

Between the Lines

Chapter I -- Premonition

"It can hardly be a coincidence that no language on Earth has ever produced the phrase, 'as pretty as an airport.' "

- Douglas Adams

A gray and sprawling landscape surrounded him as he stepped out of the taxi car. It was still dark out and starless, and even the bright sporadic beams of artificial light striking the walls and pavement couldn't dissuade his instinctive feeling that he should have stayed in bed. He put on his backpack, strap by strap, as the driver handed him his blue carry-on, wished him a pleasant flight, and drove off. Eric sighed to himself, turned around and faced the airport. He hated airports. It wasn't just their sterile, brutalist design, perfected by a school of architecture made popular by its uncanny ability to disguise cheap construction as modern minimalism. It also wasn't just how vastly inflated were the prices shops charged for bottles of water and horribly-tasting food, depending on a crowd that had nowhere else to go. And while he despised the macabre security theatre he had to go through each time, just to embark on one of the safest modes of transportation

ever invented, it wasn't that either. All of these were just symptoms of some.. thing.. he couldn't quite put his finger on. Whenever he searched himself, he always returned to the same vague observation: Airports radiated quiet, timid anxiety. No one spoke it, or stared it in the eye, but there it was, all the same, flowing through the recycled air and touching all who passed through it. A tinge of dread settled into him as he dragged his luggage through the entrance of the airport, while a security guard scrutinized him with impersonal suspicion. Eric sighed again and braced himself.

He is going to Seattle to see Lina, the girl currently on his mind. They met in Barcelona, a chance meeting at a touristic boulevard, and they instantly clicked. They spent the following hours touring the wide and narrow streets of the city, taking in its beautiful foreign architecture. They talked endlessly. They talked about her past and her future, about how she played violin when she was little, how she likes foreign films, and going on forest hikes, and so on and so forth. but by now, he couldn't remember half the things they talked about. Instead, he remembered the music of her voice, the gestures of her slender hands, the small shapes her mouth made when she spoke, the way her eyes, clear and blue, widened when her interest was piqued, and the way her hair, dark and flowing, sometimes half-covered her eye, making her smiles seem even more mysterious and alluring. All these minute observations, and countless others, were still vivid in his mind two months later. Two whole months apart, when even a day was too much. They kept in touch, and spoke on the phone a few times since, but each time felt a little more distant than before, and he could feel the brightness of it extinguishing. Finally, he decided he had to go see her in person. Flying across the ocean was a grander gesture than he was used to, and quite an expensive one, but he decided, or perhaps it was decided for him, that he should be foolish for once.

He reached the excruciatingly long check-in queue, which was full of irritable strangers, each one keeping a solemn silence usually reserved for elevators. A few of the queuers chatted dispassionately among themselves, but most were too tired for any sort of interaction. They lingered onward with dead faces and slow non-committing eyes. Occasionally a cough or yawn was heard, and a long pause of silence followed it. Such is the spirit of the 4am check-in. After a long while, that felt like forever, Eric made it to the counter. "Passport please," demanded the bored attendant, and Eric complied. "Where are you flying to?" she began her well-rehearsed routine to filter out the confused.

"Seattle," Eric said. Despite himself, there was a bit of excitement in his voice. "Is this your luggage?" she asked dryly. "Yes, but I'm taking it on the plane". She fumbled with her computer for a long minute while Eric stood in uncomfortable silence. A passing coworker leaned in and said something unintelligible in her ear which made her smile and suppress a snicker. He checked her name tag, "Ellie". She had a quirky smile, and green eyes that stood out against the red and white uniform she had to wear. A minute ago, he didn't notice she existed, and now he wanted to invite her for coffee. "Here you go, Sir," Ellie said curtly as she handed him his tickets, without quite looking at him. "Next!" she spoke out as she craned her head sideways, and her green eyes darted to find the next customer in line.

Resolved to get it over and done with, Eric soon made it to security, with its endless whirring of plastic trays sliding up and down, delivering potential explosives to screening machines. He stood in yet another long, barely advancing line, just behind an old lady with bad skin, who stood behind a tall guy with dreadlocks, who was behind a middle-aged couple in Hawaiian shirts, and so on. He wondered why would a terrorist even bother to pass security, when so many defenseless people gathered in the line to security. He looked around, wondering if

everyone felt the same. He wished he could just ask someone else in line, just to share a little laugh while he was waiting. But everyone knows there are some things you just don't say in an airport, and especially not in the line to security.

He had to put his backpack in a plastic tray, and his laptop in another. Yet another one was for his wallet, keys and passport. He had to take his leather shoes off, and then his belt. Then he passed The Grand Voyeur, which is what he nicknamed the machine that lets them see you naked. He remembered reading in the NY Times that this whole charade had a five percent success rate of actually catching explosives. But it seemed like a great way to catch bedbugs. Eric just finished his quick redress when some security official walked up to him and said briskly, "Sir, please follow me." Since the machine didn't beep, he knew this was a Random test. He was used to those. Random is just the politically correct form to mean Specific Yet Undisclosed Criteria. The official swiped a swab in Random locations on Eric's person and personal effects. "You're clear" he said, turning to go, and then, noticing the disdain of Eric's expression, he added, "do you want to know why we stopped you for this check?" Eric was surprised at the offer. "Umm, yeah, sure." That never happened before. "Look here," the official pointed at a monochrome X-Ray scan that showed an electric board and tangled wires, a picture that urged one's mind to conjure the image of a home-made bomb. "Oh," Eric said, "that's my kindle and earphones."

As he walked, Eric's thoughts wandered to the day he met Lina. It was on La Rambla, on his way to Barcelona's Gothic Quarter. She was leaning against the head of a public bench, wearing a short skirt that accentuated her long thin legs, and casually observed people passing by while her friend was browsing at some upscale fashion store. He walked by and couldn't look away. Their eyes met and they both smiled. It was one of those moments, that one might consider a cliché,

but feel entirely genuine when experienced. He approached her coyly and their conversation went something like this:

He said "Hi, I like your shoes." and instantly regretted it.

She smiled slyly, and to his surprise, went off-script.

"No, you don't."

"Okay, I like your legs."

"That's rude!" She feigned shock.

"I like... your kneecaps?"

