

Duke Majorca had worked the same chef's job for months now. Generally the bottom feeding districts saw rapid turnover, but he'd sold his body to this amazing place overlooking the dirty water which seethed and bobbed with a millennia of detritus, remnants of animate and inanimate stuffs the city'd ejected from its chrome-gilded centre. Detritus they lived off. It was an ideal package, and his boss wasn't that bad, a guy partially supplemented with a standard erectile-motor and hitting his fifties in stride.

His boss's name was Garth Hader.

Garth enjoyed games. One game had him wearing a plug during service: dicing spidery irradiated root-vegetables and other practically scavenged produce into a viscous broth, skinning the seven-legged hares from the industrial fields (a particular skill), all the while experiencing delicious contractions of his anus around its silicon handle, which protruded enough for Garth to give it casual taps, even in view of customers (the sallow users which passed as such), or fuck him with it under the counter when he was taking payments, Garth sunnily well-wishing the tippers with a "come back now ya hear," and Duke's shaky smile barely concealing his pleasure.

Garth grew up in a mega high-rise, like everyone, and in this vertical township (population: ten thousand), he had all the caustic formation of a youth in the ghetto, drugs and gangs and petty crime. But this familiar personal narrative was aborted once pharmaceutical companies acquired the patent for all class-A drugs and produced synthetic, legal versions of each, adding heroin to the household medicine cabinet alongside over-the-counter pain relief and the morning-after pill. It was a longsighted market saviour once the foreseeable drying up of resources finally happened, and after that all recreational substances were exclusively available in this sanitised form.

It wasn't long after this that rumours of superdrugs started surfacing, simple pills affording their swallower all sorts of profound abilities such as clairvoyance, telekinesis and immortality. Also a whisper of a pill pitched as some kind of answer to not just one but ALL crises of the human animal,

but, being rumour, its exact properties were unclear. Drugs being the mainstay of any and all hubs of organised crime, the vanishing of this nucleus transformed Garth's adolescent ambitions overnight. He would be a restaurant owner.

"What's this?" Duke said. Garth was feeding ice cubes to his sweetly swollen anus, and slung over the bed's edge Duke found a black leather book like the ledger downstairs with suppliers names and numbers, bookings etc.

"The Bible."

"The what?"

"It's God stuff."

"Oh. Do you believe in that stuff?"

"Yes. No. Mostly. That particular version gets some things right. Like the actual God part, or the idea of one. I believe in that."

"Really? How?"

"Well, we're alive aren't we? How'd that happen?"

"Natural selection?"

"No, the planet's dead, it no longer serves as a reliable feedback system. Evolution died, but we are still here. What else could be sustaining us, even here and now in this room?"

"Wow, you're smart buddy."

Garth dug a finger inside Duke and swizzled the tightly packed interior until he'd elicited the desired effect, an arched back, a deep moan.

"Fuck –"

"I win."

There was a beggar who came in every night, for whom Garth made Duke prepare a meal especially, with deference he couldn't understand until one day their morbidly scant profit just didn't compute with this constant charity, which didn't stop with this one beggar but extended, perhaps by word of mouth through to all the man's beggarly friends who started coming in, and Duke just had to say something.

"It's nice and all, but we can't afford it man."

"Sure we can. So long as you keep topping us up, hunting in the eastern burbs. Which you're damned good at, by the way."

"Yeah but it's a hassle man, and if you stopped with these

handouts man I wouldn't have to do it.”

On Garth's face the passing of a shadow, fleeting but nonetheless cutting Duke with shame he didn't understand.

“Hey I'm just protecting your interests man, it's your business.”

“Yeah, and who's protecting theirs?” said Garth, gesturing to his derelict friends, some peppered with the scabs of hybrid-venereal diseases, including a mutant cousin of AIDS which had emerged a decade ago, with a shockingly selective appetite for white flesh.

“Hey man I'm just sayin...”

“Duke, these are your people. Squarely, you were selling your ass left and right before our arrangement, and it's the same deal with these guys. Just doing what I can.”

Shame ran deep and flushed Duke's face. Garth saw and wasn't trying to humiliate but educate, took the boy's callused worker's fingers in his and brought them to his bearded lips.

“There's nothing worse in this life than a selfish cunt, and little one, you're showing me tendencies. Stop it.”

