



willie smith | **submachinegun consciousness**

Semantikon.com presents

SUBMACHINEGUN CONSCIOUSNESS

A Novella by Willie Smith



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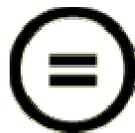
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Chapter 1

It's one of those nights I'm drinking alone in my basement studio; snapping polaroids of my hemorrhoids, bending over backwards to allow time all the time in the world to kill itself.

For the moment I've convinced the functionaries I'm disabled – unfit to work. Even the therapist has become at my hard head so pissed he last week told me to beat it; leave him alone; go home; subsist off my check.

I'm faking it. I'm a spy. Insane Welfare recipient my cover. In reality, I'm hip-deep in top secret doo-doo. If I told you, you'd hafta put down this book and steal something else. Suffice it to say it has everything to do with those behind the lines reading between the lines.

I miss the days of bulb release. Today you gotta set the timer. Get X amount of secs to get into position. Oh, you can program the secs. Once you create a password, override the default, study the tutorial in what to update – but who's got the time?

Default seems set for three, maybe five secs. Damn good camera, actually. Picked up in a pawn shop for three months worth of checks – stiffed the rent, skimped on grub, aggressively panhandled; other austerities a spy's gotta perform to get by.

With a release, you got all the time in the world to get down on all fours. Balance the drink on the back of your skull. Reach around with both hands. Spread cheeks. Slowly squeeze bulb between teeth.

I'm actually an artist. Tell myself I'm a double agent working for creatures from space. A ruse to get the subconscious concentrated on art, while my so-called mind art in space, looking for ways to kill time.

I not only spread, you see: I *manipulate* the rroids. Distort puckers into masks. Tie swellings up into Xmas trees. Flocked and intertwined with scarlet satin ribbon, topped with a tinsel-decked purple angel. Twist 'em into statuettes of General Grant. Marshall veins into an instrument a kinda cross between a flea circus zither and a cockroach ocarina. Construct Colin Powell voodoo dolls; *thrill* to stick pins...

Then a scene from the bar on Bandersnatch materializes. Bandersnatch being a prostitute planet orbiting a black hole in the outermost underarm of the Calcutta Galaxy. I've been piecing together this scene all night. Actually, of course, I'm agent Aleph Null, secretly gathering...

Somebody out in the hall bangs on the door. I spit the bulb out of my mouth. Then remember they don't have bulbs anymore. Look down at what I actually expectorated: the toothpick I use for fine detail. I contemplate the roundhead Diamond, softened on one end with saliva, thinking: The manager? Not something Aleph Null wants to think, as the manager is a saboteur on the Time Conspiracy payroll...

Plan is to sidle up to one of these eight-limbed Andromedans installed on a stool, six elbows on the bar. Peddle her polaroids of masks portraying Mary Dolorosa. Art works best when reality breaks in...

That my agent at the door? This *Bandersnatch* a potboiler intended to keep me in film and toothpicks; prostituting myself to keep going on the side the real art.

Get to my feet, pull up pants, thinking: Now must moisten new pick, because one on floor stuck to it dust mouse.

When I – ripped with sudden panic it’s a functionary on an unannounced home visit – open the door...

My breath catches. Hurries out in a gasp of relief...

Only Art Rambo, the dealer upstairs, come to sell me an AK-47.

Art, like most inhabitants of this many-storied slum, doesn’t have a real job. He pretends to be an artist. Sculpts in papier-mache various attempts at lifesize automatic weapons. In reality, Art sells dope. Small time. Enough for his habit, the rent, clothes to arouse the envy of a used-car dealer; claims to have upstairs big screen tv. I’m not sure what kind of dope. I never take drugs. I’m careful even to flush my medication. Trust me, I’ve got the most anti-psychotic toilet in town.

“Actually,” he anticipates my mistake, “this is not my usual ’47, but a mock-up of the exact Thompson Russian troops packed marching into Berlin. Note the modified flip-up rear sight; this a weapon intended for so much more than simple close-in work.”

I’m staring at my fisheye faces on the mirror sunglasses perched on the fat nose above his welltrimmed kinky black beard. Rambo’s head becomes a one gallon aquarium. I tread water – while he blabs – ready to snap up grub.

He never exhibits in galleries. He is against commercialism. Totally. He is committed totally to door-to-door art. I can have the gun for \$25. Tax free. He is totally against tax.

“Say,” he frowns, eyebrows wriggling like arms rolling up sleeves prior to dipping into the bowl, “you OK?”

“Yuh.”

“Well,” he shifts in his snakeskin boots. “I wondered – you never seem to buy drugs. You OK for drugs?”

Goes on to say, Greg, the poet up in 301, mentioned I haven’t been paying my rent. Rambo is concerned. He knows I’m on State help, getting a regular check. He worries I might have too much money laying around. The neighborhood, this building in particular, totally infested with thieves.

He means the apartment manager – Greg, the fifty-something recovered alcoholic; known upon occasion to put entire coffee shops to sleep with recitations of rhymes detailing his experiences with women at AA dances.

Agent Aleph Null draws from the pocket of his soiled flannel shirt a toothpick. Lodges same between incisors. Softly closes door on dealer, who continues barking dully through the flimsy wood, “A collector’s item, an investment! Look, I’ll give it to you for twenty; toss in – you don’t tell anybody in the building – half a rock. I’m talking cocaine, man. What – you fucking *crazy*?”

I drop trou. Shuffle over between the mirrors. Settle back down on elbows and knees.

Reach around with the Diamond. Start to etch protruded veins – inspired by the moment – into a Tommy gun. Painstaking replica, down to flip-up rear sight. Can hardly wait to set the timer, take of end product couple snaps.

Staring into mirror staring into mirror, guiding the pick, pain bursts. Van Gogh's ear got nothin' on me!

Then the phone rings. I don't own a phone. But sometimes inside my head explodes a ring like a bulldog followed by a string of ladyfingers. I pick up.

It's Sideways Eight, Aleph Null's boss. He's congratulating Null on how exquisitely Time is getting killed. He promises time off soon. Maybe vacation secret identity Southern France; Arles, if desired.

Thing is, even though I hold the phone in my mind's hand, Sideways' ebullience distracts me from the pick – scratching final touch on a flash suppressor. This a Thompson ideal for night sneak attack.

BANG! The door flies open.

SPLAT! The chain lock – ripped off the frame – crashes into the opposite wall not ten feet away. \$80 a month, even Section 8, doesn't buy a lot of space in this town.

Art barges in, screaming, "I won't leave you alone with all that MONEY! Something could HAPPEN!"

Rambo stands about five-seven. Thick wavy hair. Weighs maybe two hundred. The body, not the hair. His entrance me shook up. I jump off the floor. Nearly trip over pants around ankles. Swarthy complexion. Arab, Jew, Greek, Hispanic – I forget. I hardly know the clown. Just a building fixture. Figure he thinks the same of me.

His jaw drops. He's speechless. I neglect to pull up the pants. We're both boys. This is my house. If I make no move to cover myself, maybe he'll stay mute long enough for me to figure out how he figures in – time conspiracy shock troop? Bandersnatch pimp? Something I ate, or rather didn't, as I do now recall nothing to eat since that yesterday morning dumpster bearclaw...

He snuffles. Causing my faces in the sunglasses to jiggle. Pinches his nose. Glances – drawing away hand – at the bloody, white-powder-dotted slime on his thumb. And I begin to realize this character might in reality be Sideways Eight. Null has never met Eight – they just talk on the phone inside each other's heads.

"Uh..." Art slaps the snot off on a seam of his plaid polyester slacks. "You OK?"

The Andromedan resembles Mona up in 307 – the pre-menopausal waitress who is the model for *Carla* in so many of the manager's meandering lyrics. The bartender is Null working undercover.

Now, thanks to the break-in, I can work Art in as Mona's pimp; which, in reality, when she can't come up with the coke money, he likely indeed does do for.

Actually Mona is a folk singer. Waitressing at the Edgewater her day job. She hasn't played a gig since last year that time in the coffee shop when Greg interrupted with a sestina and she threatened to kill him with her guitar.

Although her exoskeleton gleams obsidian black, and her body recalls a six-foot, upright vinegaroon, she does have Mona's long narrow face, defaulted to the expression of an early medieval *Dolorosa*.

I saw her smile once, fleetingly, when some cop busted a goth jaywalker out front. And I hear her features sprang into a wolfbitch snarl when she came after Greg with her Gibson.

I never talk to anybody, you understand. Null gathers all this data from the manager when I send Aleph up to pay the rent, and the exdrunk holds forth, trampling out the vintage of the grapevine to any ear not totally detached.

I'll have Rambo sell me – in the character of the bartender (played by Null) – the Andromedan. I always wanted to make it with some spineless stinky space bitch.

She blew vinegar smoke in my face. Lollered pincers at the zinc. Muttered in guttural extragalactic coloratura, “307,” rendezvous for the transaction.

“What are you *doing!*” blurts the real Art – the pusher under the sunglasses.

Null pushes me aside. “Look!” he spits at the bearded face. “I'm photographing my asshole, OK?”

“What?” Art steps back. Cheeks flush. Brow sweat beads. His boots squeak. The coke changing gears, ripping out the clutch. “Oh, sure. Yeah, uh, like... you a photographer?”

Null wags a finger inches from the silvered lenses. “I'm an agent fighting time. I hate time. I hate people who DON'T hate time!”

Rambo grins, “I knew you were some kinda artist. Dude like you make any money off that camera?” He points to the polaroid mounted on a cinderblock between full-length mirrors leaned against facing walls.

“I don't do ART!” Null screams. “I KILL TIME!”