Then she laughed, and he knew, having had some experience with women, it was not her testament to his sense of humor. She kept her eyes on him and pushed her hair back. There was a short pause of contextual adjustment that left both of them full of words they wouldn't say. "What else do you like?" Lina teased. Surprised again, and left without words, he answered with a smile. Before anything else could be said, or not said, a shrill excited voice called out: "Lina! I got the pink ones!" Her friend emerged from the store, carrying big paper bags. "Ooh, good choice!" Lina replied back supportively, "they'll be fantastic with your blue dress!". Lina's friend approached them gleefully, apparently pleased that she walked into the thick of some intrigue. "And who's this?" she asked. "That is.." "I'm Eric, nice to meet you." He reached out and shook her hand courteously, "Anne" she said, and then he turned to Lina and shook hers for slightly longer. "Lina". "Well, Anne and Lina.. Have you toured the Gothic Quarter already?"

But Eric had an hour and a half to kill before his flight, and daydreaming alone could not satisfy his attention. The uninspiring halls and corridors of the airport

didn't help. He was reluctantly drawn towards the food court. It was bustling with sleepy travelers and worn out workers and there was the smell of cheap grilled cheese in the air. He was hungry, but every food item he examined made him feel slightly nauseated. He considered getting the pasta, but then he saw it on someone else's plate, and the sauce looked like tomato soup and its smell reached him though he was a meter away and reminded him of the smell of puke. Eric turned away, concluding that he wasn't hungry enough. He tried to recall a time when he had a good meal in an airport, but he drew up blank. Why was that? He could understand the unique limitations of airplane food: It had to be pre-made, compact, and easy to prepare. But airport food carts and restaurants could be just as good as regular ones, couldn't they? Except they had no reason to be. Eric sighed, retreated to a peripheral bench, sat down, and dozed off...

"You can't sleep here!"

Eric opened his eyes, still in a daze.

"*SIR*, you can't sleep here." An annoyed voice repeated. It belonged to a large man of dark complexion wearing airport uniform that tried to resemble police without saying so outright. Alarmed, Eric checked his phone. Only thirty minutes passed. He relaxed, almost even disappointed so little time has passed. "Oh, okay, sorry..."

"If you want to sleep, I will have to ask you go to your gate and sleep there. But you can't sleep here."

"No... It's fine, I'm awake. I'm not sleeping."

"Uh huh." the large man intoned and walked away defiantly. Eric was surprised he managed to sleep at all, while having bright fluorescent lights shining down on his

eyes, and the constant whirring sound of industrial floor cleaners ringing in his ears. He sat there in silence for a minute, letting his mind boot back up to regular consciousness. Still mid-boot, a voice called out in surprise: "Eric?!"

It was a young man in his twenties, dressed casual but smart. They went to high-school together, Eric was almost certain. "Oh hey," he replied evasively, while trying to recall that person to memory.

"I haven't seen you in ages! How have you been?" the familiar guy continued, seemingly without noticing any of Eric's confusion.

"Oh, pretty good." Eric said automatically. "Got a good job, a nice place, been traveling quite a bit..." he gestured around as if he's stating the obvious. "And how have you been?"

He remembered now, it was Daniel from high-school. They were Facebook Friends too. Last time they spoke, about five years ago, Dan interned as a graphic designer, unpaid. But about two years ago, he began living as a digital nomad, traveling from city to city and taking envy-inducing pictures of genuine foreign cultures and gorgeous nature scenes. Eric thought of his mundane office cubicle. It had a plastic plant, and his window view was obstructed by another high-rise. When he looked outside, all he could see were other offices with fake plants inside.

"I've been traveling quite a bit myself," Dan confided eagerly, and with Eric's polite encouragement, told his story with a surplus of detail. He designed websites and sold them online. He spent most of his time in East Europe, Vietnam and Thailand, and worked from cafes and dedicated work-spaces. He was happy, he was, he really was. He's been to so many different places, seen so many different cultures and had so many interesting experiences. Sure, it gets lonely sometimes. It's hard to make real friends when you keep moving around. Friendships become a

shallow past-time. You're absent from your old friends' big life events, and so you begin to drift apart... But whenever he's back home, Dan says, not a few weeks pass and he becomes restless again and buys another plane ticket. Well, you can't have it all, Daniel said, and his wide smile seemed a little bitter, perhaps. They caught up on trivialities and casually gossiped about their shared friends. It was a pleasant conversation, until its flow was interrupted by the overpowering noise of a floor cleaner drive-by, and then Eric remembered he should probably head for the gate, and excused himself. They said their goodbyes, and Dan hugged him and said: "Nice seeing you, dude! Let's keep in touch," Eric agreed enthusiastically, but they both knew very well that they most likely won't.

There's an old proverb saying you can't ever escape yourself: "Wherever you go, there you are again!" But here's the truth: if you go away far enough, part of your self will stay behind. Because where no one knows you, you are no longer obliged to consistency. And where no one cares about you, you are no longer bound to appearances. When you're away, however lonely it may get, at least you can reinvent yourself every day, and everyone around you will still accept you at face-value. And to have others see us as we wish to be seen, that is a most salutary gift.

Eric made his way to the gate, following the confusing trail of numbers and arrows. Seeing an old friend make such a drastic change in his life, inspired Eric to believe that he can change too. Lina deserves to be with someone who has it together, who is brave and strong. He felt like he was an imposter, always making a big show, but really just barely hanging on. And he felt she sometimes had her doubts about it. He could feel her pull away every time he let his timid, gloomy

nature slip by. But perhaps he really can become the person that they both wanted him to be, and grow to deserve the attention that so far he only stole with pretense. At least, he had already done the first step: He took a chance, despite all the uncertainty, despite everything that could go wrong, and he is going to see her again, very soon.

Chapter II -- Admonition

"If there's no music up in heaven, then what's it for?"

- Arcade Fire

"Welcome aboard!"

"Have a pleasant flight!"

