

The Uncomfortablists

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Chapter 1

"Did you masturbate this morning?"

Ma is stirring a pot on the stove.

"Fuck, Ma!"

"I know you don't like to discuss it, honey."

"What do you want me to say?"

"It's not about what I want, Ben."

"It's none of your business."

"You know I'm going to keep asking."

She will, too. At least once a day. She doesn't even care about the answer.

"We are not having this conversation."

"Well, try to remember tonight."

I say nothing. I hunch into my jacket and try to warm my hands in my armpits.

Ma slops mush into bowls, puts one in front of me and sits down with another. It looks like beige wallpaper paste.

"What's this?"

"It was on sale."

I pick up my spoon.

"What do you say?"

"Thanks, Ma."

"Say it."

I sigh.

"For what we are about to receive, make us truly uncomfortable."

"Was that so hard?"

"It doesn't even make sense."

"It's not supposed to make sense."

I force down a few swallows and stand up.

"Gotta go."

"Weapons inspection."

I hand over my gun. It's a Colt .38 Detective Special. Series One, snubbie. It used to be my Dad's. She flips open the cylinder, unloads, squints down the barrel and the chambers, checks the ammunition and reloads. She shakes her head.

"Five rounds?"

"Safer."

"Less firepower. And you're not even loading +Ps."

She hands it to me.

I put it back in my pack.

"Yes, you loved your father, so did I, but."

I shrug.

"He had an automatic he might be here today."

I have to get out of here.

"Are you going to be too warm in that?"

"It's below freezing outside!"

"Take off your jacket."

I take it off and stuff it in my pack.

"Bye Ma."

I give her a kiss. She slaps me lightly on the cheek.

I run down the stairs. The cold hits me like a fist. I turn the corner, haul out my jacket and put it on, gasping in the icy air.

The low, leaden sky amplifies the traffic noises. They grate in my skull. I have to run for the bus, and the bus driver pulls out just as

I reach it. Then he squeals the brakes so loud my teeth hurt and lets me on. He's grinning and I can't help grinning back.

"Thanks, man."

"Shut the fuck up."

He definitely made me run on purpose. All part of being uncomfortable. I head for the back.

There's a girl on the back seat, at the end of the aisle. I've seen her in the cafeteria. She sees me looking and looks straight back. Then the bus lurches off. I stumble, fall forward and end up on my knees, face in her crotch. I scramble up.

"Use your head!" she says brightly, with this vacant Barbie face. I don't know what to say, but then she gives a low chuckle.

She moves over and I sit down.

It wasn't exactly an original line. Half the ads in the bus say "Use Your Head!" The other half say "Give Yourself a Hand!" They're really graphic, but it doesn't make you feel horny. Not me, anyhow. Roy says it works for him, but he's a walking hard-on. The government claims it reduces unwanted births. How they figure that out I do not know.

She sees me looking at the ads.

"I'd say they suck, but that's the whole idea."

I try to come up with a good reply.

"They're everywhere."

"They're giving porn a bad name."

Her eyes are brown with dark green flecks. There's a little gap between her front teeth.

"That's just what I was thinking."

"May."

"Oh, yeah, I'm Ben. Ebenezer, really. You may as well know the worst."

"Yeah. Mayberry. Just plain idiotic. We're not supposed to like our names."

"There's this guy I know, he acts tough but his real name's Fauntleroy."

"Maybe he deserves it. But how could his parents have known? Why do they do it?"

"Oh, my Ma buys into the whole thing. Like "Give yourself a hand". She keeps asking me, you know..."

"Don't you hate that? It's just none of their fucking business."

"That's what I tell her, I say, Ma, it is absolutely none of your fucking business, but she's like 'It's for your own good, honey'".

"Grrr."

She clenches her fist and looks fiercely out the window. Her fingers are thin and there are freckles on the back of her hand. I can see a blue-green vein below the surface.

"Something bad out there? Delivery trucks? Fast food franchises? Maple trees?"

I seem to have locked into some stupid jolly mode.

She gives me a puzzled look, then glances at her fist. The knuckles are white.

"Just something I was thinking."

She opens her hand and puts it on her knee. For a while we ride in silence.

It's like a staring contest in reverse. I crack first.

"Thanks, by the way."

"For what?"

"For being ok about me falling on you."

"It was an accident. Wasn't it?"

"But, you could have acted embarrassed, or mad. Or weird."

"I wasn't weird?"

"Well, maybe a little."

"Just comes natural. You're pretty weird yourself."

"You're too kind."

"Not at all."

"Thank you so much."

"Shut the fuck up."

There was the usual traffic jam around the lockers.

"Hey, Ben, did you finish the assignment?"

It's Ted from my homeroom. Full name Asafoetida. He never gets assignments done on time, and he gets himself in this anxious state about it. All the time and energy he spends panicking he might as well do the assignment.

"Sure. You?"

I know the answer anyway, but while he's clenching his trembling lips together and building up to admitting he hasn't, I think I see Roy at the other end of the corridor. He has his camouflage pants on and a big coat and he's carrying a sports bag.

"Roy," I yell. He turns. His eyes are dark underneath, as if he's smeared paint on his face. He doesn't even nod. Maybe he hasn't seen me. He turns and goes around the corner in the direction of the gym.

"That guy is a dick," blurts Ted.

I look at Ted for a second, deciding there's not much point in discussing Roy with him.

"He's ok," I say.

The class stands and faces the flag and we move our lips while the old P.A. distorts the pledge:

"Party's over, that's enough,

Do it now and do it rough.