Rambo backs toward the door. Clears throat, swallows dry spit. “Cuz if you do, and you need a manager – I'm up in 105. I know photography totally. One of my regulars is an agent buys for all the galleries downtown. Got some killer blow – y'innarested?”

Null and I, and whoever Null in fact is, draw ourselves up to our full six-foot-six. We customarily stoop down here in the studio. Even though the ceiling is a good seven feet high.

We tense the face into what shrinks call alexithymia. Textbook says you gotta be clinically nuts to be able to do this. But I practiced. I'm good.

Sculpted alexithymia once onto a rrhoid. Dubbed it *The Mask of Death*. Got the photo around here somewhere. But it's blurry. I was so excited at the accuracy of the mask, couldn't hold still for the shoot. Art's like that: emotions choke it.

“Oh.” Art's bushy eyebrows arched above the glasses betray the widening of his chickenshit eyes. “I totally understand.” He whirls on heels. Disappears through door dangling on hinges.

The phone is ringing. It's Sideways Eight. He wants to know why I hung up. I hand the device to Null, who explains he had to attend to an urgency. Sideways mumbles something, then states audibly – suspiciously Rambo-like – how, if I never tried cocaine, can I know if I'm *truly* crazy?

Null and I stand dumbfounded. Sideways chuckles, hangs up.

“Because,” I mutter, closing the broken door, “Section Eight is military for crazy, and that's what they call this housing program I'm on because I'm crazy: Section Eight.”

Maybe it's an inner psychic echo, or actual mice inside the real wall, but think I hear, in response, Art's sarcastic sideways chuckle. I listen to the taunt slowly fade, till I can't tell which came first: me the chicken, or him egging me on.

Well... I could hock the camera. Get the dough buy enough coke get so strung out *really* crazy. Compare that state to this, where I know I'm sane (secretly sane). Sane as... that righthander pitched with Warren Spahn... Boston... '47... *Johnny Sain!* There... my memory is intact – I'm Sain.

My eye wanders to the cinderblock – makeshift camera stand – beside which I left the aqua plastic drinking glass full of tomato juice and rubbing alcohol. A roach has crawled in; died. The inch corpse floats bellyup in wavelets people upstairs stomping about create.

No matter. Just a prop. The Andromedan's bloody Mary. Bitch upstairs now with a customer. Short stocky greaseball – sunglasses, Moroccan leather jacket, rattlesnake boots; on R&R from construction of the flywheel. The galacticwide effort to tap the black hole's energy for commercial purposes. The millennial project to erect a wheel nearly three lighthours in diameter. The rim to pierce the planet's core. So Bandersnatch will orbit the hole like a bead on a titanium bracelet. Thereby providing an outpost not only amply stocked with prostitutes, but also doing yeoman service as a repository for the silenced imagination of the universe.

I don't drink. For the same reason I avoid drugs. Alcohol upsets the mind; alters the personality. Besides, I'm on duty – pretending to be Null working his cover at the Space Bar, while in reality creating art with the rhoids.

The Space Bar purports to be a writer's hangout. A port for any typist. Bandersnatch lousy with keyboard junkies. There's one over there – in the mirror. Tall lanky goof with the stony stare, cadaver cheeks, pursed alabaster lips.

They exiled the scribblers here. After synapsectomy. Cut brain connections between tongue, fingers, throat. So each sits alone at the bar or at a table out on the darkened floor, thinking compulsively plots, scripts, scenarios; forever frustrated in word.

Other orbs orbiting other collapsars (other name for black holes) hold the sterilized artists and musicians; the cosmos free now of lies, myths, fables. Nothing out there but frigid fact.

And these writers, and the likewise surgically-silenced painters, folk singers, sculptors, so forth – orbiting other collapsars – so goes the plot – slave toward one unified goal: the extinction of time.

Null, masquerading as laconic bartender Johnny Sain, takes the Andromedan's untouched drink into the kitchenette. Dumps the bloody Isopropyl into the sink. Grins to himself, giving the glass a rinse, stacking aqua plastic cylinder in rack: Without stories, music, images – time withers. Art the only barrier between today and eternity. One slays the Muse on the threshold. Oh – whither goest thou, Johnny?

“Creativity,” Sideways butts in, voice crackling from a bug inside a spigot, “is the art of remembering the future.”

Himself a pitcher, Johnny thinks, eyeing the buckled legs of the dead roach caught in the drainbasket: Why not fix in advance a pitcher of bloodies? (Take a picture?) Improve the Mary? Substitute for tomato V-8, maybe Snappy Tom; back there a bit use M-80 for bulldog (re-image fuse)? Or wait for that prisonship full of poets scheduled – at the end of Chapter Eight – to arrive without warning?

With so many choices, he decides on nothing. Wanders back out into the living cubicle, lit by bare bulb overhead. Pops into mind, nature calls.

Steps into dwarf bathroom. Raises seat. Unzips. Cradles unit. Allows flow to commence, thinking:

Null turns back into the scaled-down model for the Space Bar, thinking: The end of art is the end of art. The end of time – the start of space.

Wordlessly they decide to themselves – above splashing urine – to send out to pawn the camera Johnny Sain.

Chapter 2

Across the nine square feet of big screen opened a cable tv rerun of *Secret Agent*. To the theme music Art Rambo played air guitar, seated in an orange plastic chair that had been 1965's idea of comfort in outer space.

To his right Greg hunched uncomfortably in a beige metal folding chair that looked stolen from a high school gymnasium. Under a stem-in-the-center black beret loomed his ruined pumpkin of a face. As a final chord echoed electrically, he raised the remote like a Raid can; killed the volume; leaving the visuals to plead their snazzy, slightly sleazy cause to a deaf audience of two – forty years in the future.

"I send you downstairs," Greg frowned, returning the remote to the bare floor beside his chair, "to spy on my delinquent tenant, and all the info you come back with is now the goof thinks he's some kinda *artist*?"

"Photographer. He blew the money on a camera. Computerized polaroid. Maybe two K new."

"He's taking pictures of his..." Greg winced, "anus?"

"Yeh, man. It's kinda cool. I think he markets the pix to medical book publishers and such. He's got some kinda funky disease. I never saw a butt so overgrown with weird sores."

"Could we change the topic?" Greg creaked in the chair. "Feces ain't my favorite discussion material."

"You were accusing me of falling down on the job," Art shrugged. "I never miss a trick, man. I am totally attentive to detail. Besides, no feces were involved. Hey – you wanna know what else I glimpsed in that mirror before he jumped up? I'm talking colors: bile yellow, pus green, bloodblister purple..."

"I can't listen to this disgusting shit! Look, lemme recite this work in progress I got about Mona. I'm gonna get her to set it to music. I think you'll like it. Get your mind off that nut down there anyway."

"I think you already repeated this one for me."

"Impossible," Greg hoisted his plastic of geyser water from the floor beside the remote. "I just composed it last night. I ain't seen you since lunch yesterday. God, wasn't that salami wretched!"

"Don't get me started," Art said to the tv, as men in suits stabbed one another in the vest. Then a double-agent in a Fedora began gunning down everyone in sight. They were out in a dark alley. Ricochets holed garbage cans. A helicopter rotoed overhead, blasted down a search. The gunman fled across the border. The electric guitar crazed the *Secret Agent Man* theme (only this part Greg and Art don't hear, just me creating it down here). "Next time you wanna hire me for a job, we meet in a place where I can digest the food, OK, Pops?"

"OK – this is it!" Greg leaped to his feet, knocked over the folding chair in the process. "I call it *Song In Progress*."

He took two steps left. Brought himself up between Art and the tv. Gazed into Rambo's eyes, which fought for peeks at the screen. Raised his arms palm up:

“So cool is the dude,
His house got mildewed.
He aimed for the lewd,
But only got rude.”

Greg regained his chair, first picking it up and clanking it out of its collapse. “Ya like? It’s hot off the press. Song about a black guy wants to imitate Elvis. The old triple-reverse-o-roony. I mean, it’s just a start. But once I show it to Mona and we sit down and work out some bugs together...”

“I tell you Mona and me are partners?” Art frowned at muzzle flashes star the night of a parkinglot behind a Monte Carlo casino.

Greg’s head snapped around. His thick, half-gone-to-flab neck muscles rippled, squinched. The apartment manager knifed eyes at the dope dealer. “What you talking about?”

Rambo slipped out of his shirt pocket and plopped over his vicious little pig eyes the sunglasses. He snickered, head kept pointed at the tube.

The manager stood up carefully. “Is there something I don’t know?” Faced the profile of the television viewer. “Or haven’t been told?”

“Relax, man. It’s a joke. Just stringing you along. I’m not porking your babe.”

“Well, I... I mean she’s not,” Greg slumped back on the chair, forced himself to become engrossed in the tapestry of black-and-white violence six feet from his nose. “I don’t care what she does. What you and Mona got goin ain’t none of this old drunk’s business.”

“Don’t be so dramatic. It’s the movies, Pops. I’m her agent.” He flashed Greg a smile; revolved his gaze back on the screen. “I’m in contact with a producer down in West Seattle.”

“Is it...?”

“Sure,” Art nodded at the Secret Agent Man using a chrome Zippo to light a cigarette, then firing a bullet from the derringer in disguise. “It’s porn. Only kinda opening in town at the moment. It’s a start.”

“Ain’t she too, uh... too...?”

“At forty-three she’s perfect. This is *mature* amateur. A new niche in the industry got created less than a year ago. Dude out in West Seattle invented the concept. Cutting edge, my man.”

Cut to the conning tower of a surfaced sub. Two officers in smart Soviet uniforms scan through binoculars the horizon; on which finally – about two seconds television time – appears the fattening dot of an approaching chopper.

