

YELLOW MAMA WEBZINE

Jericho by Leon Marks



Art by Darren Blanch © 2024

In Krakow's *rynek*, thousands waved banners, faces painted with the flag, chants becoming roars, an echo like thunder off the charming, colored facades lining the square. It was the Independence March. *Bóg, Honor, Ojczyzna!* God, Honor, Homeland! Around the country, almost a million Poles, so the media had reported, stood arm in arm to barricade international borders, a collective act of resistance to the enemy. From the Baltic to Belarus, from Korczawa to Grzechotki, highways of hands, palms out front, raised up to signal to the border's other side: "No!" Commentators throughout Europe imagined a human perimeter, a human chain snaking along the border in its entirety, each link inextricable from the next, a wall greater than China's, visible from outer space. Handfuls of counter-protesters had arrived to try to redirect tiny fractions of the energy to their own causes. Climate change. Animal rights. Gay rights.

The land of the Poles was a land of pride and self-protection, and more than a little paranoia. Every Pole—elderly, youthful, rural, urban, rich, poor — knew the risks of letting one's guard down. Invaded from the north, conquered from the east, kidnapped and slaughtered from the west, more blood per capita — especially severed capita — had been shed in this land than almost anywhere else in the past few centuries. Every little son and daughter had listened in fright as painful memories were handed down. Every great-grandparent entered the room to pinch the young when they became too comfortable with their home, their family, their savings in the bank.

The French say Poles are backward. The Russians say they're weak. The Swedes call them fascists, the Germans — of all people — bigots. Everyone says Poles are cold, they've closed themselves off, they've locked themselves in their churches, they are stuck in time, they simply must get on with it. The Poles reject these calumnies with faint indignation and quiet amazement because all these name-callers — and many more so-called civilized nations — have abundant Polish blood on their hands. *They* were the murderers, Poles say. *They* were the barbarians. And now *they* are the weak and the foolhardy, inviting foreign cultures to trample their own, admitting foreign crusaders to ransack their land. It will be *their* blood this time. *Open your gates wide and let it be.*

As Dumy pushed his *babka's* wheelchair toward the brick towers of St. Mary's, she commanded, annoyed, in sharp Polish, "*Spowolnic!*" Cracks in the pavement rattled the wheels and shook her fragile body in the seat, her veined claws clinging to the arms. Dumy was rushing, but there was no reason for it. Mass would begin at 5:15 and end at six no matter what time they arrived. When mass ended, he would wheel her over to Cloth Hall so she could see the jewelry and crafts, and especially the bright red silk scarf she so admired, which Dumy had promised to buy for her once he got them caught up on rent. Then he would wheel her home to their basement flat where she would fill the cat's bowl in

the closet where it hid all day, heat up her dumplings and watch television for the rest of the night. That would leave him fifteen minutes to bathe before meeting his date at 7:30. He would have time. And even if he showed up late, so what? This one would wait all night if necessary.

In Polish, Dumy's name meant pride, but he didn't feel particularly proud of anything. Besides, the meaning was mere accident. He was named after a village, a speck barely detectable on any map, close to the Ukrainian border. It was his grandmother's birthplace long before she migrated to the city. Decades later, she had accepted that she'd have to raise the boy, so she took responsibility for naming him too. Her daughter Aniya, Dumy's mother, had died of a drug overdose only a few weeks after his birth, and until then the child had gone nameless. Aniya had had no way of knowing which customer was the boy's father, so she had wanted him gone, but the fall of communism had meant the fall of abortion, so any safe form of that option was impossible, which had relieved *babka* to such an extent that, upon Dumy's birth, she traveled to Jasna Gora two hours away, newborn in hand, to pray in gratitude to the blessed black Madonna. Now, at 17 years old, Dumy had inherited his mother's livelihood, if not her chemical dependence, but he had the luxury of technology, so his work was safer, more selective, much more profitable. When he thought about his mother, which was rare, he felt sad for her, that she walked the streets, got beat up, got hooked on drugs, probably had to beg for business. It was different today. And it was different for Dumy. He had always known men desired him. Some men, in fact, he could drive crazy even before shaking a hand or saying a word. This power alone, however, would not have been enough. He'd combined it with his brain power to maximize income and minimize risk. Discretion was essential in the land of the Poles. Dumy had learned to dodge hazards, screen customers, slip discreetly into hotels and clubs for assignments.

