”

“Oh—it’s over here.”

“Okay, we have to put that back.”

After a little bit of finagling the tile was replaced, and Mari and I lay a few feet apart from each other in the dark. I couldn’t see the look on her face, but I didn’t need to; her silence had an icy this-better-be-good quality to it. I tried not to think about how stupid I was going to look if the plan I’d come up with didn’t pan out, and reached (slowly, so as not to distress the structure of the ceiling more than was necessary) into the pocket of my jeans to retrieve my phone. I had a couple more texts from Brian, asking what was happening. I decided that it was time to respond:

Running an errand

Related to ur impending nuptials

Might need ur help in a bit, stick around

This accomplished, I searched up Mari’s contact information and sent her the first text I’d sent her in more than a year:

Silence your phone!

I heard her received-text notification buzz clearly in the silence of the makeshift crawlspace, and saw her face dimly illuminated by her screen. I had half-hoped for a smile (come on—that was a pretty good one) but instead I had to be content with a disapproving eye-roll as she tapped out a response.

What’s the plan here. Sit til close? Then what?

Daring heist. Hopefully. Worth a try, I think.

Mari put her phone away, and I decided to try to take the most needed and least comfortable nap of my life. I came close to nodding off twice, but each time some patron or other came noisily in to the bathroom and sent my heart into my throat. *Please, please, please don't look up at the possibly-buckling ceiling...*

No one noticed anything. Eventually 11:00 came, and Mari texted me to wait another half-hour for the security people to lock everything up. At this point I was too wired to sleep, and so I stayed up, inhaling dust and probably asbestos, until 11:30.

Ready?

Yeah, Mari wrote back. You first.

I reached over to the tile we'd lifted out before and tried to pry it free, but even with the help of my phone's flashlight I couldn't seem to find enough purchase on the edge to lever it up. Finally, I decided to rise up to a squat so that I could get a better angle on it.

Bad idea. I barely felt the ceiling give way under me, but I heard an ominous CREAK followed immediately by a resounding CRASH, and I felt something⁹ strike my jaw. I lay on top of several large chunks of particle board on the tile floor of the bathroom, stunned and covered in dust, until Mari lightly and gracefully lowered herself down out of the hole I'd made and onto the tank of the toilet, looking somehow spotless.

"What's next, genius?"

I got up on my elbows and massaged my jaw. It wasn't broken, but it hurt to move. "Anyone here after hours?" I asked, wincing.

"I don't see why there would be."

⁹ The sink, as I later realized.

Well, that's extremely helpful, I thought, but dared not say. Mari and I walked together back to the door to the Rare Books collections that had defeated us earlier, and on the way I called Brian on whatever videotelephony app was current back then. He answered on the first ring, looking wary and a little confused.

“What’s good?”

“Hey, man. Say hi to Mari.”

“Hi, Mari.”

Mari looked disapprovingly at the screen as I presented it to her.

“Look, this is going to sound a little strange, but in order to save your marriage I’m going to need you to teach me how to pick a lock using paperclips.”

“Dude, come on. It’s not something you can teach over the phone, even with a proper set of picks.”

I thought about swearing, and then remembered Mari’s opinions re: swearing,¹⁰ and decided to swear internally instead. Mari took my phone from my hand and took charge.

“Brian, you can either get this lock picked with Ezra and I and a handful of paperclips, or you can go get your special tools and whatever and come down to Hyde Park yourself, or we can call it quits and go to bed now, and you can give up on the only girl in the entire continental United States who could ever possibly be convinced to tolerate you. Those are your options.”

It took about forty-five minutes of trial and error, a lot of broken paperclips, and three of the attachments on my Swiss army knife, but eventually we got through.

¹⁰ Not favorable, to put it mildly.

Tempers¹¹ had frayed by that point, and Brian hung up on us without so much as a good-bye, which I considered to be somewhat ungrateful of him. The stairs—what seemed like at least three flights’ worth, leading ever deeper—were unfinished, made of bare concrete, and extremely spooky by flashlight. The door at the bottom was—thank God—unlocked.

“Okay,” Mari said, as she turned on the light in the Rare Books room, “Help me carry this.”

I blinked and shaded my eyes from the sudden brightness, and then looked around. The room was mostly unremarkable—plain walls, a lot of bookshelves with ancient-looking volumes arranged neatly on them, a few small lockers for storing particularly valuable and/or fragile items. But in the center of the room, on a wide, low table, was a folio that was clearly too large for any of the lockers, too large indeed to fit even on the especially large shelves where the ancient atlases and grimoires sat. It must’ve been 4 feet tall, and at least 30 inches wide; its cover had a beautiful life-sized watercolor painting of a blue heron on it.

“Mari,” I said, hoping that my voice was conveying the full measure of the trepidation I felt, “is that *Birds of America*?”

“You’ve heard of it?” She said, brightly.

“I mean, is that an original first-edition double elephant folio copy of John James Audubon’s *The Birds of America*?”

“I sure hope so. If it isn’t, we went to all this trouble for nothing.”

¹¹ Not my temper, mind you, but note the plural form.

“Mari, that book is worth *millions* of dollars. It’s like the next-best thing to a Gutenberg Bible. I didn’t even know that UChicago had one.”

“They usually don’t. It’s just being stored here temporarily. Tomorrow it gets flown out to some new museum in San Francisco.”

“How exactly were you planning on sneaking it out while the library was open?”

“I was going to improvise.”

