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Presidents & Assholes

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PRESIDENTS & ASSHOLES

By

Heather Luebke

THESIS

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SIGNATURE APPROVAL FORM

This thesis by Heather Luebke is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of English and by the Associate Provost and Dean of Graduate Studies.

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ABSTRACT

PRESIDENTS & ASSHOLES

By

Heather Luebke

This thesis is a fiction piece set in a futuristic, dystopian United States of America. This story follows three characters in their struggles to cope with a world heavily segregated by class in which the most important thing to know about a person is the corporation or city he or she represents – not his or her name. The President of Stillwater, Minnesota and the President of Emerald Island Entertainment must deal with their responsibilities as leaders, while Tom Wedelman must cope with being a lower class person in a world dominated by the upper class. This story is told mostly in first-person point-of-view alternating between the three main characters, and is intended to make a commentary on today's business and political arenas.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *MLA Style Guide* and the Department of English.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Presidents & Assholes.....	7
Works Cited.....	51

INTRODUCTION

Over a year ago, I wrote – on a whim – a five-hundred word flash fiction piece from the point of view of a man whose identity was solely “Stillwater, Minnesota.” He lived in a futuristic, dystopian society in which the leaders of cities, corporations, companies – basically any kind of group to which a person could belong – discarded their names and personal identities to become the face of the groups they led. This man, a so-called “President,” basked in his superiority over the non-Presidential class, which he and his entire class deemed “Assholes.”

The idea fell into my head after learning to play the card game from which I have taken the title of my story. The concept was simple, and the piece seemed to fall onto paper of its own accord. After I finished, I realized I had stumbled upon a solid story idea, something that could be built and expanded on.

I had no idea just how large “Presidents & Assholes” would become.

I used the voice of the character Stillwater, Minnesota, as my main inspiration for lengthening the story. Here was a man in a position of power, expected to aid and protect the people living in his city. Here was a man that, instead of doing his job with integrity and temerity, had become entirely self-obsessed, whose responsibilities to his constituents became unimportant compared to his own self-importance. Here was a man who looked down on other people and treated them poorly simply because they were not like him.

As a counterweight to Stillwater's haughty but blinded view to the world, I expanded the story to include that of a second first-person character, an “asshole” bar

owner in Stillwater's town by the name of Tom Wedelman. He was everything Stillwater was not – a down-to-earth and at times vulgar townspeople with a more than ample understanding of exactly what rights were being denied him by the Presidents' selfishness. His anger at his unfair lot in life, coupled with his growing hatred toward Stillwater, the man who had never lifted a finger to help him, draws Tom to begin a conflict with Stillwater.

This longer draft of the story was workshopped for a Creative Fiction class in the spring of 2009. By that time, "Presidents & Assholes" was beginning to look like a viable contender to become my thesis.

Extending the story beyond Tom's conflict with Stillwater and Stillwater's slow realization of his wrongdoings was the most difficult part of the creative process. The piece had previously been entirely two-sided, first from Stillwater's point of view, then Tom's. A third perspective was needed to balance out the binary feel of the piece, which is why another character – the President of Emerald Island Entertainment - developed her voice. Emerald, a long time friend of Stillwater's, was just as self-absorbed as Stillwater, and it is her own realization her flaws and of her place in the world that lead her to plead with Stillwater to do the same. I also added a section told in third-person omniscient point of view to explain the significance of the connection between Stillwater and Tom Wedelman, adding a new layer of complexity to the piece.

My intent with this thesis has been to make a satirical social commentary. I have been immensely fascinated with the different lifestyles, behaviors, and expectations that exist in separate social classes, especially when one class believe for some reason that their class is superior to all others. "Presidents & Assholes," for that reason, became an

examination of social class in a dystopian setting, in which the most important thing one can possibly know about another person is the class to which he or she belongs. The world of “Presidents & Assholes” is one in which class segregation is once again a defining characteristic of the social structure. I have attempted to explore the ways in which society would adapt to accommodate a modified style of social thinking, and I have used the characters’ individual narratives to illustrate those changes. I gave both Stillwater, Minnesota and Emerald Island Entertainment an extreme “me first” complex, one that no leader should have. I also examined how corporations dominate our current lifestyles by drawing attention to the significance of shedding one’s birth name in favor of the company or organization one represents. The events of this thesis take place in a future in which the fate of many is decided by a select few who have no true concerns or sympathy for the well-being of humanity as a whole, and in which the conflict between the classes is the focal point of most people’s lives – most “assholes” would spend their lives either desperate to become a “president,” or desperate to free themselves from the influence of the higher class.

I do not fancy myself a politically savvy person. I make my judgments based on what I see and hear and read. I also do not consider myself a skeptic, but the lack of concern for constituents in today’s political arena is troubling, at best. “Presidents & Assholes” is not some magical cure-all to our world’s contemporary political and social woes; it is simply an observation of human nature, applied to a future which may not be so far-fetched. I am not the only writer to have undertaken such a feat.

It is from some of these other writers that I have taken much of my inspiration. Most of my preparatory reading was in the science fiction genre, in which authors are

free to experiment with alternate setting and social structure without very many guidelines. I have admired the works of Orson Scott Card for many years, and I am intrigued by the way he is able to create his own dystopian scenarios without making his setting and story too far-fetched or unbelievable. I read his 2006 novel *Empire* not long before I wrote the original flash fiction piece that became the opening narrative section of “Presidents & Assholes,” and it is after his picture of a not-so-distant future America that I modeled my own version of the United States. There are differences between my dystopia and his, however; Card set his novel in a war-torn United States, whereas mine is set in a recession after a period of peace and prosperity.

For other samples of futuristic societies, I consulted *2041: Twelve Short Stories about the Future*. From that collection, “Old Glory” by Bruce Coville sparked my inspiration – Coville’s rendering of a futuristic America is also partially responsible for the inspiration behind the “us or them” situation in which the characters find themselves in “Presidents & Assholes”. I also drew inspiration from Anne McCaffrey’s “A Quiet One”, as McCaffrey’s short story dealt with two characters who are significantly different from each another, so I took notice of those differences when writing out any interactions between characters to better highlight the differences between them – such as Stillwater, Minnesota’s desire to work only for himself and his own needs, and Tom Wedelman’s desire to better the lives of his employees.

No amount of reading other writers’ work, however, could make my thesis my own. I am a small person with limited life experience, so writing a piece of fiction much bigger than my own experiences was a challenge to say the least. However, I was born and raised in a small town, and I felt that a small town such as Stillwater, Minnesota

(which really exists, ten miles east of Minneapolis) was the perfect location to illustrate the drastic changes that have overtaken the America of “Presidents & Assholes.” I believe corruption and selfishness at a corporate level are not so uncommon today, but within small-town America, I believe these things would be more shocking. I had considered several different events that would lead the President of Stillwater to reevaluate his stance on his job and constituents, but an accident directly related to or caused by Stillwater’s actions seemed to be the most intelligent way to go about it. From there, I decided upon a car accident that almost took the life of Tom Wedelman.

Cars are one of the motifs I worked to incorporate into my story. For Americans especially, cars have signified progress. Traffic fatalities, however, are one of the leading causes of death in the United States. No person, not even a President, is immune from death, and even the things we enjoy could kill us. I intended cars here to be signifiers of death or near-death experiences, but also symbols of a coming change.

I also paid heavy attention to the motif of “the Story.” Three characters here have separate stories to tell, and because their stories are not complete without the others, I feel that storytelling was essential for interconnecting their separate threads. There are many other ties that I would like to explore, including a more intricate exploration into the histories of the President of Stillwater, Tom Wedelman, and Emerald Island Entertainment. I feel that these three characters still have stories to tell.

“Presidents & Assholes,” above all else, was a learning experience for me, and one of the most difficult pieces I have ever written. I have to this point lived a small life and I write small fiction, so expanding something so short into something so long – from five hundred words to nearly fifteen thousand – was extremely challenging and infinitely

rewarding. More than anything, writing “Presidents & Assholes” taught me that I am capable of writing fiction of any length, and that I am not only restricted to a few pages and one small idea. My thesis may be complete but I have more work to do. The world of “Presidents & Assholes” is not closed to me yet.

PRESIDENTS & ASSHOLES

Stillwater, Minnesota

We cannot remember whose Idea it was. Most of us have never known whose Idea it was. A few of us from the same Chapter are sitting around in a lounge, drinking the most expensive scotch we can get our hands on, when Maple Valley Paper wants to talk about how it started. We shift our drinks into our other hands and fold our legs a different way. We sit up straighter. University of Minnesota Gun Club lights a cigarette, looking interested. West River High School Key Club, who is not old enough to drink, was not born when the Idea came into existence. Both of them are too young to remember this history.