Look behind you. Lock and load.

Zero parking. Clear the road.

Pain is gain and gain is pain,

Learn to like it, don't complain,

Use your hand and use your head.

Do it right or do it dead.

Death to spammers."

Beamish says it loudly in his high, cutting voice, making every word a threat, and his little black eyes dart around, looking for students who aren't suitably awestruck by the emotional power of the occasion. The trick is to do it completely deadpan. If you crack a smile he'll haul you out and give you a week's detention. You can't even roll your eyes. We get it over with and Beamish says "Be seated".

Then he calls the roll. He does it in this accusing, sneering tone, as if our names are our fault, and he lingers on each syllable trying to extract the maximum annoyance. When he calls out "Fauntleroy Nebuchadnezzar Kelly" no one answers. I look around. Sure enough no Roy.

"Has anybody seen Fauntleroy?" Beamish asks. I don't say anything and I give Ted a look. He looks at me and clenches his lips and keeps quiet.

"Absent," says Beamish with great satisfaction and makes sure he records it immediately on his laptop so it will go straight into the database for all eternity. Roy is going to get himself expelled if he doesn't start coming to class. He's missing at least one day a week. It's not really his fault. Ma can be irritating but she does care whether I go to school. Roy's Dad is really strict but only when he comes home, which is not often. They have this really messy apartment with a sink full of plates and falling over piles of magazines everywhere. Roy is pretty much looking after himself and he can't get organized.

Then the door bangs open so hard it slams against the wall and everybody jumps.

The guy in the doorway is in full ballistic gear. He's wearing a riot helmet, with a tinted visor so you can't see his face, full vest and groin protector. He has a Swock in each hand and an M4 slung across his back. He has a belt hung with equipment and ammunition belts

criss-crossing his chest. He looks like a fucking battle robot. He walks into the room.

Beamish hauls out his pride and joy from under his desk. It's a Barrett M82A1. The fucking thing will blow a hole through armor plate a mile away. It makes no sense whatsoever to have it in the classroom for close combat, but Beamish thinks it makes him a big man. The recoil will probably dislocate his shoulder. The truth is nothing in the universe could make Beamish a big man.

The gunman simply walks between Beamish and the students. If Beamish fires the 50 caliber high velocity bullet will go straight through the gunman and kill any of us in its path and probably through two more classrooms, out of the school and into the library next door. Check-fucking-mate. Beamish gets this dimwitted confused look on his face. He obviously doesn't have the faintest idea what do to next.

We all have to get down to give Beamish his shot. Which he probably hasn't got the guts to take. I look around fast in the hope the others will catch on and then duck under the desk. My bag is there. I take out the snubbie, as quickly and quietly as I can. From under the desk I can see one combat boot. He's still covering Beamish. He's going to hear me cock the hammer so I'll have to cock and fire in one movement. Three shots rip out in rapid succession and in the noise I fire at the boot. His helmet hits the ground right in my field of view. He seems to be looking at me but I can't be sure. I get out from under the desk.

Beamish is down. He's taken two in the head without firing a shot. One of his beady eyes isn't there anymore. The gunman is moving a little but it's like he's lost interest. He's dropped his semi-autos and his M4 is under him and he can't get up with a shot foot anyway. He's making a high sound, not quite crying. I move around, covering the gunman, and kick his Swocks well out of reach. Then suddenly the class wakes up. They pull their guns and take aim at the gunman. Ted is doing it strictly by the book, right arm straight, left hand cupping the butt, and his jaw is working as he clenches his lips.

"No Ted!" I yell but fires before I get it out. Then the others open up and I have to fall backwards out of the way. It feels like it goes on for about ten minutes. It's probably only a few seconds. I'm in the corner holding onto my knees with my back against the wall.

I don't really follow things too well after that. There's a lot of running and shouting. People keep yelling "Don't touch him, don't move him, wait for the paramedics."

Paramedics aren't going to be able to do much except collect shell casings.

One of the local vigilante groups arrives about ten minutes before the cops. They come in two by two cover formation, in battle robot outfits just like the gunman except for the last one. He's just wearing regular clothes, and he's unarmed. He's still the boss though. They all take up positions looking dangerous but they wait for him to decide what to do next. He's a big tall guy and he doesn't look excited at all. He scans the room, taking in Beamish, the gunman, me

in the corner and the kids who are standing around still holding their guns. Then he says "Stand down."

The robots lower their weapons and the kids start putting their guns away.

He checks out Beamish and nods to himself. He walks over to the gunman and looks down at him. He sees the wound in the foot. He takes a big breath and swallows once. Then he bends down and opens up the visor.

He knew it was Roy. Roy had all his Dad's gear, after all. We all knew. The face is still recognizable. He has this strange expression, though. It's not like an expression a live person would have. You can still see the dark marks under his eyes. Two big bruises. Roy's Dad looks at him, breathing quietly. Then he turns away without a word and walks straight out.

The vigilante robots don't know what to do. They shuffle their feet for a few minutes. Then one of them says "Fuck," and goes. The others trail after him.

Then the cops show up. They do more or less the same thing the vigilantes did, but with less style and more shouting. The cops are mad because someone has touched the body and they like to do their forensic shit. They're very territorial. They hate it when vigilantes get there first.

The paramedics arrive. Somebody points them at me. One starts prodding me and asking questions.

"Are you hit?"

My mouth isn't working very well. I manage to croak "Don't think so."

I'm starting to shiver and he drapes a blanket around me.