Greg squinted at the action as though himself staring through binoculars, “Why you telling me this?”

“She’s your girlfriend – you got a right to know.”

“I wish,” the Secret Agent descends like a tuxedo spider on a rope from the chopper belly, “*wish* she was my girlfriend.”

“OK – she’s your *fantasy*. All the more romantic. Love, similar to art, is founded on irreality.”

“So...,” the famous actor sprints in Florsheims across the deck of the sub. “This a lesbian film?”

“Nah. This is her first appearance. Straightforward boy-meets-girl. Not even any anal.”

“Who’s the, uh...”

“Lucky guy? Well...,” Art turned his mirror-blotted eyes on the hepatic ex-lush, “no reason I can’t be also *your* agent.”

“I meant no such thing.” Dodging bullets from above, the suave spy hustles up a dozen steel rungs to the top of the tower. “I’m in love with Mona. And I happen to think porn degrading. I don’t begrudge people making a living. Don’t get me wrong. Folks gotta pay the rent. I’m in favor of porn above starvation. But on a personal level...”

“You could probably recite a poem in the film,” Art said to the tv. “I already told the producer I know this wellhung mature poet.”

“It ain’t but eight inches,” Greg chuckled, pleasantly losing all consciousness of what transpired on – even though he persisted staring at –the screen. “Say, you serious about me reciting a poem in this movie?”

“What?” Patrick McGoohan pitched a Russian officer into the Mediterranean; returned to karate chop ballet with the remaining Red.

“Listen, Art – this could mean a lot. I mean, if enough people could see me recite... I’ll cut you in handsomely on any of the take directly resulting from this cinematic production, rest assured.”

“Oh, that’s it...” McGoohan removed something from a hip pocket of the corpse he had just created by appropriating the officer’s luger, then shooting the officer pointblank in the stomach. “That’s just the point – there is no take. Male actors in the industry don’t get payed. I mean, they do – they get free sex; ain’t no free lunch. Totally. You’re old enough to know that by now.”

“Wait a minute here: two items: 1) I gotta get payed, because I don’t give away my poetry free in no goddamn movie; 2) I need a disguise – I can’t have Mona know who it is. At least, not till I recite.”

“Script calls for male lead to wear an executioner’s hood. Film’s a Black Mass girl-has-sex-with-sacrificer kinda genre. You’ll fit right in. She’ll never know who owns the eight-inch joystick looping her loop through multiple fake orgasms.”

“Fake?”

“Remember what I just said about irreality the lynchpin of art? Well, the irreality of this flick will intensify the love totally. I’m speaking of your thing for Mona as an art form. I mean the irreality of the celluloid coupled with the staged love act.”

“Love *act*?”

“Yeh – the *love act*. And in this movie the whole setup will be sterilized – all love depicted totally sterile. Intellectually, I mean. Although a work of art in its own right, this film is protection-free. Excuse me while I step into your bathroom.”

“This is *your* apartment, you hophead. Christ, some day one of you addicts is gonna burn this building down.”

“So it is,” Art mused, clomping in snakeskin boots to the bathroom set to the right of the kitchen. “Don’t worry, Pops. Stuff keeps me alert. Hey, at least I was being polite. I’ll be out in a sec.”

Inside the small, bright-lit, white-tiled bathroom Rambo closed and locked the door. An old habit.

He reached out of his candystriped polyester slacks a tiny ziplock of off-white powder. Examined it carefully. Saw the indelible *H* scrawled on the plastic.

Yes, heroin after the sun goes down. Thank God for the sun. A wonderful invention, sinking below the ocean out there, to let us know it’s time to lay aside the coke and snort smack.

After breathing up the contents of the bag, he stares into the mirror above the sink, watching himself on the sunglasses, thinking, “Through a glass darkly I threw myself into myself darkly.”

Art emerges from the john. Lopes across the floor of the two-window, one-bedroom, groundlevel apartment. Eases himself back down into the orange plastic contoured theoretically to the pelvis. *77 Sunset Strip* is coming on. He demands volume, needs to hear the theme.

Greg grunts. Lifts the remote. Holds a thumb down on the button, till 1958 fingerpops into the room.

While across the screen flashes Kookie – the carhop-cum-undercover-detective – Art aircombs his own hair, chanting softly, “Kookie, Kookie – lend me your comb!”

Chapter 3

I come busting in. Guess I forgot to knock. Johnny Sain is like that. A pretty off-the-wall character.

“What the Jesus?” Greg leaped to his feet, turned around staring at me saucer-eyed.

Art squinted at a 1957 Bel Air Chevy pull up in front of the 77 Sunset Strip port-cochere. “Sounds like a visitor. That you, Mr. Sain?”

“Yuh.”

“So it is!” Greg huffed out a breath, got hold of himself, grinned, face still flushed with shock. “If it ain’t my favorite tenant from downstairs who don’t pay no rent no more. How ya doin, Mr. Sain?”

I took Greg’s measure, eyed him up and down: a flabby old wreck a foot shorter than me.

“I useta have Johnny Sain’s baseball card. It’s true, Art,” Greg calls over his shoulder, keeps grinning at me. “He was quite a pitcher for the old Boston Braves back right after the War. They’d say: ‘First Spahn, then Sain, then pray for rain.’ Boston didn’t have no pitchin except Warren Spahn and Johnny Sain, ya see.”

I saw right through him. Saw through his bull. Literally saw through his skull – empty of anything of interest. Kookie aided a stacked blonde out of the Chevy. Relieved her of the keys. Zoomed the coupe off into the lot.

“I’m only kiddin about the card,” some bug cleared its throat, maybe a katydid with the croup, or a syphilitic cockroach. “I know you ain’t him. Just a coincidence. I possess my faculties. And I ain’t *that* old. My dad taught me that rhyme. He drove bus along Landsdown back in the 50s...”

The voice became alum on the end of my tongue. Facial muscles tensed – barbwire wound on a drum. Hands cramped into knuckle sandwiches. In about five, maybe two seconds, I would be unable to help myself.

Greg wobbled deliberately for the door, “I gotta go. Bye, Art. Pay rent, you get a chance – OK, Mr. Sain?” He slid out the door without waiting for reply from either of the two beings remaining in the apartment.

I gravitated to the chair Greg had vacated. Stared at the enormous television. Inside his swank Hollywood office, Efram Zimbalist examined a ballistics report.

“Got the money for that coke you want?” Art said slowly, not taking his eyes from the screen.

“Yuh.”

I didn’t *know* it was a ballistics report. The sound was off, I’d come in in the middle. But this was that detective show set in Hollywood. Hollywood pretending to be itself; to be investigating itself.

“Pawned your camera – hey?” Art grinned. Zimbalist frowned, picked up the phone on his desk, rapidly dialed. “How you gonna do your art with no camera? You totally sure you want this coke?”

It would be OK. Coke help me complete *Bandersnatch*. Sniff enough, turn into work of real art, my head spin, art spin off. And I'd still do stuff with the rhoids. Let it drift into the wind, never get photographed. Art for the moment. Art for the asshole. "Yuh."

"OK, sure. Got the cash?" Efram Zimbalist looked up slowly as the blonde entered his plush office. "I mean, how much you wanna buy? I just did smack, so I'm talking a little slow. This must be the one where the babe took out her husband and is coming to Zimbalist because she needs to plant evidence the mob did it, have Zimbalist find the clues, draw his own conclusions."

I handed over six crisp hundreds. Art groped over, caught my hand, extracted the bills – all without breaking concentration on the screen.

When he had the cash in his lap, he glanced down briefly; looked back up as the babe sat on the edge of Zimbalist's desk – using nylons, lipstick, cigarette to cloy the air with cheesecake and death.

"Wow! Six hundred bucks – this buys about a quarter ounce of high-grade Bolivian. This should *totally* make you crazy!"

I smelled vinegar. Out of the corner of his eye Art caught me grimace.

"Now, don't try any of that face on me, man. I'm mellow as a cello, nothing can hurt me – I just snorted smack. So don't bother to try..." Kookie helped the babe back into her Bel Air Chevy, leaned in through the window greasy hair and crooked smile. "Oh, the vinegar. Of course – you're smelling the vinegar!"

I turned on him a goofy stare of incomprehension, which – by cocking my head – I managed to pry up under his peripheral vision.

"Yeah. I got a couple vinegaroons on my stove stewing in cough syrup. The syrup contains codeine, which chemically is totally similar to morphine. Heroin, as any schoolboy knows, is diacetyl morphine. That is, acetic acid combined with morph. Those vinegaroons are oozing acetic acid right now, as we speak, as I got 'em simmering in with the Cheracol. No way they'll die; syrup not hot enough. But maintaining constant fear and stress – like missionaries in the cannibal kettle – keeps the acid flowing."

Zimbalist – his black and white image nearly three feet high – knocked on a bungalow door, gazed over his shoulder at the lone potted palm in the shabby courtyard. He was about to knock again, when the door flew open and a fatman in BVD's thrust a black revolver in the detective's handsome face, motioned him into the shadowy interior of the blinds-drawn shack.

"Now I hear you saying," Art pocketed the money in his tight slacks, "why not just use bottled vinegar. Well, my dear Mr. Sain, you see the acetic acid the vinegaroons exude is both pure and organic. Totally. Who knows what additives in the Heinz 57? The roons cost me a sum; like I think five bucks apiece down at that pet store up on Broadway... can't remember exactly... but the high-grade heroin they are more than likely to produce will totally justify the layout."

“Yuh.”

Zimbalist did some tricky footwork. Knocked the fatso to the floor. Got possession of the gun. Wiped persp off his lips with the back of his hand, as the fatso winced, peering up beaten-dog style.