We tell the Story, even though we already know the Story, even Gun Club and Key Club. We remember that we found the biggest stadium in the States and packed ourselves into it. We recall the invitations, the reservations, the anticipation. Some of us tell stories about flying halfway across the country, about nerves, about feeling the way people from the past used to when their lives were about to change forever. Knowing we were a part of something big. Bigger than anything our parents ever planned for us.

Gun Club and Key Club listen with rapt attention, though they have heard the Story uncountable times. The Story is no less important, no matter how many times it is told.

Someone describes the way the stadium rose up from the ground like a monolith, like the beacon of world history and importance it would become, as if it knew how pivotal its existence was. Someone else speaks of the snakelike lines of us who twisted

around the outside of the stadium, a massive rope twined of gray suits and colored ties.

Yet another talks about entering the stadium – the check-ins, the thorough but necessary screening process. Our identifications, our true names emblazoned on laminated plastic, stuck to our lapels. Given names are not allowed. A person's true identity is his or her job.

I remember the way the stadium hummed with unbridled energy, a nuclear bomb of authority, ticking, ready to explode. I tell them. I remember the way the whole place hushed when United States got to his feet. We were on the cusp of history then, I tell them. Those who remember it murmur in agreement. Emerald Island Entertainment, who sat beside me in the stadium, forces a smile before she swishes the last swallow of scotch around in her glass.

I will never forget that moment for as long as I live, she says.

Asshole, says Maple Valley Paper. More scotch.

The asshole tending the bar at the lounge obliges with a scowl. We continue telling the Story.

I am feeling lightheaded from the scotch by the time the gathering concludes. Maple Valley Paper, who has taken it upon himself to lead our Chapter, bids us meet in the same place and time next week. The assholes here, he says, are quick and submissive, as they should be. We agree with him. None of us wants to wait any longer than two minutes for another glass of scotch, no matter how many of us might privately disagree with Maple Valley Paper's style of running things. We decide this lounge will do well enough, for now.

The assholes in the lower bar have their eyes turned toward us as we emerge from our upper solitude. Then, the instant they have realized they are staring, they turn away, eyes downcast. They do not speak to us. There are specific times and proper places for them to address us, if it is truly necessary, and now is not one of those times and here is not one of those places. This routine never changes, no matter where we go. They realize their inferiority. It is not arrogance on our part – it is truth.

Emerald Island Entertainment follows me down from the upper lounge. She is dressed in a long green chiffon number, the price of which I cannot even imagine. She always wears green – it is in her name, in her very being. She and I were friends before the First Meeting, and we have been friends for the forty years that have passed since. It is not wrong that I cannot recall the given names of the rest of the members of my Chapter, having never known them. But I wonder, is it wrong that I cannot recall Emerald's given name, though once upon a time I knew it? These days, if I do not think of it for a week or two, sometimes I forget my own given name. I have been Stillwater, Minnesota for so long, I cannot imagine being anything or anyone else.

Emerald pinches my arm from behind and effortlessly slides hers into the crook of my elbow. She throws her head back as we pass by the assholes in their smoky clouds, and we stare them down even as they refuse to meet our eyes. I cannot imagine how desperately they must want to be like us. How any female asshole in that bar would like to be in Emerald's place, to be the woman on my arm.

The cool February air stings deliciously against my flushed skin as we exit the building. The rest of our Chapter has dispersed, gone to their homes and to whatever their lives are behind closed doors. Emerald, still on my arm, glances around to make

sure we are alone as I lead her out to her car where it is parked across the street from the lounge, across the busy road where cars rush past at all hours, even this late at night, in a blaze of glaring headlights. She leans close, so close her lips brush against my ear as she whispers, “Maple Valley has no right to lead our Chapter.”

I raise my head away from her mouth. What convinced you that we need a leader in the first place?

Emerald shrugs, and one of the green straps of her dress tumbles halfway down her pale arm. “You can remember the old days. The way it was ... before.” The hesitation in her voice must mean that she’s afraid of what would happen to her if anyone knew she was discussing the old days with anything other than disdain. Her speech has changed – it is no longer the formal, tight, pinched tone we use when we are in public. “Maple Valley ... he’s young. He’s still a kid by our standards. Probably hasn’t even gotten his first gray hair. *You* remember what it was like before,” she repeats.

Yes. And?

“And Maple Valley has no sense of humanity.”

What?

“I think a sense of humanity is necessary in our business, don’t you?” She has noticed that her dress strap has fallen down, and with ease, she repositions it at the crest of her shoulder. I cannot stop staring at the vibrant green fabric against her smooth, unblemished, pale skin. I cannot with good conscience estimate her age, but she was there at the Beginning; therefore, she must be at least as old as I, yet she carries herself with a youth and vitality not even young asshole women of today could match.

“Stillwater? Did you hear me?” she murmurs.

Hmm? She has been speaking this entire time, and I have heard not a word of it.

“I said, humanity is necessary in our business. We’ve been charged with representing the people of this world. That’s why these parties, these late nights in upper-floor lounges and expensive clothes, should not be what matters to us.”

Why not? We are not *them*. We represent them, but why should we be forced to live as they do?

“We shouldn’t,” she says. “But we should also remember the Beginning, and why it happened in the first place.” She is plaintive, earnest. I have never heard Emerald speak this way. There is a shadow of something desperate behind her eyes – something striving to break free of the silent cell she holds it in, as though she has been trying to put into words exactly the way she has felt since the Beginning. She must still be an idealist. One of those who came to the First Meeting hoping that this new Idea would change our world for the better. But even still ... It has been forty years. Things have changed.

Glancing around, finally satisfied we cannot be heard over the roar of passing automobiles, I let go of my formality and speak with the improper inflection of the assholes. “I know why it happened. But that’s no reason for us to act like assholes.”

“You’re not understanding what I’m saying, Stillwater,” she says. “We are Presidents. It is our responsibility to make sure our constituents are spoken for. That they’re represented. That their hopes and fears and dreams can be made possible, so that our society can continue to function. We can’t have a society without them. Every society needs some kind of *them* to make it function. If we didn’t have them, then *we* would be them.”

“Our society functions just fine the way things are right now.”

“But for how long?” Emerald punches a button on her key ring, and her expensive automobile roars to life. She opens the door – she has had enough of this conversation, that much is obvious. “If we continue to ignore them, they will eventually refuse to accept our ignorance, and everything we know will change again. There will be revolt, Stillwater. Revolution the likes of which we are in no position to comprehend, let alone deal with. In order for this government to work, we have to do what we’re supposed to do. What we came together to do at the Beginning.”

She climbs into the car and almost has the door closed when I speak. “Just how many assholes have you been talking to lately?”

“The ones who work for Emerald Island Entertainment. The ones I represent. Maybe you should do the same for the ones counting on you to represent them.”

Emerald slams the door of the car. The noise is nearly lost in the roar of passing traffic. She shifts the car into gear, flicks on her turn signal, and merges into the flow of traffic effortlessly, leaving me standing in my best silk suit, breathing the fumes of her exhaust and her annoyance.

From behind me, a voice shouting over the roar of the traffic. Emerald’s tail lights have blended into all of the other lights, just two more circles in a moving canvas of glowing red and white. I am not certain how much time has passed since we left the upper lounge. I am not certain about much in the world. I have never heard Emerald speak in such a manner. What appalls is not that she associates with assholes, but that she would dare to sympathize with them.

The voice comes again, screeching, insistent, sandpaper on my ears. “Hey! *Asshole!*” The asshole from the lounge earlier, the one who served us our scotch in the

upper lounge all night, is yelling from across the street. “Yeah, you! You’re the asshole here, not me! You’re the one who sits around talking about how great you are when you’re really doing jack shit for this town and for anybody in it! Do you have any *idea* what we go through? No, you don’t! We’re not the assholes here! *You* are!”

I tense reflexively. I am preparing for a fight. I imagine the next time anyone sees me, I will more than likely have two black eyes. I imagine the next time anyone sees this asshole, he will be in jail for assaulting a President.

The traffic has not slowed. There are no shrill blares of car horns, no howl of irritated drivers. It is as though the drivers do not even see him. It is as though he does not even see the cars. He races into the middle of the street without looking and is almost immediately thrown head over heels across the pavement by the front of someone’s midsize sedan.