The paramedic is trying to get me to lie down but I just need to stand up. I feel a little dizzy and I lean on the wall until it passes. I sort of want to throw up. A detective comes over and shows me a badge and says something. I can't even focus on it.

"Name?"

"Ebenezer Hollins".

"You fired the first shot?"

"I don't know. I think the gunman. Roy."

"Roy the perp? You know him?"

"Yeah. Fauntleroy Nebuchadnezzar Kelly."

"Jesus fuckin' Christ. Helluva name, even these days. How many times you shoot your friend?"

I'm out of breath and it's hard to talk.

"One."

"You the foot?"

"Right."

"So he shoots the teacher, you shoot him in the foot, he goes down, the rest of the kids tap him."

"Yeah."

"Ok, future reference you maybe shoulda shot him a little more but you did good, kid, and the other boys and girls came through. Look, there's no suspicious circumstances here, standard school massacre, we got your name, we may be in touch. Ok?"

"Yeah."

"You can go."

He turns around and yells "People, we are done here. Let's wrap it up."

They start zipping up body bags.

I decide to sit down on the floor.

Chapter 2

The next few days I just stay home. Ma isn't letting anyone in the apartment. They say they came to offer their condolences but they just want to hear about what happened. It's a bit of excitement for them. The local paper sends a reporter round. Ma tells him to fuck off. They run a page one headline "Fuck Off!" with a picture of Ma at the front door giving the finger straight to camera. She prints it out and puts it on the fridge.

I hear Ma at the door. She is saying "I'm sorry May, but he really doesn't want to talk about it."

"Ma, let her in," I yell.

May has brought a cake. I have no idea what it cost her. It has fruit and nuts and chocolate and this sugar glaze on the top. We have it on the sofa. Ma sits with us for tea and cake and then she leaves us alone.

"How are you doing?" says May.

I put my arms around her and kiss her on the lips. She holds me and we sit there for a while.

"I'm not too bad," I finally say.

Her hair smells like cinnamon and vanilla and wood smoke. We kiss some more.

"What's happening at school?" I ask in a break.

"Wall-to-wall rent-a-counselor. A death of a school community member is a traumatic event. Your grief is a normal reaction to abnormal stress. As you come to perceive the enormity of this tragedy we would caution you not to engage in dangerous, self-destructive, or socially unacceptable behavior. You may experience denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. I mean fuck. Just mail me the PowerPoint."

I kiss her again.

"The tragedy being Beamish and Roy."

"I don't think anybody much is going to miss Beamish."

"I do miss Roy."

She moves her fingers around in my hair. I literally do not ever want her to stop.

"Why don't you talk to his Dad?"

"Roy's Dad. Fuck, Roy's Dad did it!"

"He was at fault, but you two have Roy in common."

How does she know these things? It's like this whole other form of intelligence. After that we don't talk a whole lot.

So I try to call Roy's Dad. No answer at Roy's place. In the end I reach him through the group, Eternal Vigilance 14674. I leave a message and ask if we can meet. He calls back an hour later.

"Zeb Kelly, returning your call."

"Mr Kelly, my name is Ben Hollins. I was a friend of Roy's."

"Ben Hollins."

"Yes."

"The foot."

"Yes."

"You want to meet?"

"Yes."

"Grounds for Prosecution, 15:30".

I start to say "OK" but he has hung up.

Grounds for Prosecution is a cafe near the law courts. I show up early and find a table. I buy a coffee so they don't mind me sitting there, although I can't really afford it. He shows up at 15:30 on the dot. He sees me straight away and nods. He gets a coffee and sits down.

"So."

"Mr Kelly, I'm so sorry about Roy."

"What is it you want?"

I have to think about that. It's the obvious question, but I don't know the answer.

"I want to speak at Roy's funeral."

"You knew Roy before?"

"I was a friend. I want to talk about him."

He looks at me hard. It's the same way he looked at Beamish.

"You saw the whole thing?"

"I saw some of it."

"Roy got off three shots?"

I don't know what to say to that. I nod.

"He hit that teacher twice? The teacher with the Barrett?"

I just stare.

"The teacher didn't get off a shot?"

I am struggling. What does he want from me?

"Roy stayed cool, Mr Kelly."

He slumps.

"I didn't know my own son."

I can't believe I'm feeling sorry for the old bastard. He beat Roy whenever he felt like it.

"How could this happen?"

His voice is shaking. I can't handle this.

"Mr Kelly..."

He raises his head and looks me right in the eye.

"Something stinks. And I am not gonna stand for it. You hear me?"

He's sniffing.

"Did he say anything?"

"No."

"You were his friend? He said nothing to you?"

"No."

"He said nothing to me. Nothing."

I'm not saying anything either. I don't want to set him off. He's glaring past my right shoulder. It's not even clear if he's talking to me. It's like he's making a holy vow to someone behind me. I want to turn around and look, but I have this horrible feeling it's Roy.

"Someone is responsible for this. And they will pay. They will find out there is a price and they will pay that price. I will demand payment. I will exact that price."

Trying to talk to this guy is worse than getting shot at.

"I want to talk about Roy at his funeral. May I do that, Mr Kelly?"

He nods, head bowed over his coffee.

I stay there for a decent interval, shallow breathing, every muscle aching. I manage to leave without breaking into a run.

The funeral is a big event. It happens on the Thursday. The whole school shows up, and some media. There's all this organ music as we go in, like random notes but maybe it's Bach. It trickles out and stops.

