

PUBLIC⁵⁶
ART | CULTURE | IDEAS **ATTENDANT A TO Z**

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T FOR TOOLE

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The Riddle of the Fey King

A STEVEN TOOLE ART MYSTERY

The horses took the final turn with the pent-up fury of a typhoon, mud from the soaked track spraying in a chaotic frenzy as they came into the home stretch, now reaching a full gallop, accelerating with a burst of pure energy, the two lead horses—Baseline Ump and Garden Princess—neck and neck, a battle in which the muscle, wits, intuition, and the intellect of jockey and horse, man and beast, merged into one kinetic structure reaching ever-forward toward that great goal of the finish line until, in a final desperate surge, Garden Princess took a hairsbreadth lead to win the race.

Right Decision III sauntered across the finish line fifteen seconds later, not limping or injured, just not in a particular hurry. I could almost have respected his Zen attitude if I hadn't had a solid fifty bucks riding on him to place.

I scowled, and tried to rip my betting slip in half in anger, but they make them out of water-resistant paper that's actually pretty difficult to tear, so I settled for crumpling it up, throwing it down, and stomping on it.

The odds on Right Decision III were 50-1, so I guess I shouldn't have expected much, but I'd had an inside tip to look out for him, and when I'd seen him walking on the parade ground, his lackadaisical gait and defiantly depressive attitude really won me over. I guess I identified with him, which should have been my first clue not to bet on him.

"You're not having much luck today, Toole," Charlie said, interrupting my frustration.

"Appearances can be deceiving, my friend," I said, affecting a wisdom and calm beyond my current frustration. "In horses, maybe I haven't been so lucky, but you might also say that, today, I'm actually the luckiest man of all."

He took a swig from his hip flask, passed it to me. "You're supposed to be in therapy right now, aren't you?"

"Yep," I said, taking my own swig, long and sweet.

"Sheila's not gonna like that you're skipping."

"Hopefully she'll never know," I said. "It's not like I even wanted to go. She's the one who set me up with that Freudian crackpot...I mean, come on, Freud's been dead for at least fifty years. Nobody believes that stuff anymore. It's time to move on. Embrace the new."

"Go ahead, tell me what's new in psychoanalysis, Toole," Charlie said. Through the haze of his drunkenness and my own, I couldn't tell if he was fucking with me or genuinely curious, or both.

"Neuroscience, my friend, neuroscience."

"Wuzzat?"

"Nerves. The brain. It's all matter. We're just a series of synapses sparking at arbitrarily arranged

patterns. No rhyme, no reason, just the determination of evolution. No hidden meanings, no symbolic castrations or Oedipal complexes, just the pure drive of biology.”

Charlie took another, longer, drink from his flask, then held it up, as if looking for more. “Sounds pretty depressing. Like nothing has any meaning.”

“Exactly,” I said, “It’s not my fault I skipped therapy today. Blame it on the genetics of the ancient Toole clan. I’m at the mercy of biology.”

“Try telling that to Sheila.”

“Like I said, I’m not exactly gonna tell Sheila anything.”

A depressing truth. Things hadn’t exactly been going well between Sheila and I lately. What had started as a beautiful relationship built on booze, good times, and more booze, had turned sourer than a half-finished Heineken the morning after. What had gone wrong? Well, she’d started drinking less for starters. Then she started complaining about my drinking, saying I didn’t have any “motivation” or “goals,” whatever that means.

And worse, a few weeks ago she started talking, again, about enrolling in the police academy. I tried to explain to her that it just didn’t jive, a private dick together with a cop. That they were natural foes, friendly only according to circumstance. A relationship like that just couldn’t last. She didn’t respond to that one.

Instead of coming around to my point of view, we’d gone to bed angry, and I’d woken up to a cold, empty bed and the name of a therapist scrawled on a piece of paper under the words “Get some help.”

To my credit, I’d given it a shot. I’d had two whole sessions with Dr. Lipkin. I can see why people get into it...if you’re the self-involved type who loves to talk about yourself. But deep, honest, critical introspection...it’s not really my thing. I got about ten minutes into session three when I decided I’d had enough, took a “bathroom break” and hightailed it over to the A train at 14th Street and took the long ride out to Aqueduct Racetrack and Resorts Casino.

Fortunately for my bank account, Right Decision III’s loss was the last race of the day. And we were all out of booze, so it seemed like a good time to book it. It was cold, and rainy, and grey, one of those classic New York April days that can’t decide if it’s spring yet or still winter, or some new mutant season altogether. So I looked forward to the dry warmth of the train after being out in the wet, windswept grandstand.

“Hey, Charlie!” someone cried out from behind us.

Charlie was a pretty well-known and well-respected—if not a particularly successful—gambler in the city, and a lot of guys looked up to him as a sort of father figure. He gave off a waft of confidence mixed with cheap cologne. He frequented Aqueduct, Belmont, and myriad other gambling holes, legal and illegal, so he was always running into people he knew. But, from the way he winced when he turned around and saw who’d called his name, I gathered he’d rather not have known *this* guy.

“Hey, Vince,” Charlie said without too much enthusiasm. “How’d you make out today?”

“Aww, you know it. Lousy.” Vince looked like he usually did pretty lousy at the races, and not a lot better anywhere else. I guess I could relate. But at least I knew how to dress seasonally. Vince, clearly anticipating summer at the shore by at least two months, wore shorts and a Hawaiian button-up, complete with a pair of sunglasses, even though nobody in the Tri-State area had seen the sun in a week. It didn’t look like he’d ever heard of an iron, either, and he smelled like he’d never been close to a washing machine...or a shower.

“Sorry to hear it, brother,” Charlie said, sympathetically, “Better luck next time.”

We started to walk away, but Vince wasn’t letting us off that easy.

“Say, Charlie, wait up, man. You taking the train?”

“Unless I want to sleep at Belmont.”

Vince laughed a little too long at that one. “Good one, Charlie, good one...I’ve done that before,

on accident, can't say it's a great idea." Another too-long, shrill series of laughs. "But, say, wouldn't you rather have a lift back into town?"

"You have a car?"

"Sure, I got a car, man, I mean, it's not mine, but I borrowed it from my brother-in-law, only he don't know I borrowed it yet. But I'll have it back before he cares too much, right? My sister'll still kill me, but she's been mad at me for 32 years anyway, so what's the difference, right?"