The car swerves to a stop, and the driver jumps from the car, looking panicked, rushing for the asshole lying motionless twenty yards away.

I do not think. I react. I yank my portable phone from the inner pocket of my suit coat and dial the emergency department, running out into the middle of the road. The rest of the traffic squeals in protest at the disruption of their rhythm. Now, the shouts – “Get the hell out of the way!” “Move it, asshole!” and “Oh my god, what happened?” In between the stopped automobiles, a crowd has begun to gather, looking on, afraid to act.

The line connects. The voice on the other end is cool, professional, disconnected and unconcerned. “Nine-one-one.”

“This is the President of Stillwater, Minnesota. I need an ambulance outside of Fourth Street Pub immediately! A man was just hit by a car.”

I do not want to assume the worst. I stay on the line with the operator until I hear the wail of a siren in the distance.

The scotch churns in my stomach. I am sick all over the pavement.

I hope they are not too late.

Tom Wedelman

“Hey, asshole.” Marija tosses her threadbare coat onto the table in the back room of the bar, throws her dark hair out of her eyes, ties her apron about her barely discernible waist. Marija is about fifty pounds too heavy, probably one of the reasons she’ll never be anything more than a barkeep. She’s intelligent, but she doesn’t have upper-class connections, and she’s definitely not rich, and that’s probably the biggest reason she’ll always be a barkeep.

I’ve been running the upper lounge bar all night, running *them* every upper-crust bottle of scotch the bar has. There’s probably fifteen or twenty of them, most of them older and grayer than us normal folks, but there are a couple of kids. Kids that pretty much have no ability and no right to be the boss of people like me and Marija but have the honor of it anyway. This is only the second time they’ve come to the lounge. They already own the place. They owned it without even saying more than “get me more scotch, asshole.”

“They took over the upper lounge again,” I tell Marija, untying my own apron and stuffing it inside my locker. “Drunken jackasses, all of ‘em.”

Marija lets a little tuft of breath pass across her teeth, hissing at me like a pissed-off snake. “Watch it, Tom.”

“I hope they got kicked out of the last place they infested.”

“Tom.” Marija is moving closer now, as if she wants nothing more than to slap her hand over my mouth. She probably thinks they’re listening, judging by the way she’s sweeping her eyes from side to side, looking for some secret spy. And they probably are listening, because that’s what they do. How dare they leave us with any measure of privacy, or the right to complain about our so-called government in secret?

“It’s like the worst kind of high school clique you can imagine,” I say. “Except it doesn’t go away after high school. Except they’re in charge of running our lives. I just wanna know, who in the hell died and made them god?”

“They made themselves god. And we let them. Now we’re living with the consequences. Now shut the fuck up, for god’s sake.” Marija has had enough of my ranting. Two more shots of bourbon and I’d be unstoppable, and had I not been running the upper lounge all night, I probably would have had those two shots. Maybe that’s what I’m really pissed off about. “Why don’t you just go home and get some rest, before you get yourself in serious trouble,” Marija says, and her tone leaves no space for negotiation.

“Fine. Have fun playing slave to the leaders of the so-called free world.” I throw my locker door shut with enough force to wake up half the neighborhood. Making noise and causing disturbances are two of the only things left that make me feel better about my lot in life. I hope the jackasses upstairs heard it.

“Have fun getting arrested and sent to jail for sixty days for slander,” Marija says.

But I’m not paying attention to her anymore. I punch out and grab my wallet from my jacket pocket. Time to mix work with pleasure. Going home doesn’t sound

nearly as good as getting drunk. Unfortunately for me (but more unfortunately for Marija), they are still in the upper lounge, ordering bottles of scotch, and I'm glad I don't have to be the one to tell them we're about to run out, that we only get liquor shipments on Thursdays and it's only Monday night.

I pull up a bar stool in between some of the regulars, the ones I'm used to serving on Thursday nights and the ones I would have spent my night with had the presidents not decided they wanted to show up and overtake our bar with their snobbery. From my seat, I watch Marija trudge up the stairs to the upper lounge, and nobody has any idea how glad I am that's not me. Time to vent my frustrations through drink, the way God intended.

“What'll it be, Tom?” asks Cay, the barmaid tonight for us lower-class folk.

“Double shot of bourbon.”

Cay pours the liquor into a slightly water-streaked shot glass and passes it to me across the oak bar. Bottoms up.

I set the shot glass back down on the bar top and watch as a soft ring of bourbon and condensation collects around the bottom of the glass. I could have been one of them in the upper lounge. I have no doubts about it. If I really wanted to, I could make some kind of organization out of the regulars of our bar, tell them we need representation and that I'm obviously the only choice since I've been here the longest. And then I could go through that ridiculous application process and get my name changed from Tom to “Fourth Street Pub” and sit in the upper lounge with the bastards soaking up the collective supposed greatness. I wonder just how much work they actually do for any of us. If they came here enough, would they even bother to learn that Marija is a single

mother of two working three jobs just to make ends meet and both of her little kids have been kicked out of public school because Marija can't afford the premium the government asks just to educate the youth, or that Cay lives with her disabled father and takes care of him and supports the both of them because the government won't pay for him to live in an assisted living home, or that my wife died of a heart attack on the pavement outside of a super-store two years ago and no ambulance ever came because there were haughty, holier-than-thou upper class people with more problems – some jackass's seven-year-old daughter fell off her jungle gym and got a scrape on her upper arm and apparently that required the attention of an ambulance over my wife dying on the pavement. This is shit I know because I know these people, and I've known them for years, and our lives aren't pretty, but we do the best we can. And we certainly don't pretend we're perfect.

No, I'm not pissed because I didn't get my two shots of bourbon while I was slaving away for them all night. I'm pissed because I was slaving away and they just don't give a shit about us. They don't listen to our problems, and they don't care that they and they alone have the power to fix those problems – probably with a snap of their fingers.

I pass the next half hour with six more shots of bourbon. Cay serves each with her lips pursed in disapproval. Me and the rest of the poor, downtrodden, unwashed miscreants of the lower class turn when we hear footsteps on the stairs. And here they come, a parade of them in gray suits and ties and fancy dresses and smug expressions like someone just put dogshit under their noses. Look at them looking down their noses at us.

I can hear them thinking: You poor, desperate sons of bitches. How we love to laugh at your pain. How glad we are that we aren't you. Ha. Ha ha.

One of them, the oldest man of the group, gray haired and stately and just as self-satisfied as all the rest, is watching us watch him leave the bar, looking every ounce the smug jackass he is. I know exactly who he is. He's Stillwater, Minnesota. He's our goddamn town. He's the one person of all of them who has the power to solve all our problems, and still what has he done? Not a damn thing I can remember. What I wouldn't love to give him a piece of my mind. Or a piece of my fist ... whichever one happened to act fastest.

Cay murmurs under her breath, "Just let it go, Tom."

And I do. For a moment.

I'm sure that Cay could already tell what was on my mind when I sat down at the bar, and by her clouded expression, I know she's thinking the same thing – tonight is yet another night spent in servitude to the rulers of our universe. It's the same expression I saw cross Marija's face when I told her that she was going to be their cute little bitch for the evening. Same look I see on all of our faces every time one of them even comes near us.

I can only guess at what Cay and Marija feel. Fear, worry, anger. Probably all, in some strange mixed-up combination. My emotions have gone well beyond that.

All I have room for is hatred.

Cay has her mouth open as if she is about to say something, to yell at me to stay in my seat, or something equally ridiculous. But by now I'm fuzzy from liquor and even more unstoppable, so I jump off the bar stool quick enough to knock it over. I don't

flinch, but everyone else does, when it slams like a gunshot onto the hardwood floor. I'm out the door of the pub and onto the sidewalk before anyone can say a word about it. I can just imagine the looks on all their faces, can just imagine them talking about it – “Tom's gone mad.”

Yes, Tom is mad.

The President of Stillwater, Minnesota, is standing on the other side of the street, standing stupidly beside some kind of ritzy, expensive silver car, watching as it pulls away and merges with the traffic. To hell with haggling with bitchy secretaries for an hour to get a ten-minute meeting five months from now with one of these morons. Why should I have to wait to give him a piece of my mind when he's standing right there and I want to give him a piece of my mind right now?

I've got my mind made up.

