

BENJAMIN WOODSIDE SCHRIER

Bohemian Roulette

A PARTNER AT MY FIRM DIED IN HIS office last month. I know that office. There's a gold scimitar from the Seven Sheikdoms hanging on the wall. If you look out the window to the right, you can see the White House. If you look out the window to the left, you can see the Capitol. In the summer, everything in between is verdurous and electric, but this time of year the elms look like the trees in Halloween decorations.

The dead partner and I have the same secretary, or at least we did until he died. Her name is Cynthia, which is a common name among secretaries. When I got here, it took me a while to get comfortable asking her to do secretarial things, because she is old, and I am young, and she is black, and I am white, and what the hell do I need a secretary for? Once, I asked her if she liked being called a secretary, or wouldn't she rather be called an assistant. She just raised her fine eyebrows at me.

No one's come by to collect the dead partner's things. His office is the city after snowfall. Every morning I make first tracks past the grandfather clock and turn on the banker's lamp so the decanter of brandy glows like a piece of amber. Then I pick a *New Yorker* from the bookshelf. He has every *New Yorker* from the past 20 years, which is about a thousand *New Yorkers*. He was a New Yorker too, but he came to Washington to make a difference.

I pad back to my own office down corridors hung with lipless judges. So too are there robber barons and national security advisors. Their vestments are so blue or black they evanesce into the background and I perceive strange shapes in the negative space: saw-toothed mountains, an automatic rifle, an aquiline nose. I close my door and stand by the window to read, because there was an article in yesterday's issue about how sitting is the new smoking. According to the writer—who interviewed all sorts of anthropologists and doctors—people weren't made to sit. We were made to walk, sometimes forever.

GERGEL LEVY GERGEL LEVY GERGEL LEVY, says the phone on my desk. The phone is set to silent but still makes a faint digital clicking sound like the rending of electrons. Gergel Levy killed the dead partner whose magazines I emancipate. Gergel froze him out of a big case so he knew he was done here like the men hanging in the hallways and gave himself a heart attack. "Like an old Eskimo," Cynthia says. "Iceberg or whatever." And

now the senicide is calling me, and I can feel my pulse in every knotty vein, because I haven't done any work for the six months since Albi was shot in a poppy field in Helmand Province. I just read the dead partner's magazines, or peer down at the woodcut of Lincoln outside Ford's Theatre, or gaze into the building across the street at the girl on the treadmill, the one with the withered arm, doing what humans were meant to do.

Gergel must know. You see, we are required to account for our time in increments of six minutes, or .1 hours. That's about how long it takes to play both sides of a 78 rpm record, or for your average American to be intimate, or for me to run a mile, back in high school, before all that sitting. Here's what I sent Cynthia yesterday:

Notice that male paralegal with Russian name I can never remember (either Vasily or Vitaly) who sits at work station on my floor is balding (.1 Hours); observe Vasily/Vitaly staring at breasts of female paralegal at next station over, which breasts are admittedly large (.1 Hours); read article about technological singularity and consider whether novels written by robots will be any good (.8 Hours); lose close game of online chess to "CommanderBlop" while defecating (.4 Hours); lie on back under desk with hands folded across chest like knightly sarcophagus (3.6 Hours); inspect pores inches away from mirror in bathroom until co-worker enters, then offer hearty salutation (may have actually said "hail fellow well met") and pretend to be washing hands (.4 Hours); research age limit for Marine Corps officer programs, it is 28, I am five years late, I knew this (.2 Hours); think about time in fourth grade when I was unkind to dwarf visiting my elementary school as prospective student, recall dwarf's stoic response to sadism, admire dwarf (1.1 Hours); evaluate whether I am good person, and in so doing try my best not to shy away from episodes I would rather forget, like that with dwarf (1.3 Hours).