The lights dim, then up comes a spot and in it Santa walks to the pulpit. He stands there a moment, looking gravely out at the congregation. The majestic red costume and flowing white beard do their work. When he speaks there is total quiet.

"I giveth and I taketh away," he says, and pauses for effect.

"Hallowed be my name!" he says, and someone says "Amen."

"We are here," says Santa, "to celebrate the life of Fauntleroy Nebuchadnezzar Kelly."

Roy, I want to shout.

"Earth to earth," whispers Santa. Everybody leans slightly forward.

"Ashes to ashes," intones Santa, almost singing. He raises his eyes high over our heads, and his hand sweeps broadly but gently out from his chest. It's a beautiful gesture, an offering of infinite peace. I glance back and realize he's signalling the sound engineer.

"Dust to dust." It's the wind blowing over the desert of time. I have no idea how Mr Kelly can afford such a good Santa.

"For dust you are, and to dust you shall return."

Santa surveys the audience matter-of-factly.

"Every soul will taste death. And what is the life of this world except the enjoyment of delusion?"

No one has an answer to that.

"Roy chose the manner of his going. Some of us would not make that choice. Some of us will have no choice. But which of us can say Roy was wrong?"

He waits. No one pipes up.

"Roy cannot testify. His lips are pale and still. But we can make some kind of a noise about it."

Santa works his eyebrows.

"He's not coming back," says Santa. "You won't see him again. That's it for Roy. All over. Anyone mad about that?"

"Yes," someone says.

"Are we just gonna sit here and take it?"

"No!"

"Roy is dead, people!" bellows Santa. "Is anyone mad about that? Let me hear you say it! Are you mad as hell?"

"Yes!" we shout.

"Is it fair?"

"No!" we shout.

"Is it fucking bullshit?"

"Yes!" we yell.

"Is there any way to comprehend this fucking world?"

"No!"

"Is it stark staring fucking crazy?"

"Yes!"

"Is there anything we can do about it?"

"No!"

"Do not go gentle," roars Santa. "Stand at his grave and weep. Wail, rend your garments, slap your cheeks. Knock yourself out. Will it matter?"

"No!"

"Are we gonna do it anyway?"

"Yes!"

"Do it! Do it now!"

A spot comes up on Barbie, in full backswing, sequins shimmering. She strikes the gong and a wave of noise rolls out over us. Opposite we

see the Bunny, arms raised over her head. She brings her mallets down on the drum she is wearing in a slow, firm strokes. Barbie joins her on tambor and they build an insistent, lilting beat.

Santa starts to chant. No words. It's just a sound. After a while people join in. The air begins to throb. The sound pulses and swells. People are swaying, eyes closed. A few kids and old people are whirling around. There's a gravelly bass thrumming along. Santa is droning like dark honey. There's a high tenor that could cut glass. Women's voices are ringing bell chords. High tones pop out of the corners of the chapel ceiling. People are stamping and pounding and clapping. The benches are buzzing. I'm howling. The Bunny is whirling her mallets around her ears in a frenzy. She gives her drum a final mighty thwack. There's a hair-raising shriek, and a chorus of sirens and howls. My guts vibrate. It dies slowly away, with giggles and sighs.

"To talk about Roy, I am going to call on Ben Hollins."

I walk up the aisle. Barbie greets me with a dazzling smile and leads me to the lectern. I have my notes in my hands, but the papers are snapping and rattling and I have to lay them down for a minute. My throat is raw. I look up.

"Roy was my friend," I say. I look down at my notes but they start rattling again.

"Roy was just a normal kid," I say. "He wanted what everybody wants."

I look up again. They are waiting for me to start making sense.

"The Roy I knew cared about his Dad, and about his friends, and about his axolotl. Roy was interested in nature, and he could tell you plenty about astronomy as well. He was going to buy a telescope when he figured out how to get the money. "

I'm losing them. I press on.

"I went home for lunch at his place sometimes. We had spaghetti-os. Roy and I would watch Discovery Channel and just talk about stuff."

I know what I want to say now.

"Roy didn't know he was a good person, but I did."

I look up. No one seems to be getting it.

"I knew."

I pick up my notes and walk away. Barbie heads me off and directs me out the back. The organ starts up again.

I'm wandering around looking for the bathroom. There's a sign outside one of the chapels. Beamish.

I put my head in the door. There's an old lady in there. She's sitting very straight and staring at the coffin. Her head snaps around and she's staring at me. I act like I meant to go in all along.

"Mrs Beamish."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

Lipstick is leaking out of the wrinkles around her lips into the deep grooves beside her mouth.

"Forty three years I kept him alive," she says. She looks down at her folded hands. "Come March it would have been forty four." Her small dark eyes are red-rimmed and watery.

"He was trying to do his job."

She gives this snort, like steam escaping. "What kind of a world is this?" she wheezes.

After a while I decide she isn't going to say any more. I can't stop my footsteps echoing as I leave.

I'm waiting around outside to see if May is there and Zeb comes up. He towers over me for a moment, then he holds out his hand. I take it and he pulls me into a hug. What the hell. I hug him back.

He keeps on hugging. I sort of ease off. He increases the pressure. He has this big man smell, cigarettes and coffee and sweat and stale breath. Mold is coming faintly from the suit.

I realize I can't remember what my Dad smelled like. I don't see how it could have been anything like this. I'm just standing there, arms

by my sides. He's hugging away. I see May and raise my chin. She smiles and shrugs her eyebrows.

Finally he lets go.