“Hey! *Asshole!*”

Emerald Island Entertainment

Tom Wedelman's run-in with traffic outside of the pub he owned that late night in February was buried as the fourth story on the Stillwater local news. Notably absent was any mention of the President of Stillwater or his involvement in the incident. No doubt the information relayed to the masses about the accident was cleverly edited and perhaps skewed by the President of Stillwater and his exceptionally competent staff. (For what reason were they hired, other than to keep their President shining in the purest light possible?)

The news reports, of course, also made no mention of the fact that I was present at

the Fourth Street Pub just moments before Tom Wedelman ran, furious and partially drunk, into the street and was struck by a passing vehicle. Even if anyone else had known that I had been there moments before, I doubt anyone would have found my presence noteworthy. But I still can't help feeling partially at fault. It's irrational, I know. But I feel the slightest tinge of guilt. If I had been there for just a moment longer, I could have somehow prevented the worst.

I have not spoken to the President of Stillwater, Minnesota since that night, though I must have spoken to his secretary, Tamara, fifty times at least. It is because of her that I have any idea at all that he was involved in the situation with Tom Wedelman. It was he, said Tamara, who called emergency services. He was on the scene the longest, allowed himself to be questioned by police, stayed until long after Wedelman was taken to the Stillwater hospital. Aside from that small shred of information, which undoubtedly is the only information the President of Stillwater has allowed Tamara to tell, I know nothing of his reaction to the situation. For all I know – and also what I assume – he has continued in his normal routine, ignorant as to the outcome of Tom Wedelman's situation – not knowing or caring whether Tom Wedelman is even still alive.

My assistant, Tracy, interrupts with a polite knock on my door. Tracy is my most recent hire and the person with what is possibly the most difficult job at the company. She's been thrown into the deep end since day one, and even though she's been on payroll for a few weeks, she's struggling to get a grasp on her job. She is marginally effective but not nearly as efficient as the assistant she replaced, a capable young lady named Ari. For now, I'm trying not to hold Tracy to the same standards to which I held Ari. "Madam, the President of Audio Industries Minneapolis is here for your two p.m.

meeting,” Tracy says, holding out a thick folder chock full of records of the transactions between our two companies. A quick peek at the file shows that she has grabbed the correct folder this time.

“Thank you, Tracy. Send him in.”

An hour and a half later, when my meeting with Audio Industries Minneapolis concludes, I realize that I’ve spent the majority of the meeting not listening to a word he was saying. He leaves a thick folder full of invoices on my desk and asks if I’m free next week to discuss my latest soon-to-be musical superstar. I shoo him out the door with instructions to set it up with Tracy, follow him out, then close and lock my office door behind me. Anything else that might come up, I hope Tracy can handle on her own. At this moment, it seems that all I will be able to accomplish is yet another analysis of the events of the Wedelman accident, so I can yet again attempt to convince myself that the President of Stillwater is not at fault. And it looks as though the only way I’ll be able to speak to the President of Stillwater is if I speak to him face-to-face.

I barge through the door of his fourth-floor office some twenty minutes later, a flabbergasted Tamara attempting to prevent my entrance or, at the very least, explain my sudden presence. “Sir, I tried to stop her. I told her no one gets in without me clearing it with you first, sir, but she insisted—” She babbles uncontrollably, her words a steady stream of panic, a defense mechanism against some kind of anger or annoyance from Stillwater that she apparently expects.

Stillwater cowers behind his computer monitor, aged gray eyes peeking up at me from over the top of the screen. He is not entirely surprised at my presence – that much is obvious. He must have expected my visit to come sooner or later, and by now he will

have realized that nothing will prevent me from getting out of him the answers that I am looking for.

I lean over his desktop, place myself nose to nose with the leader of my city. “Do you care to explain what happened the other night after I left?” A challenge. Will he tell me no now?

He stares back at me, unspeaking. A younger version of him, one no longer giddy with idealism but still high on the stink of power, would have fought me relentlessly, but I can see in his tired, pale eyes that that version of the President of Stillwater no longer exists. The moment passes. He sighs, defeated. “Thank you, Tamara,” he says, breaking eye contact for the first time. “You can go now.”

“But sir—”

“It’s all right. Go on now.” His voice is mellow, inviting, soothing. I haven’t heard him speak in such a manner in decades. “In fact, you can close up the office and go on home early tonight. There’s no reason for you to stay. I’ll be out for the rest of the day.” A glance at Tamara finds unfiltered shock plastered plainly across her features. I’m willing to bet she has never had a day off in all the time she has been his secretary. She opens her mouth to argue but evidently decides better of it, turns on her heel, and exits the office without another word.

Stillwater turns to me once Tamara is out of earshot. “I’m sure you want the whole story.”

“Right. I want the truth, not the bullshit version your staff fed the local media to cover your ass. What in the hell were you thinking? Getting into a fight with that barkeep—”

“Not here, Emerald. I’ll tell you whatever you want to know, but not here.”

“Fine. You’re driving.”

Twenty minutes later, Stillwater pulls his sedan into one of the plethora of empty spaces in the parking lot of the bridge-side park that overlooks the river. Though the City of Stillwater itself has undergone many changes since I was a young girl growing up here, this park has remained fairly static. Its use has diminished over the years, illustrated by a wide spackling of rust across the swing sets, see-saws, and tarnished silver slides. This park has no place in a serious, business-minded world. Our buildings, our highway billboards, used to be papered with colorful, bright advertisements encouraging citizens to enjoy themselves, but now, just like this park, our cities are static, colorless, dare I say – boring. Even my career, which once upon a time I undertook for its focus on the humanity of enjoyment, has become strictly business. I no longer work for the love of music; I work for the love of money and the honor of my position, of being a President. No surprise that, as I can still remember how things used to be, I find myself increasingly hollow, shallow, so unhappy.

The swings sway against the light late winter breeze, their links and bolts creaking with the cold as Stillwater and I traverse the snow-patched asphalt path. These years, the weather is warmer in February than I remember. Now the sun has broken through its wintry imprisonment to melt what little snow we have received, reducing it to shimmering white patches in the deadened grass. Still, though the weather has grown warmer with every passing winter and the children should make use of the playground even earlier every spring, I note that the playground equipment in this particular park has remained untouched and left to rust since I’ve grown up.

“It didn’t happen like that.” Stillwater’s voice breaks my reverie. He pauses on the path, nudging a small chunk of ice with the toe of his expensive brown loafer. “I didn’t fight with the ass—” He hesitates. “Barkeep, I mean. I didn’t even touch him. He was drunk and he wanted to pick a fight, and I—”

“You do realize he was the same person tending bar at the meeting, don’t you?”

“Of course.”

“And that his name—”

“Tom Wedelman. Yes, I know.” Stillwater looks pained. When he inhales, the sound is a harsh, sharp whistle. He stares out across the deep gray river as the faint sunlight paints splashes of silver upon its waves. “I’m surprised that no one realized—”

“No one realized, or no one printed it – on your orders?”

Stillwater shakes his head. “No. No one knows. Not as far as I can tell, at any rate.” He shrugs and turns his back to the river, staring up the pathway to his gleaming sapphire sedan. “I think my staff is too terrified of me to go digging up information behind my back. And they’re all too young to remember ... *before*.” Stillwater scuffs the side of his shoe against the pavement and buries his hands deep within the pockets of his expensive charcoal suitcoat. “I don’t expect you to believe me, Emerald, but I didn’t hit the guy. I didn’t even talk to him. Yes, I knew who he was and I knew what he wanted, but I wasn’t looking to fight with him. It’s beneath me.”

I am silent for a long moment. “You do realize we’ve spent forty years forgetting what we’re really supposed to be doing and spending more time caring about money and power than we do about the people we represent.”

“Yes, I know.” The pained tone has returned to his voice, the anguished, tired look rematerialized in his eyes. “But I’m not sure that I remember anything but this.” He spreads his hands wide, helpless, as though the weight of the people of Stillwater and their needs has become too much for him to bear.

“I think you used to.” I’m not sure I can look at him for one moment longer. I turn to face the river, the opposite direction as Stillwater. “At least, you used to want to stand for hope and prosperity and all of those things. But you let age and skepticism take that away from you. We both did.”

Some five minutes or more pass in silence, save for the constant light babble of the river. Stillwater breaks the silence first, and when he speaks it is though a man from forty years ago has returned from a long, exhausting exodus. “Whatever went wrong with us? With you and me, I mean.”

“Was there ever an ‘us’?” I chuckle. “You took me on one date.”