Inside the cathedral, Dumy rested the chair in the center aisle and hugged it to the pew next to where he took a seat. The rear of the nave was packed with foreign tourists as always. Some snapped photographs with a flash, despite the signs. Many waited to catch a glimpse of the priest and the opening notes of the processional hymn, and then they'd wander back outside, content with their brief visit with the divine. This morning's hymn was "*Witaj Krolowo Nieba*" and the congregation of blond and gray heads joined in, especially *babka*, who always sang off key but surely didn't care, her faint off-key voice never rising to the ceiling vaults with the others; she was singing just for herself. And for God.

After the homily, Dumy began his silent prayers. He didn't like waiting until after the Eucharist like everyone else did; instead, he prayed while the priest prepared the sacrifice, the host. He prayed for his safety. He prayed for *babka*'s health. He prayed for enough

money to get caught up on rent. He even prayed for his grandmother's cat, that it would come out from the closet, that it would lose its fear of the humans in the house and the world at large. It was a foundling, so who knows what trauma it had endured before *babka* brought it home? But a smelly closet was no home. The cat deserved as much light and space as the humans had, so Dumy prayed that it would come out.

Then, he confessed his sins.

#

It was strange for the date, with all his millions, to have taken a room in such an ordinary hotel in a district as dull as the *Zablocie*. The bald, tall, 55-year-old man parked his car a block from the Oskar Schindler Factory, which was now a museum, and they walked another block to the nondescript, rectangular building with a plain lobby and a two-person elevator. The man's name was Arthur, and he had learned a few Polish words, including *piękne*, or "beautiful," which Dumy found endearing at first, but tiresome after Arthur overused it during sex. Dumy had taught himself enough English to converse with American and British customers. He wasn't fluent, as his on-line profile claimed, but he was proficient enough to make plans, make small talk and make love. For better or worse, Arthur wanted to make love. Most customers were cold or crude or kinky, but not Arthur, just like the last time he was here. Married to a woman in a place called Missouri, he had four daughters — Dumy clearly played the role of the son he always wanted but, thank God, never had — and was CEO of one of the world's largest scientific research companies. Just like last time, he was in town for a conference of "important people" from around the world. Unlike last time, however, all these important people were staying in the same hotel, where they conferred all day and dined at night and were discouraged from leaving the premises at all. Arthur had sneaked out and taken a second hotel room specifically to meet Dumy.

"We come here because you are embarrassed by me?" Dumy joked.

"Never," Arthur said, holding him from behind.

"Maybe tomorrow? I can be quiet like mouse."

This made Arthur radiate with pleasure, to hear this beautiful boy suggest a second night even before the first was over.

"It's a sensitive meeting this time. No outsiders allowed, but maybe I can hide you under my coat."

After a second round of sex, Dumy sat naked at the writing desk. Normally, this was when he slowly reached for his clothes to indicate the night was winding down. It had to be carefully calculated, however, because some customers wanted conversation — afterward, of course — and were willing to pay for it. Arthur was kind, so conversation wouldn't be a chore if he wanted it.

He did.

Over the next fifteen minutes, Dumy answered Arthur's questions with exaggerations and half-truths, claiming his favorite subject at school was history, his dream was to be a soccer star, he loved Grizzly bears (this part was true), he had a girlfriend once, but not at present. He talked about his faith while fingering the gold cross around his neck. He talked about his grandmother and her Parkinson's Disease — this information would surely elicit an even larger tip — and how he took care of all the grocery shopping and escorted her to Saturday vigil every week and how he wished her cat weren't so afraid.