The well-dressed, finely-tuned flight attendants repeated their mantras to the passing passengers with mechanical cheerfulness while Eric was pushed and shoved from all sides. All the passengers of Priority Boarding were already sitting comfortably in their seats, secretly smirking as the poor Regular Boarders fought for space for their carry-ons. By the time Eric made it to his seat, all of the nearby overhead bins were occupied, and he had to scout a vacancy about two dozen seats back, against the still persisting current of passengers scurrying to their seat. Around him, passengers were browsing the in-flight magazine, which was in many ways just like a regular magazine, except it didn't have any articles, and instead only had ads. Other passengers were struggling with the armrest radio controls, unaware that it doesn't broadcast while earthbound. Yet others were playing with the window shutters and the incline of their chair. Eric sighed, sat down and pulled out his kindle from his backpack.

"That's a nifty gadget." suggested the passenger in the adjacent seat. He had dark skin, a graying beard, expressive eyes and a deep raspy voice. He looked to be in his fifties.

"Yeah, it's pretty cool," Eric said distractedly.

"Sure, sure. You know, when I was a kid we were promised interactive holograms, mind-reading devices, and intelligent beeping robots. But that little book is okay too, I guess." he mused and his eyes wandered to an imaginary distance. "Heh, I'm still waiting on my flying car."

"Well, you know what they say.." replied Eric, who by now was in a sarcastic mood, "Man makes plans, and God laughs."

"Oh," the old man hand-waved dismissively and chuckled at Eric, "God's gonna laugh no matter what."

A passing flight attendant, visibly disgruntled, inspected Eric's belt and seat angle, and soon the plane began its lift-off. As it accelerated, Eric felt a little nervous, despite himself. His rational mind knew there was no point in contemplating the uncontrollable. He could logically recall that he was much less nervous inside of a car, despite it being, statistically speaking, far more dangerous. But all the same, when the plane left the ground, his heart beat just a little bit faster. All the wonderful abstract notions humanity has cultured over the years and instilled in Eric's supposedly sophisticated mind, could not redeem the fact that he was just a land mammal, suspended in mid-air. When the ordeal was over, Eric resumed his reading, and let the turbulence slowly subside into white noise. He read through half the book before a duo of flight attendants turtled along with a cart of drinks, and reminded Eric of his plane-induced thirst.

"Can I have some water, please?" Eric requested in a projected voice.

"No problem," replied the flight attendant, "that will be two fifty."

"Sorry, I said: I want water."

The flight attendant, annoyed, held out a tiny plastic water bottle. Eric has never seen such a small bottle before. "Cash or credit?"

Reluctantly, and begrudgingly, Eric paid for the water. The old man bought one for himself as well, and didn't seem perturbed in the slightest.

"Don't sweat the small stuff, right?" Eric quipped to placate himself.

"It's all small stuff." the old man replied absentmindedly.

It all really did seem like small stuff to Eric, just two months ago, when he and Lina toured the old stony alleyways and wide flowering boulevards of Barcelona. They walked hand in hand, thought in thought. Sometimes they said so many things, and other times they were content with deep silence. It was then that all bad things became so distant, such that he could barely see them any longer. All his fears, his frustrations, and his worries, they all belonged to another person, a miserable person for whom he distantly felt sorry, only just. He became free to renounce all of them, for at those moments he was lifted above ordinary existence by the thick cloud of pheromones that infiltrated his mind. It lifted him, and it soothed him, and it spoke suggestive whispers in his ear that sounded so much like the words he always longed to hear. He felt like he found his home. But very little of it has stayed with him to present tense. Very little, except for the strong yearning for it to return. Without that chemical buffer called infatuation, his foes seemed big and terrifying again. Now his worries and frustrations resumed to hit him in intervals, like waves eroding the cliffs of his nerves. It was remarkable to him,

being vaguely aware of the process his mind has been through, how quickly these things change; how unreliable our mind can be at choosing what is important, and really, how little control we have over it.

“Is it all small stuff, really?” he said abruptly, surprising even himself. Or perhaps only himself, because his neighbor gave no sign of detecting an oddity. “I mean, some things aren’t small. Some things are so big, they make everything else seem tiny. Some things are so devastating they can crush you, some things are so dark they can extinguish every light around you, while others are so incredible and uplifting they can carry you through hell.”

“You’re not still talking about water bottles, are you?” the man chuckled. Then he looked out the window, at the arable patterns decorating the far below ground, and said contemplatively, as if to himself, “the same rule always applies: the size of things depends on how far away they are.”

Chapter III -- Admission

*"I'm a British citizen & so proud to have been welcomed to this country.
Sad to hear ill be banned from the USA based on my country of birth"*

- Twitter post by Nadhim Zahawi, British Member of Parliament

The line to border control was long and tiresome, from whatever distance Eric tried to observe it. He was rather happy to be standing up, after sitting for so long in the uncomfortable airplane seat, but he much preferred it if he could walk around instead, to mend his joints and muscles. It must have been an hour before he finally reached the immigration booth. Inside it sat a uniformed man, a clerk, dark skinned and wearing a turban. Eric handed him his passport and visitation slip with a tired smile. The clerk took them snappily, fumbled with his computer silently for a long while, and then mumbled unintelligibly at Eric's direction.

"Sorry, what?" Eric asked.

"Where. You. Come. From." the clerk repeated, angrily this time, in thick Indian accent.

"From London."

The dark man peered suspiciously towards Eric. "What you come here for?"

"Just visiting a friend."

The clerk grunted, and then preoccupied himself once more with his computer. Barely looking at Eric, he handed him back his passport, and with it a big bright red plastic card.

"You go there!" the clerk pointed obscurely to his left.

"Where?"

"There!" the clerk repeated angrily, and scatter-pointed harder, towards a corridor made of airport ropes. Eric walked down the make-shift corridor, holding the red bright make-shift mark of shame, towards a police officer standing behind a small reception podium. "Am I supposed to give this-" Eric started, but the officer already grabbed the card.

"Do you have a phone?" The officer behind the counter asked.

"Yes."

"Turn it off and give it to me."

Eric hesitated, but the officer said "We'll give it back to you later. Do you have more luggage?"

"No."

"Okay, leave your bag here. Sit over there and someone will be with you soon."

"Okay, I just need to call someone. She's waiting for me outside, and I need to tell her I'm being delayed."

"You can't call or text anyone right now," the officer reasserted, "turn off your phone and give it to me."

"May I ask what this is about?" Eric asked while carefully handing over his phone.

"No. Sit and wait patiently."

