

This Is It

Casey J. Labrack

On my answering machine this chick Tracy says she's got my pills. That was six hours ago and it's evening before I get the van started. But now that it's going I might as well get them back.

It's getting dark out as I get into the city and I'm only able to find my way by the sweet yellow light that is, like, the fruit of street lamps. I'm coasting along slow, anxiously trying to read the street numbers. I wipe the windshield and, having no success, remember to wipe my glasses. All these city apartment complexes look the same, so she said I could look for a giant graffito tag of an amoeba wearing a cowboy hat.

Now I've spotted it. I park the Night Wulf in the adjacent alley by the fire escape and hustle into the building. Inside there's another set of doors, like the air lock to a spaceship. Or space station.

Here's what appears to be a listing of everyone in the building. The listing has Tracy Allen residing in apartment 203. So I try the inner door. Locked!

Of course I need those pills, but there's no way I'm going to start wailing on this stranger's door after dark and be a total creep.

Fortunately, her window jimmies open pretty easily.

I haul myself in from the fire escape before a lot of cold air gets in. This apartment complex is criminal to keep me locked out in the elements like that. Climbing down from a washing machine, I notice my toes have actually started to turn *blue*.

Now I am still for a moment, listening for any sound from the washing room of this messy apartment. Hearing nothing, I decide it's best to find and quietly abscond with my pills without disturbing her.

Hence I am presented with the decision of creeping versus just walking carefully. Now, I'm not convinced that I can creep that much quieter, and walking normal could make things less uncomfortable if I'm caught. It is best, I have found, to sort of skulk, moving slickly around the seams of the floorboards, where they are less likely to creak.

Small piles of scrubby clothes clump in the corners throughout the place. There is a musty smell. A car dealership sign across the street casts a neon glow into one room and spiders cast webs here to catch bugs drawn to light.

Lurching around a corner, I spy the distant blue flicker of a TV left on. I instinctively want to avoid that room, but there are few other places to look. For a furtive, twilight search of an apartment I don't know, I've been damn thorough.

Looks clear—I enter. And I'm still skulking, right, but I'm getting lower and lower as I go, more like the spider, invisible against the inky black, extending—

"You're blocking TV, Ron," says a female voice with some kind of Slavic accent. There, on the futon mattress lying in the corner, two weary eyes visible under a comforter.

Damn. This might get weird.

"Tracy?"

"You are *not* Ron." The statement is entirely declarative, as if for my own information. She straightens up now, and I can see she's a white girl, dirty blond, in her mid-twenties. Kinda sultry, in a haggard way.

"You like the TV? I was just watching some," she says, making small talk as if this is some awkward moment at a cocktail party.

And, like, does she realize that she's watching an infomercial? On TV, they're demonstrating a mattress, with a chick jumping up and down on one end and a wine glass sitting undisturbed on the other.

Huh. Actually, that is pretty interesting. I mean, you could have an affair with your wife sleeping right there next to you.

"Yeah, I like TV. I like my pills better," I say, and shoot her a look. I think it might have been too subtle for her, because she just stares at me with these glossy eyes for a really long time.

Then she starts to lick herself.

Like a house cat, she's suddenly absorbed in lapping at her bent wrist.

"Strawberry-flavored skin lotion," she says, noticing me stare. "I can't help myself."

"Mmm. That could be dangerous in the wrong hands."

Just then, the front door crashes open.

Ron.

"Start your engines!" he calls from the threshold.

He enters the living room shirtless, a CVS bag at his side. Ron is massive, balding, paunchy, and flush. He almost walks right past me, reeking of cigarettes and other things. It's like I'm in the orbit of some uninhabitable planet.

"Who the frig is this?" he says. "Looks familiar."

"I have no idea who this man is," she says.

"What, you just let any motherfucker with muttonchops waltz in here during my time?"

"I didn't let him in!"

"All right, you go pass out for a little bit, I'll handle this."

Well, pretty soon here I'm out on the hallway floor.

Standing over me, Ron snaps his fingers and says, proudly, "I got it! Isaac Asimov!"