Dumy knew that customers who wanted to talk mainly wanted to talk about themselves, so he turned the tables before too long.

"And you?" Dumy said. "Tell about...you."

Unlike last time, Arthur shared nothing about his wife or his daughters. He spoke only of his job — even scanning his phone several times — and the pressure he had been under. The conference here in Krakow was "very important" and was attended by "very important" men. They were the chief executives of the other major research and testing companies in Europe, Russia, China, America.

"You are nervous," Dumy said.

Arthur thought about it and nodded reluctantly.

"Why? Business is bad?"

"Nothing like that," he said.

That's when Arthur told Dumy about the death threats. He and his peers were used to the shouts and stunts of radical protesters, of groups like Greenpeace, opposed to research on animals. They were used to their public relations departments receiving emails from frightened children and psychotic eco-terrorists and everyone in between. The most recent spate of threats, however, were far different in their scope and consistency. These threats were as rational as they were explicit and were sent to the heads of dozens of corporations like Arthur's, all in the same week. Two months later, another round of threats was sent by the same figures to the same executives. Two months later, another round.

“What do they threat?” Dumy asked.

“Violence,” Arthur said. “Bombs. Death to our employees and to our families. You name it.”

This week’s agenda was dedicated to a collective and coordinated response. Experts in public relations, public affairs, law enforcement and crisis management were being flown in to advise on an industry-wide plan. That’s why they had taken over a hotel but were forbidden to disclose the name or location to anyone, not even their spouses.

“We even hired security guards,” Arthur said. “Together, our companies do about 90 percent of all the testing around the world.”

Dumy nodded as if he understood what that meant. He noticed Arthur staring at the scattered lights of Krakow through the window.

“They just try to scare you,” Dumy said, approaching him for a hug. “Don’t worry. I keep you safe.”

#

“How’d it go last night?” Pietrov asked from behind the bar the next day.

It was five o’clock “Happy Hour,” and Dumy had just arrived at BJ, a gay dive bar where Pietrov had worked every Sunday since graduating from university, a famous meeting place for rent boys and their clients, a neutral stop on the way to an apartment or hotel room. A half-dozen bored-looking patrons sat on stools. Just a few weeks earlier, Pietrov, who had bulging chest muscles and thick blond eyebrows that looked like they were made of wicker, had been promoted from bartender to Sunday shift manager, which merely meant he could be left to run the bar on his own. He’d gotten to know Dumy last year when he’d first started arriving with older men. Pietrov knew he was underage, but he liked him, so welcomed him. Besides, he knew Dumy had never drunk alcohol and had no plans to start.

“He’s still in love,” Dumy said without looking up from his phone, where he was checking his bank balance. “And still has lots of money.”

The other day, when Pietrov had asked how business was going, Dumy told him about his forthcoming reunion with Arthur. He’d told him that he was an American, that he was a big CEO of a big research firm in town for a big conference.

“That an engagement ring?”

Petrov had noticed the small, paper bag folded in Dumy's hand. He had stopped at Cloth Hall that afternoon and finally purchased the red silk scarf for *babka*. Two nights with Arthur was a windfall, and *babka* had waited long enough.

"They were here earlier," Petrov said sheepishly while drying a glass. "Sorry, man." He stared over Dumy's shoulder.