“And now I hear you saying – where’s the stuff, Art! OK, I’ll get it.” Cut to Kookie, who seemed to be working undercover on the case, knocking on the door of an even more rundown bungalow, apparently fronting on the same courtyard. “It’s in the other room. Tell me if this is the one where Kookie gets winged in the shoulder, OK? I totally love it when one of these pigs gets shot.” Art stood. Walked backwards away from the screen. Slipped into his bedroom, partitioned to the immediate right of the bathroom.

Gerald Lloyd Kookson III, played by I forget his name, drew a pistol from under his windbreaker. Showed a teen idol profile. Flashed the Elvis sneer (toned down to standard tv cutesie) and entered the residence. Today Kookie would be a few years older than Greg. Now no longer a television artist – if he’s even still alive – he managing a building somewhere, maybe a clump of bungalows?

“Here!” Art strode back into the room, tossed a ziplock of white powder into my lap, collapsed back into his orange bucket, still without giving me a glance. “Enjoy!”

I liked he avoided my face. Meant the alexithymia was working. It was a work of art – the way I faked this *deadly nut* look. Unless, of course, I really was...

Jumped up, clutching ziplock. Stormed out. Behind, in all likelihood from the giant television, rang out two shots.

Rambo grunted. I slammed the door. Sprinted down the single flight of stairs into the basement.

Chapter 4

“Glad you stopped by, Mona.”

“What’s this shit you’re watching?”

“*Get Smart!* – on the cable I subscribe to.”

“The one where that jerk talks into his shoe?”

“It’s a parody. Parody is totally a very high form of art, Mona.”

“Sure – long as it doesn’t suck. Why don’t you watch CNN? Then at least you’d be up on what’s happening in the world. Maybe even acquire – God forbid – some sense of social responsibility.”

When Art didn’t respond, she craned her neck around the small living room and sneered, “What’s with all these toy guns? Don’t you worry about regressing into boyhood?”

“Don’t touch.” He scrunched around in his chair, screen reflected in sunglasses kept parallel with flat action. “Especially the ones over by the bedroom – they’re still wet.” Agent 99 was tied up to a chair, an acromegalic spy in a pinstripe suit about to begin torturing her with a straight razor. “We just finished watching an episode of *77 Sunset Strip*. That’s the show with Kookie, 1958’s sexiest greaser; he’s more your type than Maxwell Smart.”

“We?”

“Yeh. Johnny Sain was keeping me company for a while.”

“That nut from down in the basement? He gives me the creeps.”

“I know; that face of his. I worried he’d break the tv just staring at the screen.”

“Well, he can’t help *that*. You’re no Adonis yourself, Art. But…”

“Yeh.” Art chuckled, as Smart burst into the room, cheeks lathered, grabbed the razor, set to work shaving himself, more or less surreptitiously cutting 99 free with long elaborate swipes across his cheeks off onto her ropes. “I sold him a quarter ounce.”

“What? You sold that psycho cocaine? You really don’t have any sense of responsibility. In fact, you have *no* fucking sense. That’s all this goddamn building needs is a six-foot-six nut swacked on coke.”

“Relax. Look, Agent 99 is about to kick this goon in the balls. She’s actually ahead of her time. In some respects, Agent 99 can be totally viewed as a precursor to women’s lib.”

“Oh, fuck you.”

“Seriously, you should write a song about Agent 99 – make her out to be an undercover women’s libber stuck working with a male chauvinist dildo; discuss tongue-biting anxiety of resisting blowing her cover.”

“Looks like right now she’s about to blow Smart. What’s she doing down on her knees?”

“She’s taking off his shoe. Probably has info to relay back to base.” 99 finally got off the wingtip, only to have Smart fall over backwards and nearly slash the jugular of the Chief, who wandered into the room at that opportune moment. “If it’ll make you feel better, Johnny *thinks* he bought a bag of coke. Actually it’s No-Doz crushed up with Sudafed.”

Mona flashed Art her you-didn’t-leave-a-tip glare. “You burned the poor freak?”

“He’ll never know the difference,” he shrugged at 99 and Smart and the Chief babbling at one another in contrived confusion. “He’s crazy. He can’t even talk. He’ll cop a buzz. Acts like he never took coke before, I doubt he ever has. He’ll totally think the caffeine and Sudafed overamp is what coke is supposed to be. Besides, I’m doing a little undercover work here for Greg.”

“Oh?” She rolled her large, tired, hazel eyes at the ceiling. “You trying to locate a rhyming dictionary for the old rumdum?”

“Don’t be so harsh. He’s in recovery.”

“What’s left to recover?”

“Well,” Art grinned under his sunglasses, as 99 accidentally judo-flipped Smart out the window, when she had apparently only been intending to help him up off the floor, “I’m recovering tonight three months rent from Mr. Sain. Actually, Greg is only owed \$240, but I recovered almost \$600, due to my last two days of undercover. I say a little less than \$600, because the No-Doz and Sudafed set me back a good \$5; then there’s all the time I spent bringing this off, time I totally could’ve been devoting to my art. Art of course is priceless; but I figure at least \$200 an hour.”

The phone rang. I picked up. Picking himself up off the pavement where he had landed, Agent Smart removed and cradled against his cheek a wingtip, spoke into the heel for all the room to lipread, “Hello?”

It was Sideways Eight calling for Aleph Null. I handed the phone over to Null. Smart handed the shoe to 99.

“These people,” Mona sneered, “are gonna contract athlete’s foot of the face.”

“Hey – this is culture. American culture. This is totally our *roots*.”

“*Fungal* culture roots,” Mona muttered.

Eight congratulated Null on once again killing time exquisitely. If Null kept this up, he’d soon find himself in possession of a better job than serving drinks to johns at the Space Bar. Sniffing coke all night expanding the *Bandersnatch* plot was ripping the hands right off the clock!

“Now about this stag movie,” Mona said, when I finally stopped rushing on the Draino or whatever Art sold me, and my synapses ceased backflipping so I could make out her words above the neurotransmitter flashflood. “I get the cash up front, right?”

“Totally,” Art nodded at the screen, where Smart hobbled back into his shoe, while keeping up some no doubt zany dialogue with 99 and the Chief. “Minus the two bills owed on the coke I fronted last week.”

“Meaning I walk away with a lousy hundred bucks? I’m not gonna fucking prostitute myself for the price of a weekend’s worth of blow, Art!”

“That’s all the guy in West Bandersnatch pays is \$400 for the female lead. I get 20% as your agent. You owe me already \$200. That leaves a hundred cash in your hot little pocket.”

“20% of \$400 is \$80. You owe me \$320.”

“The twenty bucks goes for taxes and incidentals. This guy has overhead. Besides,” Smart donned sunglasses, hopped on a Vespa, “he’s more or less totally above board with respect to the Government. Taxes is something no good businessman can afford to ignore.”

Mona stewed over the arithmetic. The credits rolled: Don Adams played Maxwell Smart, Barbara Feldon Agent 99... Sideways Eight explained in a voice low enough so Mona and Art couldn’t hear, or at best would interpret as indistinct background thought:

“In reality, nothing Rambo sells is cocaine. It’s all frume – a white powder made from crystals that grow only in caves high in the airless mountains of X-ray-bathed Bandersnatch. Frume excites the artistic centers. In a demented manner of speaking. Makes the user talk endlessly about art projects; but seems utterly to discourage actual creation. Frume is a thing of the mind; which is to say it’s a bullshit drug. I’m not too clear how frume works. Some scientists suspect the existence of actual bullshit centers in the brain – perhaps lining the cortex of the amygdala. Whatever, la-la land is totally the operant word for frume heads.

“And what I’m not gonna tell Mona,” Sideways continues in a voice that sounds exactly how Rambo sounds inside Rambo’s brain, “is that most of these papier-mache machine guns are stuffed with eight ounces apiece of 100% pure frume. For the *big* buys. Nobody in the whole diseased building ever has the jack to purchase a gun’s worth. Some of the guns – like that beaut of a Russian tommy – are in fact works of art. The ones I sell door-to-door in my own totally artistic fashion.”

An artyfarty intro unfolded across the screen.

“Oh, man!” Art yelled, sat up straight, smiling. “It’s *Peter Gunn*. Turn up the volume – I *gotta* hear the theme!”

“Where is it? Hey, who am I gonna hafta fuck in this movie?”

“It should be down to the right of your chair. Greg left it there somewhere. Don’t worry, he’s got a big dick.”

“Jesus – is that all men think women care about? Don’t be so fucking stupid, Art. I mean – is he young, is he cute, is he, uh, *romantic*?”

“Did you find it yet? C’mon – the theme is about to start!”

“I can’t... here it is. Which button is it?”

“The one that says *volume*.”

“I’m hitting it. Nothing’s...”

“*Squeeze* it!”

“I *am* squeezing it, and still nothing’s...”

“You’re squeezing the button marked *minus*. Squeeze the *plus*!”

“Well, why didn’t you tell me. Nobody’s specific on this fucking planet – that’s the whole fucking problem! There...”

The room exploded into eight notes of one dark, driving chord. Art Rambo threw himself into air guitar ecstasy. Mona kept halfhearted time, tapping a fingernail against the plastic remote, absently beholding the screen.

Chapter 5

Then Greg comes in. I forget exactly how; or maybe just haven't worked out the details. Writing is like that. Kinda semi-circular, depending on which way you are progressing. Or at least writing on this No-Doz/Sudafed cocktail I keep snorting. Stuff sure as hell ain't frume!

Anyway, Greg says, "I understand you are going to star in an art film, Mona."

This is after he's entered the room, walked over to stand between Art in the bucket and Mona in the camp. A woman's corpse dangles in the middle of the screen. We see nyloned legs extend upward an actual eighteen inches, before they disappear off the monitor. Apparently the young woman has hung herself. The dark heel and toe of her 1959 nylons sway slightly, as Gunn sneaks into the room to discover all this leg hanging from the ceiling.