Eric picked a seat out of the rows of steel benches and looked around. The walls were gray and minimalistic, except for a few badly designed posters. The first and biggest poster read:

We are the officers of homeland security.

With honor and integrity, we will safeguard the American people, our homeland, and our values.

We are the most ethical, most professional security force in the world.

And so on and so forth. Another poster headlined "If you see something, say something", and another one, titled "Can you see her?" tried to instruct in a few points how to detect a victim of human trafficking on your flight.

Around him others sat and waited on their own metal seats, keeping their eyes glued to the floor. No one looked at anything or said anything. Perhaps they were all as tired as he was. Or perhaps they all came to the same conclusion, that it was unwise to be seen associating in a room full of potential terrorists. They were all men, most of them looked middle-eastern. Eric did spot one Korean student, and one Australian man traveling with his daughter, but they didn't wait long. He waited for an hour, perhaps two. He could not be sure without a watch. His mind kept wandering to Lina. Is she still waiting outside? Is she worried, or angry at his disappearance? What is she thinking right now? More than once he got up to ask what is the hold up, but was told sternly to sit back down. Finally, they called him, and led him inside, into a small square room, weakly lighted and cheaply furnished. It had some filing cabinets, a worn-out office desk that supported a heavy old computer screen, and two chairs. In the far corner of the room, stood an

empty table. Eric was instructed to place his bag on that table, to open it without touching anything inside, and to sit down. A hard bulge at the back of his chair was poking him in his back, and the uneven legs of his chair made it too easy to sway. Still he was so tired, that after waiting alone in that office for what seemed like another hour, he managed to nap with his head on the desk.

He opened his eyes to the sound of an officer coming into the room. The officer sat down cheerfully, and leaned forward in his chair. "Sorry to keep you waiting. You speak English, right? Good, good. You probably want out of here, so let's just get started right away, if you don't mind. My name is Officer Brian Anderson, and I'll be reviewing your case. Now, I'm going to ask you a series of questions, and you should provide short, to the point answers. Okay? Your answers will be part of the official deposition, and put to record. Do you understand what I've said to you?"

"Yes." Eric said, though his confusion surpassed his understanding. He rubbed his sore neck.

"Good, let's begin. What is your true and correct name?"

"Eric Khalif."

Anderson began typing. "And you live in Iraq?"

"No, I live in London."

"But you were born in Iraq?"

"Yes, but we left when I was two."

"So, your parents are Iraqi."

"Yes."

This was the first lie Eric told that day. It was a white lie. His parents actually fled from Afghanistan to Iraq due to civil unrest, before finally coming to England with him. He never lied about it before, but he felt it unwise to entice the officer's imagination.

"I see. What city where you born in?"

"Look, I'm a British citizen-"

"Please just answer the question," the Anderson insisted.

"Baghdad..."

"Good. And what is the purpose of your visit, umm, Mr. Khalif?" He mispronounced the name, of course.

"I'm here to meet a friend."

"How do you know this friend? Did he ask you to bring anything with you?"

"She, and no. We met abroad.. Look, do you mind telling me why I'm being detained?"

"Please wait with your questions until after the inquiry is over." Anderson asserted politely.

"I have a right to know what I'm being detained for."

"You don't, actually." Anderson said matter-of-fact, "You're under the jurisdiction of Homeland Security, and we operate under our own set of regulations. Now, I suggest you cooperate, or I can't do anything for you." And then Anderson softened, and said in an understanding, almost cheerful, tone: "Look, I have to follow the script. The sooner we finish the interview, the sooner you can get out of here. So, let's just press on, okay? Good."

The questions kept on coming, and they made no sense to Eric. In a dull voice, the officer asked him about smuggling, illegal immigration, political inclinations and terrorist association. He asked which jobs he held, and what countries he visited, and when. By the end of it Eric found he had developed quite a headache, probably due to his growing hunger and the abrasive blinking of the overhead cyan-hued fluorescent light. When the questions ended, Anderson put on gloves and sifted through Eric's bags for good measure. Then he left the room for another hour or so. At some point, Eric resolved to go and find Anderson, but as he stepped to the corridor a guard who saw him reached for his gun, so Eric went back inside and sat down again. He had no more energy left for conflict. He tried to conjure up a memory of Lina, but her image flickered in his mind along with the flashes of the fluorescent, and indistinct ideas and feelings floated through him without resistance. He woke from his daze again when Anderson came back into the room.

"So, we have reviewed your situation, and we have to refuse your entry."

"What, why?" Eric asked incredulously.

"In plain terms, you fall under the category of the ban."

"What ban?"

"The U.S. has banned nationals of certain countries from entering U.S. soil."

Anderson repeated mechanically. "The executive order took place about... twelve hours ago." he said while checking his wristwatch.

"But I was already on the plane by then!"

"That's unfortunate for you," Anderson said sympathetically.

"And anyway, I'm not Iraqi!"

"Mr. Khalif, this was not my decision to make. There is no point in arguing with me."

"Well, who made the decision? Let me talk to him."

Anderson smiled, as if he was suppressing a chuckle. "That's not how it works. I'm afraid the decision is final. Now, usually an attempt at illegal entry carries a ten-year ban," Anderson paused for gravity, "However, considering that you cooperated fully, and that I believe you didn't purposely intend to enter illegally, my superior allowed me to offer you to withdraw your request to admission instead."

Eric was incredulous. Intend to enter illegally? He bought a plane ticket just like everyone else. "Withdraw my request? What does that mean?"

"You can sign this document here," Anderson explained as he handed him the paper, "which says you retract your request for entry into the United States. That means that instead of banning you, we just cancel your visa. Then you can apply for a new one when you get back home. I mean, when you're allowed to again."

Eric struggled. The document Officer Anderson handed him comprised of many pages full of legalese, and he was too tired and distracted to grasp the full meaning of it.

"Can I call my lawyer and ask for his advice?" Eric asked.

"No calls allowed," Anderson replied, "and make your decision soon. We're closing up."

Well, he didn't really have a lawyer anyway.

After some deliberation, Eric signed over the line that read "Signature of alien", and soon he was given a microwaved army meal which he found to be surprisingly tasty and invigorating.

"So, bad news," Anderson said as he came back into the room, "the earliest flight we could book for your return ticket leaves tomorrow. That means you will have to spend the night in our hostel."