Helmand Province is in Afghanistan, by the way. You might not have known that. I didn't know it until Albi got deployed there. You also might not know what the Afghans say about their own country. They say that when God finished creating the world He had extra rocks and trees and all manner of things left over, and from this detritus He wrought Afghanistan. Albi taught me that, in one of his letters. He thought it said a lot about the people

he was fighting. When he was killed he was burning poppies, vast rippling pink fields of poppies, so the Afghans couldn't turn them into opium. He was trying to stop one thing from becoming another, which is a hard thing to do.

Long before Albi died, I rode in a black car with Gergel from a meeting at the Department of Justice. It was the week after St. Patrick's Day and unseasonably warm. It was a sensuous day—the cherry blossoms were in adolescence and the world was filled with their viscous semen smell. It affected everything, even the way people walked as they were let out of work. Their hips and shoulders rolled in their sockets. I saw two friends embrace in the middle of a crosswalk, a man and a woman. Her hand lingered in the small of his back as the signal box counted down their seconds together.

Gergel was not immune. He sat with his legs open and let his gut hang insolently over his belt. I thought I saw a priapic bulge in his trousers. When he spoke it was in a voice already nostalgic for the passing moment, as if he knew that, during the devolution from sunlight to lamplight, he was free to be nothing; as if he knew that the barbecue smoke wafting in from McLean and Falls Church obscured every expectation.

“David,” he says when I answer the phone. “Scourge of prosecutors. Sacred to politicians. Where have you been hiding?”

You may wonder why he is called Gergel. It is his mother's maiden name, a name he once traced back to a set of headstones in Kiev's crumbling Jewish cemetery. I've heard his parents gave him a last name for a first because they thought it would be his shibboleth at prep school. They expected places like Deerfield and Hotchkiss to be full of Waltons and Wolcotts. Naming their son Gergel was the best they could do without disgracing the skullcapped zayde on the mantel.

But Gergel wasn't accepted at any prep schools, so they settled for a Hebrew academy 20 minutes outside of Philadelphia with a pipeline to Penn. His name failed him even there. And I suspect it is because of his name that he's always been alone. Gergel is one athlete calling to another across the cafeteria, or the sound villains in genre novels make when they're dying. It is not the name of your lover. Just like that, Gergel! This is my fiancé, Gergel. Gergel and I are expecting. All impossible.

“Here,” I tell him. “I've been here the whole time.”

“I would've thought you'd have run off by now. Become another suit at Main Justice. Or doesn't that square with your politics?”

“I don’t have any politics.”

“Worked for Dr. Obama though, didn’t you?”

“In 2008.”

“I suppose that can’t be held against you. If you’re not a liberal at 25, you have no heart, et cetera. Edmund Burke, I think.”

“I was 23.”

It has started raining outside in fitful gusts. Still the girl on the treadmill walks on. Perhaps her walking powers the building. Perhaps her colleagues depend on her golden thighs for illumination and hot coffee.

“I’m sorry?”

“I said what do they have you working on these days?”

A trolley pulls up near the Lincoln woodcut. Out steps a man in a plastic raincoat and matching bucket hat. He looks at the theatre, then at Lincoln. He nods to himself, satisfied. His family is at the hotel, playing Monopoly and drinking instant hot chocolate and laughing, but the pastel bills drove him outdoors. It’s been an expensive trip, much more expensive than he imagined. Shouldn’t he get his money’s worth, weather be damned? Shouldn’t he tick off every sight on every dog-eared page of his guidebook? This is the curse of the American tourist: to approach each vacation like a to-do list.

“The Lincoln matter,” I say, as the rain flushes dirt and dead leaves from the cunning angles of the President’s face.

“The Lincoln matter?”

“Sure.”

“Good solid dependable American cars, Lincolns. I did some product liability work for them when I was an associate.”

“Different Lincoln. This is a Second Amendment case.”

Gergel snorts. “No doubt we’re trying to take everyone’s guns away. To disarm the people is the best and most effectual way to enslave them. Richard Henry Lee.”

“Just one gun from one guy.”