Charlie gave me a look that said he'd rather take the train, but you don't pass up a free ride... especially after you've spent the day getting pounded at the track. So I hedged my bets and just shrugged.

Fifteen minutes later we were roaring down the LIE in a car that probably didn't qualify as road-worthy and a driver who wouldn't have passed a breathalyzer given by Spuds Mackenzie. Vince's brother-in-law made a living picking through estate sales, so I sat crammed into the back between boxes overflowing with mouldering books, dingy clocks, stinking clothes, and chipped plates from an old lady's house in Sheepshead Bay.

I took it as an opportunity to really think about things. Moments of concentration—times when you can actually pause, take stock, and put things in perspective—are rare in this world, so I felt lucky to have the chance. Here I was, day-drunk on a Thursday, solidly in the red from a day at the track, my girlfriend trying to either set me up with a shrink, or dump me, or both.

Not to mention my detective work was going down the tubes. Todd, Bremer & Lawson, Inc. hadn't given me any new collections cases in months and, frankly, I'd been too depressed about the whole Sheila situation to go out seeking new clients. I hadn't checked my bank account in weeks, and after my losses at the track, I figured I'd keep it that way. Ignorance is bliss, right?

Yep, things were looking bad for old Toole. I suddenly regretted my dumb decision to meditate on my life. Meditation...ha. The only people meditation helps are people doing alright to begin with.

To distract myself from myself, I tuned into the conversation in the front seat.

Charlie was talking about fighting, his favourite subject.

"I don't know, Vince, I can't really get into this MMA stuff. The whole octagon thing. And there's no rules. And without rules, where's the artistry? Not like boxing. True sport of kings, that."

"I can see that, I can see that," Vince nodded along, "Some of these guys, though, they're pretty good."

"Maybe...but I ain't seen 'em."

"You ever see that guy bust his shin in half? Now that was something," another peel of delirious laughter.

"Like I said...no artistry."

Vince seemed stuck, and he drummed his fingers on the top of the wheel, then said, "Oh, you want art, huh? I got just the guy for you. Oscar Pintero, Puerto Rican guy from the Bronx. This guy...you see him fight...it's beautiful. He can dodge and kick at the same time, and land an uppercut that'd hurt your unborn kids. Knows tae kwon do, judo, karate, jiu jitsu, krav maga, you name it."

"He in the UFC?"

"Not yet. He's young. An undiscovered talent. But a rising star at the same time. Lost his last couple bouts, but that's just because his ma was sick and he was worried about her. But now that's over, he's got a fight coming up, he'll be back on top."

"Wait a minute, 'over' how?"

"Oh, the old lady croaked. So he'll be looking for vengeance. Win one for ma, you know."

"Or he'll do even worse." Charlie started to light a cigarette, his interest in the subject already waning.

"Fair enough, fair enough. But hear me out, there's big money in Pintero for anyone willing to give him a chance."

I bolted upright, my head popping between the seats. This sounded like just the thing I needed.

“Did you say ‘big money?’”

“You bet I did.”

“Come on, Toole, don’t get yourself roped up in this. Trust me, there’s no future.”

But this was just the kind of sure thing I’d been waiting for. A chance to earn some quick cash, buy myself some time to think and get my life back on track.

Before Charlie got out of the car, he gave me a last word of warning not to give Vince any money. But I wasn’t hearing it. Like the NY State lotto says: “You can’t win if you don’t play!”

* * *

I kept turning the fight over in my mind, hypnotized by the prospect of doubling my money, and maybe even then some, all in a few days time. I’d given Vince my last \$500, and he promised to call me with the date, time, and address of the match. If I was feeling up to it, maybe I’d even take a trip up to the Bronx to watch! I was so excited, even the note on the counter from Sheila saying she was staying with her mother on Staten Island for a couple days couldn’t get me down.

In fact, that was perfect...I’d be freed up to put all my energy into researching Pintero and boning up on my MMA trivia and stats, and get to go see the match without any hassle. And, while I was riding this wave of good energy, I could even start thinking about how to drum up some detective work.

The whole situation had me feeling on top of the world, so I just had to celebrate. And, as far as Steven Toole is concerned, there’s only one place to properly celebrate: the Corner Bistro!

Some people will tell you that the heart of the city is the Empire State Building, or the Statue of Liberty, or Central Park. I’m not saying these people are wrong, but for me, nothing says “New York” like the Corner Bistro. When I turn the corner and see its neon sign pulsing red in the inky night, I know I’m home.

I’ve been coming to the Corner Bistro for a long time. The bar hasn’t changed, and neither has the menu. There are spurts of hipsters roaming about these days, but a handful of actual musicians, carrying actual musical instruments, still frequent the place, and mainstay regulars, like myself, make this bar quintessential “Village.” The burgers are as delicious as they’ve always been, probably because they’re the only things they serve. Burgers. There’s nothing fancy about the Corner Bistro, basically it’s a dive, but there is a definitive cool factor. Either you have it or you don’t. And for me, the Corner Bistro definitely has it in abundance.

I always get the same thing: Jameson with one piece of ice. The bartender, Marc (“I spell it with a ‘c,’” I once heard him say, “...very European”) does it just the way I like it. “Hey, Toole,” Marc said, flashing his “I-only-do-service-with-a-smile” smile and setting a glass of Jameson in front of me before slowly easing a single ice cube into it. “If it isn’t the man of the hour himself.”

“How’d you hear already?”

“Hear about what?”

“My big inside tip?”

He furrowed his brow and lowered his voice. “Well, I don’t know anything about any inside tip, but maybe that’s what that lady over there wants to talk to you about?”

He nodded across the bar to the corner table, where a woman sat, a knockout blonde bombshell in a smart suit, swathed in the delicate lacing of shadow that fluttered through the bar, her face bathed in the warm, gentle flicker of the neon sign waving through the window from outside as she jabbed a powerful finger mercilessly at the screen of a Motorola smartphone, her lips pursed intently.

She looked all business. And business was booming.

“Her? For me?” I said, even more confused than before.

“Yep. Walked in here about thirty minutes ago, said she knew you came around here pretty often

and wanted to know if I'd seen you."