"Who the fuck," Mona blurted, then glared across Greg's groin at Art absorbed in the screen, "told you *that*?"

"I couldn't help myself," Art shrugged at a masked thug ram a pistol into Gunn's kidney. Slowly Gunn reached – in his cufflinked boiled shirt – for the sky. "Mona – when you are making a movie, you don't keep quiet about it, OK? We want this movie to *sell*."

"No, no," Greg frowned at the television. "This is gonna be art. You keep art quiet till it's ready to appear."

"Art," Art muttered, "isn't art unless it sells. And what do you mean keep art quiet? Look at me – I'm an artist and I talk all day. When I take coke, I can't help but get totally involved in artistic discussions. My life is art. This sitting here," he wriggled his spine over the orange plastic, seemed unable to find a more comfortable position; gave up; resumed, "sitting here with you fellow artists in the company of Peter Gunn is totally in and of itself art."

"You fucker."

"Mona, it's true what Art is saying. Art does hafta be discussed. Constantly. That wasn't what I meant when I said that. What I meant was an art movie don't need to sell. It'll go down in history. That'll transform it into art. Think, Mona – this will be *recorded*. People way up into the future will be looking at" (Greg almost said *us*) "you."

"Right. Fucking some baboon with a big dick."

"Well..." he rolled his eyes, smiling subtly at Gunn stroll down an aisle of sheeted corpses layed out on slabs.

"What Greg is trying to say, Mona – if the poet will forgive me for putting words in his mouth – is, let's face it," Art kept facing the tv, "this thing has every possibility of becoming a cult film. A couple years down the line it could sell like Elvis."

“In which case I want *royalties*.”

“Mona,” Art gripped the rim of his bucket, “I told you this guy is paying top dollar. I can’t talk him down any further without risking losing you the part. As your agent I totally recommend you stick with what you got. Now, how about we all shut up and dig Gunn interview this technician at the morgue. You might get inspiration from the cut of his clothes or something. And if you don’t shut up, I’ll crank the volume and drown the room in righteous Mancini.”

“I got the remote, you stupid asshole.”

“Say, uh, I hate to bring up business in the midst of so much artistic pleasure, but... did you get a chance to, uh, speak with Mr. Sain earlier today?”

Art shifted weight. Reached in pocket. Produced wad. Peeled off a dozen twenties. Handed same back up to apartment manager. All without turning face from screen; although probably he had – behind the sunglasses – lowered eyes to count bills. Or maybe not. Given the wad all twenties (he’d hidden Sain’s hundreds on the bottom) on top, he could’ve done it by feel, as Gunn conferred downtown with Detective Jacoby, probably regarding the presumably suicided young woman with the lovely legs, whose face we never saw, unless nobody – in the heat of conversation – had noticed.

Greg counted bills, pocketed same. “All right!” he beamed, chuckling at the screen. “This is a bit of all right – I knew you’d come through, Art! What a load off my mind. Now I can concentrate on this new poem I commenced just today. Sonnet I’m penning in honor of the movie. I understand there’s a Satan character in the script. Wears an executioner’s hood, and is quite well endowed in the family jewel department. I only got so far the first couple lines. Here, lemme recite: ‘Happy as an apple fat on a tree...’”

Detective Jacoby’s sad face fills the screen. If you are staring as hard as Mona and Art seem to be, it’s possible to lip-read: “OK, Gunn – you win.”

“Kinda catchy, huh? I’m thinking, Mona, you and I could collaborate. Make it into a cult folk song could be inserted into the movie.”

Cut to Gunn seated at his table in a shadowy corner of *Mother’s*. Shots of a beret-and-sunglasses bassplayer bent soulfully over his upright, reaching wide-spread fingers down into deep, dark notes. Gunn sips his martini. Returns glass to coaster. Primly, sexily, barely perceptibly, licks lips.

“I’m thinking maybe the next line goes like: ‘What I’m waiting for is you to pick me.’ Idea is I’m happy cause I know we are fated to bite into each other by the end of the script. What you cognoscenti think – am I on the right track for this Satanic cult concept? Also, the question in every artist’s mind: Am I prostituting myself? I want this, you see, to more resemble *Rite Of Spring* than some ad for Rite Aide – get my drift... am I up the crick here?”

“Jesus fucking Christ,” Mona muttered, as curvaceous torcher Edie sidles over to the table, jazzily seats herself beside the pensive Gunn.

In the air hung a deeply feigned interest in a soundless tv drama. The folding chair squeaked as Mona – as if making a wish – brought her sandaled feet together.

Then Greg is gone. I’m not sure why. Likely an airlock left open too long sucked him outside the bar into the actual rockpile of Bandersnatch itself. Frume makes you immune to the vacuum. You become sluggish, as though commencing hibernation; otherwise all right. For a treat, you should flip on your X-ray shades. Bandersnatch is midnight black in the visible spectrum. But with X-ray sunglasses you can see through everything – people jitter like skeletons in limbo, thoughts can be read easy as sore thumbs on a trapeze artist.

None of this is really happening, of course. Except inside Johnny Sain’s head, as he rinses glasses, pours booze laced with frume, mixes drinks and can’t keep his thoughts off the vinegaroon Andromedan upstairs with Sideways Eight. Although, come to think of it (Aleph Null thinks to himself (who else does one think to (although Null is infinitely more than one?)) what could be more real than the inside of Johnny Sain’s head?

For the next twenty seconds of air time Gunn sets about sophisticatedly lighting a filter-tip cigarette. Mona and Art regard the silver cigarette case, the matching Zippo, the whole clever business of Gunn’s fingers; allowing to pass an interval to assure that the manager is not only gone, but safely out of earshot.

“It’s him, isn’t it?”

“He’s got,” Art shrugged at the screen, “a big dick.”

“Which fact I presume you know from having personally sucked the old wino off?”

“I’m not into sex. No time for it. Too busy with my art, my business, my undercover activities...”

“Too busy *masturbating*, you two-faced jerkoff little pimp of a pusher.”

“Deception,” Art shrugged, “lies at the heart of art. And you’d be surprised at how *un*-little sometimes can get my business.”

Now, this one here I’m gonna use the toothpick to superimpose a *W* over an *S*. To create a monogram for William Smith, Art’s true name. After dropping out of college in ’96, to become a fulltime dope dealer, pimp and sculptor in the medium of papier-mache, he legally changed it to Art Rambo. In reality he had never to begin with been a William Smith. All the speed he took in college convinced him of that.

Gunn and the torcher used tobacco and alcohol to facilitate some apparently intense conversation, probably about the dead girl in the morgue.

“He told me it’s big. He’s forever harping on the subject. Guys don’t lie *consistently* about size.”

“Unless alone or with somebody.”

“Look – we find out otherwise, we’ll kick him off the set. Besides, I thought you weren’t concerned about size.”

“I’m not. I’m concerned about the \$300 I was promised. I can’t do this unless... I mean, especially if I’m gonna hafta screw some lardass juicehead on camera. It isn’t really him – right?”

“Don’t worry. He’ll be showered, shaved, scented *and* wearing over his admittedly fat head a hood with two teeny eyeslits.” Art reproduced his wad. “Look, I totally understand.” He peeled two hundreds off the bottom. “And I want you to know how much I appreciate you not piping up with how much I took off Mr. Sain for the coke.”

“Shit, I forgot. You’re such an asshole it’s hard to keep track.”

Art mashed the bills in a fist, pitched them over – without looking – into Mona’s lap. “So here’s a \$200 advance. You’ll get the other hundred from the guy when you do the film.”

Mona contemplated with horror the two crumpled hundreds. Slowly her hand moved down to her lap. Took custody of the bills. This meant for sure she was going to screw the apartment manager. From the pit of her stomach to the follicles of her scalp Mona suddenly felt herself to be a 138-pound, five-foot-six, 43 year old, hazel-eyed bug.

“Yeh, well, look, babe,” Art stood, brushed his right hand weakly over her left shoulder, “I gotta go in the back and snort s’more smack, ‘K? I wanna be rushing when the *Peter Gunn Theme* takes it out.

Chapter 6

I found myself back up in Rambo's apartment. Like Sideways always says, art is the act of remembering the future. I wrote this chapter earlier (all in, of course, my mind). So I didn't know where Art was. Just Mona sitting in the folding chair before the tv; some mothballed detective show I didn't at first recognize flashing the phosphors.

I stomped over. Collapsed into the orange space bucket. Stared at the screen, in a kind of insane effort to be polite.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Mona jump. She musta thought I was Art coming back from the bathroom, bedroom, wherever. Till my towering body slammed down into the seat five feet to her left – the only seat in the house besides the one she occupied.

“God! You scared the shit out of me! Could you maybe next time *knock?*”

Some thug in a trenchcoat and fedora hustled out of the rain into a smoky jazz club. Up on the stage facing the bar a nice-looking woman in her early thirties crooned into a floor mike that made me think 1960 (when I would have just turned negative twelve years old). The thug looked around for a table.

“Art's in the bathroom, if that's who you're looking for.”

The hostess clutched a menu to her ample bosom, hurried with a frown past crowded tables over to the new customer. The thug soured when he spotted her; old boyfriend?

“My name's Mona, by the way. I don't think we've ever been introduced. I've seen you around.”

She angrily pointed the way out. The thug smiled – casually intent on not getting the message.

“Isn't your name Johnny? Look, man, I mean, like – can you fucking talk?”

The thug grabs the hostess by the wrist. Her face pains. He leads her out of the dining area, shoves her into the cloak room.