“Yes, but we’ve always been friends. So what happened? Was I not ‘cool’ enough for you?” Stillwater snorts, a hollow, self-effacing sound that makes me cringe. “On second thought, don’t answer that. I’m not sure I even want to know, after all this time.”

“You do, or you wouldn’t have asked.”

“I suppose that’s true enough.” Stillwater shrugs, a movement I catch on the very periphery of my vision. “You know, I always thought we would eventually end up together. We were both so pleased with ourselves and what we’d set out to do for our constituents that I figured ... oh, I don’t know, I figured that everything we shared in

common would eventually turn into something more than that. But I guess we both just forgot.”

Forgot? Is that the proper word for what happened in my life to turn me away from the goals I once pursued? Did I get so wrapped up in power and prestige that I failed to see my transformation to a selfish, at times horrible, human being? I can't say that I forgot when I did not want to remember how things used to be.

“Forgot,” I repeat, and my voice sounds faint to my own ears. “Yes. We forgot.”

Stillwater glances at me. “Are you all right?”

“I'm fine, but ... do you think we can remember what we've forgotten?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, do you remember the election? When ‘asshole’ was just a word used to describe ... someone unpleasant?”

He laughs and wrings his hands. “Yeah. Those were the days, huh?” He closes his eyes in a moment of reflective thought, and for that moment, I can almost see him as a young man again, full of piss and vinegar, as my folks' old saying goes. For that moment, the wrinkles around his eyes are not so deep, and the gray in his hair is not so garish. For that moment, he is softer, open, vulnerable. The way he used to be. “I really wanted to help people back then.”

“Exactly. So did I.”

We ponder over the words in silence. Across the river, a gull caws impatiently. The breeze pushes against the swings, forcing them out of their still solitude. At least five minutes pass before he speaks again.

“I guess it's time for another change, then.”

“And how are you going to change *this* world?”

“I don’t know, Hal,” he returns with a sly smile. I haven’t heard my first name spoken aloud by someone else in years, possibly decades, and to hear it spoken now is a complete surprise. I didn’t even know he remembered my name, let alone dared to use it when he should have referred to me by my title. “But the important thing is that I’m going to try.”

Stillwater, Minnesota. Mid-October, forty years ago. A tall, slightly gangly man in his late twenties, dressed smartly in a dark charcoal suit and striped burgundy tie, crosses the busiest street in town, but like so many of those who have come before him (as well as many who will come after), his crossing is not without incident. He is almost to the other sidewalk when a Ford F-150 roars down the hill and nearly flattens him to the pavement.

“Watch where you’re going, asshole!” bellows the driver, and speeds by.

The young man ducks out of the way and scrambles out of the crosswalk. That particular section of West Pine Street, between South Third and South Fourth Streets, has always been a notoriously busy road, and dangerous to cross on foot. Even this young man, a Stillwater native and resident for all twenty-nine years of his life, is not exempt from a dangerous crossing.

On one corner of West Pine stands the book store he has just departed. On the other, a small tavern, usually filled to near occupancy no matter the time of day. Martin remembers the night of his twenty-first birthday, spent at that pub. He remembers

returning home every summer, fresh from a year at the University of Minnesota, and drinking himself into a stupor with his high school buddies. He remembers his first (and last) date with a local girl nicknamed Hal, who turned him down flat after he propositioned her outside the pub at three-thirty in the morning. For better or worse, good memories or not so good, Martin has spent many moments of his life upon the hard, shining wooden stools of the Fourth Street Pub.

But today he passes the pub by, though not without a wistful glance into its windows. On any other blindingly sunny, slightly blustery day in Stillwater, Martin would stop in for a bit, chat with the locals, have a beer or three or nine, and probably piss the rest of his day away with the beer in the back alley behind the tavern. But not today. Today, Martin has other – better – things to do than spend his afternoon half-wasted.

He is on his way to the Stillwater courthouse. He is on a mission to make something of his life, a task set upon him by his father upon his graduation from college. He is, at the ripe age of twenty-nine, going to run for mayor of Stillwater, Minnesota.

With one last hesitation in front of the Fourth Street Pub's sun-streaked front door, Martin turns and continues up the street.

The process of establishing himself as a candidate passes in a blur. Martin remembers filling out a hefty stack of paperwork, most of which seemed like an unnecessary invasion of his personal life. He had no intent to broadcast his embarrassing secrets and his deepest fears along with his hopes and plans for the city of Stillwater; however, such a sacrifice is required of those who choose to serve in a public office.

It is not until several weeks into the campaigning process, during which he has already hired on an eager staffer-secretary named Tamara, that Martin learns who is to be his competition. Martin has heard – in grocery stores and gas stations, at the coffee shop and at the pubs – of the other candidate for mayor. The man is older, in his late thirties or early forties, with a wife, a six-year-old son, and the kind of stability and community visibility that Martin lacks. He is a fixture in the city, one of its most prominent residents, the owner of a successful business – the Fourth Street Pub. His name is Douglas Wedelman. Martin has known him since he was in high school, and Wedelman inherited the ownership of the Fourth Street Pub from his father. Wedelman was there the night of Martin’s twenty-first birthday. Wedelman was the man who poured him his first legal drink.

When the announcement is made official, Martin cannot stop himself from heading down to the Fourth Street Pub. Though perhaps he should have known better, he cannot honestly say that he expected his opponent to be someone he would know personally. He had expected to run his campaign against some unseen, unnamed, unknown enemy – someone easily defamed, someone easily defeated. But Douglas Wedelman is none of those things, and Martin knows this implicitly.

He is not entirely sure of his reasons for seeking out Wedelman – to ask him why he decided to run against Martin, to ask him what he thought he could bring to the city of Stillwater as its mayor; or perhaps, to ask him to withdraw his candidacy. An impossibly long list of things to say float through Martin’s mind as he treks across the street to the Pub, where is not entirely sure what he expects to find – perhaps a collection of

Wedelman's supporters, toasting his already assured victory, turned immediately to an angry mob at the sight of Martin's face, ready to chase him from Minnesota.

What he actually finds is a quiet, almost serene Fourth Street Pub, nearly deserted save for some of the most loyal clientele, washed in the pale light of a bright mid-day. Martin finds himself gazing at the dust particles floating in the streaks of sunlight pouring in from the windows, taking in the high sweep of the ceiling and the lines and angles of the bar and tables, studying the grain of the hardwood floor, committing to memory that image of the bar he has for many years considered "his" bar, a bar in which he now assumes he is an unwelcome patron.

Douglas Wedelman is behind the bar, polishing highball glasses with a towel. When Martin finally focuses in on him, he can tell that Wedelman is trying hard not to look in his direction. The man is obviously not after a confrontation, though Martin feels at this moment that he could fight the world with his building agitation. Wedelman's graying dark hair is combed back and he looks professional and clean-cut without looking too formal. The wrinkles around his eyes tighten slightly as he focuses on his task at hand, and his mouth is set in a firm line. Martin stares. For how long, he is not sure. Finally, after watching Wedelman polish what seems like at least fifty glasses, Martin makes his way to the bar.

"Martin." Wedelman acknowledges him with little more than his name and a nod as he reaches for another glass. "Nice day."

"Mm." How typically diplomatic of Wedelman. Martin scoots onto one of the unoccupied bar stools, resolutely ignoring the rest of the patrons who he knows must be resolutely ignoring him. If a conflict is coming, it will start with him and not with

Wedelman. For now, Martin chooses the high road, the one filled with banal small-talk. “How have you been?”

When Wedelman smiles, it is in no way malicious. He smirks, but it is the expression of a man speaking to another man in the know, sharing a private joke. “You know. This and that.”

Martin nods. “This and that,” he agrees.

“Get you a drink?”

Oh, to hell with it, Martin decides. Best make the most out of an awkward situation. “Whiskey sour.” He watches Wedelman reach for one of the recently cleaned glasses and pour the drink with the grace and speed of an experienced bartender. Wedelman reaches for a pair of shotglasses then, places them on the bar to complement the filled highball glass, and pours two shots of bourbon. He passes the whiskey sour and one of the bourbon shots across the bar to Martin, and keeps the last glass for himself.

“To your health,” Wedelman says, lifting the glass. “This one’s on me.”

As slowly as the changing of the leaves, the election turns furious. It is the most unusual thing Martin has ever experienced. At no point does Douglas Wedelman engage in slander or libel against his opponent, but his disdain for Martin is evident in every word he speaks to the public. He is at all times professional, neat, clean, even-tempered, soft-spoken, well-worded. His demeanor makes Martin wish he had paid better attention to Wedelman in the past. Perhaps that way he might have learned the proper way to defeat his opponent.