"What did you say?" I said, my voice halting. I might be an ace gumshoe, but intimidation makes me pretty nervous.

Marc smiled. "Relax. I just told her the picture didn't ring a bell, but she was welcome to sit and have a drink and wait if she wanted."

I had to hand it to Marc. Always cool under pressure.

"So, what, should I go talk to her?" I heard myself clearly and distinctly gulp.

Marc shrugged. "Up to you. She seems pretty on-the-level to me, though."

If she passed Marc's sniff test, who was I to judge, right?

So, with a sigh, I gathered up my courage—and a top-off of Jameson—and slouched toward the corner table.

"So, uh," I stammered, "I hear you're looking for Toole. For me, that is. I mean, I'm Toole."

She gave me a long, straight stare, her lips curling into a slight smile, the kind of look a shark might give a surfer, or a drunk football fan a plate of Buffalo wings.

"So I see," she said, dropping her phone in her bag. "Cassandra Voight."

She held out her hand and I gave it a long shake...a little too long, I think, because she started to look a little uncomfortable. Handshakes aren't really my forte.

"Well, how, uh, can I help you?"

"You're a detective, aren't you?"

"You've got the right Toole."

"But do I have the right Toole for the job," she said, smiling just a little seductively.

"I don't know? What's the job?"

"I'm sorry to meet you under such unusual circumstances, but I have a somewhat unusual case. What do you know about shoes?"

"Is that a trick question?"

"Mr. Toole, I represent Nike, and..."

"Whoa, whoa, whoa." Now she had my attention. "Like, Air Jordan Nike?"

"That's right, Mr. Toole."

"Just do it Nike?"

"Exactly. I work for the Nike Street Team, the division focused on street-level, grassroots marketing. We make sure that Nike stays true to its roots in urban youth culture.

We need your help. We're concerned about some knock-offs that have appeared recently in the New York metro area."

"Knock-offs? There's gotta be thousands, millions, of those."

"Of course, Mr. Toole. However, the problem is that these aren't just regular knock-offs. These are duplicates of an unreleased, top-secret design. I'll be perfectly honest with you here: whether you know it or not, Nike has been in a bit of a slump lately. People don't buy shoes like they used to, and there's a lot of competitors. This design, however, is our comeback. We have a lot riding on this. Which is why it's disturbing that the shoe has been leaked, and that fakes are circulating even before we've released the real thing."

"So where do I fit in?"

"We want to hire you to track down the makers of these shoes."

"And then what?"

"That's it."

There had to be a catch.

"What's the catch?"

"No catch. Just find out who's making the shoes, and we'll take care of the rest."

"No offense, but how'd you hear about me? I mean, I try to fly under the radar, if you catch my drift."

"We're Nike," she smiled, "We have resources. We did our homework. And, simply put, Mr. Toole, you're the best. Nobody works the street like you do. So what do you think?"

I rolled it around in my mind, carefully considering each and every nook and cranny of the case, the client, my own hunches and gut feelings. On the one hand, it seemed like a good deal: I did need some detective work, and how often does a blond bombshell of a client, representing one of the most illustrious brands in the world, walk into a smoke-filled bar, ask for you by name, and flatter you up and down.

Yes, it sounded like a good deal. Maybe too good of a deal. Something smelled, and it wasn't the beer soaked into the floor or the odour of charred grade-C ground beef. No, I just had a hunch that something wasn't what it seemed. Not to mention, I really wanted to follow-up on this hot MMA tip, so my schedule at the moment was a bit packed.

"Corporate has earmarked \$1,000, plus a \$500 per diem, for up to a week."

I did some quick math in my head, and felt my eyes bug out. If I could get this case nailed ASAP, I'd have plenty of money to go big on Pintero!

"Five hundred, up front."

"When you put it that way," I said, grabbing her hand and shaking it, "I'm you're Toole!"

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The first problem was logistical: how to carry around the shoes.

I don't carry a bag. Never have. I know there's a trend these days for men to carry big bags, and while I don't have anything against it, it's just not really my style. I like to live a free and easy life, uncluttered, focused, minimalist, which pretty much equals "bag free" as far as I'm concerned. But I also wasn't going to carry around a pair of shoes in my hands all day like a sucker. So I did the only sensible thing: I wore them, lacing them up and tying them tight with my patented Toole-triple-knot (why stop at two knots when you can be even more snug and secure?).

And let me tell you, from the perspective of comfort, these shoes had it all: form fitting, no-lace strap system, multidirectional outsole, zoom units in the heel and forefoot cushion hard landings and provide springy, split-second responsiveness.

You want more details? You got it. Among the other features was a tri-layer foam and textile upper for lightweight, breathable comfort, compression inner sleeve for snug-fitting support, materials are reinforced in high-wear areas for increased durability, straps are constructed with premium materials. These knock-offs were top-notch.

My first stop: Chinatown. Cassandra had also given me a run-down on all the case details assembled by the Street Team about the knock-offs. They'd first been spotted in the Michael K. on Canal Street, but, when a rep had spoken to the manager, he said they'd only ever had two pairs, didn't know exactly where they came from, must have been a mix-up at shipping. His story had seemed legit, so they'd let him off the hook, but they soon found another pair in Shoegasm, then another in DNA Footwear; the Street Team flushing them out of each proper brick & mortar location only to have them reappear, in dozens rather than single pairs, on the open air tables and illicit junk shops and underground Chinese malls of Hester Street. In short, the shoes were spreading, virally, and Nike needed to contain the pathogen. Dr. Toole was here to give the medicine.

So like a regular Jake Gittes I hopped on the 1 train at 14th Street and took a ride south to the Canal Street stop, a short hop from the chaotically beating heart of Chinatown. The markets and shops that lined Canal were the best starting points for my investigation. The rain cascaded down, but the sidewalks were still busy with shoppers and tourists who'd picked the wrong season to visit, all with the

added chaos of extra car traffic speeding by, splashing fetid, filthy water in random sprays onto the pedestrians. I picked my way through the grocers and junk shops, pointing to my shoes and asking the shopkeepers if they'd seen anything like these before. I'm not sure people really got what I was asking...most of them just gave me a slow, confused nod and a smile before calmly escorting me out.

"Hey, you seen these shoes before?" I said to a grocer at Mott and Canal.

"I'm seeing them now."