In had walked two characters, one of whom Dumy had known casually for years but lately tried to avoid. Unfortunately, he was walking straight toward the bar, eyes locked on Dumy's. His name was Pawel and he was the older brother of one of Dumy's school friends. Dumy had been to his home many times, had met his loud-mouthed, orange-haired mother, and had lost to him at video games once or twice. He had grown up to become an annoying animal rights activist whose preaching usually turned to shouting. He forced pamphlets in hands, stalked the still-not-converted on-line, solicited donations or rally attendance in every conversation. Pawel's mood shifted from cheerful to angry at the blink of an eye, depending on the reaction, and he sometimes appeared to be high. His dyed white hair was cut short, his face pale and unadorned, and he dressed plainly aside from chunky silver rings on all ten fingers and thick black boots so he would appear taller. His eye contact with Dumy was distracted, as if he were self-conscious in front of the second man, whom Pawel introduced as Jozue. Compared to Pawel, Jozue was much older and much taller, easily six and a half feet. He had a dozen silver rings pierced through his lower lip, tattoos on his neck and eyelids, a narrow nose whose tip pointed toward the floor, a scruffy beard that climbed up high on his cheeks, punctuated eyes from thick black eyeliner, and five-inch holes in his ear lobes, which had been stretched to the limit by gages and now dangled on his shoulders like rotten meat.

"I need your help," said Pawel.

"Want me join a march or something?" Dumy asked.

"We shouldn't talk here. Jozue's place is on the next block. Will you come?"

"I'd rather not," Dumy said.

"It's about the guy you were with last night. Just need a few minutes."

Dumy thought of Arthur in his hotel bed, waking up alone this morning, driving back to the secret hotel by himself, sneaking inside at five in the morning like a criminal. Then, Dumy thought of Petrov, who was avoiding making eye contact with him. How the hell would Dumy's clients come up in casual conversation? It felt shady.

"Come on, man. Just hear me out. You can say no."

“Fine,” Dumy said.

The street was quiet except for loiterers at the intersections.

“Petrov’s been shooting his mouth off?” Dumy asked to no one in particular.

Without responding, they walked ahead. Loud music pulsed from a second story apartment with broken windows. A girl was screaming a few houses down, maybe from laughter, but it was impossible to tell.

They arrived at a bland, box-like, concrete edifice, which looked like it came straight off the communist assembly line. Dumy followed them inside and up three sets of stairs with flickering light bulbs. He knew Pawel was harmless, but this Jozue was another story. He wished he had brought his knife. Just in case.

Inside was a studio apartment with one window, a bed, a desk and a bench. The furniture, however, was practically invisible next to the ossified wallpaper. From floor to ceiling, every inch of wall space was covered with bones and skulls and horns, some tiny, as if from a bird, some enormous, as if from a bull. They appeared to be glued together, organized in no particular pattern. The room was a catacomb, a font of death, a necropolis of the natural world, animals staring and pointing and castigating all who enter. When Dumy partially closed his eyes to blur his vision, the walls looked like black and white checkerboard, but the animals sprung back to death when he opened wide again. A few dominant, disk-shaped bones — the pelvises of extra-large mammals — caught his attention down close to the floor. They looked fresh and durable, not on the brink of disintegration like the rest. They were either fake or fresh off the carcass.

“I thought you were animal rights warriors,” Dumy said simply to fill the silence. “All these guys are dead.”

He was surprised there was no smell.

“Bones are nature,” Pawel said coyly. “Jo’s a naturalist.”

Jozue nodded, studying his wall. “*When one dies, so dies the other.*” His voice was a soft baritone, strong but nonthreatening. Dumy recognized the words.

Pawel gestured for Dumy to sit on the bench. “Listen,” he said. Immediately down to business.

Pawel did most of the talking. For several years, Jozue had led a coalition — he called it an “army” of “comrades” — called Promised Land, which was dedicated to ending the exploitation of animals for human profit, specifically the breeding of animals for laboratory testing, and certain death, in food, drugs, cosmetics and other industries. He had

organized dozens of protests and marches and graffiti campaigns all around Poland, which is how he and Pawel had met. Dumy recalled the group's frequent stunts, often right outside St. Mary's, always drowned out by jeers. According to Pawel, however, grassroots campaigning had proved feckless: the problem was the entire system that allowed the world's corporations to outsource their cruelty to testing labs. There was a whole economy of animal production and destruction, the treatment of lives as objects, the dismissal of pain as instinct, the annihilation of sadness and compassion as unnecessary human responses that could be conditioned out of us for the "greater good."