"Excuse me, Zeb."

He nods, not meeting my eyes.

I go over and take May's hand. Snow is falling softly.

Chapter 3

"Who has not completed the assignment?"

Ted puts up his hand.

"Excellent, any one else?"

A few other kids raise their hands.

"Why do you think I give you these assignments? Ted?"

Ted just shrugs. He's not looking too good these days. Not that he ever did, but now there's no color in his face and the spots show up in angry contrast. He used to come up with great excuses, though. Like the time he said a stray dog grabbed his assignment, ran into a building and took the elevator before he could catch it. Or the power went out in his apartment and they had to burn his assignment for heat and light.

Gomez is just playing with him. She looks around. "Anyone?"

"To help us to learn?"

Fran always answers those questions. She's like a cheerleader for the teacher.

"Thank you, Frangipani," says Gomez. "Can anyone offer a better reason?"

Fran looks peeved. The whole class is just sitting there as if they aren't getting paid enough to answer questions. Sometimes I say something just to get things moving.

"To annoy the crap out of us?"

Gomez throws me a beaming smile. "Thank you Ebenezer. To annoy the crap out of you, to make you...?"

"Uncomfortable."

"Uncomfortable. Yes. Now why would I want to do that?"

"Because you hate us?"

That's not like Fran, but it's a good call.

"That's a significant consideration, Frangipani, but the main reason?"

The fact is everyone knows what Gomez is driving at. We just don't want to give her the satisfaction. After all, this is Uncomfortablism 101. We go over this every time. I've had enough.

"Comfortable bad, uncomfortable good. That's all you're saying. I mean, you give us this stuff about scientific studies proving this and proving that, but you can make an experiment come out however you like, it's not about science, it's about this goddam religion, what's so bad about comfortable, is it going to destroy the world if people wear their fucking jackets, I mean what is this shit?"

Gomez is delighted. I've just made her day.

"Emphatically put, Ebenezer. Someone has been paying attention. However I want you to be more precise in articulating your concerns. You mentioned a distrust of science that supports Uncomfortablism doctrine. Can you offer alternative studies that support the opposing viewpoint?"

"You raised the conflict between science and religion. This is a profound observation, and together we shall explore this more deeply."

"And your final question, perhaps you will allow me to rephrase as 'Can Uncomfortablism save the world?' Perhaps it can. We do know the pursuit of comfort came very close to destroying it."

See, this is what they do. They bait you until you go crazy and then they act like they've achieved something unbelievably positive. They put it all down to this moronic Uncomfortablism but really they just get a charge out of driving us nuts. Congratulations to me, I just got one of my students to embarrass himself.

The rest of the class is looking at me like I'm some kind of traitor. Frankly I don't care about that much. I'd rather give them what they want than waste my time being bored.

"Ok, but I don't see you looking all that uncomfortable."

Gomez frowns. "The fuck you say?"

"I said, you don't look like it hurts you to give us a hard time. You enjoy it. Where's the uncomfortable in that?"

Gomez is watching me with a different kind of smile. Her teeth are really sharp, I notice.

"You know, what with spending my nights marking confused assignments, untangling tortured syntax and preparing classes for you all to ignore, and my days fending off your surly attacks and striving to kindle a glimmer of interest in your unreceptive minds, I haven't got much time to be uncomfortable."

Ted sniggers and Fran practises her bell-like laugh, which, to be fair, is coming along. It used to sound like pterodactyls mating but now it's more like a bad attack of hiccups.

"Ok, Gomez, point to you, because you got me to lose it. But point to me, because I got you to lose it. But point to you, because now you've got me playing this stupid game. But point to me, because I know what you're doing."

Gomez stops smiling. For a moment she looks thoughtful and sad and tired. "You can stay after class, Ebenezer."

The class goes "Ooooh!" I ignore them.

I wait while Gomez makes her report and packs up her notebook and straightens things up. She doesn't meet my eye while she's doing it, so it looks like I may be in deep shit. I watch her. She's wearing this grey green top that goes really well with her skin tone. You can see her age under her eyes and chin, but her movements are light. She's taking a long time, thinking about what to say.

She sits down on the edge of the desk and tilts her head to one side. Her eyes are even darker than May's.

"Are you seeing a counsellor?"

I shake my head. I went a few times but then I quit.

"Are you talking to anyone?"

I shrug. "Everybody talks."

"Ben, my job is not to make you unhappy. It's to help you think. But I'm not going to stop doing my job because the thinking hurts. Do you see that?"

You just never know with Gomez. She always comes at you from left field.

"You have a good mind, Ben. We have to keep it moving, keep it busy. I want you to keep using it. Keep talking to me, in class, whenever. If you want to get angry, get angry. With me if you like. If you hear anyone say anything you don't agree with, tell them. Talk to them."

"What good is talk?"

"Talk is what we have. Or write it down. How about writing a page or so every night? Hand it to me in the morning."

"About what?"

"It doesn't matter. Write the first word and then write another."

"Why would I do that?"

"Let's just try it. You write a few words for me, I'll write a few words for you. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Uncomfortable doesn't mean unhappy, Ben. It means active. Alive."

Her eyes are very dark. She's looking right into my head. She thinks she has some kind of message for me that she can't say out loud. It's too terrible to mention. She stands up and puts a hand on my arm.

"Now, we'd better get along to hear what Secretary Garner has to say. I'm sure you'll enjoy that."

The hall is full and the noise is bouncing around the ceiling and walls. There's a blur of chair scrapes, coughs, laughter, shouting, feet drumming, doors banging, high pitched chatter.