"No, but I mean, other ones like them."

"Maybe in a shoe store?"

"Oh, so you have seen them?"

"Look, boss, you gonna buy anything?"

"That depends. Do you have these shoes?"

"You already have them, though? Also, we don't sell shoes, this is a fish market."

A likely story. An easy cover. And cold trail after cold trail.

And, yet, it felt good to be back in the game—I'd been resting on my laurels, enjoying the domestic life. Sure, this life is fraught with perils, but for any true knight the quest is everything.

I turned off Canal onto Mott Street, wound my way through the stone faces and blind alleys, the miasma of mortar and concrete chaos of the tenement-laced mysteries of the city of New York, the Naked City.

After an hour or so of cutting down false lead after false lead, following the low rumble of distant clues, I started to feel a different sort of rumble in my gut. I looked at my phone. No wonder I was hungry! It was almost noon, and I'd only had a bagel for breakfast.

There was also a text from Sheila saying she was staying on Staten Island another night and asking me to call her. Bah! No time! Not while the game, the crime game, was afoot.

And to play the game well, to keep my mind sharp, I had to fulfill my more bodily needs—it's the secret to any good detective work. So, I made a beeline straight to Great New York Noodle Village II, between Bayard and Mulberry. I've been going to Noodle Village II since it was just Noodle Village, and over the years I've actually become pretty friendly with the owner, Sammy Chang. When it comes to noodles, he's top-notch, a whiz with a wok, but only when I was about to dig into a steaming bowl of roast duck wonton noodle soup—in fact, the delicious aroma probably gave my mental faculties a big boost—did I remember that Sammy wasn't just an ace chef and *restaurateur*, but also an avid shoe collector. Vintage Chuck Taylors, first-gen Nikes, the latest experimental Adidas, Vans custom-designed by Banksy—Sammy had them all, even a side-collection of oddball knockoffs. If anyone had a bead on the underground shoe world of New York, it was him.

As luck would have it, I was slurping noodles, mentally reviewing the facts, when Sammy himself strolled up to the table and sat down in the seat across from me.

"If it isn't my favourite private eye, Steven Toole."

My mouth was filled to the brim, and then some, with noodles, so I just gave him a thumbs-up.

"Slow down, my man," Sammy said, frowning a bit, "You're gonna choke yourself."

Still working on swallowing, I just shook my head.

"Just because you're eating duck doesn't mean you need to eat like one."

I snorted a little at that, and felt a few drops of broth squeeze through my sinuses and dribble out my nose.

"Well, good to see you, Toole. Enjoy your soup," he said, and started to get up.

I panicked, because I really needed to talk to him, so, as he turned away, I leapt—still choking down noodles—across the table, overturning table and soup onto the floor, grasping desperately at Sammy's sleeve, trying to swallow an oversize bite of duck, only to have it lodge in my throat.

Sammy turned, saw me choking, and his eyes went as wide as a noodle soup bowl, and, using well-

honed restaurant reflexes, he turned me around and gave me a quick and professional Heimlich squeeze, sending the duck chunk spurting up my throat and out my mouth, arcing through the air a more than respectable distance before landing squarely in the open dumpling basket of a family of four.

"Thanks, Sammy," I said, recovering my breath. "You saved my life."

"I told you to watch out, Toole. I don't want anyone dying in my restaurant. Bad for business. They'll murder you in the Yelp reviews."

He started to walk away again, but this time I used my words.

"Wait a minute, Sammy. I need to ask you a question. Have you ever seen shoes like these before?"

He looked down at my feet, and I followed his gaze. I was a little dismayed at just how spackled with soup they were. A few stray noodles covered some of the prominent detailing, so I shook them off a bit.

Sammy kneeled down and took a closer look, at foot-level.

"Hmm. Interesting colour pattern. Complicated stitching. Velcro fades. I'd say this is a genuine Jean Valery but, then, where the hell would you get something like that. No offense."

"None taken."

"So...where *did* you get something like this?"

"It's complicated." And I commenced to give him the whole spiel. I mean, I guess I'd technically signed a confidentiality agreement, but Sammy's a close friend, or at least a well-known associate, and sometimes you have to give up a little info to get people to play ball.

"What's really interesting about this is the quality of the work. If this is a knock-off, it's a very thorough job."

"What do you mean 'if'?"

"Check this out," he said, and gripped the shoe at the heel, started to pull it off. "Do you mind?"

"Oh, no, of course not," I said, and lifted my foot, setting my socked foot down in a puddle of soup.

He held the shoe up close to my face, a blast of foot funk and duck noodle soup hitting me hard, and lifted a small flap hidden underneath the lacing, revealing a small stitched image.

"See that?"

"Yeah, I guess. What is it?"

"Look closer."

"A crown? A yellow king's crown?"

"Exactly, my man. It's Valery's signature stitch...deliberately worn down, too. It's why they call him the Faded King. It's a hard stitch to get right, and not everybody knows about it. I've seen plenty of Valery knockoffs, and none of 'em have it. Not worth the trouble."

"So you're saying these might be authentic?"

"Either that, or you've got yourself a very talented forger."

An inside job? Another chill went down my spine. Another lurch in my stomach. But this time, it was more than hunger.

* * *

Sammy had to take off to tend to a "major kitchen malfunction" at Noodle Village III out in Flushing, but before he left he gave me the address and contact info of a friend of his, a big shot in the illicit shoe manufacturing world who might have some useful info, on the "sole" (get it?) condition that I didn't get either Sammy or his buddy involved in this whole Nike investigation. I agreed...after all, I might be a detective, but I'm not a snitch.

I got up to leave the restaurant, drowsy from soup (Sammy'd given me an extra-large portion to replace the one I'd knocked over) but feverish with the excitement of my new tip. Or maybe I just had to use the bathroom.

I stumbled my way down to one of those classic New York bathrooms, thirty feet underground down a straight bare-walled stairwell rancid and festering with slick moisture. The bathroom itself

was down a long hallway, illuminated by a single swaying bulb, distant sounds of kitchen clutter and commotion only emphasizing just how alone and isolated you can be in one of the biggest cities in the world. I always get the creeps in this kind of place, and the fact that I was hot on the trail of crime only heightened my detective senses...danger. But, gathering my courage, I went into the bathroom and did my thing.