The elation from this recognition fades quickly, and he turns to head back into the apartment. "Get outta here, you Asimov-looking motherfucker," he says over his shoulder. "Arvonne, I oughta take you from behind for this shit," I hear as he slams the door.

If this Arvonne is going to be coy about my pills, then I'm going to have to wait until Ron isn't around.

As I'm letting myself out of Arvonne's apartment building, I realize I have to find a bathroom. But there aren't that many places open nearby without a cover charge, and I'll be damned if I pay that to take a piss. Which brings me to this tittie bar.

At the entrance to the Auspicious Hunting Grounds, I grimace at the bouncer to look more like the picture on my ID. When I had that picture taken I figured only cops and such would really be looking at it, so I wanted it to say "fuck you" right off the bat.

Walking between the bar and the action, I pass through the hot glare of all the seated creeps. Off to one side there's a mirrored booth where a pallid brunette looks over her shoulder towards me, her back arched, giving me a cubist perspective of the goods.

The line at the can is three deep. I'm stuck, doing a little jig in place and wondering why Tracy gave my pills to this Arvonne chick.

The guy on deck notices me and says, helpfully, "The women's room is empty."

No kidding.

I must have given him a weird look because he says, "You've never had to duck into the women's room at these places before?"

I shake my head.

"I can see life has much to teach you yet, my young friend."

He winks before disappearing into the men's room.

All right, what the hell, I figure.

...

Ah, a Herculean piss. It being too damn clean in the women's bathroom, I scrawl "Fnord" on the towel dispenser before I leave.

On my way out of the joint, the bathroom guy grabs my arm and yanks me down next to him at the bar. Apparently I'm having a drink with him.

"So, getting' any?" he asks presumptuously.

He seems to know that I'm not.

After some small talk, this guy, hefty, bald, he introduces himself as Caesar. Caesar failed to kill himself three years ago and has been working as a Wal*mart greeter ever since. When he pounds a drink, the sleeves on his army surplus commando jacket come up too short and I can see rubber bands around his wrists.

He excuses himself to visit the mirrored booth. There's an undernourished blonde there now, with pink boots and an innocent smile despite herself. Caesar reaches into his pocket and finds a folding hunting knife which he appears to be using as a money clip. He makes a big presentation of the money while she waits aloofly. Returning, he whips back one of the rubber bands on his wrist, snapping it hard on himself.

"What you need to remember is that women don't have metabolisms," Caesar says, laying a hand on my shoulder. "No, they're short, fear food, and always claim to be cold. They are powered by attention."

I admit that I cannot understand women lately. I tell him about my encounter with the dour, oddly distant Arvonne. Hearing that I was tossed out of her apartment, Caesar could not be more pleased.

"Oh, dude. I will coach you," he says, showing a snaggletooth smile. "Dude, I'm the man. What's she like?"

I'm not good with accents, but she must be from somewhere in eastern Europe or Russia.

"Physical description?" Caesar prods. "Features, man."

It quickly turns into a discussion about his ideal chick. Exacting specifications are outlined. Heights and hair colors debated. This is a modular woman, able to accommodate parts found all over the Auspicious Hunting Grounds. No joke, he wants this one chick's collarbones. He also finds a number of candidates to be the Legs, but the Face, she is special. Her makeup is so thick it's, like, confectionery.

She will be pristine but not pure.

A virgin who will stick a finger up his ass.

"Doctor Frankenstein's bitch," I muse.

"Doctors, man!" he cries, standing and smacking the bar top. "They have the money and the prescriptions. It's too easy for them!" A cheer and whoop go up from nearby.

"Plastic surgeons, man!" I say even louder, seized as I am with sudden inspiration. "All the money and prescriptions, right? But even if that didn't work out, we could just grab any old chick and go to work on her features.

"You know, a fixer-upper," I add. I had expected an enthusiastic reaction from Caesar, but he and the bartender are having what looks like an intense conversation.

A moment later my friend tells me that the atmosphere of this place is getting to him; we should go. Heck, I've only had two drinks.

On our way out, he says something, slurred, about wanting to play bloody knuckles. And, well, I am psyched for this, but goddamn if I've played bloody knuckles since the sixth grade.