“Yuh.”

Somewhere along in here the question surfaces: how many children has Mona? Even though this is a sci-fi potboiler with a porno twist – what Null calls *adult space fiction* – offspring concerns regarding the lead female alien inevitably arise.

The answer is nine. Nine abortions; because nothing on Bandersnatch ever carries to term, thanks to the profusion of X-rays with which the black hole inundates the planet.

The number rather high because no method of birth control – especially for an overworked waitress with a flair for blow – is perfect. And when all available partners are frustrated artists equally prone to high levels of promiscuity.

Mona isn't bitter about her abortions. They all came in the first month; through the miracle of Snickersnack – the one-pill treatment available from a well-stocked machine to your immediate right as you enter the Edgewater ladies room. Besides, she's too busy being bitter about non-receptive and/or non-existent audiences, as well as never finding the time to write down any of the protest songs forever besieging the perimeter of her consciousness.

Or possibly the abortions – orbiting in limbo – are themselves bitter; and that causes her in reality to be just as bitter about...

Anyway, as for me the answer is zero. I was precocious. A veritable body art Mozart. At the age of thirteen, while yet a virgin, I figured out from books how with two mirrors and one Exacto to vasectomize myself.

"Look, maybe if I turned this fucking stupid antique cop show off..."

The tv died. Not with a whimper; but with a click, and a selfdevouring star.

After a few blinks – adjusting to killed video – I settled back into staring at the blank screen. Slowly a familiar ghost seated in a contoured chair materialized. Beside it I began to make out a slender, tallish female wraith seated in a chair I couldn't really see, the reflection so dim and spectral.

"Wow!" Mona chuckled. "I can see you over there in the screen. You don't look half so bad when I'm not looking *at* you."

I thought I should feel insulted. But I didn't. Didn't feel anything. Except the passage of a near-meaningless thought. Sometimes, for hours on end, none of my thoughts has any meaning. That's just me practicing to be Johnny Sain.

"I guess you know everybody in the building is terrified of that look you get on your face. But do your worst, Johnny. I can take it now, looking at you on the screen. And you got good features. Strong chin, high cheekbones, intelligent forehead. I can't see the nose too well, but I seem to remember you got kind of a cute turnedup pug. I mean, it looks like Satan's own beezer when you put on that sneer. But no way you're ugly. No need for you to feel bad about yourself. That why you never talk – you obsessed with self-hate? Believe me," she sighed, and I saw her reflection dump its hands in its lap, "I know all about self-hate. All women do. Society drums it into us. And I'm a waitress; double-dose self-hate right in the contract. Am I talking too much? Art should be out of the goddamn bathroom any minute. He just went in there to snort."

For some covert reason or another, Aleph Null insinuated himself to the head of the line; came out with the line, "I thought you were a folk singer?"

"Christ!" she chuckled, and I thought I glimpsed on her image teeth in a possible smile, "you're not mute – you *can* talk! Will wonders never. Singer/song-writer, Johnny. Folk singer is a good enough pigeonhole, I suppose; although I'm liable to write a song about anything. Haven't written anything in the past six months.

Worry too much about money. Tips have been lousy and Art raised his prices. Can't do my art without coke. You an artist?"

Null grinned slyly, knowing the grin would in his reflection be indecipherable. "Well, you might say insanity is my art form."

"Wow – sentence number two! Don't wear your throat out, hon. You might need it later for swallowing medication. Forgive my attitude; but it's just such a trip to be talking to, I mean *conversing* with..."

"Actually I flush all my medication. I'm not really insane. It's, like I say, an *art*."

"Oh," her reflected head nodded slowly. "I see. Crazy money. Fraud the government for disability. That's what you get for being mental, disability – right?"

"Something like that. Couple hundred a week, at any rate. Tax free."

"You know, you got a great voice. You sound like a radio announcer. Or tv. You could like do the fucking news at eleven or something. See, you need to feel better about yourself. We all do... me included."

"I had a job once. I was a bartender. I excelled at announcing *Last call!* Even the dead drunk would hear, understand; belly up for that nightcap they didn't need."

"Jeez, I wish we had you down at the Edgewater. I have a personality conflict with the current mousey little poison-slinger. They'd save money – big guy like you a bouncer/bartender combined. Current bouncer is also a jerk. Half the time drunk, forever making passes at the help."

I stared at my image. Dark hollows for eyes, vague lip line, ears and hair silhouetted. But failed to see the nose I distinctly felt wrinkling.

"The mouse doesn't like us wait people either. He might move on soon. Talks – when he *does* talk – about bartending up in Alaska on the pipeline. I could put in a word, get you the job. Harvey – he's the manager – doesn't care – he'll let you work under the table. Won't affect your disability."

A sharp stench recoiled facial muscles; caused saliva to flow, gag to reflex.

"Vinegar?" said the television ghost. "Am I back on *Bandersnatch?* Name your poison, space bitch!"

"Get outta this building once in a while do you good... huh?"

My ghost turned left profile, as her ghost leaped out of its chair: "Oh my god! The kitchen. The pot. It's *boiling!*"

Null followed the Andromedan out into the cooking area. Kicked aside, on the way, an AK-47 painted pink with purple stipples.

He felt numb – hands cold, feet ice, brain a giant hail stone – entering the back room to fetch more frume with which to spike drinks. Johnny often felt numb on the job. Likely the frume he himself took.

Mona killed the gas. Hefted the one-gallon Lustre Craft sauce pan off the range. Banged it between dirty dishes crowding the formica countertop.

“Goddamn that Art!” she grunted from exertion. “He’s boiled his fucking bugs to death!”

I surveyed the cramped kitchen:

Ceramic bowls of half-coagulated papier-mache. Several open five-pound sacks of flour. Flour thumbs, flour palms, even a few complete flour handprints smudging the cupboards above the sink and the range. Waste basket overflowing with empty stew cans, ketchup bottles, mustard jars; packages of popcorn, Pop Tarts, Tootsie Roll Pops, Sugar Pops, other related trash wasn’t really there popping into mind. So where’s he keep the frume?

Mona peered into the sauce pan. Winced. “I’m gonna get Art outta the bathroom. He’s gotta see this.”

Johnny Sain followed the Andromedan into the bathroom.

Sideways Eight lay unconscious in the tub. A greenish booger glazed with beige powder clogged his left nostril. His shades had fallen off, probably lay under his head. He gave every evidence of having fallen over backwards while snorting smack. There was heroin on Bandersnatch, of course. There was heroin all over the Universe.

Mona rushed over. Knelt beside the porcelain trough Sideways had collapsed into. Felt his pulse. Cocked an ear at his nose, listened for breath.

“He’ll live.” She loosened his collar, unbuttoned pink polyester shirt. “Dumb bastard’ll have one hell of a banger when he wakes up. Probably snorted so much he’ll spend the night in here.” She removed one snakeskin boot; but the stench his argyle sock released was so sour she left the other boot on. “Look, let’s toddle into his bedroom, get a pillow, blanket. He deserves the headache; but I suppose it’s our duty to see he doesn’t get double pneumonia sleeping in a bathtub in a drafty slum like this.”

Into the bedroom Johnny followed the Andromedan. She couldn’t seem to sit still. Where was whatever it was he had come upstairs for?

Mona yanked out dresser drawers, found wool blankets. Swiped a pillow off the kingsize that took up most of the mickeymouse bedroom. She loaded the blankets into my arms. She grabbed some other items I didn’t see, while I was wandering back around with the blankets into the john.

Mona came into the bright tiny bathroom and we got down on our knees and wrestled the inert Art between two blankets. Threw a third on top. I lifted his wavyhaired head and Mona slipped the pillow underneath. On the way out we doused the lights, closed the door.

We gravitated to the tv, over on the far wall of the living space. Figured we’d resume our chairs. Maybe a spot more chitchat among the ghosts on the screen... Then I looked down.

Held my leg in midair, because I had been about to step on an already-broken purple-stippled pink AK-47. Snapped in half – right where barrel met stock. From its ruptured papermache had issued a miniature dune of white crystalline powder.

“You see what I see?” Mona circled around the disaster; squatted down to inspect.

“Frume?” Null thought to Alex.

“Coke.” She wet a finger. Dabbed at the spill. Raised the powder-caked fingertip to her nose. Sniffed each nostril at it sharply. “It’s his best shit. So *that’s* what he does with all these stupid fucking guns!”

Alex Thymia contemplated the pile of frume on the warped pinewood floor. Alex was Mr. Sain’s longlost cousin. A freshly-created character; like when the network introduces a new detective into the series.

Self-hate? No, everybody gets along. Oh, off and on Sideways Eight fires off a snipe. Null deflects it to Johnny Sain or Alex Thymia or the manager or the dealer or some extragalactic slut or whoever else at the moment is tending bar. But hate demands a depth of concentration alien to the scope of my art. Remember, this is all a potboiler intended to finance the rrhoids.

“Look – we need privacy. Something more between *us*,” she jerked her head back, “and that ricepaper front door. I’ll scoop up a handful. We’ll shut ourselves in the bedroom. Art won’t be needing his bedroom tonight.” She grinned off to one side, being careful to avoid confronting Alex’s face. “Snort City, Johnny!”

“Yuh,” Alex said, ignoring the wrong name (aliens rarely got anything right); but first loped toward the kitchen, obeying an urge the vinegar fumes were touching off.

Chapter 7

“The bad news is,” Art winced, pressed the ice against his head, “I can’t use you for the part.”

“You want the volume up? Looks like the song part.”

“No, man. *The Man From U.N.C.L.E.* theme sucks. I mean,” he slid the plastic bag of icecubes around to the back of his skull, “it starts out OK with a few driving bars of fusion. But then it degenerates into muzak. Muzak isn’t art; no guts. Art’s gotta have guts.”