On the way back out another guy passed by me. Thin, emaciated, looked like he hadn't slept in a good long while. He pushed a slip of paper into my pocket.

"Hey, buddy," I said, "Sorry to disappoint, but you're barking up the wrong tree here."
"The King awaits."

"Huh?"

"You spoke of the Fay King...he now awaits your arrival."

"Now, I don't know what you're getting at, but..."

"Across the velvet sea, the waves do roll / The dim, sad suns take their heady toll. / The dreary crows, they cannot sing, / In deference to their darkling king."

"What the hell are you talking about?"

"The cleave twixt he'en and blackest hell / Is where the King most fay doth dwell. / The curtain rises / The lights do dim, / a whispered hush as we await him."

At first I'd thought this guy was just looking for a good time (not an uncommon occurrence for yours truly... what can I say? The Toole attraction is a heady pheromone), but now I knew he was just plain off his rocker. I mean, you have to be pretty crazy to recite poetry to a total stranger, right?

And then there were his eyes, which went from fully dilated and pitch black to swirling clouds of cosmic colours, like the grains of the universe shifting through the sands of time. I shit you not, those are the exact thoughts that came into my head when I looked into his eyes. Whatever he was on, it must have been some powerful stuff.

"We bait our breath, / We dance, we sing, / A proper entrance / For such a gloomy king."

I put my hand on his shoulder, gave him a friendly squeeze.

"Look, pal, go upstairs, eat some noodle soup...it'll sober you up and, brother, do you ever need sobering up?"

But from the way his eyes were flitting around in crazed patterns, I didn't think he was gonna follow my advice. Too bad, I felt for the guy, but I didn't have time for this kind of nonsense: I was hot on the trail of some hot Nikes.

Outside, the early spring night air was misty, hovering uncomfortably between cold and pleasant, but with a dampness that soaked straight through any and all clothing. I walked down Bayard until it spit me out on Bowery, right by the gaping maw of the Manhattan bridge, its supersized whitewashed columns shining brilliantly in the inky darkness, the low soothing hum of late rush hour traffic punctuated by the desperate honks of the late-for-dinner, the impatient, and the chronically angry. Looking over my shoulder, I saw a figure in a navy tracksuit peek his head out of a doorway, stare directly at me, and pull back in.

Suspicious. Very suspicious. I walked briskly north, and at the Canal crosswalk looked back and saw the guy in the tracksuit dodge quickly into a side street.

I was definitely being followed, and in a panic, I didn't wait for the northbound crosswalk to change, but instead ran across the east crosswalk, which led directly to the pedestrian walkway of the bridge. The beginning of this walkway is an island surrounded on all sides by quickly moving traffic and, because it only leads to a bridge, not much foot traffic. So there I stood, a sitting duck, as an unknown tracksuited entity loped after me. I watched him cross the street, dodging cars, making his way steadily toward me.

Without thinking, I took off up the walkway, leaving behind the lights of the city for the darkness

of the bridge, suspended ominously over the slick, greasy, pitch black currents of the East River, the tracksuited man gaining ground on me slowly but surely. I'll go ahead and take this moment to clarify that this was not exactly a high speed foot chase. I'm no athlete. I haven't exercised, per se, since Clinton got impeached, and from the looks of him, my shadowy tail wasn't much of a fitness buff himself. In fact, he was the kind of guy flowy, form-obscuring tracksuits were made for. But, boy, could he move...faster than me, at least, and in a final burst of speed I ran, heart pounding, feet slapping the concrete of the walkway like a dynamo throbbing over steel, as I felt the mysterious figure coming closer, and closer, and closer, felt the strain and groan of my legs as they buckled and gave out. I stumbled, fell against the railing, and looked back, wide-eyed in terror, at...no one.

The lights of the walkway, lined up in a straight sloping row, illuminated nothing.

Jeez, the pressure of the case must really be getting to me, I thought.

I shook my head, stood up, and dusted myself off. My pants were soaked and filthy. I started to walk back to the train, the mist turning to a rain that went from gently coating to pelting in a matter of minutes. Fortunately, I realized I was near Nancy Whiskey Pub, site of more than a few of my more infamous nights out. In other words, the perfect place to dry out. Besides, after a hard day of sleuthing, I figured I deserved a celebratory drink or two.

Or ten.

I don't know how I found my way home, but I vaguely remember a drunken bet that must have ended badly for me, because when I woke up, my head was splitting worse than one of Gallagher's melons. I looked at the clock: 2pm. I panicked, feeling my time—and the chance for my big payout—slipping away. I threw on a shirt and a sweatshirt, but the only pair of pants I could find was the pair from the night before, which had somehow become soggy—but whether in beer, liquor, water, or all three, only God above knew.

I reached inside the pockets, slick and clammy, and fished out the address Sammy had written down for me and found two slips of paper instead. One of them must have been the address the stoned guy had slipped me. I had to make a choice, and fast, no time to track down Sammy and confirm. I looked at them: one was in Flushing, the other in East New York. Equally inconvenient, so no easy way to decide. I did what anyone would do in this kind of situation and consulted my friends "eeny," "meeny," "miney," and "mo."

* * *

Moving southeast through Brooklyn, once you get past the classic brownstones of Fort Greene and Park Slope, and the just as iconic pre-war brick apartments that take up entire blocks of Flatbush and Crown Heights, and, even further south, beyond the shabby mid-century vinyl-sided duplexes of East Flatbush, you'll eventually come to East New York, where the borders between neighbourhoods blur and waver into a long stretch of low-rise apartments and free standing homes, unkempt and crumbling, the true margins of the city. Which is exactly where Sammy's illicit shoemaker buddy was based.

I took the 2 train straight to the end of the line, New Lots Ave, but was still a ways away. A few livery cabs, black and busted, loitered around the edges of the train station, but I didn't have much cash on me, so I decided to hoof it. I'd had more exercise in the last few days than I had in years. I guess detective work is good for the mind *and* the body.

I must have overestimated my walking speed, because by the time I got near the shoe shop—a run-down, abandoned store-front church—the sun had already set behind the city, the dark greasy grey of the rainy day giving way to the blotted black ink of night...and here I was, in the middle of East New York, searching for an illicit shoe factory.