Dumy had listened respectfully. Pawel was clearly knowledgeable and extremely articulate, but it was Jozue's observation of Pawel's speech that was slightly unsettling. His eyes were green and calm and didn't blink once as he listened, but all his muscles visibly contracted up and down his body. As if he were an animal below the neck, all his animal instincts warring against the human reason in his head, and reason was losing.

Pawel continued: "A dozen men, all the guys who run the largest testing labs, are here in Krakow. Your customer last night: he's one of them. He's here for a global conference. They're all here. The world's largest breeder of dogs for torture. The top importer of primates for conducting experiments that make them go crazy, pull out all their hair, eat their own flesh. They're all here for this meeting. We've known about it. We just haven't known where."

Dumy nodded, then looked down at his sneakers.

"And you want me to tell you," he said.

"Please," Pawel confirmed.

"We're not going there. He took a room downtown for...our meeting."

"Are you seeing him again tonight?"

Dumy didn't answer.

"Ask him where the conference is."

"He won't tell me. He won't even tell his wife. It's all top secret because you've got them scared."

"He told you that?" Pawel asked eagerly.

"That's what the conference is about. How to respond."

Pawel and Jozue seemed to share a beam of pride.

“You’re the ones threatening to kill ‘em?” Dumy asked. “What’s your plan, anyway? Why the hell do you need their hotel?”

The men glanced at each other calmly. Jozue seemed to nod permission to Pawel.

“Surveillance,” Pawel said.

“Surveillance? Of what?”

“We want to get in there and get undercover video of the meeting. Footage of private conversations, planning sessions. We need to get their strategy.”

“Undercover? No offense, but you two aren’t exactly the type that blends in.”

Jozue cracked a peaceful smile through his whiskers.

“Let us handle that,” Pawel said. “We just need to get in to plant a few cameras, some recording equipment.”

“Nah,” said Dumy, preparing to rise from the bench. “I don’t think so, boys.”

“Dumy.”

It was the soft baritone of Jozue. It was a plea for him to reconsider. The tall, quiet man and his bearded face replaced Pawel now, coming close and crouching before Dumy with sad, longing eyes.

“They drop toxic chemicals in the eyes of cats and make them worthless,” he said, then closed his eyes for a moment as if to picture it. “God said, *when you sacrifice a blind animal, is that not wrong?*”

So, Pawel had told him that Dumy’s a Bible thumper. *Say it in the voice of God*, Dumy could hear Pawel saying.

“They implant food restriction devices into dogs so they become so emaciated they can no longer walk.” This time Jozue’s eyes remained open, so Dumy looked closely into the green pools and discovered that through the layers of paraphernalia, the punctured flesh, the woolly beard, he was handsome.

“God said, *when you sacrifice a lame animal, is that not wrong?*”

Dumy nodded but wasn’t conscious of doing it.

Jozue tapped his phone and held it up for Dumy to watch. Somber music played before the first image appeared: undercover video footage of a trash can filled with dead piglets, flies crawling on their faces, necks snapped, unwanted inventory at a corporate lab. Next was a

metal stall filled with pigs, one on its side in the middle, squealing and kicking, suffering an unspecified injury or disease while the other pigs charged at it, bit at it, graphics stating, in Polish, “Diseased pig left defenseless for 40 hours.” Next was a counter containing a row of enclosed hot plates, half a dozen mice released in each enclosure as the dial is turned up as high as 60 degrees centigrade, slowly, over time lapse, the mice scratching at the enclosure walls, standing on hind feet, their squeaks more like screams.

Dumy’s heart dropped into his stomach, and he was beginning to feel ill. He brushed away the phone.

“Who...” said Jozue slowly. “Who are they to inflict cruelty?”

Jozue tilted his head so one ear lobe nestled in his beard. His stare penetrated Dumy’s resistance without blinking as if asking Dumy to let his reason fall away and instead embrace something more like love, like spirit.

“When one dies, so dies the other,” Jozue whispered.

Dumy felt another shudder just thinking about the charging pigs. And the burning mice.