The speaker whirrs. Gergel is sharpening a pencil. Gergel is famous for his pencils. He keeps 100 of them in an oversized coffee mug on his desk. There are always exactly 100, like the Swiss Guards at the Tuileries. On the mug is a cartoon of a lawyer addressing a jury. The

quotation reads, “Could my client be innocent? Probably not. My point is it’s interesting to think about.”

Gergel doesn’t even like pencils. I know this because sometimes during a deposition the lead will snap and he’ll say something unprintable under his breath. He doesn’t like those long yellow legal pads either. He finds them difficult to balance on his abbreviated lap. But they are essential nonetheless. Essential to his conception of the lawyer and himself as such. Over many years he has constructed this vision from photographs in the foyers of law school libraries; grainy footage of the Nuremberg trials; several Auchincloss novels he read in college; and the names debossed on the letterheads of his adversaries. They rouse in him memories not his own, of pipe tobacco and lawns that slip down to the sea.

“Well, in any event, I suppose Lincoln isn’t keeping you so busy you can’t fly to Charleston with me tonight?”

I ponder this. The word “Charleston” makes no sense. It is a misunderstanding that must be cleared up. I whisper it to myself but it reduces to the sound of an engine turning over.

“Charleston, South Carolina or Charleston, West Virginia?”

Gergel snorts again. “Do I look like the kind of person who goes to Charleston, West Virginia?”

I have never been to Charleston, West Virginia, but I must admit that he does not.

“Okay. What’s in South Carolina?”

“Button is in South Carolina, as you well know. And so is one of Button’s paintings. It’s a Pissarro. His wife bought it at an auction.”

Button is a client of Gergel’s—and, I suppose, of mine. We got him out of a gorgeous fix with some regulators a few years back and now he calls Gergel for everything. His company manufactures paraffin wax. It’s worth about a billion dollars and must make a goodly percentage of the wax in these United States. With all that wax money Gergel bought himself a rambling mansion near the Battery and converted the old slave quarters into a home theatre with red carpet and terraced seating. I swear to God. He had us over to watch Clemson play Georgia.

“It’s nice, the painting.” Gergel says. “Kind of a farm scene. Some farmers and their animals and their haystacks. It’s about something, you know? Not like the blank canvasses and urinals you see in modern art museums.”

The rain is coming down so hard now I can hear it hitting Gergel's window through the phone. I almost ask him if it's raining where he is too.

"*La Roulette des Bohemiens*," Gergel says. "That's what old Pissarro called it. I have no idea what it means. Bohemian roulette?"

"I don't speak French."

"Me neither. But the name isn't important. What's important is that some old man in Vienna has been writing Button letters about it. Actually, the letters are from his lawyer. She says it was stolen from his family before the war."

I can tell the prospect of visiting Button makes Gergel uneasy. Verily his voice cracks. Button likes to take him golfing with his friends from the Crescent Club, where he introduces him as his Jew lawyer Levy down from our nation's capital. They laugh at Gergel's convulsive swing and how he gets drunk on his second Old Scout. Button is always making jokes about usury and how it's no wonder all those kings gave Gergel's people the boot. Someone like Gergel doesn't know what to do with that kind of chat so he cuts his rates for Button so low the other partners have noticed.

I went golfing with them once. I remember the 18th hole. One always remembers the 18th hole. The rest of us were on the green, waiting to putt, but Gergel had planted himself in a copse of cypress trees halfway down the fairway. He was dressed in all white like a cricketer. "What's the holdup, Levy?" Button yelled, but Gergel didn't move. The light was starting to go and the moss cast lacy shadows on the Bermuda grass. We realized Gergel was pointing at something. It was a golf ball, hidden by long blades of fescue. A man in a visor detached himself from a foursome coming the other way. Gergel showed him his ball and stood back respectfully while he clipped it out of the rough with a gleaming iron. Gergel and the man shook hands. When Gergel caught up to us he was smiling like a Labrador Retriever.