I tried the front door; locked, of course. I looked around. What the hell was I even doing here? Sneaking around a strange abandoned building in the middle of East New York in the middle

of the night? It was crazy. I could feel my detective courage slipping out of me like air from a popped balloon animal.

I was about to call it a night, go back home, grab a slice and a cold one, and recalibrate, when the door swung open. A blast of light flooded out and temporarily blinded me. When my eyes recovered, I could make out the silhouette of a hooded figure stalking slowly toward me, eyes glowing sinisterly from the blackness of the hood.

"The initiate has arrived." His voice boomed back into the blinding white light of the space behind him.

"Huh?" All I could think to say.

"I shall be your ceremonial guide into the realm of celestial darkness. You may call me Kurt." The hood came down revealing a pasty middle-aged guy in glasses. His voice dropped to a whisper. "You're late, though," he paused, looked down at his clipboard, "Dewey."

"I think I have the wrong address..." I said, back-peddling.

But Kurt grabbed my shoulder and pulled me inside. "Too late for cold feet now. You said you were in, and there's no going back."

"Look, I think there's been a mix-up here."

"Yeah yeah yeah, save it for the judge," he said, then smirked. "Well, I guess you will, actually."

"I don't get it."

"You see, the judge is our little joke-name for the Grand Inquisitor. He's the guy who...well, you'll see soon enough." Another smirk, which seemed a bit more sinister this time around.

"Look, I don't want to mess up whatever it is you've got going on," I said, perhaps a tad desperately, as he led me through a red velvet draped hallway, replete with crests and swords hung on the walls. "This looks like a real nice set-up you guys have here, and I'd love to see more, really I would, but I need to get going."

I jerked my shoulder from his grip and turned around...right into two bigger and beefier hooded "gentlemen." Squeezed between these two goons, I was promptly dragged back down the hallway.

"Like I said," said Kurt, "There's no going back."

The goons threw me into a glorified janitorial closet. Actually, it wasn't even really glorified, it still had mops and bleach solution and a big yellow rolling water bucket. I heard the guys talking through the door.

"Where'd they dredge this guy up?" one of the goons asked.

"I dunno," said the other goon, "But he looks like a real loser."

"Yeah, but most of the time they're more messed up...usually, they're on so many drugs they don't know which end is up."

"Probably for the best, all things considered."

"Quiet down, you guys," Kurt hissed in a stage-whisper, "The ceremony's getting ready to begin."

The goons piped down, leaving me alone with my thoughts, which were mostly panicked screaming. This was definitely not an illegal shoe fabrication factory. This was starting to seem like one of those crazy cult things I'd read about on the Internet; one of those crazy cult things from *X-Files* or *True Detective* or something. Whatever it was, I was definitely out of my league here.

But before I had time to panic too much, the door opened up and Kurt and the goons came in.

"The ceremony will now begin," Kurt said with all the gleeful solemnity of a kid playing the lead in a high school version of *Hamlet*. "Bring him," he ordered the goons, who grabbed my shoulders with their by-now-familiar meat-hand grip and pushed me out of the room.

"I know it's asking a lot," I said, "But, before this whole ceremony begins, do you think I could use the bathroom?"

The goons looked at each other, then Kurt, who just shrugged.

“Down the hall, around the corner, on the left.”

Phew. I'd bought myself some time. And I really did have to take a leak. I have a small bladder that gets extra active when I'm nervous. As I was heading to the bathroom, I saw a door at the far end of the hallway, slightly ajar. I couldn't resist a quick peek.

Now, the private dick trade isn't for the faint of heart. I've seen things that would make you wince, that would make a civilian say, “That's disgusting,” or “That's really fucked up.” But at the heart of this trade is the ability to stare into the darkest crevices of society, its most rotten core, and not flinch. But, when I looked into the dining room of the East New York Creepy Elks Club, I have to admit I flinched.

There were about thirty guys standing around in robes of a variety of colours, from black to crimson, and even a few purple and white. They were also wearing masks, mostly animal shapes: bears, horses, rats, a few dragons, even a turtle. I guess that guy had waited until the last minute to get his costume. I could deal with all this...fine, just another night at the Elks. Not that I'd ever been to an Elks Club meeting, but this is roughly what I had assumed they're like. They weren't particularly threatening, either—from the size of their stomachs, most of them looked like they'd been living the good life. If I had the chance, even *I* could probably outrun them. They were actually pretty lazy about the masks, too. A lot of them had them resting on their foreheads, and I'm pretty sure I recognized a few faces from the business and real estate pages of the *Post*.

But two details really got me. First, a big stone block sat in the centre of the room. I want to say granite, but I'm not really a rock guy. Maybe it was shale. Either way, this thing was a real slab. What was particularly weird was that the top of it had little divots carved into it, in a pattern, a spiral, and each divot ended at the side of the slab, almost creating little funnels for some sort of liquid to run out of.

Then there was the guy in the corner. If the other guys looked like out of shape businessmen getting their cult yah-yahs out, this guy seemed a bit more...into it, let's say. He was wearing a leather mask that covered his entire head and face, with only eye, nose, and mouth holes. Shirtless, too, he had on leather straps holding up leather pants. To be honest, that didn't throw me very much, I'd seen plenty of guys like that while serving papers to leather clubs in the Meatpacking district and Hell's Kitchen. But, nobody at those places had big knives like this guy. And I'd never seen any of them carve spiral sigils into their arms while staring trance-like out into nothingness with, come to think of it, pretty much the same look in his eyes as the guy at Sammy's restaurant. Now, I'm no expert on cults or secret societies, but somehow, I got the sense that this leather daddy wannabee and that big slab of granite were connected, and yours truly was about to be in the middle.

I heard some commotion down the hallway, so I ran into the bathroom and started washing my hands, just in time, too, because a second later I heard the goons pounding on the door. Kurt yelled at me to hurry up.

“Let me guess,” I said, “The ceremony is about to commence?”

“That's right, wise guy,” he said, frowning.

As they led me down the hallway, I heard the din of conversation in the dining room come to a hushed end, and the men began chanting:

Floweth the waterfall
Into a deathly morass.
Darkness reigns across the land,
Save for the King's illuminating gas.

The time grows short;
The leaves grow pale.

The King goes forth,
His foes to assail.