“Enough,” he said. He rose and exited.

#

Babka was napping when Dumy returned home. He pulled a carton of milk from the icebox and poured some in a glass for himself, then poured some in a small bowl. In a second bowl he poured dried cat food. Normally, he would open the coat closet door and place the bowls inside, and the contents would be gone in the morning. Tonight, he decided to set them in the hallway, six feet away from the closet door. Maybe tonight could be different. Maybe the cat would leave the dark on its own for once. Dumy slid his back down the wall, sat on the floor and sighed. The bag with *babka*’s scarf hung on a doorknob a few feet away, the tail of red fabric dripping over the side. He had about two hours before he was due to meet Arthur. He thought about the pigs. That one stuck in his mind the most. The way they left the maimed one inside the pen and just watched as it was attacked. And the mice jumping on the hot plate; thank God there was no audio on that one. Thank God. Dear God. My God, what do I do? *Trust in the Lord with all your heart and lean not on your own understanding.*

Then something shocking happened.

The closet door inched open, as if moved by a breeze or a ghost, and out walked the cat. It didn't look timid or afraid. On the contrary, it glided over to the bowl of milk as if it were nothing unusual. As the cat lapped, Dumy studied its profile, its little cone-shaped ears, noticing the brilliant orange stripes buried deep in its silver-gray fur as if for the first time. He smelled a fresh litter box deposit inside the closet and made a note to clean it later. The cat took a break from the milk, and rather than move on to food, it glided toward Dumy and rubbed its head against his thigh. It was purring. Is it possible the cat had never purred before? Never in its life? This was a fresh sound, never produced before, never heard before. A feeling never felt before. Dumy scratched between its ears, then retrieved the phone from his pocket and dialed.

"I don't want you recording Arthur. I don't want you anywhere near his room with your equipment or your cameras. I don't want him showing up on any of your footage. I don't want you embarrassing him or hurting him. Stay away from him and we can do this. Otherwise, fuck you."

Pawel was silent on the other end. He was taken aback. Finally, "Thank you," Pawel said. "Agreed, of course. But how will we know him? We might bug some of the rooms, so how will we know which room is his?"

As if it had waved for his attention, Dumy spied the red scarf peeking from the paper bag. *Babka* could wait one more day.

#

Dumy had arranged for Arthur to pick him up at BJ, but rather than waiting inside, he stood on the sidewalk, hands in pockets, wearing his customary blank, uninterested expression to avoid being mistaken for a common hooker. Across Podolsk Avenue and down a half block idled Jozue's car, a green sedan at least 20 years old; he and Pawel had been waiting 20 minutes already, eager to pull out and follow at the first sign. Jozue had flipped on his yellow parking lights, which annoyed Dumy as they were unnecessary and might attract attention.

Less than a minute later, Dumy was seated inside a silver, four-door Toyota rental car with Arthur's right hand on his knee.

"You can change the music if you want," Arthur said.

“It’s good.” It was a soft male vocalist, an American singer Dumy had never heard before. “I want to change plans. I want to see the nice hotel.”

Arthur smiled, surprised at Dumy’s directness.

“I don’t know. We’ll have more privacy at—”

“You ashamed?”

Arthur laughed half-heartedly.

“Please let me see it,” Dumy whispered as he leaned in and began sucking on Arthur’s ear and stroking him between his legs. The purpose of this wasn’t only to delight Arthur, but also to steal a discreet glance behind the car. Jozue’s car was no longer alone. Two more cars and a van had appeared behind him, idling and waiting, the four vehicles prepared to travel as a unit. Dumy hadn’t thought to ask if other *comrades* would be joining, but that looked to be the case and made him more nervous.

The drive seemed to go by quickly, or maybe Dumy’s heart was racing. They were no longer in Krakow but had entered a neighboring town with several tall church steeples and some sort of public building made out of brick. They drove through the central square, which was small and quiet, a few diners or drinkers exiting restaurants.