There won't be any golf this time around. The season is long gone. The drinks you have to drink are too cold; the clothes you have to wear are too thin. The wire tables and chairs are stacked and covered in canvass, and the jolly Scottish waiters have gone back to hospitality school. But if Button's mood isn't too foul, there will be dinner at Magnolias or Husk. We will sip punch by candlelight and display impeccable manners.

"Which one?" I ask.

"Which one what?"

"Which war. You said it was stolen from his family before the war."

“Oh. The war. World War II.”

“So does that mean it’s Nazi plunder?”

I know all about Nazi plunder from an article in one of the dead partner’s magazines. It concerned an old woman who rounded a corner at the Prado and collapsed. There in a gilt frame was her mother’s favorite still life. A curator was scolding someone for taking a picture of it with the flash on.

“We don’t know yet, David. It may be Nazi plunder, as you called it. It may not be. And so what if it is? Button didn’t do anything wrong.”

“Alright.”

“Tell me, how could he have known? That’s not a rhetorical question.”

I shrug at the phone.

“He couldn’t have, is the answer. His wife bought it from one of the big European houses. They gave her a chain of title and everything. You want to condemn Button for something the Nazis did 80 years ago?”

“I don’t want to condemn anyone for anything.”

We listen to the rain for a little while. Or at least I do. I listen to my rain, and I listen to Gergel’s rain on his behalf.

“David,” Gergel says. “He should give it back, right? If it is what the old man says it is. Even if he couldn’t have known.”

“Yes.”

“Even if he was a bona fide purchaser for value. That’s the phrase. I couldn’t remember it. I had to look it up in my old contracts book.”

“Even then.”

Gergel’s voice has changed. He sounds like he did on that tight spring day when you couldn’t tell the difference between cherry blossoms and people.

“He isn’t going to want to give it back,” Gergel says.

“No, I imagine he won’t.”

“His wife especially won’t.”

“I’ve met her.”

Gergel laughs, an unnatural sound. “That means we’ll have to convince him. Which means you’ll have to convince him.”

“Why me?”

“If it’s me he’ll think it’s personal.”

“Isn’t it?”

“I don’t know. It shouldn’t be.”

“But I’m Jewish too. Half Jewish.”

“You think Button knows that? With your last name? You don’t even look Jewish.”

He is wrong about that. It’s not that I don’t look Jewish. It’s that I look like I could be lots of other things as well. A Venetian gondolier, say, or a swart Montenegrin come down from the Durmitor.

“How am I supposed to convince him?” I ask.

“Appeal to his better side.”

“I’m pretty sure there’s just the one side.”

“Then appeal to that. Tell him it’ll be a public relations disaster.”

“That he hasn’t done anything wrong but people are so sensitive.”

“So politically correct. You might mention the Anti-Defamation League.”

“Really?”

“Subtly. These people.”

Outside the street is empty. The tourist has moved on. It was not important to see Ford’s Theatre; it was important to have seen it. Still, it is not quiet. From another street, an invisible street, cars are slurring through a stretch of puddled asphalt. The sound they make is not unlike waves crashing on a beach.

“What happens if I can’t convince him?” I ask.

“I have full confidence in your powers of persuasion.”

“Thanks. But what if they don’t work? Do we, you know, resign?”

Gergel sighs. “Don’t be ridiculous. Of course we don’t resign. We have certain duties to Button. Ethical duties. You don’t just abandon a client because he doesn’t take your advice. Especially when it isn’t really legal advice in the first place.”

“So then what? We help him keep his Nazi plunder?”

“Jesus Christ, David. Obviously I wouldn’t put it like that. But yes, we defend him. Of course we defend him. We’re lawyers, not rabbis.”