The hour wanes,
It waxes dimly.
A blood sacrifice,
We gather grimly.

I'm not much of a judge of poetry, but this stuff was pretty wretched. I mean, rhyming verse, even *I* know nobody writes that stuff anymore. And it sounded a bit phoned-in at that.

They stopped me in front of the entryway.

"We must...prepare you..." said Kurt, in his ominous voice, which wasn't particularly ominous on its own, but he had a distinct advantage over me. The goons used a knife to strip off my shirt and pants (pretty excessive, if you ask me), so I was standing there in my underpants (embarrassingly dirty, too, since I was at the end of a wash cycle, and had been for weeks). One of the goons bent down to untie my Nikes. He was having trouble undoing my patented Toole-triple-knots when I got a flash of bravado and kned him directly in the forehead. He went sprawling onto his back, and I took off ahead of goon number two, running full speed to the end of the hallway where I'd seen a small window. To be honest, I'm not sure exactly what kind of plan I'd worked out in my mind for getting through that undersized half-window, but I managed to claw my way up to it, push out the screen, and squeeze through. I guess I somehow imagined that, once through the window, I'd be able to hold onto some sort of ledge long enough to jump down. Instead, as I was pulling my legs through, one of my patented Toole-triple-knots snagged on the window latch just as I was leaping down and I slammed face first against the outside wall of the building. I bounced off a couple times, and then the latch snapped (note that the knot held...that's serious staying power), sending me flailing to the ground ten feet below.

I picked myself up off the ground and, looking back only long enough to see Kurt's face, apoplectic with rage at the window, I ran out into the street and searched frantically for a cab. Nothing. The streets hung in the deadest silence you've ever heard this side of the grave. So I started jogging as fast as my legs could carry me, which, after a day of so much running, was not very fast. Then I realized that I was running pantsless and shirtless in designer Nikes through East New York at 4am, which was not good. I looked behind me, and saw a few of the cult goons starting to emerge from the front door, pointing in my general direction and moving toward me, and fast, too!

I started to run faster, then stopped. I sighed. I couldn't do it. I couldn't run anymore. Call it bad lifestyle choices, call it bad genes, call it whatever you like, but the fact was, I was tired. There was nowhere to run. Every alley was blind, every wall a blank face, windows dark or curtains drawn. I could try yelling for help, in fact, that sounded like a great idea. I started to shout, as the cult goons closed in, I could hear their voices.

Just when I was about to give up the ghost, turn myself in, and prepare for the ritualized castration, I heard the honk, overzealous and broken, the unmistakable sound of a livery cab. It pulled up next to me, and without looking I jumped in and yelled at the cabbie to drive. He sped off with a screech, leaving the cultists with only the smell of molten rubber to sacrifice.

"I cannot help but notice you are not wearing pants," the driver said after an awkward silence.

"Good observation," I said, "Thanks for picking me up though. I owe you one."

"No thanks necessary," the driver (Aarav, I saw from the cab license) said in a crisp, British-Indian accent, "I have been in such a situation before."

"I seriously doubt it."

“Oh, yes, my friend...it was in Hyderabad...I had just been given my discharge—honourable, I must say, from the army after serving eight years in Kashmir, doing and seeing things that have come to haunt my soul forever since. I was in the Khilwat neighbourhood walking home from a party held by a wealthy military acquaintance of mine, more than a little inebriated—a sad attempt to escape the nightmares caused by my pathetic, slavish service to the Indian state and its wretched causes. And I don’t mind telling you that not long after this I swore off the demon alcohol forever, and am much the wiser, happier, and healthier for it. In any case, I was walking back from a party, quite inebriated, quite late at night. Khilwat is home to many ancient buildings, as you likely know, and is said to hide many ancient treasures and, even darker mysteries. Several famous Indian cults have made their homes in this neighbourhood, and it was just my misfortune...where are you going to, by the way?”

“Oh, uh, Manhattan. West Village.”

“Very good. Sit back, relax, we will be there in no time,” he said, and I felt the car accelerate wildly as he turned onto Flatbush. I was starting to feel like I might have had a better chance of survival with the cultists. “Now. Where was I?”

“Uh...Khilwat cultists?”

“Oh, yes, of course. So, there I was, inebriated, walking by, unbeknownst to me, a famous cult compound, when...”

Thirty minutes later, Aarav came to a screeching halt on the corner of Greenwich and Horatio, the frame of the black Lincoln swaying on the blown shocks.

“So long, Aarav,” I said, “You’re a real lifesaver.”

“Do not mention it.”

“Hope to see you around.”

“I do not doubt it.”

And the cab sped off, a lone rocket launched straight into the heart of the night on a collision course with the next fare. At least someone was feeling energetic, because I was feeling beat.

I spent most of the next day recovering, and it was only in the late afternoon that I even started to have the energy to move. Still no sign of Sheila. I wanted to not care about it, to put it out of my mind, to be the lone, rugged, independent private eye, but another part of me cared...a lot.

And then there was the case itself. The shoes. The Faded King. The Fay King. Nike. The pieces were on the board but I didn’t know how to move them. I didn’t even know whose turn it was, or what game we were playing anymore. Lost in thought, I barely paid attention as my body, of its own accord, carried itself straight to that constant safe haven, that port in the storm, the Corner Bistro. I only came to my senses there and then, sitting in my favourite spot, a Jameson and single cube of ice being pushed in front of me by Marc. It’s like my mind made a decision on its own! Weird.

“Why so glum, Toole?” Marc said, smiling sympathetically. A class act all around, this guy.

“This case. It’s an enigma. A puzzle-box. A riddle. All wrapped together in a knot. I don’t know which way is down, I don’t know which way is up.”

“What do you know?”

“Nothing. Nothing at all.”

“Too bad,” he frowned, and craned over the bar to look down at my feet. “What happened to the shoes?”

“Don’t ask. I tell you, it’s been classic Toole luck from start to finish. I get a great case but I botch it up almost immediately.”

I told Marc about my “inside job” theory, about how Cassandra had hired me to track down authentic Nikes. How I didn’t even know how to get in touch with her again, and the phone number she gave me didn’t work.

Marc’s face suddenly lit up, and he snapped his fingers.

"I've got it!" He pulled out his phone and started scrolling through his pictures. "A friend came in the other night when you were here meeting Cassandra. I took a picture of her. And check this out..." He held the phone over to me.