It was hard to argue with that. It was also hard to argue that, having come all this way to steal a rare book, I could now back off on account of the book’s being too rare. I might have tried, if my jaw hadn’t been so sore that it hurt to talk; as things stood, I sighed, wiped my hands as clean as I could get them on my shirt, and took up my end without complaining.

* * *

We managed the stairs without incident, and we didn’t run into anyone on the way to Mari’s car except for a couple of fraternity brothers, dead drunk on their way to a party from a pre-game. The book was an even less pleasant burden than its weight and shape would have predicted, because we were both unwilling to set it down and rest for fear of damaging the cover and destroying a hundred thousand dollars or so of value. But it just about fit into Mari’s trunk, and I made it as comfortable as I possibly could before she snapped at me to get in the car or be left behind.

I didn’t protest when Mari said that the last thing that we needed to do was to deliver the volume somewhere; I did hope, vainly, that I might get a couple minutes’ sleep in on the way, until Mari informed me that I was driving. She gave me an address in the northern suburbs, about forty-five minutes away, and promptly fell asleep. I might’ve done the same, at the wheel, and killed us both, if it wasn’t for the jittery, sore-

jaw-clenching anxiety that flooded my body every time we passed a cop car. But we made it fine, and at 12:45 on the dot I pulled into the driveway of a large, tacky McMansion with an awful AstroTurf lawn.

A fifty-something white guy in a sweater and khakis stepped out of the front door almost as soon as I had parked, and he quickly walked over to his garage door, punched in a combination to open it, and motioned us inside. Mari was awake again, but neither of us said anything as I pulled in next to a Lexus and got out.

The homeowner was oddly built, with a huge upper body and relatively small, skinny legs. He had a truly silly amount of gel in his dyed-black hair, even though it was almost one in the morning. I wondered idly whether he'd dressed up for the occasion, or whether he just had an oddly formal taste in pajamas.

“Did you get it?” He asked Mari, quietly.

“Yes. It's in the trunk.”

The man walked over towards the trunk and opened it, then whistled through his teeth in appreciation.

“I didn't believe you when you said you were going to go for it,” he said. “I thought you were joking when you talked about it the other night. But you saw your chance and you took it. Good girl.” Then he gestured at me. “Who's this?”

“The only person I know with a UChicago I.D.,” Mari replied. “He reached out to me about something else earlier today, and I thought, why not put him to good use? Don't worry, he's harmless.”

While Mari spoke, the homeowner had been sort of casually sidling up to her. At the end of her sentence, to my very great surprise, he swept her off of her feet and kissed

her passionately. She reciprocated for a moment¹² and then pushed him away, giggling and looking at him in a way that wasn't the least bit disapproving.

"Ezra," she said, without taking her eyes off the homeowner, "I think you'd better call a 'Share back to the city. We'll talk tomorrow about that letter, okay?"

I wasn't particularly upset by the display. I'm not a super jealous person by nature, and I hadn't had any real claim to Mari's affections for more than a year at that point. But I didn't immediately respond to her. In my head, I was trying to calculate what Jesus would do in this particular situation.

Well, he was pretty big on books,¹³ if I recalled correctly. And on birds.¹⁴

It would be so easy just to call the rideshare, I thought. And the garage was really cold, and my socks were still wet, and my bed had an electric blanket on it, and I'd washed my sheets just last night, so they probably still smelled nice.

"Karen out of town?" I asked the homeowner, who, I had just realized, was not just any homeowner, but was in fact Steve Sussman, the slightly-more-jacked of the two named partners of Sussman and Cole, L.L.P., he of the memorable slogans and large billboards,

Steve froze in place, and turned to look at me. Mari's eyes flashed something stronger than disapproval. I smiled weakly.

"I think it's time for you to go, little guy." Steve said after an ominous pause.

"Nah," I replied. "Not quite yet. See, I seem to be in the business of bringing happy couples together, and I think that if we really put our heads together here we can

¹² Well, for several moments, if we're being totally honest here.

¹³ See, e.g., his various debates with the Pharisees.

¹⁴ Mostly doves, true, but also occasionally sparrows, if Matthew is to be believed.

pull off one of those three-for-one deals, like in the fifth act of a Shakespearian comedy. *Midsummer Night's Dream*, or *Merchant of Venice*, or whatever. You and Karen can stay together, and you and Mari can stay together, and ne'er the twain shall meet."

Steve was listening.

"And as a sort of cherry on top, we can also marry your daughter off to the love of her life, who is I believe a charming young man named Brian Pearsey, who might as well have been genetically engineered in a lab by scientists trying to create the perfect son-in-law."

Steve was still listening, somewhat to my surprise.

"Of course, he needs a little bringing to hand. That goes without saying. I suggest that you endorse their union on the sole condition that Brian join your widely celebrated firm as an entry-level paralegal, and that the marriage take place after a probationary period of, say, three months at that position. I don't know that he's ever had a job before, but he's a quick study. He'll catch on."

"And, naturally, you'll have to return the Audubon to the library. But that's easy enough to do anonymously, and you'd never be able to fence it anyways. The whole thing was a ridiculous idea in the first place, really."

I stopped and massaged my jaw. It was too sore for me to talk further. Other parts of my body were also sore from the fall, I suddenly noticed, and I didn't think that I'd ever been so tired before in my life. For a moment, I almost blacked out; when I regained my balance, I was surprised to see Steve's large, meaty hand extended for me to shake.

When I got home, around 2 A.M., I slept the sleep of the just. I woke up around 11, and took my time getting to work. My non-temp colleagues ribbed me a little bit, but it was all friendly, and no one seriously considered calling the temp agency to report me.

There's a lot to be said for a life well lived.