It is the worst it’s been in a while after Gergel hangs up. Not as bad, though, as it was right after my uncle told me about Albi. I heard the news and went straight to bed. I didn’t cry myself to sleep, like you see on television. I went to sleep quite sensibly, having put on my

pajamas and brushed my teeth. I slept as if medicated, and when I awoke my face was wet. I had dreamt thick dreams, fantastical dreams. A hundred Greek spears glinted in the moonlight in an Afghan vale. Their enemies carried curved daggers and crept down the hillsides through the tamarisk trees. I slept like that every night for weeks. Twelve, 14, 16 hours at a stretch. Then one day the languor was gone and in its place I found a pale stillness.

I can't make myself go home to pack so I turn off all the lights in my office and sit in the gray semidarkness until it's time to hail a cab. I wish we were taking the train. The train is nice. It is especially nice when it stops for no reason in the middle of nowhere. Between New York and Wilmington; between Baltimore and Richmond. No mile markers or town signs. Then you can see the marshlands stretched out to the curvature of the earth. The marshes beneath the telephone poles, cut through with shimmering ribbon creeks. There are whole countries under those telephone poles. They are America's last frontier. Not where we haven't been—what we have seen but passed over. No one is there because no one wants to be there. But I am there, looking over the turquoise fen as the train clacks on into the darkness that the marshes collect.

Three or five hours later I am in seat 4F, which is a window seat. I have the row to myself. I bet Albi never got a row to himself. I bet he was packed in so tight with the other Marines he could barely turn from side to side. I bet he never got to see the desiccated roads or the squared orchards of plum and quince and pomegranate as his plane slid into Bagram. I have seen all this and more but only in the movies.

I bet Albi never thought about our promise. He never mentioned it, even when I said I wasn't coming with him to Officer Candidates School. When we made it we were sitting at the top of a knoll in my front yard. Below us the knoll leveled off into a field of dry grass and a cracked riverbed where rattlesnakes nested and king snakes pretended to be rattlesnakes. In the distance we could see the dead lions, which is what all the hills in California looked like in late summer. It was our favorite time of day, when the fog started to spill over the ridgeline. The fog was a gunmetal curtain many stories high and its arrival each evening made everything seem permanent.

My parents were out of town so we had with us an ancient bottle of port we found in the back of their liquor cabinet. We drank the whole bottle before the bats came out. When it was done we looked into each other's eyes and shook hands and promised we'd join the Marines together. We'd been talking about it for almost a decade. And for months we'd been

running up and down the matted flanks of the dead lions with rocks in our backpacks, and rising before the fog retreated to do sets of push-ups and sit-ups and pull-ups at a disused elementary school playground. I could always do more than Albi could. He was terribly skinny and had a concave chest he was ashamed of. Everything about him was small except his great eagle's beak of a nose. But he'd memorized all the words to the Marines' Hymn and knew every bit of lore. He told me he'd never wanted anything more than the Mameluke sword they give you when you become an officer. After graduation he moved to Quantico and I moved to Morningside Heights and we never said a word about it.

We tear down the runway and I am pressed back into my seat. I think of Albi pressed back into the elastic sod. Of course I do. The metaphor is too obvious. We climb higher and now the not-cities of Northern Virginia are a bed of embers below. Then we break through the billow and we are one with the pinpoint stars, all vapor and possibility.

There is a driver waiting for us at the airport when we land, a blonde woman with her hair pulled back too tight. The effect is a severe mien belied by the wrinkles at the corners of her eyes. She is enormous and stately, and takes great gulps of something sweet from the water bottle that rests in her lap. We go spinning through the oldest part of town, where the streets are ballast stone and the fences iron. Screwed into the side of each house is a bronze plaque that tells its story. Built in this year. Burned in that. Risen again. They catch our headlights as we pass, flicker for an instant, recede unseen in the dripping night.

Benjamin Woodside Schrier is a lawyer living in New York City. This is his first short story. It is dedicated to Major Nathan J. Woodside, USMC, Retired; Major Kirby A. Sanford, USAF; and Lieutenant Daniel S. Sherman, USN, Retired.