"Can't you just book it with a different company? I'll pay the difference. Or maybe I can sleep in the airport, I've done that before."

"No can do," Anderson replied, "but don't worry, you'll get a good night rest and head back first thing in the morning."

"Okay... I guess," Eric said. The thought of sleep on a comfy bed filled him with warmth.

"You will have to leave your bag here, so make a list of all your belongings," Anderson said and handed him a form. "Make sure to count your cash too."

"I don't think any of the officers here are going to want what I have," Eric joked.

"You'd be surprised," was Anderson's reply.

After they stowed away all his belongings in a designated safe, they led Eric into a hall that hosted about a dozen officers, talking casually and loudly among themselves. When he entered, they became quiet and tense.

"These are your escorting officers," Anderson said, and gestured towards two of them. They appeared to be in their early thirties. The man, Officer Bunker, was tall and bulky, and the woman, Officer Parker, short and stout. The man came to stand in front of Eric and barked: "Turn around and face the wall."

As he turned, confused and offended, he noticed two officers at the far corner had their hand on their holsters for some reason. A rush of adrenaline washed over Eric, but he didn't know why. He faced the wall stiffly.

"Put your hands behind your back and point at the floor."

Eric did so. He got patted down thoroughly, and then he heard a click and felt the cold metal press tight against his wrists. Without even looking, he could feel the tension in the room drop. The show was over, it seemed, and the hall began to empty as the officers resumed their duties.

"You know I'm not a criminal, you don't have to treat me like one", Eric said, but he got no reply.

Officers Porter and Bunker escorted Eric out of Customs and Immigration, back into the public space of the airport. They held him steady from behind, an arm for each. The first thing he looked for was the clock. It's been twelve hours since his plane landed. Lina is probably asleep by now, and who knows what she dreams of. She must have called him and texted him and got no reply. A pang of sadness struck him, followed by anger. He was alert now, sharp, and could take it all in. The large hall around him, the fast and steady pace of the officers escorting him, the way they kept behind him, pushing his back while probing for sudden movements. They paraded him past the same corridor of ropes, and past the same immigration booths, where a long queue of new arrivals were waiting to have their passport inspected. The crowd stared at the dubious procession, enchanted by its novelty, and Eric became acutely aware of how they observed at him tensely. They were afraid. No one has ever been afraid of him before, and now an entire crowd was warily transfixed by his presence. Handcuff a mild-mannered office worker,

place a couple of officers behind him, and suddenly he's a terrorist to everyone's eyes. He smiled to himself bitterly, and held his head a little higher. Infamy can be very satisfying when the heart is filled with indignation. He thought of shouting to the crowd, "This could be you!" but he knew that no one would believe him. Well, why would they? Had he been told so just a few hours ago, he wouldn't have believed it himself.

They went down a spacious industrial elevator, to a faintly lit parking lot just outside the building. When the elevator doors opened, a rush of cold fresh sweet air filled Eric's lungs and he breathed it deeply and appreciatively. He had been breathing recycled air for the past 24 hours. The increase of oxygen and sudden cold sharpened him, and thoughts of escape flashed through his mind. After all, he was already outside, and he could see the starless sky of Seattle, and his escorting officers seemed more distracted now that they weren't under anyone's scrutiny. It was the flight instinct of a captured animal, still there after all these years of civilization. It amused him how strongly his body suggested it to him, he could almost feel himself running on the dark asphalt, cold wind blowing in praise of his courage. Surprisingly, he found solace in these delusions of escape, despite knowing he would never attempt it. Parker showed Eric into the back of the police car, lowered him into the seat with a "watch your head," and announced their departure on the radio. The handcuffs clung tight to Eric's wrists, and already his fingers began to tingle from the lack of blood. When he leaned back, the backseat pressed the them against his back further onto his wrists, and sharp pain shot up his arm.

"Can you handcuff my hands to the front? It's really painful to sit like this, and I've been calm and cooperative."

"Sorry, can't do it," said Officer Bunker, "We gotta follow procedure."

They drove on, away from the planes and the buildings, until they left the airport behind altogether, and took the I-5 southwards.

"Where are we going?" Eric asked.

Officer Bunker dialed up the volume on the car's radio. The easy music of Bobby McFerrin filled the car and drowned out the officers' voices, as they continued their casual conversation. From the back of the car, Eric could peer outside and get a glimpse of normal life in Seattle. Sleepy families in passing cars, half-lit office buildings, and idle passers-by in gas-stations. He kept searching the faces outside, half-hoping to see Lina. It was a silly imaginary game, but nothing about his situation felt real anyway. Meanwhile, the awkward upright posture he had to maintain began to hurt, and every time the car accelerated, he fell back, and the pain in his wrists grew strong enough to make him wince. Occasionally, passengers in passing cars looked at the police car, curious to peek into the world of Law & Order. But they all immediately looked away in apprehension when they saw him looking back. It was daunting at first, being tied up and mistreated while all the happy undisturbed people passed him by in the cold night, unaware of his circumstance, uncaring of his pain. But then it dawned on him, obvious yet elusive: There is always some injustice happening not so far away from him. It's just that usually it happens to someone else.

"Don't worry," sang the radio, "be happy." And then it whistled a tune. Eric complied.

Chapter VI -- The Bed & Breakfast

"For-profit immigrant prison with arguably inhumane business practices in the middle of a petro-chemical hub of Tacoma's tide flat." - 1 star

"Violates human rights." - 1 star

- User reviews of NDC, posted on Google Maps

The police car pulled up to a bleak facility edging on railway tracks. Pale white spotlights beamed through the dark of night and illuminated the gray pavement and the barbed fences. Eric might have guessed he was brought to an industrial factory, if not for a grim stone sign at the entrance that read simply: "NORTHWEST DETENTION CENTER"

They parked by behind a bus, and from it, Eric came to see, prison guards were unloading dozens of men wearing orange. The hands of the orange men were handcuffed at the front, and their legs were shackled by chains. They wobbled from side to side as one by one they descended from the bus, got patted down, and then in small steps disappeared into the large metal doors leading into the building. When the last of them was in, Officer Bunker escorted him out of the car, and with four guards around him, unshackled his handcuffs. Then they escorted him into the building, through the large metal doors, and through a plain corridor into a small admissions hall. The hall contained a simple reception desk, surrounded by blank white walls, and the floor was carpeted by a pale blue polymer, like that of an old

tech laboratory he visited once on a school trip. They marched him on and took him to a tiny, adjacent room.