A gunshot booms and everyone goes quiet. The principal lowers the Colt Magnum, gives it a brisk sniff, and surveys the school over her bifocals.

"Thank you for your attention. Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, we are very privileged to have with us today Secretary Garner, who as I am sure you know is responsible for the administration of policy throughout the region. He will speak to you on a topic of vital concern to us all: Whither Uncomfortablism? So fucking listen up."

Dutiful applause. A pudgy character steps up to the microphone. He's bald on top with a grey pony tail behind. He's wearing a suit that doesn't fit too well, with shiny knees and elbows. There's a brown

wool vest underneath it and a thin greenish tie caught at a funny angle underneath that. It looks like he got the whole outfit out of a recycled clothing bin. Which knowing these guys he probably did.

"Ah, hello everyone. Thank you for coming."

Like we had a choice.

"I trust you're all uncomfortable."

He smirks. Maybe back when he had hair this was a joke. He scores a few titters.

"Our educational institutions are our life blood. Here, in these halls and classrooms, is our future."

He beams modestly, like he invented schools but doesn't want us to fuss over him.

"But not so long ago, schools were not held in such high regard. Schools had to pick over what was left after industry and the military had their fill.

"In those dark days, as the resources of the world were dissipated in pursuit of comfort, students were packed thirty or forty to a classroom, with a single unarmed teacher struggling to be heard above their anguished cries for help.

"As the ice caps melted and the forests died, a mere two percent of the population owned half of the world's wealth. One country with a

twentieth of the world's population used a quarter of the world's energy.

One in five could neither read nor write, while the privileged spent on their child's education what would support twenty families for a year.

"They burned irreplaceable fossil fuels to drive miles for recreational shopping.

"They squandered fabulous resources on weapons of mass destruction.

"It was a time of irresponsibility and excess, of greed, of inequality, of shocking, criminal waste. A time when the comfort of a few deadened their sensitivity to the ruin they brought to all. A time of shame.

"Their shame is our shame. We must shoulder that burden of guilt. We must live with the damage done by our forebears, and try to repair the catastrophe with our effort and our sacrifice.

"We make a virtue of necessity. We can no longer consume as they did. There is no oil, no coal, no natural gas. The minerals are exhausted. The trees are pulped. The topsoil is in the sea and the fish are fertilizer.

"Where they grew bloated and ill, we live lean, and mean, and clean. Comfort is our enemy. But some things we will not sacrifice. We will not sacrifice our self-respect. We will not sacrifice our respect for

each other. And we are fucked, we are fucked ladies and gentleman, if we will sacrifice the education of our children!"

I have to hand it to him. He must have done that speech a million times but he sounds like he means it. On the last word he hits a high note that twangs off the metal roof. There's a big burst of applause.

For all I know he may be mean, but I'm not seeing lean and clean. He turns, acknowledging the audience. Anyone would think he was trying to get elected. Except they had the last election before I was born. As his gaze passes over me it feels like we lock eyes for a second, and his eyelid twitches.

He steps up to the microphone again.

"Recently a terrible event took place at this school; an event that would have been even more terrible had it not been for a quick thinking young man. Ebenezer Hollins made a difficult decision and carried it out, and in so doing saved lives. The party believes that acts of dedication and courage deserve recognition. I would now like to call on Ebenezer Hollis to receive the Citizen's Sacrifice Medal. Ebenezer?"

Ma tried to talk them out of it but they insisted. So I walk up and shake hands with Secretary Garner, and we have to stand there, holding hands, the medal held up for the cameras, while the other kids clap and hoot and whistle. I can't blame them. It's an opportunity to let off steam.

Then I'm supposed to go to tea in the staff common room. I don't talk to anybody much. There's an unbelievable number of cookies, no doubt to impress Garner. I just keep eating them.

Gomez comes over with the Secretary. Close up he looks even worse. There's food on his vest.

"Got a spare cookie there?"

I start to answer but my mouth is full so I just nod. He nods back and takes a cookie, studying me as he takes a bite.

"Not bad. Thanks for letting us give you the medal. I understand you weren't too happy about it."

"I'm not proud of what happened," I say.

"It's hard to make sense of these things. Giving you a medal helps the others, don't you think?"

"I think it helps you," I say.

Gomez narrows her eyes and gives a tiny shake of her head. Garner raises an eyebrow and smiles with half his mouth.

"You know what would make sense to me?" I say.

"Tell me," says Garner.

"Do something to stop people shooting each other."

"Easier said," says Garner. He takes a sip of tea. "It turns out you can't stop them getting hold of a gun if they want one. So we make

everyone carry a gun, and train them to use it. The idea is you have a general deterrent, fewer accidental gun deaths, fewer casualties when someone snaps."

"Another dumb idea that doesn't work."

He gives me a wry look.

"On the whole, there's probably an improvement, if you read the statistics creatively. Some gun deaths now might have happened another way before. Suicides. Murders. Overall death by violence is down."

"It didn't save Roy."

"I'm sorry about your friend. And it was not your fault. What I hear, if it had been up to you, he would have survived with a limp."

He puts down his teacup.

"Pleasure to meet you, Ben. Thank you again."

He makes his farewells and his minders walk him out. Gomez comes back.

"Whew. That went pretty well considering."

She puts her hand on my arm again.

"Write me something, ok?"

I want to touch her but I can't figure out how to make it feel right.

Ma refused to come to the ceremony or the tea. She didn't want to get into any fights. I catch the bus home as usual.