To his credit, Martin is no campaign slouch. He develops a following simply because he is young and charismatic, because he is a life-long resident of Stillwater and a graduate of a Minnesota university, and because he is a well-known face in the community with a reputation for being an upstanding citizen. Following Wedelman's lead, Martin also refrains from slander and libel, instead using carefully crafted words and phrases to illustrate just how inappropriate he finds Wedelman to be for the job of Stillwater's mayor. He makes it obvious to the residents of Stillwater that what they need is not an older, grayer, more conservative person, but a young, hip, motivated and driven, liberal and welcoming *cool* guy. He tells them they need Martin Wanda. They need Martin Wanda to solve all their problems, to be their friend, to take care of them, to restore Stillwater to all the shining glories of its heyday. He shouts it from every high-rise, exclaims it in every last alleyway and corridor – Stillwater needs Martin Wanda. He says it so much that after a while, he believes it, while once upon a time he had been so terribly unsure. Once he begins to believe, the rest seems easy. Once he believes, making the rest of the city believe will be no problem. He cries again, "Stillwater needs Martin Wanda!"

The loyalties are split, and the preliminary votes show a close race. Martin knows which of Stillwater's residents will not vote for him. He can see it splattered across their disapproving faces. Most regard him with disdain, or open dislike. Some seem flabbergasted that a young, green, upstart *boy* has the nerve to run against the older, wiser gentleman. A few faces are filled with unfiltered hatred, set with glares meant to scorch the soul.

But for every one of these people who will not vote for Martin, there is at least another smiling, supportive person who will. There are those he went to school with, those he has known his entire life, but there are also those of people he has never met, people eager to shake his hand and tell him they believe in everything he says, in his ability to change their beloved Stillwater for the better. When Martin comes upon these people, he knows he has found a career, not just some half-assed attempt at procuring a post-collegiate occupation for however short a time. When he shakes hands and exchanges smiles with these people, Martin sees a future version of himself, glad-handing his constituents, the same eager, tireless man that he is now. He sees the same driven person, willing to do everything and sacrifice anything to vault himself to that level of power – the power of being needed.

How could he have known?

Not long before Martin becomes the mayor of Stillwater, he attends a funeral. It is a somber affair. The sleepy, saddened church on the hill that overlooks the Catholic cemetery is stuffed with Stillwater residents, but though there must be at least five hundred people inside, the building feels damp, musty, lonely – empty. No one voices what Martin assumes must be on everyone’s mind. Those that speak to him are sympathetic, supportive. For once, there are no nasty looks for Martin, no hatred-filled glares, no resentment, no anger. Though he expects to be named the culprit for the accident, Martin apparently is the only one who expects such a thing. The tears are of sadness, not blame.

During the service, Martin finds his eyes wandering, sweeping over the crowd the

people that have become *his* people, his to represent and defend, and he wonders how things might have been different if Douglas Wedelman had won the election. If Douglas Wedelman had not died.

An accident, said the papers. A trucker fell asleep at the wheel and crossed the center line of the Stillwater bridge, into the path of Wedelman's car. Wedelman, left with no escape route, drove his car off the bridge to avoid a head-on collision with the truck. His vehicle was found four hours later. Wedelman was still inside.

The closed-casket funeral is the first time that Martin ever properly meets Douglas's six-year-old son, Tom. He seems to be a precocious boy, reeking of Wedelman's charm but none of his soft-spoken, well-mannered propriety. Even as a six-year-old, even at his own father's funeral, Tom seems possessed of unfiltered, unrestrained energy. Martin has no idea what to say to him, or if the implication that the accident was somehow Martin's fault even occurs to Tom. When Martin comes face to face with Douglas Wedelman's widow to give his condolences, he feels the burning, curious gaze of Tom Wedelman on his face. He avoids eye contact.

Tom Wedelman

When I open my eyes, I see nothing but banal décor. I'm strapped to fifty billion wires and IVs and I don't even know what the fuck else. I don't recognize the room, the pastel seashell patterns on the wallpaper, the photograph of a red and white lighthouse, or the painting of some sunset seashore. I don't know how long I've been out. I barely remember the last time I was awake. I think I remember stepping out of the pub and into

the street ... and I think I remember that jackass in his gray suit standing by the side of the road, staring off into the distance.

On the bedside table are two cards. One is large and splattered with a rainbow of unique signatures. It's from everyone at the pub, all my employees and coworkers and all the regulars. *Get well soon, Tom. Can't wait to have you back, Tom. Love you lots, Tom! We miss your smiling face!*

The other card is small and plain. I pluck it off the stand. *Tom, it says. Wishing you a speedy recovery. I have included the phone number of my office and my home. Please let me know if there is anything I can do to assist you. Please also accept health care and medicine free of charge as you recover as my apology for your situation. Please do not hesitate to call me if there is anything else you need. Best wishes, Martin Wanda.*

Below the signature, in parenthesis, reads *President of Stillwater, Minnesota.*

I want to shred the card, but I can't quite do it. I clutch it until it turns damp from the sweat on my hands, until the ink is in danger of smearing. I clutch it until I lose the nerve to rip it to pieces. It flutters onto the floor, rustles as it settles, and it stays there until the nurse picks it up an hour later.

I didn't even know he still knew his own name.

Emerald Island Entertainment

A few weeks before my discussion with the President of Stillwater outside the Fourth Street Pub, the discussion that took place mere moments before Tom Wedelman was struck by a passing vehicle, Stillwater and I were the same self-important, egotistical

type of person. I went along with the world as it changed; I went along with Stillwater as he changed. When I started the Emerald Island Entertainment Corporation, I was thirty-one years old – by no means young anymore, but still full of wide-eyed enthusiasm that I'd been full of since I was a young girl. Stillwater was just the same, two years into his first term as mayor, and we both saw a world of endless possibilities – and we were both seduced by the desire to be wanted, to be needed.

The Presidents call it “the Beginning,” even the ones who were not alive yet, who were nothing more than distant glimmers of the future. It's something we don't speak of to those we call “assholes.” We treat the Beginning as though it's a sacred ritual for only the precious few to know the secrets. We treat the Beginning as though if we spoke of it to anyone other than a President, our world would be horribly shattered, or we would be drawn and quartered, hauled off to be punished for our sins. Even now, discussing the Beginning so casually, I still feel that there is a bogeyman lurking somewhere, eager to gobble me up for releasing the secrets of the Presidents.

But in reality, the Beginning was not so much a beginning as it was a confirmation that our world would continue on its natural progression to complete class segregation. Before the Beginning, the world operated very much the same as it does now – the only difference of course being that back then, we actually had names other than “President” or “asshole.” We only used the Beginning as our way to complete our assertion of superiority. Authority equals power.

And so it went, for years and years, and so it still goes.

Nothing about our collective rise to power involved force. Truth be told, the change from the way it was to the way it is now was so gradual that I could hardly

believe the change had happened until I finally saw it with my own eyes – and that took me forty years. Not long after the Beginning, our world was a boon of social and economic progress, of a whole planet full of Presidents wanting to help their constituents. The crime rate was among the lowest it had been in recorded history. The world economy was booming. Trade and sales were off the charts. Enjoyment for hard work was our world mantra – reward for hard work was extravagant. We were convinced that all our people needed was someone to lead them, to introduce them to the proper moral code by which to live their lives.

But that was back when we still thought we could be voted out of office, or overthrown easily. But authority equals power, as I've already said, and once we realized we had power, we realized no one would be able to take our power without our consent. Try getting a President to agree to resign.

I don't recall exactly when the use of the term "asshole" for anyone non-Presidential became standard. For a while, I remember, it was a term used only by the Presidential elite, in complete confidence, as a way to complain about our oh-so-needy constituents to each other and not feel that we were doing direct wrong to our people. Then, gradually, just like everything else, the term became commonplace, to the point where we began to refer to everyone non-Presidential as "asshole" to their faces.

So really, I'm just like every other person who was there in that stadium the day of the Beginning. Every other person who at first glowed with hope and idealism. Every other person who went back to his or her constituents and worked to bring the world into one of its most prosperous stages – even though that stage only lasted ten years at most. Every other person who eventually became a glutton for power, for basking in the

limelight shone upon the high class. We had become the very monsters that we had originally wanted to protect our constituents from.

I was still that monster up until just a few weeks ago.