"Put these on," a guard handed him a package of rough fabrics, "you'll get yours back when you leave."

There was no door, no curtain, no table, but there was a dismantled shower in it and a little wooden bench. Eric turned his back on the hall, and used the private moment to examine his wrists and make sure they were not injured. Then he relieved himself into the drain, meanwhile guards passed behind him and performed their duties. Then he removed his flannel shirt and put on the extra-large, coarse shirt he was given. He took off his leather shoes and cotton socks and his corduroy pants, and put on the coarsely woven pants that were too wide and too loose, put on the itchy wool socks, and the worn-out soft prison shoes, that felt like they were made for bowling alleys. He was now wearing a very faded dark-blue prisoner uniform. He didn't need a mirror to feel its weight. When he was done, they took away his folded clothes for storage, and handed him a bundle of sheets and a blanket, and a plastic bag containing a sandwich and an apple. Then they led him through several metal doors into a confinement room that was about ten meters long. The room's floor was a stony concrete, its walls white, and overhead ranged strips of fluorescent lights. The wall Eric came through was barely wider than its door, and along its three other walls, protruded right-angled benches of cement. The protrusions were continuous, except for the left corner at the far end of the room, where they stopped and a sink and a toilet were placed in clear view of the rest of the room. And on the benches, crowded together all along the walls, sat roughly fifty prisoners in faded dark-blue uniforms, and looked at Eric with keen interest.

Eric scanned the benches for a space to sit, but there was none. All eyes were still fixed on him, as if in expectation. Perhaps looking for weakness? He felt pressured into action, so he began to cross the room deliberately, and everyone's attention followed him as he did so. As he passed the inmates, he allowed himself short glances, and found that they all appeared South American. He could not read their foreign countenance, so he assumed the worst. He kept his head tall, and his face blank, and his gait steady, and did his best to hide his agitation. He reached the end of the room, and as he still could not find a place to sit, he stood himself with his back against the farthest corner, and tried to appear confident.

"Do you want to sit?" asked a man on his right side, in a Mexican accent. Eric looked down, and saw the man shifting away to clear space. His manner was polite enough. Maybe even a bit eager, Eric thought, but he could not refuse and remain the only person standing in the room.

He sat down cautiously. The man on his right said a few urging words in Spanish, and his fellow inmates shifted away to make room.

"What is your name?" the man inquired.

"Eric."

"I'm Miguel."

"Pleasure." Eric said formally, avoiding eye contact. He was reluctant to interact and expose himself any more than he had to.

"What are you here for?" Miguel continued. Everyone was still looking.

"Nothing."

"Qué suerte! We too are all here for nothing."

Suppressed chuckles sounded across the room.

"Tell me, Eric," said Miguel, with his eyes searching, "do you like Mexicans?"

Eric tensed. He wanted him to sod off. "Yeah, sure." he said as laconically as possible.

"Of course, what's not to like?"

A few laughed.

"And," Miguel continued suggestively, "do you like men?"

The room was quiet. Eric said nothing, did nothing. He kept Miguel in his periphery and let the adrenaline flow through him again, and the anger to rush to his head. Two or three critical hits is all you need to disarm a person, and that might be enough to deter the others. One could hope. Beneath his over-sized pale clothes Eric flexed his muscles, waiting to react. The silence and tension stretched for several long seconds, and suddenly the entire room erupted in loud, roaring laughter.

Soon the laughter died down and was replaced by casual, genial chatter between the inmates. It was easy for Eric to sense that he was just a jestful interlude, in an otherwise long and boring night. He was still sitting red and quiet, but he was more embarrassed than angry. He was fidgeting, so he took out the apple and ate it to its core. Then he began to unwrap the sandwich, but it was tough to the touch, and it emanated a strange odor, so he wrapped it back. A nearby inmate, he noticed, was looking at it hungrily.

"Do you want it?" Eric asked, and handed it to him. The prisoner looked at the sandwich, and then at Eric, and then reached out for it hesitantly. Only when he

took hold of it, he was convinced it was not a hoax, and he let himself smile widely.

"Gracias." he said meekly, and then devoured the foul sandwich in three bites.

"De nada." Eric remembered enough to answer. That seemed to do the trick, and as if by magic, the atmosphere of the room changed. Eric realized that the other inmates were worried about him just as much as he was about them.

"Sorry about before," Miguel turned to him, "we were just having fun with you. But really, you should have seen your face! Hey, let me introduce you. These are my friends, Manuel, Javier, Toro, and Miguel, but we call him Mickey." And each at his turn smiled rather cheerfully for a prisoner and reached out to shake Eric's hand.

"Where are you from?" Miguel asked.

"I live in London," Eric said. Ahs and Oohs sounded around the room.

"Ah, beautiful women in London," Miguel said with a wide confident grin on his face.

"Oh, you've been?"

"No, but I've seen movies." Miguel said, without a shred of irony to his voice.

Soon enough, to his relief, Eric was no longer at the center of attention. The inmates were chatting in groups and the room became lively with conversation and laughter. He sat quietly on the concrete bench and observed their interactions. They spoke gently and kindly to each other, as if they were old friends, and even though he could not understand a word of their Spanish, it put him in a better

mood. Miguel did not sit or stand idly. Like a politician at a fundraiser, he was making the rounds, and in every group, he was greeted with enthusiasm and farewelled in humor. Finally, he returned and sat next to Eric. "So," he spoke gently, leaning in, "what are you in here for?"

Eric, no longer defensive, told him about Lina, the interrogation and the travel ban.

"Those bastards," Miguel concluded, and then shared his own story. It turns out Miguel, for all his hidden talents, was a garden landscaper. He said it with a surprising amount of pride, considering he chose this line of work only because it was relatively clean and he could do it off the books. He lived in Seattle for eight years. One day his apartment got raided, and of course, he had no papers. He thinks one of his competitors tipped Immigration. He has a family in the States, a wife and two kids. That's another thing you can do off the books. Naturally, they are legal, so they will stay in Seattle. He hopes he will get to see them again soon. Eric didn't ask how. He figured it was impolite to question wishful thinking. Instead he asked about Miguel's friends. Though Miguel must have met them only very recently, he knew their backstories. They had different jobs, and lived in different places for different amount of times, but they all had the same story: They came to the U.S. to find better lives, they worked for cheap, they had family and friends, and then they got caught. Some of them lived in the states for over a decade. Manuel lived there for over twenty years.