Caesar squares off to me under a street light. His focus is intense, his chin dropped, mouth drawn. His launch actually throws himself off balance and he only just clips my knuckles with his. Even so, I wince like a bitch, and Caesar, already somewhat numb for the past half hour, just laughs.

I'm going to have to muster up much more crazy to take this one.

We stop again on the sidewalk for my turn, Caesar stepping back with one foot to brace himself. He looks only at his proffered fist. Thinking back to the Little Ninjas Karate program, I steady, access my chi, and unload.

Our knuckles crunch and I jerk backwards with the force. My head floods with white noise. Eyes tearing, I reflexively cradle my busted hand.

Caesar cackles again triumphantly.

"You fuck your mother with that fist?"

For the moment I can't say anything and I don't look him in the eye.

"What, you hurtin'? You're not hurt," he says. He shifts around in place, agitated. "Listen, it's a scientific fact that your fist hits mine with the same amount of force that mine hits yours!"

Now I feel I am probably giving Caesar that funny look again.

"You see, I'm on the Internet now," he says grandly. "The information superhighway? I know things."

"I don't know, it looks like my knuckles are in trouble here..."

"Looks like your knuckles need to man the fuck up," Caesar suggests.

"Listen, man, no one wants my knuckles to man the fuck up more than me, but I think I might have to throw in the towel on this one."

"All right, all right," he says. "Do one left-handed?"

"Yeah, for sure," I say, heading into an alley, "Lemme take a piss first."

Spraying this dumpster, I think how weird it is that this night began with me looking for a place to take a piss. I chuckle a little bit.

Laughing, that seems to open something up. I can feel this tingle start my head, my spine, and my busted hand. The laughter keeps billowing out of me.

I'm aware of the city watching me as I lose it in this alley. Now the city can't keep a straight face, either. Through foggy eyes, I try to focus on this dumpster I'm slumped on and the dumpster just cracks up laughing. Then some windows, from being rigid and functional for so long, can't take it anymore, either. They get down with me, and a trash

can is soon to follow. A security camera looking over this way is nodding and chuckling. Even the buildings around me can't keep up the facade, and they buckle over and guffaw with the rest of us.

There is no mistaking the laugh. I can't believe how long they've been making fun of everybody! But I'm in on it now. And I'm laughing like a goddamn crazy person.

I can't get any oxygen, but I'm beginning to wonder if it's necessary. The feeling in my nerves rages, the tingly parts dumping scalding hot juices into my blood.

I'm getting it. I am channeling something new to the Earth. I don't want to move at all, so afraid that I might somehow lose reception. But the feeling keeps feeding me.

I know I can't contain it all without laughing. Laughing is helpful. I am reaching the saturation point and the rest will just wick off.

At the sound of footsteps behind me, the alley snaps back to parade attention. I regain my composure.

"Excuse me, sir?" says a guarded voice behind me.

A cop. I swear to god, you can't even take a piss in this city anymore.

"Yeah?" I respond tentatively.

"Sir, excuse me. What are you doing?" he asks about my pissing, as if he's never encountered this phenomenon before.

I pivot to see this little cop scratching the back of his neck apprehensively. He has this befuddled look for me so I answer by squaring off to him and making my jaw go slack. This furrows his eyebrows, so I think fast and pop my eyes out wide, still agape. We continue like this for maybe 30 seconds, then I remember to zip up.

There is an art to messing with a cop.

"Public urination," says the cop, clearing his throat. "I can make you a sex offender for that."

With laws against disrespecting the badge, you can't just tell one to sit and spin. You can't act anything less than earnest.

"What's your name?" he asks.

"Rhombus," I reply.

"What?"

"An equilateral parallelogram."

I say every second you throw them off their stride is worth 100 badass points.

"Sir, have you had anything to drink tonight?"

"I'm not supposed to drink."

"That's not really an answer, though, is it? I mean, really."

"I've had two drinks."

Caesar joins us by the dumpster.

"Officer, this man cannot be waylaid," he says, his hands raised diplomatically. "He is on a mission."