“It’s called the Skawinka,” Arthur disclosed coyly.

“On the river?” Dumy asked.

“Near it.”

“That’s the name of the river,” Dumy said.

Arthur took a side street that curved a half mile through rows of box-like, single-family homes and then another half mile through increasingly thick forest until taking a left into a driveway lined by enormous pine trees on both sides.

At the end of the driveway was a small parking lot to the right, surrounded by woods, as was the inn, a Gothic structure of stone walls, arched windows and wrought-iron tracery, a tower on the far end and an unmanned valet station at the front entrance, a small spotlight on “Skawinka” carved in stone above the door. Architecturally, it might have fit in nicely in historic Krakow, but out here, it felt like driving into a dream.

“Lovely, isn’t it?” Arthur asked as he parked. “Apparently very few people know about this place.”

As they crossed a footbridge from the parking lot toward the inn, Dumy glanced toward the driveway. Fortunately, no headlights were approaching right now. Jozue must have pulled over to plot their approach.

It was already after eleven o'clock, so the lobby — small with a vermilion carpet and iron sconces — was almost abandoned. A middle-aged woman stood behind the reception desk, barely acknowledging their arrival. A short, stocky man in a uniform sat on a cushioned bench on the far side of the lobby. He wore a holster with a pistol and a radio. Another uniformed man stood at the end of a hallway that separated the lobby from the rear door to the hotel. Both men looked bored. The hired security.

“Two-sixteen please,” said Arthur nonchalantly, and the woman handed him his silver key with a white ribbon for a key chain. Arthur was acting supremely confident, even though Dumy knew he must have been terrified of bumping into a business associate. There’s only one explanation for a man bringing a strange teen-aged boy to his hotel room.

They passed a large conference room, its doors propped open to reveal rows of empty chairs in the dark. They walked up one noisy flight of stairs, ventilation equipment roaring from the other side of the wall. When Arthur finally unlocked his door, it didn’t take five seconds before he was pawing and kissing and growling, so they fell onto the bed.

When the first act was finished, Arthur went to use the bathroom while Dumy waited in the dark. The window blinds were open, letting in the gauze of moonlight that made it through the canopy of trees just outside. The hotel looked smaller inside, had no more than 15 or 20 rooms, and was quiet as if every guest other than Arthur was already sound asleep. Dumy pictured these guests sleeping in their sheets, and he felt his heart drop in his chest. He wished he’d taken more time to think about it. He could have given Jozue and Pawel the name of the hotel tomorrow. It was too quiet now, like the building itself was sleeping, not prepared for pranks, like everything here was too sacred to withstand the disruption that was coming.

Naked from the waist down, Dumy removed the red scarf from his jacket pocket, quietly opened the door and tied it to the knob on the other side. He walked back to bed, feeling very uneasy. It was more than uneasiness; he was suddenly afraid. What had he he done? He’d opened the metaphorical gate for Jozue and Pawel and their comrades to pass right through. They were coming to violate this sacred place. He didn’t know how exactly, but they were on their way.

To calm himself, Dumy recalled the images which had so upset him just hours earlier. The monkeys. The pigs. Recalling their grotesque circumstances and the evil that exists in human beings to afflict them in that way was a helpful reminder. It was evil. Evil was acting

upon those poor creatures and just because the perpetrators were asleep in their cozy beds in this silent, moonlit inn, a brook babbling under the footbridge outside, that doesn't erase their sins.

Arthur returned, smelling of cologne. He came from behind to hold Dumy in his arms, but just as he began to squeeze his nipples, Dumy said in his broken English: "I wish you to stop."

So, Arthur did.

"Not that," Dumy said. He turned around to find the man's nervous face. He looked as if he'd been caught misbehaving.

"The testing. I wish you can stop. I wish you can find a different kind of work."

Arthur may have been touched by Dumy's earnestness, but what he expressed outwardly was contrition. This wasn't the first time this request had been made of him. He closed his eyes and leaned back against the headboard, inhaling deeply. He had a big heart, that much Dumy knew. He was sensitive and he was a good man, too good for those videos on Jozue's phone.