"Wow, that's a lot! What is he going to do now?" Eric asked

"This isn't his first dance, he will find his way back. He is like La Cucaracha" Miguel shouted at Manuel, and Manuel replied with a big round belly laugh.

Their conversation was cut short when the door opened, and everyone's attention turned to the guard that entered the room.

"Does anyone here speak English?" the guard queried the room. Everyone looked at Miguel, some even pointed fingers. "Anyone else?" the guard pleaded, but no one volunteered. So the guard called Miguel over and began his speech.

"Welcome to Northwest Detention Center" the guard began festively, obviously pleased with himself, and paused so Miguel could translate to Spanish.

"Some of you, like Miguel here, have been here before. But for those who are here for the first time, I will explain, so pay close attention.

"We will soon begin processing you. When the time comes, we will call your name, and you will come over and do as we say in an orderly fashion. If you do as you're told, we can be done by tomorrow, and we will move you to the permanent residence, which is a lot more accommodating." He gave a long pause, waited for Miguel to finish his translation, and then continued: "Some of you won't see a judge for two weeks, maybe more, so I suggest you make yourself comfortable here. Play by the rules and don't make a fuss, or we'll have to put you in isolation. Trust me, you don't want that. I will now go over a list of rules," the guard solemnly continued his inconsequential speech, and Eric tuned out. None of it really pertained to him. But, his fellow inmates didn't have that luxury. They listened to every word, some even asked questions. For Eric, it was a visit backstage. For them it was a reality.

When the speech was over, a group of inmates were called out of the room for processing. Those that remained began to realize their fatigue, and one by one they spread their sheets on the floor and dozed off. Eric could not bring himself to sleep just yet, and he was glad to see Miguel give no such indications either. He came to sit next to him on the stone bench, and asked him about the men wearing orange.

"Orange is for medium-risk," Miguel said, "maybe they steal or even punch someone. I don't like them. Blue is low-risk, misdemeanors. Usually it is papers and visas."

"They keep you here for two weeks just because you don't have a visa?"

"Two weeks?" Miguel laughed. "Usually it takes months."

"No wonder," a nearby inmate interjected. It was Javier, who was quiet the whole evening, but now spoke with confidence and eloquence. "There are only three judges assigned to the entire facility, which hosts sixteen hundred prisoners."

Eric couldn't quite make that out. "But that makes no sense," he said.

"Oh, but it does," Javier said with a sarcastic smile. "This detention center is owned by GEO, a private corporation. For each one of us, the government pays GEO a sum of 150\$ a day, and of it we, the prisoners, receive exactly 1\$ a day for taking care of the cooking, cleaning, and maintenance of the facility. So that's a 149\$ profit times 1600 each day, minus salaries for the guards of course, and a minus a bit more to buy politicians. Well, that still amounts to a lot of profit." he chuckled bitterly and concluded: "This is not a prison, my friend, this is a business, and we are the merchandise. They need us here."

Javier was a professor of history, back when he lived in Sao Paulo. Twelve years ago he flew to Seattle to give a lecture on the colonization of South America, and there he met his future wife. He never left. She herself was staying on a green card, so he applied for a student visa and began to study economics. He spent the following years alternating between H-1B and student visas, teaching and consulting. They had two children, and led a quiet and happy life. But this

morning, as he was getting ready to take his daughter to school, ICE agents came to his home and arrested him right there on his front porch. They informed him that he forgot to maintain his work permit. He claimed he didn't. They said he can tell it to the judge.

"You might say I'm the exception," Javier said as he concluded his story, "but if you actually look at the numbers, immigrants are a net profit for the U.S. economy. Billions in taxes. These make-shift private jails, that farm humans for government money, like the one we're in right now, they harm the common good of everyone, for the profit of the few."

"So you're saying," Eric asked incredulously, "that this whole detention system exists just to make a profit?"

"Don't be so surprised," Javier reproached him casually. "That's how this country was built. About four of every five of your English countrymen immigrated to America as indentured servants. That usually meant a seven-year period of slavery. Not always entered voluntarily, mind you. Approximately sixty thousand of them were transported from jails as a substitute for their prison sentence. That's a lot of Jean Valjeans, if you don't mind me saying. And I don't have to tell you about the practice of real, life-long slavery, right?"

Eric shifted uncomfortably.

"Anyway, all of that is illegal now, of course." he concluded, "You have to be much subtler nowadays."

The grim conversation reminded Eric of just how tired he was. He looked at the bundle he was given. It contained two white sheets, and one army blanket.

"Don't let the blanket touch you," Miguel told him, "it's fertile ground for Scabies."

Eric watched Miguel set up his sheets, and imitated his method. He spread the blanket on the ground, and then spread the two sheets on top of it, to create two layers of separation. Then he wrapped himself inside, so only the sheets touched him.

He laid on his back and felt the hard floor press against his him. He put his arm over his eyes to protect them from the pale-white ceiling lights. He was asleep within the minute.

Chapter V -- Check-out

"The future belongs to those who believe in the beauty of their dreams."

- Eleanor Roosevelt

One the inmates woke him. Cut him off in the middle of a dream. but he could no longer remember anything about it. Just that it was gray. His eyes felt heavy. He couldn't have slept more than a couple of hours. They already called his name.

"Hey man," he sleepily rose and approached the clipboard-holding guard, "Just let me sleep. I'm out of here by morning anyway."

"Everybody gets processed," the guard said stiffly, and hurried the others along. Sighing internally, Eric followed the queue out, through several halls into a narrow corridor, where he stood sleepily and advanced sporadically, waiting for his turn. He heard footsteps coming behind him, and a saw column of inmates wearing orange advancing past, just an arm's reach away. They were handcuffed, and there was something hard and wild in their faces. His heart rate paced and he felt himself tensing. Nervous thoughts passed through his mind. One of them, bald and stout, looked at Eric as he passed. To Eric's surprise, he seemed tame, and curious.