"And what is the nature of his mission?" the cop humors him.

"A woman!" he declares.

"Maybe she can take care of the little freak."

"And how!"

The cop mulls this over.

"You," he says, turning back to me. "Pisshead. You know I should take you and even your big friend here in for this?"

"With all due respect, sir--getting any?" I riposte.

The cop sighs and seems in his own world for a moment. Maybe I've called his bluff. It's like he knows he's pissed off right now, but he can't get himself into it.

"This job is going to be the end of me," the cop says, rubbing his eyes, vanquished.

I actually find myself about to sympathize with him, this man whom I have disarmed with such disquieting quickness.

"This woman, your place, it's close by?" he mutters.

"Only upon finding the amoeba wearing a cowboy hat will I know for sure."

And without even trying, we're now looking at 400 badass points, at least.

"Man, if I were as fucked up as you, every day would be an adventure, huh?"

"Kinda."

"Get the hell outta here."

When I'm back on the street, Caesar is nowhere to be found. A digital marquee says it's midnight. Christ, I am hemorrhaging time. I'll have to go on without him. Going forth, I'll just have to ask myself, What would Caesar do?

It's way darker in Arvonne's laundry room this time around, so I'm glad I brought the Leatherman with the little flashlight in it. Now, some guys swear by blue or green flashlight lenses for discreet light, but red does the least damage to your night vision. Even better, I can just shine this through my fingers for the same effect as an expensive red night lens.

Being very cautious with the light, I make my way through the apartment. For all I know Arvonne sleeps on that futon mattress in the living room floor, and I take this into account on my way.

A shuffling sound. Have I alerted her? I bury the tiny light in my palm and everything turns to black.

I listen intently for any other sound from this shabby apartment, as perhaps she is now doing as well.

It's possible that evolution has trained us to listen for the rhythm of footsteps. So with no further sound coming from behind the bathroom door, I resume walking, but irregularly this time. Making my way queerly on all fours, I could be a roof leak, a roaming mouse, or a draft from the window.

I make my way to the living room like this. The television is off and the futon mattress is empty. There's no sign of her except a couple of empty tuna tins, a couple of magazines, and a slender imprint on a tired-looking bean bag chair. There's the feeling that this place would be a real dump, if only she had more stuff.

Then I notice the strawberry-flavored hand lotion left on the coffee table among some spilled potato chips. I tell myself that it's time to focus, but after Arvonne's display earlier, I can't resist rubbing a bit on my hands before I leave.

I make it to the front door at last. I open it slowly, pushing upwards on the door handle to take pressure off the hinge so that maybe it won't creak.

Out in the apartment corridor, I spy the plant I knocked over earlier when Ron tossed me out. Righting it, I think about the hazards I have braved to get here, at last, to apartment 205. Like my dad used to say, everybody's gotta eat his pound of dirt.

I knock loudly. When Arvonne comes to the door she seems, once again, completely unsurprised to see me.

"You again."

"Howdy."

"What do you want?"

"What would I want?" I say, trying to sound suave.

"You were saying about pills before."

"I'm very bad at small talk," I say, winking now.

She sighs.

"Why do the American guys obsess on the foreign girls?" she asks.

I consider this, licking my hands provocatively while crafting my response.

"I have read that it is easier to catch a yellow butterfly in a group of brown butterflies than it is to catch a single brown one."

Well, she is so content being a butterfly she doesn't even dwell on the word 'easier.'

...

This is it.

I have equalized my pressure with the outside world at last. In this instant I feel so light I can permeate anything. My self diffuses and enters everyone ever stuck to the face of this derelict rock in space.

But my mind gradually shutters all this off and starts using words again.

I roll off Arvonne.

Turning over on my side, I sense her recoil. I think she's afraid I'm going to try to spoon her. Actually, I've just always lay on my side in bed, since back when I was babysat. At night, my babysitter would peek her head in the door to my room and whisper, "I wonder what the poor people are doing tonight?" When I laughed or smiled, she knew I was only pretending to sleep. It became necessary to lay on my side.

Imagine, never wanting to sleep!