

THE JUDGMENT (AFTER FRANZ)

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George surveyed the bleak, sparsely furnished bedroom with satisfaction. There was a single window with a view of an enormous brick meat plant, a closet door adorned with a poster of Rodin's "Gates of Hell," and a simple bureau. On top of the bureau was a small plastic trophy depicting a boy executing a perfect handstand. Upon the neatly made bed lay an open suitcase filled with the paraphernalia of a life: articles of clothing, necessities of hygiene, a thick stack of frayed drawings. At long last George would leave this room, a development that filled his heart with a strange glow, a wild kind of happiness he'd never known, for his life to this point had been a series of predictable events systematically arranged by his parents. In twenty years of living he had never controlled his destiny nor experienced, in the slightest way, the thrill of spontaneity. Now, after a brief meeting with his mother and father, he would walk out of this house into an uncertain future entirely his own.

Two wonderful occurrences had made this freedom possible. He had become engaged to a lovely young woman whom he had known for several months, and he had been accepted into the Academy, an unprecedented accomplishment in George's family. It was a family, as his father was fond of pointing out, of clerks and gate guards. Indeed it was in total secret that George had obtained and submitted his Academy application. Without telling a soul he had completed a battery of rigorous tests. He had submitted designs, sketches and formal drawings of buildings erected out of the caverns of his mind. Most of his creations were dreamlike structures, vast labyrinths that often rambled beyond the very margins of the page. He was accepted

by the Academy on the same day that he was accepted by the lovely and perfect Felicia.

Now he need only inform his parents of the wonderful news. Then, with suitcase in hand, he would proceed to the subway station to meet his good friend Maxwell. Together they would travel uptown to the apartment they had already leased, an austere but affordable flat near the Academy where Maxwell was a prominent and successful student of chemistry.

The walls and floor of George's room vibrated with the passing of a train below. It was a common occurrence, something George had learned to ignore, as the building was situated directly over a subway line. He lifted the small plastic gymnastics trophy from the top of the bureau and held it carefully in his hands. Over the years its coating of cheap gold paint had nearly chipped off entirely. He placed the trophy gently inside the suitcase and snapped it shut. With the suitcase resting on the bed he left the room.

Out in the hall were the familiar kitchen smells that had marked his childhood—onions, cabbage, sausage. Entering the dining room he saw the familiar picture on the wall. It was an old print of the Savior wearing some strange, thorny headgear that broke the skin of his scalp, spattering drops of blood over the pinched agony of his face. It was a striking countenance, worthy of examination. But it was the Savior's heart that always drew the eye, for it was entirely exposed, skin and bone having been miraculously splayed to reveal a pulsating, blood-red organ. Indeed, protracted scrutiny of this heart had been known to produce the optical illusion of a living, pumping muscle.

George's mother entered the room, a short gray-haired woman with a narrow and severe look about her. His father followed. He was a tall bald man with a strange and vacant face. Strapped to his belt at hip level was a revolver that was securely fastened in a leather holster. Together they looked across the dining room table at George. He returned their gaze and said,

“I am engaged to be married to Felicia Bauman. I have been accepted by the Academy into their School of Design. I have leased an apartment in the West End with Maxwell Brown.”

There appeared suddenly, at the corners of the bald man’s mouth, the faintest suggestion of a sneer. He cast a furtive glance at his wife whose face had opened into a wide and very polite smile. She fastened tender eyes upon George, the smile widening, and said, “Where would this design come from?”

George said, “It comes from me, just me.”

“We shuffle papers,” said his father. “We guard gates.”

“I suppose,” said his mother, “that design falls from heaven like rain.”

George bristled. He threw back his shoulders and said, “This is what you said about my tumbling, but my trophy speaks for itself.”

A fine spray of spittle issued from his father’s mouth. “Surely you knew it was presented out of sympathy, to spare your sissified feelings. Why—it’s plastic!” He held out a massive palm that closed slowly into the rock of a fist. “I could snap it in two,” he said. “I could crush it into little pieces!”

“You’re aware of course,” said his mother, “that Stanley Bauman is a bank officer. You’re aware that a relationship with his daughter is laughable.”

“We guard gates,” said his father. “An engagement to the Bauman girl can only be nonsense.”

“The kind of nonsense,” said his mother, “that can only be fiction.”

“It’s obvious,” said his father, “that someone’s imagination has run amok. Mr. Bauman is an officer at a bank.” He leveled a superior smile upon his son.

George thought it imperative that he not rise to this bait. He and only he knew of the profound love for Felicia that dwelled in his heart, and of her mutual feelings for him. He and Felicia were committed to one another. Their bond was eternal and no

one, least of all these doubters, could alter that fact. So it was with intense personal pride and unwavering adoration for his future wife that George stiffened his spine in defiance. He need say nothing. He merely stood before this odd parental inquisition thinking of the lovely Felicia, of their mutual devotion, of the certainty of their future together and of the plush sofa in her father's home where, a mere three nights earlier, she had exposed her soft pale breasts to his feverish kisses.