That night Garth fucked him slow and tender, which hadn't happened before, ever, and Duke thought maybe he wasn't that into it except for the tiny kisses Garth planted on him, needlessly he thought, because it was where his partially augmented dick sat stuck up in the warm sleeve of Duke's rectum that really mattered and anything else was an incomprehensible flourish, like the kindness of strangers.

“You're mine,” he was saying to Duke, over and over “you're mine you're mine you're mine...”

“Game?” said Duke.

Garth stopped, grunted disapprovingly which was contrary somehow and pulled himself off the bed. Duke sat up excitedly as Garth proceeded to drag The Trunk out from its mysterious home in the back of the closet. His erection pulsed expectantly, unable to see what Garth was extracting and lining up with artisanal precision on the vanity. Garth finally stood back, and there in a row were six butt plugs with girths ranging reasonable to cruel.

“The challenge of the game is we move through one –“ (pointing) “to six –“ (pointing again) “without a peep, or it's overnight in the stocks.”

“Deal.”

One day a man in a grey suit came.

Duke was chopping warped veggies in the kitchen and heard Garth greet the man with his general cheer but slightly clipped, where usually he'd boisterously hug and kiss his regulars. And he thought in that moment, hands stained with the blue blood of a potato-thing he was quartering (which he swore had a face), "I could love this man".

Then, talk too quiet for him to hear, followed by silence which wasn't extraordinary but all the same made Duke's hairs stand up and he couldn't say why. Then he definitely heard the words "send him away", spoken in the unfamiliar voice of the man in the grey suit.

Garth came into the kitchen, and Duke instantly regarded the expression on his face as strained, potentially catastrophic.

"Take the gun, stock us up from the hinter-dump . Maybe take a pole and trawl the pond."

Duke was frozen, struck with implacable numbness and – as he sidled into Duke's vision from behind Garth's broad visage – a loathing of the man in the grey suit; a foreign contaminant, and with increasing certainty in Duke's mind, a portent of ill.

"Fine," said Duke. He moved past Garth towards the gun cupboard. As he did, Garth reached for him. Duke went limp in Garth's arms, resistant to everything suddenly but he couldn't have said why, only this thickness of the air and tightening of his organs, like the line of his vertebrae had been pulled tight by two godly hands, making him want to shut his eyes and scream.

The sky roiled darkly and spat, tiny patterings falling on Duke's hand toting the rifle. He was leaning invisibly behind a hulking machine corpse, in shadow, and he was waiting. There was a smell of shit and something sweeter, like glass cleaner, or the luminous cud of synthetic wastes from an upriver plant, the smell of which reminded him of overripe fruit.

He shifted his foot and felt a pebble slip between the leather thongs of his sandal.

He'd made a basket of thatched hairs and other scraps, woven polymers, a spherical structure of used textiles and

other biohazards, and this he'd stuffed with slop and even his own blood, sprinkled from a recent cut. Once submerged in the pond it'd swarmed with brightly coloured bottom feeders. He'd check it once he'd trapped something with actual haunches.

The water swirled thickly, coagulating with the burden of industrial capillaries evacuating themselves. He could make out shapes which appeared with dreamlike purpose, if he slanted his eyes and drew his thoughts back from what his eyes perceived, curving his apprehension of the world 'out there' (burning car wrecks, swamp lights, empty lots, rubble and garbage).

Softening it.

Yes, shapes could be divined in and from anything, and he was sure of their significance.

Like now, lights crossed other lights welding colours and textures, flimsier shadows fell into other darker deepening shadows, their purple swallowed in black. And he saw things, densities and rippings which might've been the jelly of his eyes but which didn't matter because he saw them anyway. The denuded boughs of a tree crowning indigo eyes, auburn snout with a speckled nose and snarling steaming grin. He heard its hooves against the cracked pavement and it slunk out from shadow into the flickering lamps. A deer.

It looked like the water was boiling now, where he'd dropped the trap. There were frenzies underway which would hopefully draw out a five-eyed bass or the rays, which basted and roasted were local delicacy.

The deer stood in a cone of sickly orange light, like a tent of skin from someone with a harried liver.

Duke lined up his rifle arm with the animal's proud head.

It swayed and snorted, clopped out from its spotlight ring of pavement and Duke saw its full haunch. Its coat was chocolatey, flecked caramel and socks striped on its thick legs. But – there on its back were wings, tiny wings that twitched fleetingly but which Duke doubted had any function other than flyswats. They were golden-feathered, drank the light and shimmered fey.