“How come I don’t get the part. Am I too old – that it?”

“Quit feeling sorry for yourself. I told you, this is *mature* porn. You were tailor-made. But everything last night fell into my lap. I filmed the whole shebang right here totally impromptu.”

“I thought this guy was in West Seattle?”

“Huh? Oh, yeh – the producer. He’s actually just the financial backer on this one. Besides,” Art dropped the icepack onto the floor beside his orange bucket, “the actual filming is always done here. My bedroom is in reality a studio bugged with a dozen hidden cameras and mikes. I can’t believe my luck – how it all panned out. I mean, if you’d been around last night, I would’ve – as your agent – seen you got included. But it all happened so fast. Art’s like that – an explosion of the moment.”

Greg leaned forward, “You want me to pick up that ice?”

“Nah, I’m through with it for the moment.”

“It’ll melt; warp the floor.”

Art grinned, winced – the grin creating pain. “Maybe the new warps’ll straighten out the warps already there.”

“Sheesh!” Greg creaked back in the folding metal chair that was several sizes too small for his girth. “And now I come to learn you got a whorehouse operating in this apartment!”

“Hey – I pay my rent.”

“Oh no,” Greg shrugged. “I didn’t mean nothing along them lines.”

“And I keep trying to explain, Pops – last night *art* happened.”

“She screwed that goddamn nut, didn’t she?”

Art frowned at bandages being unwound from the face of a man in a polo shirt and blazer. “Don’t get fixated. It was for a higher aim. Calling it screwing is like saying Michael Angelo was lying down on the job when he painted the chapel. I mean yeah, it’s outrageous, it’s like sex in church; but it’s art, Pops – *art!*”

“Quit tryin to make me feel better. What’s with this guy – without the bandages he looks the same as the other guy.”

“He’s supposed to. It’s a facelift. In reality he’s one of the enemy. It’s Robert Vaughn playing a spy impersonating Solo, who is also, of course, played by Vaughn. Studio thereby saves on the salary of one entire actor.”

“Ya know, thirty years ago, there were people useta say I myself somewhat resembled this Vaughn character.”

“Which one,” Art snorted. “The impersonator or the *real* Solo?”

“Don’t try to confuse me. They’re one and the same. I got *that* much straight.”

Art grunted, smiling painfully, “Yeh, I’m still seeing double; guess I’m thinking double, too; talking double, whatever. I’m not exactly totally myself here, Pops.”

“You fell down high on drugs, banged your noggin that bad, huh? Jeez – what the hell *transpired* in your apartment last night, Mr. Rambo?”

“Drugs had nothing to do with it.” Art shook his head, blinked, focused on what seemed to be the real Napoleon Solo briefing in a corridor a deadly serious Illya Kuryakin. “Well, on second thought, drugs did play an incidental part. I knew that Sain dude would be back up for more coke.”

“What – you give that freakin maniac cocaine?”

“No.” Art’s eyes closed, his head bent forward, he squeezed thumb and forefinger to the bridge of his nose. “It’s too hard to explain. Let’s just say I knew he was coming back up; so I hid myself in the bathroom on the pretext of, uh, refreshing myself. I hear him come in. He and Mona get to talking. I get this vibe they are totally warming up to one another.”

“But you’re in the bathroom...”

“Pops,” he opened his bloodshot little eyes, squinted smilingly back up at Kuryakin secreting a micro pickup under the collar of his black turtleneck, “I got bugs all over this unit, OK?”

Greg shook his head in grim admiration, idly following Kuryakin slip behind the wheel of a spanking-new 1965 Corvette Stingray. “I shoulda known,” he grunted. “I shoulda freakin known.”

“One thing leads to another. At one point they check on me. I fake being passed out in the bathtub. They’re so full of love and tenderness, they even wrap me up in blankets, wedge a pillow under my head.” The impostor gains electronic access to Solo’s office, picks a microscopic speck of lint off the lapel of his blazer, strides over to the wall safe. “Then God steps in and they somehow find a certain amount of blow. I dunno, maybe Mona brought it with her. I know for a fact she sniffs. She’s a waitress – comes with the turf. And you know I got nothing like that in here – I pay my rent, right?”

Greg frowned. Nodded at the television.

“They probably would’ve anyway gotten down to skin. But the coke made it better. Highlit the kink in both actors. Turned the loop into a total work of art.”

“Actors?”

“I’m speaking metaphorically. You always gotta be somebody else hiding inside somebody else. That’s the nature of being an artist. It’s like Chinese boxes.” The real Napoleon Solo sits roped to a straightback chair in a warehouse down by the waterfront. A ten-foot tall praying mantis – actually a novelist from an irregular galaxy deep in the heart of Coma – is attempting to chew through the rope before the timer detonates the dozen sticks of dynamite bundled at Solo’s feet. The clockface of the timer freakishly reflects a highlight from Solo’s left Florsheim. Cut back up to his handsome grimacing face, as he struggles to burst the half-gnawed hemp. “You *do* understand the word *metaphor*?”

“Fer chrissake, Art – I’m a poet! Tool of my trade. By *metaphorically* you mean they were acting like they weren’t actors, because they weren’t; but they were, because you – you sick bastard – were filming the whole, uh, the whole...”

“The whole work of art. Totally. You got it, Pops. Guess you really are a poet.”

“Of course I am! Managing this slum is my day job, OK? And I’m not upset about that hophead waitress playing hide the sausage with the fuckin nut downstairs. What ticks me off is you gypped me out of an opportunity to expose my poetry to a mass market. It wouldn’t be hard for me to raise your rent; now I know the sick kinda shit goes on in here.” The manager’s face purpled. With the last phrase, a slight spray of saliva had almost made it from his flabby snarl to the screen.

Art actually turned his head, looked over. Disbelievably blinked at the manager. “But you’re in the *credits*!”

“Huh?” he squeaked around in the camp chair, glowering obstinately at the tv.

“Sure. Your poem about Satan – the apple in the fat tree – inspired the set totally. So I credit you. Inspiration – Greg Pope, it’ll read.”

“Greg Pope, *poet*,” he grumbled.

“Sure. And I gotta tellya, I know you inspired the best part, where Sain rubs boiled vinegaroons all over Mona’s naked body. I got that from at least three angles. Lotsa editing ahead. Totally.”

“Vin-uh-*whats*?”

“Vinegaroons. Also known as whip scorpions. A large ugly arachnid whose sole defense is to exude vinegar when in stressful situations, such as about to be eaten by a bird or maybe boiled to death. I was performing a chemical experiment. I guess I lost track of time and so the vinegaroons got overheated and I guess this Mr. Sain fixates on scorpions or something.”

“You let that freak rub Mona with dead bugs?”

“She didn’t seem to mind – lying on her back or her ass up in the air or whatever, sniffing coke the whole time.”

“She, uh, she done a lotta different positions, huh?”

“Hey, don’t take it personally.” Art settled back into contemplation of the climax. “They don’t call it *acting* under the influence for nothing. The chick was stoned. So was the nut. Hey, wait’ll you see that face of his while he’s walking dead scorpions over her distended nipples!” Back inside Solo’s office, the look-alike and the real Solo square off. The impostor waves a letter opener that looks like a stiletto, or maybe the other way around. The real Solo is of course unarmed; the good guy always starts out unarmed in fights to the death. “Mature porn with a trans-species kink – it’ll sell like hot dildos to Eskimos, Pops!”

“So if it wasn’t drugs, how did your head come to get wounded?”

“This fight is totally captivating. The editing so slick it looks totally like Robert Vaughn is beating the shit out of Robert Vaughn.” Solo and the impostor grapple across the office floor, neither identity of the actor getting his jacket rumpled or his slacks dirty. “It’s a long story about the head. Let’s just say Mona gave it to me when I reminded her of a debt. After the sex was over – took about five hours and maybe sixteen grams – the nut wanders off. I hear him stumbling down the hall like he’s probably headed back down to his cave. Then Mona whips into the john to take a piss and surprises me fiddling with some incriminating video equipment. When she starts to get pissed, I mention two hundred dollars I gave her that I need back, because the film was in the can, it was a kind of porn documentary and therefore she was ineligible to receive any payment for whatever appearances she might make on said cinematic production. I actually did get the two bills back; every penny of which I’m gonna need to edit the film – this whole effort just for art’s sake, really. I stand to make nothing, especially after taxes. But then she rushes out into the kitchen, grabs my sauce pan of, uh, tea. Races back into the bathroom. Clobbers me over the head till I actually do lose consciousness and collapse into the bathtub.”

“Serve ya right, ya scumbag.” Greg pouted at the doppelgangers wrestling across the screen; but then couldn’t hold back a chuckle that quivered his baggy face. “She beaned ya with a cook pot just like in the comics?”

“Scumbag *artist*, Pops. Yeh, she broke my sunglasses and damn near fractured my skull. Being an artist means pain; nobody knows why.”

“I’m an artist and I’m feeling pain from Mona, too. I can’t believe she did creepies with that freak. I forgive her, of course. She was under the influence. But I still can’t... believe... how much longer does this Vaughn character continue to fight himself?”

The scuffling Solo’s knocked a clunky early-60s telephone onto the floor. One of them seized the cord; wrapped it around the other Solo’s neck. Judging by the ferocity of his snarl, the strangler must’ve been the impostor.

The phone rang. I picked up. It was Sideways Eight gasping, “See – this is an artistic statement! What I’m talking about when I say *guts*: the artist – the actor in this case – duelling with his double. It’s totally a metaphor for the entire artistic process!”