With a turn of her head George's mother indicated that she was about to speak. "This friend," she said.

"This acquaintance," interrupted his father, "whom you fancy a friend."

"This—I don't know..." said the short gray-haired lady.

"Vagabond?" offered the eager pistol-packing elder.

"This boy," said his mother. "This Max whatever..."

George interrupted in a firm and clear voice. "My close friend Maxwell Brown and I have signed a lease for an apartment in the West End." He looked at his watch. "In fact, we have arranged to meet one another very shortly. He has obtained a key to our flat."

"A flat key?" said the mother. "Hmmm..."

George looked at her blankly. Her gaze assumed a look of benevolence and pity. Smiling sweetly she said, "A key is one thing. A lock that cooperates is still another."

George announced, "My bag is packed." There was a moment of silence. The two elders seemed taken by some collective mirth known only to themselves, as if a secret joke were being shared between them.

George's father, suddenly agitated, eyed his son with a hand squeezing the holstered sidearm. As if to calm himself he looked over at the picture on the wall. Following his example George too looked at the Savior. It was a very old print that had buckled in numerous places and was covered with old yellowed glass. These impediments created a potential for certain visual distortions.

As father and son perused the picture a late afternoon commuter train thundered below. The vibrations continued unabated and the image itself seemed to move. Certainly the Savior's face remained fixed, filled with love and pain. But the heart, the naked ever-present heart seemed alive, so vivid and bright with blood that, to George's weary eye, it looked more like a wound than a vessel, a large gaping wound the size of a man's hand that, upon close inspection, teemed with countless quivering white worms as thick as fingers, each intricately segmented, each with hundreds of threadlike legs wiggling, the tiny tips of which glowed with an odd phosphorescence.

The shaking abated, the portrait became still, but George felt as if the floor beneath him was the deck of ship in rough seas. He feared for his balance. He felt drunk. His father had lighted a cigar and layers of blue smoke began to obscure his vision. He looked through the haze at his mother who was high in the air. He realized after a moment that she was seated upon his father's massive shoulders. Her arm was outstretched, a forefinger pointed at George. He turned and began to stumble from the room, but not before hearing her unmistakable words: "You tumbling fool," she bellowed. "I sentence you to an acrobatic death."

Staggering along the hall George felt his intoxication begin to wane. His head cleared. He straightened his posture and quickened his gait. He opened the door to his bedroom, snatched the suitcase and hurried outside to the street. He took in a deep rush of cool air and his breast swelled with a renewed sense of purpose. The sound of his own heels clicking on the sidewalk was music to strengthen his resolve. Doubt and uncertainty fled before a hard, icy clarity. Moving quickly along the street he felt as if his future was etched deeply into his being, as if carved painfully into the flesh of his back. He hurried down into the subway station where he was to meet his best friend.

Maxwell was seated alone on a bench against the wall of the

station. He stood and looked at George with an affection that was palpable. “For some reason I was afraid you wouldn’t show,” said Max.

George pushed the suitcase into Maxwell’s hands. Max said, “I don’t think so buddy, you’ll carry your own baggage.” He was a pleasant looking young man with a full head of wavy red hair. “I have some bad news,” he said. “There might be a problem with Felicia. We’ll talk when we get home.”

George smiled and said, “Of course.” From the tunnel came the rumble of an approaching train.

“But I have good news as well,” continued Maxwell. With thumb and forefinger he held up a thick, gold key. It did not take a great deal of scrutiny to see that it was flat and smooth with no grooves or notches cut into it—a blank.

George smiled in approval. “What do you think Max? A key to the future?”

Maxwell beamed.

“Just as smooth and straight as an arrow,” said George. “Like the Six Train I’ll be catching.”

“No, we take the West End car,” said Maxwell. “The Six Train’s an express. It doesn’t stop here.”

At the far end of the platform a train emerged, screaming out of the tunnel like a black bullet. The entire station shook with an angry metallic gnashing. George pushed the suitcase against Maxwell’s leg, stood up and took several steps forward. Momentarily he hesitated, not over what to do so much as how, precisely, to carry it off. Immediately a revelation passed over him like soft heavenly rain, like an ancient genetic mystery decoding bright white daggers of truth into his mind. He threw out his arms and began a series of perfectly straight and erect cartwheels in the direction of the red line at the platform’s edge, his spinning limbs blurred like the spokes of a wheel. As if programmed he landed with both feet together on the painted red line. His toes gripped the edge of the platform. He bent his

knees, bellowed “I can fetch it Maxie!” and swan-dived neatly into the path of the barreling Six Train, thinking how fitting and proper it was, how perfectly appropriate, that an entity so small, a life so meager, should vanish in so vast and clamorous a racket.