"Hey, big man, let's see the medal."

Ted has a grin that can't decide whether it's a sneer. I could punch him out but I'm not that bothered. I fish the medal out of my pocket and hand it to him.

May is in the back row. She doesn't make me talk. We just sit, her head leaning on my shoulder.

Chapter 4

When I open the door I see Ma at the kitchen bench, arranging flowers in a big peanut butter jar.

"Honey, look who's here."

Zeb is sitting on the sofa in the living room. He stands up and holds out his hand. I take it.

"So, they gave you a medal."

"Oh, yeah."

I realize I left it with Ted.

"I didn't bring it."

"Zeb is joining us for dinner, Ben. He brought steak."

"Steak?"

"You know what steak is, Ben?"

"Sure. Beef."

I've read about it. But it's funny the way in old books they just assume you know what they're talking about. There's a lot of things they don't describe in any detail and you just make a guess. I mean what the fuck is a samovar?

You can find recipes on the Internet that they missed when they cleaned it up. There'll be this picture of a plate with things on it

that you have no idea what they are. Roy used to have thousands of downloaded pictures of food. Sometimes he'd leave a slideshow running and we'd just sit there staring at it for hours.

Where is Zeb getting the money for steak? There was never any sign of money in Roy's apartment.

"Are we celebrating something?"

"They gave you the medal for the wrong reasons, Ben, but Zeb and I talked about it. You know we're both proud of you, honey."

We? Both? Zeb and I? Zeb is staring down at me trying to arrange his face into a smile. That is something he should not do.

"Zeb was wondering if you'd like to go with him some night to Group."

"Oh. Right. Yeah, I guess so."

Zeb's vigilantes are probably the tightest group in the area. They definitely have the best equipment. In a way it's kind of childish, dressing up and running around with guns, but I would sort of like to see how it all works.

Zeb is definitely smiling now. Must brush regularly.

"How about tonight?"

"Sure."

Ma serves the steak with fried onions and mashed potato and frozen spinach. It's only cooked on the outside. On the inside it's almost

raw. It's like a big lump of bunched muscle. When I cut into it blood runs out all over the potato. I have never tasted anything like it. Iron mostly, and carbon and salt. There's all these different flavors in there. And the added thrill of eating something illegal. Nobody talks while we eat the steak. Even after we finish we just sit around running our tongues over our lips and our teeth.

"So, how about you boys help with the washing up and then you can head out?"

Zeb actually does the washing up, with his hands in the sink. I'm drying and Ma is running around wiping and tidying. I am wondering if this is going to become a regular thing. I'm trying to figure out whether I'd mind. I'm not thinking straight after the steak. My whole body feels sleepy and grateful.

Outside it's already dark and really cold. Zeb pulls a black balaclava out of his pocket and hands it to me. That's better. He puts one on himself. Zeb strides ahead, and I get warm trying to keep up. We turn at every corner, apparently at random. I hear ice crunching under tires and realize a black van is cruising slowly behind us. It pulls ahead and the back doors open.

Zeb nods me inside. In the back are two guys wearing black overalls and balaclavas. There's another guy up front with the driver.

"Hi," I say. "I'm ..."

Zeb puts a big hand on my shoulder and squeezes hard. I stop talking. He nods at the others. They nod back silently. These guys know how to have fun.

"Stoner, Monk," says Zeb, pointing with his chin. "I'm Wolf. Gap at the wheel, Snapper shotgun."

I look at the guy in the passenger seat. Sure enough, he's cradling a Mossberg 500. Zeb stares at me, blank faced, for half a minute. Maybe the steak's wearing off. I'm not so sure this is a good idea any more.

"You're Foot," says Zeb.

Zeb pulls a curtain across between the front and the back. We drive around for a long time. The van is going to run out of charge. There are no windows in the back but there's a shelf with a laptop and on the screen you can see different angles of the road.

Zeb motions me to sit in front of the laptop. He leans over close and runs through a few quick moves on the interface, switching the view, zooming. I try it out. You can see all around, but it's hard to get a sense of everything that's going on. I figure out there are six cameras, two in front, one on each side, one behind and one on top. You can rotate the one on top through three sixty. I need a way to arrange smaller views with a main view in the center. After a minute or so I find a working layout. I'm getting the hang of this. There's a car behind us, not too far back. I check its number plate and take a look at the driver. I watch it for a while to see if it's following, but when we make a turn it goes on.

Zeb and the others are watching me. What was that, some kind of test? Zeb reaches over and closes the laptop. He squeezes my shoulder again. Apparently there's a sign on my forehead saying please grope me. We drive around blind for another half hour. No way are they using fuel in this thing. What's next, a helicopter?

We pile out of the van. We're round the back of a big house in the middle of a snow-covered field. There are a few stars showing but no moon. There's no sign of other buildings nearby. It just disappears into blackness. There might be the outline of woods against the sky. The only light is spilling from two open basement doors. We go down the stairs.

It's a normal basement, full of cobwebs and dust and old paint cans and gardening equipment. Zeb waits till all the others are down the stairs, except Snapper, who is on sentry duty. Then he opens a metal door. Everyone goes through and Zeb triple bolts the door behind us.

This room is clean. It has white cement walls, but you can't see much of them. They're covered in racks and shelves. On the shelves there are laptops, rows of manuals and stacked boxes. On the racks there are gas masks, riot masks, goggles, gloves, vests, overalls, belts, straps, holsters, pouches, packs, rappelling gear, rams, grenades, knives, sticks and clubs. But mostly there are guns. They have all the guns in the world.