Up to the bar clacked the mantis from Coma. Demanded a bloody vorpal. Sain threw together ketchup, vodka, frume. Stabbed in a swizzle with a tiny plastic typewriter at the top.

By the time he rolled eyes back up at the screen, Art was saying:

“And don’t fret. I’m still your agent. I’ll place your talent, no sweat. You *do* really got nine inches?”

“Sure.” Greg farted – utterly without motion – silently; raised his eyebrows at the rolling credits. “I mean... I take enough viagra.”

“Joke?”

The manager shrugged. “Robert Vaughn – there’s his name. Yeh, sure, I useta look like him. Back when Jack Kennedy was Senator. Long before the conspiracy blew his brains out. Before Marilyn even blew him. Ah, Mr. Rambo: time is the unkindest cut of all. Me... Robert Vaughn of 1960. Oh, yeh, nine inches, you bet. Always was, always will be. Always at the Space Bar, you and me are... new poem just coming... poem about the typewriter itself. Uh-oh: here we go...”

The screen exploded into *I Spy*. Art picked up an invisible pick; slid left hand up the neck of a phantom Stratocaster.

Eyes glued to television, Greg squeezed an aging-but-steady thumb down onto the *plus*. Took a deep breath.

He was relieved the gas didn’t stink. He’d just choked back a load of anger; didn’t need right away deal with shame, however *petty*. A sideways glance revealed an oblivious and twitchless nose, as its owner became absorbed in imaginary virtuosity, triple-timing the *I Spy* theme now bouncing off the walls and making the dirty dishes stacked out in the kitchen area vibrate ever-so slightly.

Chapter 8

Guts, guts, guts – I’d never seen so much guts. The books say twenty-five feet of intestine. After last night I can believe it. And we are dealing here with an Andromedan resembling a giant vinegaroon, so she might have up to forty or fifty feet.

Anyway, plenty to work with, as I stick with a pick a blob cut from something maybe like the jejunum. Hard to tell – once you’re inside somebody’s viscera, there are no labels. Dissection is like any other art: you start from scratch and you never really know what you are doing; especially when you have no formal education, no road map handy and minimal hands-on experience.

This blob I’ll sculpt into an octopus alien – native of a prostitute planet in the Tarantula Nebula off in the Larger Magellanic Cloud. The Tarantulan can’t hold his frume. He loves the high, but the stuff drives him nuts. Many is the time Johnny Sain has cut him off, to keep from having to peel the writhing gooey creature off the ceiling. But tonight Sain was distracted by the Andromedan, and forgot to notice that he refilled the Tarantulan’s glass with straight frume no less than five times.

So now the Tarantulan is attacking a starfish-shaped poet from the Crab Nebula pulsar back in our own Milky Way. The Calcutta Galaxy, by the way – home of Bandersnatch and her black hole “sun” – is a good 250 million lightyears from the Milky Way. Life exists nowhere in Calcutta; thus all of us here in the Space Bar are aliens.

The six-foot diameter starfish has no defense against the somewhat larger octopus of a Tarantulan.

This hardly hurts. The slice of jejunum or whatever is just sticky enough to adhere to my flesh, especially when I press the pick in all the right places really hard. And the starfish, of course, already exists. On second thought, to better anchor the sculpture and into the bargain feel a kiss of pain, I move the pick through the images the mirrors provide so as to wedge one of the tentacles a full inch *inside* the starfish.

Wish had camera for this. Although without all the frume I converted the camera into, I might never have hit upon the idea of killing Mona. The Andromedan, I mean – triptime-warping trollop.

Hey, this is just a potboiler. I didn’t really kill the Andromedan. What transpired was, she comes downstairs a few hours before dawn knocking on my door. The door opens right up, because it’s still broken, and she steps into the dark basement cubicle calling my name.

I’m curled up in the bathtub, my stocking feet dangled out over onto the top of the toilet seat. I’m lying there daydreaming in the dark. Took too much frume. Can’t sleep.

Johnny Sain says not a word. That’s the kind of character he is. A convoluted dumbbell introvert.

She fumbles around till she finds a switch. Flips on the light. Spots me behind her in the bathroom. Demands to know what I’m doing with my clothes on stretched out in an empty bathtub.

“Yuh,” Sain mutters, rolling dazzled eyes at the low ceiling.

“I hate myself for what happened up there.”

The phone rings. Nobody picks up.

“I came down here not so much to apologize as to...” she looks away from my tensing face. “I’m not the apologizing type. Especially when crashing on coke. It’s just we got unfinished business. My whole life is unfinished business. Look,” she turns her back on the tall slender bartender sprawled out in the tub, “I notice you got mirrors in your living space. What say we go out here,” she’s already walking off and I’m mechanically getting up to follow. “Nothing personal, Johnny. It’s just I feel more comfortable talking to your image. Have you ever considered plastic *surgery*?”

We sit on the cold cement floor, hunched in opposite corners so as to be visible each to the other in one of the facing mirrors. First she gets up twice to fiddle with the mirrors, position them to yield the appropriate angles of reflection.

I think maybe she actually got up three or four times – too much frume induces futziness; also distorts the memory, the vision, the balance and various other floats in that parade we call the brain.

“There, that’s better.” She draws her knees up to her chin, leans back against the cement wall. “Now let’s get this straight, right off the bat: what happened up in Art’s apartment a little over an hour ago was *not* a mercy fuck.”

On the fifteenth ring Null lunges for the phone. Gasps into the perforated plastic mouthpiece, “Mercy? – I *can’t* fuck you any more tonight!”

“You are so,” she smiles across the room into the mirror, “innocent! Look: by mercy fuck I mean doing it outta feeling sorry – like for that ghastly face you can’t help but wear, or when Art takes advantage of you, or how you gotta live in this cubbyhole – the shittiest dump in the whole dive. Anyway, mercy isn’t my bag. A revenge fuck maybe. Maybe I was getting back at that pimp, doing you in his bed; but they left the mercy outta this gal, OK?”

I nod at her mirrored frown.

“Tonight was like a folk song.” She bends her forehead down to her knees a moment, then looks back up. “How we turned off the tv to get to know one another – both victims of the media, the economy, the system. Two talented artists just trying to make it through this world of Listerine and Philistines and Budweiser and environmentally kosher gasoline additives... See, Johnny,” she appeals earnestly through the mirror, “just being around you draws the poetry right *out* of me!”

When she starts to talk like this, I know I’m going to kill. It’s simply a question of how. This is Sideways Eight talking, of course, because it has now become a matter of Galactic Emotional Security. Not even Alex’s

thymia working, dampened through the mirror. Continuing to think coherently becomes like Superman up to his Brylcream in kryptonite.

“I think the subconscious overcame me. I knew, deep down in the night of the soul, if I did you, it would free up the juices. I could write songs again. I mean... it's not *just* that. Shit, Johnny. I think, you know, I *love* you.”

How could I think such schmalz, much less write it?

I did not want to develop a situation where the author's taste in personality forces the snuff of a character who has fallen for his counterpart in the potboiler. In particular when, had he stuck to the story line, it would've been more the author who fell into the well of unrequited love with the Andromedan call girl. Like making a dream character fall in love with you, who in the actual dream never did. I felt like an actor playing an actor who can't act, and I can't go on with it. Just can't...

What's she talking about? There's no time for love. Sideways, Null, Johnny, Alex, Drake – none of us has the time for goopy stuff. We're all gooped up just fine as we are, thank you. It's like Art says, “I got no time for love, I'm too busy with all my undercover activities.” As it is, there's hardly enough time to properly kill it. Why waste time on emotion?

“Besides,” Johnny thought to himself (that is, to Null), “I'm too busy expending all my efforts killing time. Why create more time for love? Artists create. I'm no artist – I'm a secret agent combatting the Time Conspiracy. Disguised as that long-drink-o'-water tending bar. Pretending to be John Drake – isn't that who Patrick McGoohan plays?”

Then it flashed: Mona was the Madonna of Time. She had an arachnoid clock face. Heart a pendulum. Soul an oh-so seductive escapement. Of course she loved me – I was the end of time: time's purpose, time's point, time's death, time's don't-get-me-started. The metaphor weighted to the bottom of the shaft with baggage – hemorrhoids adroop.

Mona the extragalactic vinegaroon as Moment Manifest, Princess Now, Queen Tomorrow, Yesterday's Drab, Today Incarnate.

And so I became and so I am the End of Time.

I still haven't let myself remember how exactly I killed her. Unless she died from that first blow (which I do recall), when I leaped up, grabbed one of the mirrors and smashed her over the head with its heavy gilt frame.

Whatever, now that Mona lies in the bathtub draining, I'm getting back to the *real* art. No more prostituting myself as insane performance artist or potboiler hack or cult film star.

I'm chuckling at the taunt *Van Gogh's ear got nothin on me*, applying touches to the Tarantulan octopus frozen in the act of devouring my actual living starfish, when a knock comes at the door.

Art again? Art disguised as Sideways Eight playing the role of a flywheel engineer? Come down to inquire about the Andromedan, or deal more frume, or peddle another submachinegun?

Then I hear – on the other side of the door I nailed shut, so as not to be disturbed while gutting Mona – radio chat: numbers, codes, muffled calls for assistance in other quadrants of Bandersnatch. Listening harder, accidentally skewering the starfish with the toothpick – while giving a tentacle believable suckers – I make out from the radio through the door that a prisonship full of poets has crashlanded; all on board escaped, and the zombified versifiers this instant are converging on the Space Bar.

A thumb squeezing the *plus* whitened. Up came the *I Spy* theme, as the credits rolled.

“That’s it.” Art giggled in the dark. “The end.”

“The living end,” Mona’s corpse gurgled.

From the other side a voice calls, “You the party ordered the pizza?”

-The End-

About the Author:

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