There in his mind he'd raised a memory fogged in wine and sex, a story Garth read him once. It was Hemingway, the one where a woman gets eaten by a lion on a hunting trip. Probably punishment for being a lady in the godly eye of its

author, life's reckoning for feminine-weakness in the killing fields. Hemingway.

Duke's finger nuzzled up to the curved trigger, squeezing just shy of the final mechanism into which his projected mind hugged with quivering majesty. He loved guns.

When he got back the man in the grey suit was sitting at a corner table, staring into a cup of tea. The tea was cold. Duke had bundled the deer into sacking he'd found and stitched together in the alley. He walked past the man into the kitchen, opened the cellar door and hurled the corpse down stairs where he heard it softly thud with the other pallid meat. This type didn't require refrigeration. Their diets in the industrial wilds ensured slowed decomposition, like plastics.

"Where's Garth?" said Duke.

The man sipped at his tea before answering. He swilled it, with strange earnest. He looked at Duke.

"You are unsuitable," he said.

Duke didn't understand, said so.

"Your blocked understanding is part of your unsuitability. But I have sworn."

"What are you talking about, sworn what? And where's Garth?"

The man stood up. Duke remembered the knives he'd left out on the bench and rapidly calculated the distance should the need arise. Here the man came close to him, not uncomfortably, but within an arm's reach.

"Garth as you knew him has gone. We've been watching him for a while; you too. Of those we watch few are actually selected, and of the elect, certain indulgences are afforded – which where I'm from is a matter of some contention."

He reached into his blazer pocket and Duke coiled for the counterattack, the dodge of a shiv or a bullet.

Instead, he pulled a closed fist from his pocket and held it aloft, out to the side. With his other hand, he mimicked himself, standing there in a hallowed T. Then slowly, the left fist unfurled and between his fingers Duke saw a pearly glint. A pill. And then between the fingers of the right fist he saw the same, except this pill bloomed into a golden cup.

"Garth has moved on. We'd like to give you the option of joining him, but this means giving you knowledge of where you'll be going, and approximate proportions of the 'body'

you'll inhabit there.”

Duke saw the threshold, and quivered.

“To properly render where it is you will be going, should you choose, we need to delineate exactly how it is, and through what processes we've come to this,” (gesturing in a sweep around him, probably meaning the world), “the final decrepit bastion of three dimensional being.

“Exactly five years ago when we, the pharmaceuticals – my employers – acquired the patent to all narcotics, we'd exhausted one objective only to discover another emergent one. To save time and resources, industry relied on intuitive programmes to calibrate the most efficient means of production for all newly patented narcotics in a safe and readily available form, befitting lightly restricted sale at general outlets.

“The thing with is intuitive programmes: they often repurpose incomprehensible code, like metabolising their own waste, which normally means cataclysmic functional mutation, which in turn requires a third party to monitor this process and keep the programmes within their original directives.

“This latest programme, however, which we'll refer to as The Way, was so intuitive as to anticipate the monitoring process, and defensively simulated its own monitor, thus subsuming the need for interference. We celebrated, congratulating ourselves on designing a programme with total self-sufficiency, a world first.

“The Way not only exhibited competent manufacturing process, but erected sufficient infrastructure to install every module between factory and shelf of its own accord. We let it.

Months later, new building projects emerged in relation to The Way, which, with our inherent trust, and bearing the signature of our will, we allowed. Finally, this appeared –” the man indicated the gleaming pill in his left hand.

“We didn't know what it was at first, but that was irrelevant. The Way had projected its design into the future, bypassing the usual annals of animal and human testing. The pill is perfect, as are its methods of distribution, of which I am a bit part.”

“What does it do?”

Duke at the gates, beginning to feel a swell of forward

motion behind him, like a strong wind.

“It is your vehicle. It will take you where you need to go. This planet is dead, or beyond the means to function for organic human bodies as a feedback component in the evolutionary process. The Way, in its expansive knowledge of past present and future, of animate and inanimate, has declared a remedy for this bleeding stopgap in your species’ history, in the form of this golden pill. Garth exhibited behaviours worthy of its gift, giving him a place in tomorrow’s über-culture. The Way has laid out a very specific criterion which I needn’t go into. All that matters is Garth desired for you to join him there, in tomorrow, which is where the pill will take you. And as a favour to those The Way has chosen, a veritable plus one is admitted.”

With this, the man held his objects out to Duke, who by an implanted will brought his own hands up to meet them. And there he stood, with his cup of wine and his pill, wobbling between the sublime weight of his flesh, and a promise of paradise.