They have Sigs and Colts and Glocks and Swocks. They have M4s and MP5s and Uzis and Kalashnikovs. They have Remington 870s and Mossberg 500s. And they have long range sniper rifles, including a Barrett.

I pull out one of the office chairs next to a laptop and sit down. I put my face in my hands for a minute. The steak is definitely wearing off.

"He ok?" says Gap.

"He's fine," says Zeb. "Foot, me and the unit are going to have a briefing session for a few minutes. Why don't you wait out here? Use the computer if you like. Might find something there to interest you."

They head deeper into the basement through another metal door. It clangs shut and bolts bang into place. The reverberation dies in the room, and after a while it dies in my head.

Whatever they're doing in there, it's not making much noise. I scan the shelves and racks absently. Some things on those racks I don't even know what they do. There's a Sig model I haven't seen before. Maybe it's a custom job. I think maybe I'll get up and take a look at it, but then I notice a Swock right next to it. I'll check it out later.

I turn to the laptop. I browse around a little, checking on a few sites I like. There's this one classic cartoons site with stuff from last century. Roy found it and showed it to me. Most of them don't make any sense. Roy said that was the interesting part. If we could figure out why they weren't funny we could understand the human condition. It sounded good but I didn't bother to think about it too hard. He was always saying things like that. But there was this one where there are two hippos in a river, and one says to the other, 'I

keep thinking it's Tuesday'. I have no idea why but we both completely cracked up.

I can't find it. I start searching, changing terms, following links, looking for keywords. Here it is. I don't believe it. Paul Crum aka Roger Petteward, Punch 21 July 1937. Just a few lines and you can see the hippos and the river and the desert and the trees. I have to save this. I open the file browser dialog and all these children are staring back at me.

The thumbnails are tiny but it's obvious they're naked. I open up the folder. There are thousands of pictures in here. I start flicking through them. It's sort of fascinating. How does a creature as vulnerable as this, as frightened as this, do anything at all, let alone wreck the planet? Fragile bones barely covered by pale skin, little delicate ribs and shoulders and hips. There are pictures of men with kids, too.

Something in the room changes, and I know that the others are back. I have to hand it to them. They can move quietly. They're standing right behind me. I push the chair back slowly and turn around.

They're all carrying weapons. They're completely still, staring down. My heart is beating pretty hard. I'm shivering and sweating at the same time. I haven't got my gun with me. Not that it would do any good against this.

"How's it make you feel?", asks Zeb.

"You like those pictures?"

"Cute kids, huh?"

"Bet you wish you could spend a little time with some of them."

I'm sick of them looking down at me. I stand up, a little too quickly.

There's a hum in my ears and I'm seeing them through a dark tunnel.

"How does it make me feel, you sick fucks?"

But that's all I manage to say. The steak was a little rich for me after all. I heave all over their feet.

"Ah, shit!"

"Goddam it!"

Zeb starts to laugh. I didn't know he knew how.

"Well, boys, I guess he told us."

"He did at that."

The others start laughing too. They lay down their weapons. Stoner goes off and comes back with a mop and bucket and few towels. They start wiping themselves down and mopping themselves up.

"Man, what is that? Is that steak?"

"Classiest spew I ever saw!"

I feel a lot better after throwing up. I'm trying to figure out what I should do next. Make a run for it. Grab a gun and start shooting.

"You need a glass of water? Something stronger?"

Zeb has taken off his balaclava. The others strip theirs off too.

"Water's fine."

Zeb gives me a glass and motions me to sit down. He looks at me seriously.

"Know your enemy, Foot." He puts his hand on my knee.

"That disgusting manure you saw there makes us all sick to our stomachs," says Monk. "No one who enjoys that filth has a right to call themselves a human being. Anyone who traffics in that, who exploits the suffering of those children, who derives erotic satisfaction from that hideous vileness, has effectively resigned their membership of the human race."

"Man's right," says Stoner.

"Better off dead," says Gap.

"Trouble is, the law is ineffective," says Monk. "The law requires all manner of evidence and premeditation and habeas corpus and quid pro quo and quod erat demonstrandum. No time in the world for all that bullshit. But to give it its due, the law, setting aside the theory and moving along to the application, has the good sense to tolerate a little quiet vigilantism. Citizens of good will who are prepared to devote their time and their skills to addressing this problem earn the tacit approval of the authorities."

That's probably overstating it. I never saw a cop who tacitly approved of vigilantes. Mostly they tacitly hate their guts.

"We follow due process, of course," says Monk. "We collect evidence. You saw some. We find these bastards lurking in chat rooms, looking to groom some helpless kid, and they groom more than they bargained for. Oh, I hate my crack-whore mom, won't you please make me safe and buy me stuff? I'll do anything, you just name it, I'll be your slave. What did you say your address was again? That's me knockin' on your door."

"Unless we just decide to blow the hinges off," says Gap.

"Or go in through the wall," says Stoner.

They're waiting for me to say something.

"So what if I had a hard-on from those pictures," I said. "What do you do, blow me away?"

They go very quiet.

"Did you have a hard-on?"

"No, you assholes, I did not have a fucking hard-on!"

"Cause if you did, it wasn't very big."

They bust out laughing again. Zeb is wiping his eyes.

"Listen, you fucking maniacs, I have school in the morning."

Zeb gets up. "Come on boys. We had enough fun for one night."

We all go back up the stairs, into the cold silence.