That early winter morning dawned cold, so cold that my luxury sedan had a thin sheen of frost upon its windows when I left my upscale penthouse for the complex's indoor carport. The world seemed brittle - not the sleepy world after a heavy sparkling snow. The branches on the trees seemed about to snap, break off, and fall to the frozen earth. I drove from my penthouse in St. Paul to the office in Minneapolis, avoiding the back roads, sticking to the highway as usual. Interstate 94, as usual, was completely clogged, and the cars crawled at a leisurely 25 miles per hour. One quick glance at the dashboard showed a time of 8:45 a.m. and a temperature of negative two degrees Fahrenheit. I paid only slight attention to the road, and let my mind follow my wandering, unfocused eyes.

By the time the 94 finally started to unclog itself, it was almost quarter after nine and I would probably be late to my 9:30 a.m. meeting. Not that I was particularly concerned, since the entire company bent to my schedule. The exit to the company building was just outside the Minneapolis city limits, not far from Stillwater, the town in which I grew up. Every morning, I found myself tempted to keep driving past the exit, driving past work, driving past my self-created destiny, and somehow drive myself into the past, back to when things seemed so much more complicated in such a wonderfully head-spinning way – back before my world became filled with the same tiring monotony. Every Monday morning, I couldn't wait until I could leave, until I could climb in my car and drive down to the Fourth Street Pub, climb upstairs to that second-floor atrium, drink

scotch and bask in our collective importance with other local Presidents, a group that included the President of Stillwater, Minnesota.

I pulled into the parking lot at twenty before ten, late for my meeting with the President of North St. Paul Records and several of his employees. I pulled into my reserved spot in the parking garage, but didn't bother to hurry – what could hurrying get me, other than a snapped heel? I planned to stroll into the office only fifteen minutes late, murmur some swift apologies, expecting that because I'm older than North St. Paul Records and have been a President for longer as well, the matter would be of no issue. But I never got that far. I missed that meeting entirely.

I waited in the elevator, on my way to the seventh floor of the building that housed my company, alternating between glancing at my watch and studying the faces of the others in the elevator, those beneath me. Assholes – that word I'd come to hate so deeply. None of them made eye contact. All of them found something to busy themselves with as the elevator made its slow ascent, stopping at seemingly every floor for people to get on or off. Most of them chattered on cell phones or other communication devices, normal people going about normal daily business. It was an elevator full of working people, ready to go to their jobs to get paid their pittance of wages and spend their whole lives being treated like scum simply because they were all members of the non-Presidential class.

At that moment, I hated all of them. All of them that had the nerve to get on the same elevator as me, to breathe the same air as me, and not even show me an ounce of respect and cease their endless jabbering. I hated them because they were other, separate, but more than that, I hated them because whether they realized or not, they had each

other, and all I had was Monday nights at the atrium of the Fourth Street Pub, nights spent with people as vapid and self-centered as I, nights spent with the dream of finding love, even at my ripe age – and every night spent hopelessly alone.

By the time the elevator stopped on the seventh floor, I was in the foulest of moods. I pushed my way from the back of the elevator, not caring who I bumped into or shoved from my path. No polite “excuse mes” were necessary. I strode off the elevator and pushed open the doors to Emerald Island Entertainment’s lobby, a lavishly furnished white room splashed with various shades of green. The sight of that lobby usually brought me a little comfort, buoyed in me the wonderful feeling that I was needed and important. But on that morning, the sight of my lobby brought me no joy whatsoever.

Ari, my former assistant, was the first person I saw when I stormed through the lobby doors. She looked apologetic, as though it was somehow *her* fault that I was late. “The meeting has already started, Madame,” she murmured, holding out a thick folder. “I told him you’d be right in, but I—”

And my anger and hatred boiled over yet again, this time because of Ari. Because she was so eager and organized and very talented at her job, because she had never once made a mistake, not in all the years she’d worked for me. Because she was young and lovely and as far as I could tell extremely popular with all of the other employees of Emerald Island Entertainment. Because she reminded me so very much of myself, back before my life became nothing but an obsession with my own superiority. Back when I still wanted to help people – change the world in what little ways I could.

I hated her because I was not like her. Because she was not unhappy like me.

“Pack your things,” I snapped. “You’re finished here.”

“Madam?” Whatever Ari expected, it certainly wasn’t an outburst. “I—I don’t understand—”

“What’s to understand?” I could not stop, now that I had started. I have never struck another person in my life, but that moment was the closest I’ve ever come. “You are finished at Emerald Island Entertainment. Pack your things, and leave my building.”

My building.

But Ari did not heed the command. “Madam, are you *firing* me?”

“Was I not clear?”

“What have I done to deserve it?” Ari’s dark eyes blazed with anger, an anger I knew to be well deserved. “Madame, I’ve done everything you’ve ever asked me to do. Morning, noon and night. When I want to go home and see my family, you make me stay and work, and I’ve never complained. When you make me do the most trivial tasks just for your own satisfaction, I do them with a smile. As far as I’m concerned, I’ve worked harder in one day for you than you’ve ever worked in your life.”

How dare she? How dare she accuse me of being lazy! That was all I could think. Only later would I realize how right she was. Before that moment, I might still have grasped a sense of clarity, reeled in my anger and chose to let Ari keep her job, but her accusation had cemented her termination. “You will leave my building immediately, *asshole*, or I will personally make sure that you never procure another source of income in your life.”

One look in Ari’s enraged but silent face revealed that I had won. No matter how true her argument, her position as one of *them* could not outrank my authority as a President. Without another word, she turned on her heel and headed toward my outer

office, to her sleek black desk. She threw her things into a cardboard box and swept out of the office with her head held high, and the hissing whispers of my bewildered staff followed her echoing footsteps.

My disposition did not improve over the course of that day. How could it, when I had just performed the cruelest act of my life? Only after a long night of fitful sleep and a humbling case of my conscience catching up to me did I realize my mistake, the atrocity I'd committed against an innocent person. There is a difference, however, between a person who recognizes her errors and a person who admits to them.

I was too proud.

Over the past few months, while I hired and fired incompetent assistant after incompetent assistant, I've debated whether or not to call Ari and offer her job back. To apologize, to ask for her forgiveness, even though I don't deserve it, and she certainly isn't obligated to give it. Though my unfair termination of Ari has brought the heavy anvil of reality crashing down upon me, I have not called.

For what it's worth, I have looked for her. I wish I could find out whether or not she's somehow being taken care of, whether she suffers now because of me. But I have not been able to find a record of an Ari Caligari anywhere in the Twin Cities metropolitan area.

On the night after my mid-day stroll with Stillwater in the park by the bridge, after the conversation we had in which he used my name, I dream of images of our city lost to my memories. Stillwater is asleep in the wee hours of a spring morning. Around three-thirty the bars finally close, and the kids and the regular drunks stumble out onto

the street for another night. A young man and woman are the last of the clientele to exit one of the bars, a distinct old pub downtown, one seemingly made from nothing but shining, brilliant mahogany, inside and out. The man, long-legged and gangly, is falling-down drunk, fully wasted, so much so that he's not aware of his actions. The woman is sober, carrying herself with an air of polite, amused disapproval, as she accompanies him from the bar. He gathers enough of his wits to corner her against the wall, press his lips sloppily against hers, slur drunkenly that he's wanted to sleep with her since high school. It isn't exactly the smoothest proposition, but it is apparently all he can manage. Though she might want him, she doesn't want him like this – stupid, drunk, out of his mind. She pushes him away and hurries down the street, escaping his hold and pushing him from her personal life for a very long time.

The longer I focus, the harder I concentrate, the sooner I realize that encounter was not a dream – it was all a distant memory, lost to everything but the deepest subconscious recesses of my mind.

When he remembered my name, I was filled with such relief and elation that the long-buried young woman inside me bubbled to the surface and I could no longer hang on to any pretense that my age or wisdom or class status affords me from day to day. I invited him to my St. Paul penthouse and into my personal life, two places he had never been before, however much either one of us might have wanted it to be otherwise. He hadn't kissed me since we were young and drunk, stupid and idealistic. When he kissed me last night, the same boy from all those years ago kissed me. We both wandered in the desert of our loneliness for forty years, and I had finally found a tiny oasis.

When I woke up this morning, my bed was empty save for me – just the same as every other day of my life – and he was gone.

He left a note on the table, a note I nearly missed when I walked out the door this morning.

Gone to change. Call me if you want to help.