"Cassandra and you are in the background!"

Sure enough, there we were. The beginning of my troubles.

"So where does that get me?"

"Watch this," Marc said, smiling slyly.

I watched as he cropped the photo and then did a Google image search for the picture of Cassandra. Marc's a real whiz with the tech.

"Here we go," Marc said, passing me the phone, "Think we've found your client."

The image search was filled with dozens, no, hundreds, of pictures of Cassandra Voight. Except Cassandra Voight wasn't really Cassandra Voight. She was Cass Vox.

I read a little of her bio on a site called *Artforum*:

Vox's daring multimedia, cross-platform work performatively re-enacts the techniques of the surveillance state. Inhabiting the position of both the surveiller and the surveilled, Vox actively embodies the multivalenced subjectivity and paranoid affect of our contemporary "biopolitical moment," showing the links between aesthetics, media, performance art, and the deep state.

Blah blah blah. Between this, the gibberish poetry, and all that cult chant nonsense, I was starting to think the art world wasn't all it was cracked up to be.

"Oh, and look at this," Marc said, scrolling down the search results page, "She's actually got an opening tonight. At the SAC Gallery in Chelsea. That's right up the street."

After all the twists and turns of this crazy case, the roads now came together at a single point, and that point was art. I ran out of Corner Bistro so fast I left my jacket behind, but it didn't matter, time was of the essence as I hopped onto the 1 train up to 27th Street and practically flew to the gallery.

I entered, drenched in sweat and rain, just as Cassandra, or, should I say, Cass, stood up from the crowd and walked to the front of the gallery to light, polite applause. Instead of the slick corporate suit, she was wearing leggings, a chunky sweater, and oversized nerd glasses. Vintage nerd glasses. Definitely an artist. She stood for a moment, smiling confidently at the crowd. Behind her a series of blurry, black and white surveillance-style photographs hung on the wall, each prominently featuring a single short, dumpy figure.

"Thank you all for coming out tonight," she said, a clear plastic solo cup of white wine loosely clasped in her hand. "I'm very excited that this show, years in the making for me, is finally opening. And I'm particularly excited to debut a brand new piece: 'Watching the Detectives/24-hour Surveillance/Consumer Piece.'"

I definitely perked up at the word "detectives," and, looking closer at the photographs behind Cass, the figure in them started to appear familiar.

"Taking my inspiration from Duchamp's *Étant donnés* with this piece, I fully inhabited the position of surveillance. On a flimsy, unbelievable premise, I hired a so-called private detective (read: debt collector) to track down a pair of designer shoes, donated by the sponsor of this show, Nike, while several associates and myself followed him and documented his journey with photographic evidence. The piece shows the intersection of the surveillance society and brand-identity and consumerism in the sad, almost pathetic, figure of the lone private detective as his outdated, nostalgic "tough guy" masculinity becomes ever more residual, his case ever more circular, unsolvable, and meaningless."

I felt my ears burn. I wasn't quite sure what she was getting at, but I knew it wasn't making me look very good.

As Cass stopped talking and the crowd dispersed, I took a closer look at the photos. Taking the case at Corner Bistro, choking on soup, talking to Sammy, falling down on the bridge, emerging pantless from the Fay King's cult headquarters. It was all there. I'll leave any judgement of artistic merit to the professional critics, but it was actually a pretty impressive piece of detective work...but not great for my own professional rep, unfortunately.

I probably should have stayed and talked to Cass, found out what the deal was, exactly, and, more importantly, if she was gonna come through with the rest of the dough.

But I have my pride, and, looking around at the crowd of art-society snobs in their slick, styled clothing and hair. I felt like a rotary phone in a room full of Samsung 7s or, well, a private dick in an art gallery. A relic, something out of place, out of time, just there to be gawked at or, if I was lucky, ignored.

I slunk away, and made the slow walk down the sodden alleys of the city that never sleeps, the long lonely road back to where I belonged...Corner Bistro. My stool was still there and, hey, it was even still warm from my own gullible ass.

"How'd it go, Toole?" Marc asked, friendly as always.

"Jameson, ice," I said, unable to look him in the eyes. "Make it a double. Scratch that. A triple."

"That bad, huh?"

I nodded, slugged my drink, motioned for another. The liquor brought me back to my senses, and I was about to launch into the whole thing when who should roll in but Charlie Bruno himself. I'd normally have been happy to see him, but tonight, I struggled to give him a weak smile.

"What's going on, Charlie? You don't usually come around this way."

"I had some business on the west side, and thought I might find you here. How are you?"

"Not so good, to be honest."

"Sorry to hear it. But I got something that'll cheer you right up. You hear about Vince?"

I sat up in my stool. "What about him?"

"The son of a bitch skipped town!" Charlie said, his face turning into a dopey grin.

"Wait, skipped town? When? Why?"

"Get this. This guy, normally totally brain-dead, he actually ends up conning a bunch of suckers with that stupid, half-baked MMA fighter story of his."

"Wait a minute...what's the con? When's the fight? Did it get called off?"

"Ah, that guy's full of shit. The guy's got a speed habit big enough to power ConEd. He just needed some quick cash."

"But he had a whole backstory and everything..."

Charlie's face fell. "Aww, Christ, don't you get it? There's no fight...there's not even a fighter."

"But I gave him \$500..."

"Shit, Toole, I'm sorry," Charlie said, sounding genuinely sympathetic, but also a little exasperated.

"I told you not to give him any money. Even if there was a fight, he'd probably still have ripped you off."

"It seemed so legit..." I trailed off into nothingness.

"Jesus, Toole, you got had, bad. I thought you were supposed to be some ace detective?"

"Me, too," I said, downing the rest of my Jameson and slinking my way off my stool and out the door.

I went back to my apartment.

No fight. No case. No knock-off Nikes. No can't-lose bet. No big payday.

Just art.

I opened the fridge and pulled out a Coors Light. Premium beer always helps me in the bad times. I figured I'd have a few cold ones, watch the Nets, and wait on Sheila. She'd probably already come to her senses and got sick of her mother, so I guessed she'd be back before the fourth quarter.

When the sun went down, I didn't turn on the light. It got dark and I fell asleep before Sheila got home.