"I will," he said. And Dumy believed him.

After having sex again, Dumy laid his head on the pillow next to Arthur's and pulled up the sheet to cover them both. A moment later, Arthur was snoring, which made Dumy laugh silently. He too was tired, so he closed his eyes and pictured monkeys in a tree, pigs snorting happily in a pool of mud, sheep grazing on a hillside, *babka's* cat no longer trapped in the dark, stepping forward, looking both ways, feeling suddenly ready to explore outside.

#

The news reports said it happened at 2:35 am. That was when Jozue and Pawel and six other activists — terrorists, the news called them — had entered the hotel with Ruger rifles, killing the security guards instantly but sparing the desk clerk because when they demanded she give them copies of all the room keys, she did so without hesitation.

They split into two groups — Jozue's group took the second-floor keys, Pawel's the third-floor keys — and marched from room to room, pumping bullets into each man (and one woman) who they found inside. Some were sitting up in bed, dazed or frozen, others were hiding in the bathroom. Iron bars made the windows useless for escape. One Chinese man

had managed to flee his third-floor room at the end of the corridor, but Pawel gave chase and picked him off outside. He felt satisfied because he knew exactly who that man was and exactly which company he ran.

With a corpse in each room, some nearly blown apart by bullets, the hotel smelled like fresh blood. On the second floor, the overhead lights flickered and buzzed as Jozue did a final check to make sure every guest was dead, but, as he'd promised, he walked wordlessly past room 216 where the red scarf hung from the doorknob. Had he opened that door, he would have seen two human beings still alive, one a grown man, his naked body on the bed, draped in a sheet, shaken and muttering, the other a teen-aged boy, standing naked and erect, statuesque in the moonlight and studying the door, whispering "We'll be saved" over and over until there were no more voices in the corridor, no more footsteps within earshot, the intruders now walking back to their vehicles.

We'll be saved.

We'll be saved.

We'll be saved.

I knew. I knew they weren't just coming to spy. Didn't I know? I must have known it. I knew it. But I couldn't have known it. Is that the smell? Death has a smell. We'll be saved. Don't cry. Arthur, don't cry now. Yes, be calm. You want me to leave? Is that what you mean? The news will get out. Yes, the news will get out that you were found with a male hooker. We'll be saved. Arthur, you're crying again. Sobbing, really. Are we ready to open the door? Am I? Let's open the door to help the others. To make sure they're gone. Here's the door. The knob is shaking. It's in my grasp and it won't stop shaking. Let's open it wide. The smell is harsher out here. Something smells like smoke, like bullets. Whose body is that below the splash of red on the wall? Arthur, do you know him? Arthur? Don't worry, I'm leaving. I can't get caught here. You won't get caught, don't worry. Stop crying. You'll be saved. The floor is calling. Let me slide down onto the floor. Let me sit here just for a moment and see this and smell this and maybe fall asleep just for a moment, a long moment because I still don't understand what's happened. Babka. Your scarf. It feels very soft. No wonder you loved it. I'll bring it to you. I'll bring it home for you once I've slept for a moment because I don't understand what is happening or where I am or where I need to go. Arthur tells me to leave. I'll be saved. He'll be saved. But I'm so tired and need to close my eyes for a moment because I don't understand.

As Dumy's mind tried unsuccessfully to grasp this sudden split in reality, as his shock became dizziness, as he fell into a kind of trance right there in the doorway, and as the four vehicles disappeared down the driveway, a wind arrived outside. The treetops began

swaying against the moon, the crickets began chirping again as they rested on the ground. It was as if the earth had reopened to all its moving creatures — the birds of the sky, the fish of the sea, the beasts and the cattle, everything that creeps on the earth — and they all knew that cruelty had taken a blow, that they were well stewarded tonight, that all of creation was alive again, and they saw that it was good.

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