Stillwater, Minnesota

We return. We gather in the upper lounge at the same time on the same day as last week, wearing the same clothes and drinking the same scotch. We hold thick, cream-colored envelopes of heavy paper in our hands. More of our Chapter have gathered tonight. We have received the envelopes. We are restless. We have finally received our invitation to this year's Presidential Summit. I, alongside the others of our Chapter, will be present.

“Stillwater, Minnesota” is written in exquisite calligraphy on my envelope. I wonder if I am listed in the national database as Martin Wanda, President of Stillwater, Minnesota, or just Stillwater, Minnesota.

Emerald – whose proper name is Harriet, but who I knew back then as Hal – has last Tuesday's newspaper folded on her lap, and her fingers are resting against the headline that reads “Local Man Hit By Car.” Is that really the best our town can do for the lead headline? I make a mental note to discuss the issue with the President of the Stillwater Gazette, who does not attend our Chapter meetings. I believe her name is Samantha.

The man who was struck by the car last Monday is named Tom Wedelman. He is a widower and longtime owner of the Fourth Street Pub, a Stillwater landmark previously owned by his late mother and father. Tom's father, Douglas, was the one and only opponent I have ever faced in an election. He ran against me in 2014 for the position of mayor of Stillwater, Minnesota. He died in a car accident only two short weeks before the election, and I became mayor, a position I have never rescinded. I will never know which man would have won that election in '14, but I often wonder what my life would have become if it had not been me.

The official story says nothing about the fact that Tom was running across the busiest street in town, more than likely hell-bent on pounding me into the ground. His blood alcohol content was over the legal limit, but since he was not driving, there was not much of a fuss in the paper. I've spent the last week down at the county courthouse, attempting to figure out exactly what should be done, if anything. Meanwhile, I've also made sure that everything Tom Wedelman needs gets paid for.

"We need to talk about our constituents," Hal says. She smooths a wrinkle on the front page of the newspaper.

Maple Valley Paper looks up from his fresh glass of scotch. The laugh that passes his lips is harsh, cruel, mocking. It seems he has already decided that he no longer values Hal's opinion, despite the fact that she is much older than he, and holds seniority over him by length of time served in office. He says, our constituents? The assholes? The disdain is obvious in his voice. He says, why on earth do we need to talk about them?

I feel separate from the others. I am dressed the same and I act the same, I drink the same scotch and sit in the same chair, but I feel apart from them. Hal knows it as well

as I. Are we both different? Are we the only ones who remember why we are Presidents in the first place?

Someone wants to tell the Story, and they begin with the invitations, with the younger ones listening wide-eyed and with rapt attention, though they have just heard this story last week, and I can assure them all it won't have changed in one week's time.

I interrupt them. It will do no good, but one can always hope. "Our constituents should be more important than telling the same story every time we meet."

Silence falls on the upper lounge. They stare at me and I stare back. No one speaks for a deafeningly silent moment.

Then, their decision made, they continue telling the story. I get up and leave.

Tom Wedelman

Back at Fourth Street, two months after, not much has changed. Marija works the lower bar – she looks lively, more friendly; she serves the regulars with a charming smile I've never seen. I still have three or four weeks before I'll be able to return to work, and despite the eight tons of painkillers and antibiotics and other medicines the doctors have loaded me with, I need some time out of my house and back in my home, the pub.

"Are you supposed to be drinking, Tom?" Marija wants to know. If I didn't know better, I would almost say her eyes are twinkling when she asks. She must already know the answer is "no," but she's pulling out two shot glasses anyway.

"No."

"Double shot of bourbon?"

Sounds good. Sounds very good. But not many people can get hit by a car and live to tell the tale, so maybe the more intelligent thing to do at the current moment is not to drink while on pain medication. Second shot at life, and all that. “How about a Coke?”

Marija laughs and stows the shot glasses away, pours the Coke, and slides it across the bar at me. “Looks like getting hit by a car knocked some sense into you.”

“Wouldn’t that just beat all?”

“It would.”

I slurp down the Coke. “How are the kids, Marija?”

“Back in school.” She is beaming, and I know she wants to tell the story. And damn if I don’t want to hear this story. I want to know how she could afford to put the kids back in school with the little money she makes. I know it can’t be because of the extra hours she picked up from me being out of work.

Marija opens her mouth, about to launch into the story, when the door creaks open, accompanied by the calculated footsteps of some very poised people. Marija mutters under her breath, “right on schedule,” picks up the walkie from behind the bar and radios up to Cay that they have arrived. I’m not sure how I’m supposed to feel. Rage? Hatred? I watch them file in and climb the stairs toward the upper lounge while I’m still trying to decide how I feel about their presence in my bar. I’ll decide how I feel when I see the President of Stillwater walk in and when I call him Martin Wanda in front of his cronies. Then I’ll decide whether or not to finish what I started two months ago. Getting a man health care and medicine for free because he got hit by a car right in front of you is one thing, but what else has he done?

When Martin Wanda walks through the door, he is not with the presidents. The woman in the green dress who was with him that night is with him, not with them. I don't recognize the rest of the presidents when they come in – some nondescript kids, some older-looking jackasses wearing silk ties and the usual smug expressions. They don't even glance our way. Beneath them. We always are. Martin Wanda comes in five minutes after them with the woman in the green dress. Both of them look our way, at our dingy little lower-class part of the bar. Both of them are visibly surprised to see me. And both make a beeline for me, apparently forgetting about the staircase, the leather chairs, the superiority and the scotch.

“How are you doing, Tom?” Martin Wanda offers his hand. His handshake is warm, friendly. “I apologize that I didn't get a chance to visit you while you were in the hospital. Hal and I,” and he indicates the woman in the green dress from the night of the accident, “spent most of that time in Washington, D.C.”

I'm bewildered. “That's okay.” I blink, trying to clear my head. “D.C.?”

He nods. “It's time I made some changes to how this city is run. It'll be slow, but ... things can only get better from here.”

I have to be gaping. I'm trying not to let myself descend into skepticism. I've never wanted to believe someone so badly in my life. “Like what?”

Wanda considers the question for a long moment, his eyes lowered, fixed upon the floor. When he answers, his voice is soft, somber, and his eyes are sincere. “As I understand it, you've experienced hard times and losses your whole life, and nothing but scorn and disdain for your trouble, when what you really needed was a helping hand,

some support. That's what I set out to do a long time ago, and I've failed. I want to help out and make things better. I just lost sight of that for a very long time."

I study Wanda for a long time. Could he finally be the man that my father always said was going to change Stillwater for the better? "Glad it takes a near-fatal accident to help you get your head out of your ass."

Wanda's laugh echoes through the rafters, bouncing off the ceiling and filling the pub with warmth. He orders two shots of bourbon and passes one to me. "To your health, Tom."

Four months later, it is Monday night, and *they* do not come. I'm running the lower bar and it's slow. Cay is off, visiting her father in his assisted living residence. Marija took her kids to dinner and a movie. I plan to switch with the new bartender and go upstairs to deal with them when they get here, because I wouldn't subject anyone to that kind of torture, but they don't come. It's past nine before the door creaks open, and it's Martin Wanda, with Hal on his arm.

"They're not coming tonight?" I ask him.

He doesn't answer for a long while. It's not just because he doesn't know, because he doesn't. It's because he doesn't know, and he doesn't care. When he finally does answer my question, it's not exactly what I expected to hear. "Hard as I might try, they may never understand," he says.

"Maybe if they got hit by cars, they would."

Their laughter bubbles up and bursts forth, and it's contagious. Hal orders a grasshopper. Martin orders two shots of bourbon, and passes one to me. We lift our

glasses in a silent toast. To what, I'm not entirely sure. To understanding, friendship, camaraderie, maybe. Or maybe to seeing things more clearly.

They never come back.

Two weeks later, the entire town of Stillwater is buzzing about the mayor. The Presidents want him impeached. He hit Tom Wedelman, they cry. He pushed a working-class asshole in front of oncoming traffic. He's a terror, a menace, they insist. He's got no respect for anyone; he nearly got a man killed and he's okay with that. He doesn't care about his constituents, and he's already killed a man. He killed Douglas Wedelman in 2014, they say. He killed Douglas Wedelman so that he could be mayor. He wants power, and will stop at nothing to get it. He should be impeached. He isn't fit to serve.

The Presidents grill him on the media barbeque for two weeks, and two weeks is all he can take.

Martin Wanda resigns as mayor of Stillwater, Minnesota. I apply to become the President of the Fourth Street Pub.

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