"Eyes ahead! Ojos avante!" a guard barked at the passing inmate, and suddenly Eric saw a different image. He saw himself marching indignantly down the barren corridor in an orange jumpsuit, bound by unjust and uncaring forces. Indeed, he knew nothing of these men in orange, and yet he reacted just as the airport crowd

did to him. In the song of authority there is always the same chorus: Fear the other, and get in line.

It seemed to Eric that the guards acted somewhat respectfully towards him, as if they were putting on a show. They were vulgar and disdainful towards the other detainees. With him, they toned it down. Perhaps it was his manner, or the way he looked, or how he spoke up, or his command of the English language. Most probably, he thought, it was because he was only placed there for one night. That put him in a different class, quite literally.

After a long wait in line, it was his turn, and he was brought to see a doctor. He seemed to be in his twenties, keen and kind. He asked Eric about his medical history, severe allergies, drug use. Then he asked how is he coping, and does he need anything at all.

"I don't suppose you have a phone on you?"

The doctor laughed politely, and then took an x-ray of Eric's chest cavity.

"Sometimes people panic and swallow their drugs rather than get caught with them," he explained as he was operating the machine. "That's a ticking time bomb."

Eric wondered about him. He seemed intelligent, and energetic.

"I hope I won't offend you," Eric said cautiously, "but I feel like you could land a better gig than this place."

The doctor wasn't taken aback. "Oh, I have a real job, with real pay. I just come here once a week. You know, I try to do a little good where it's needed the most."

He left the Doctors office and was led into an office room, where a fat officer with a hefty mustache sat, half hidden behind a wide desk. He took his fingerprints and

asked him to fill some forms. The officer joked with him and cajoled him cheerfully. Eric found it condescending. When he finished filling the forms, Eric took a post-it note and wrote his email on it.

"What's that?" The officer leaned over the desk to see.

"It's just my email. I want to give it to Miguel."

At the mention of Miguel's name, the guard perked up. He took the piece of paper, examined it closely, and began to laugh out loud. "So Miguel's been making new friends now, has he? Ha-ha-ha. Well, I'm sorry to tell you, but he won't be emailing nobody anytime soon. Not from where he's going to."

"Oh? Where is he going to?" Eric asked.

The guard suddenly turned serious. "That's none of your business."

"Well, I want to give it to him anyway, if you don't mind."

The fat officer held on to the note. "I'll make sure he gets it," he said derisively.

Eric was brought back to the same overcrowded wait room, where the pale fluorescent light shone on dozens of men, sleeping scattered on the hard, stony floor in rough faded-blue uniforms, surrounded by cement benches and a stained metal toilet. He regarded them amicably. These were men who came to a foreign land, overcame the unfamiliarity of language and culture, and found work and friends. Despite all their hurdles, they thrived, and earned enough to support a family. And then one day, they were taken away from their life, away from their family and friends, and brought to this crowded little cell. How can a person be illegal? The more Eric thought about it, the less it made sense. They will spend weeks if not months in this industrial detention, where their prospects are bleak while they stay, and still bleaker when it is time for them to leave. He looked at

them, sleeping peacefully, and remembered the agreeableness and simple felicity they showed when they were awake. He wondered if it is in their nature to be so submissive. Or perhaps, they just knew and accepted the rules of the game, and he was witnessing an awe-inspiring mass display of stoicism. One thing for sure, these people were not devious conspirators, they were not harbingers of social decay. They were modern slaves, helpless pawns in a vast game of monopoly. These thoughts and more swirled lazily through his head as he fell back to sleep.

Loud metal bangs woke him up. It was morning, and a self-amused guard loudly proclaimed "Buenas dias" and clanged his stick against the metal door of the room. Eric slept reasonably well, considering the situation. He ignored the quiet tumult that began around him, and remained laying on the rough ground for a short minute, waiting to rouse. Then he got up, quickly rolled his sheets and blankets the way they were given to him, and followed the column of detainees marching out of confinement. The guards collected the linens and led the column down the corridor. Eric was told to stay.

"Goodbye, good luck!" Miguel called out from the column, to the shushing of the guards, and even Javier waved back. Good luck to me! How ironic, he thought. They led him into a nearby hall, where he was given a plastic tray, and was shown to a table where a few detainees he didn't know were already eating. He sat down, grabbed the plastic fork, and observed his plate. It contained canned corn, a slice of stale bread, and pale lumpy porridge. How horrible, Eric thought, this is just like airport food. He ate what he could, forced himself to chew and swallow. He knew he needed the energy. The other detainees, on the other hand, ate it all quickly and without scruples.

"Te gusta?" Eric asked one of them.

The detainee grimaced. "Es fatal", he replied between bites, "pero tengo hambre." He cleaned his plate, and then gladly accepted Eric's leftovers.

Breakfast was over within ten minutes, and Eric was led into another confinement room. It was much like the one he slept in, but this one was empty. They kept him there alone for a few hours. It felt longer. With no one to talk to, and nothing to read or watch, Eric was more agitated than he expected to be. He whistled to himself, sang, paced up and down the room, studied the cracks in the walls, and occasionally peered out of the tiny square window in the door into the empty outer hall. None of it entertained him for long, and he started to grow more and more uncomfortable. The emptiness of the room oppressed him, and he felt dark thoughts looming at the edge of his mind. "Bad place to lose it," he told himself, and forced himself to conjure a nice memory. Naturally, Barcelona came to mind. It was already late at night, and they've been walking for hours, just him and Lina. No one else existed. The air was cool and sharp, the moon was full and bright, and lovestruck crickets hummed softly in the distance. They passed an impressively huge mansion, and then found themselves next to a beautiful garden. It had tall sturdy trees, of the sort that felt older than nations, and it had batches of delicate flowers strewn about. The radiant colors of the flowers penetrated the darkness, and their sweet scent carried over by the night's mist beyond the fence that isolated the garden and the mansion from the outside world. They climbed the fence, snickering joyfully as they did so. There is something about infatuation that arouses us to break the boundaries of society. Once inside, they found a healthy patch of grass under a flowering old tree, and laid down to watch the stars. Her head rested on his chest, their hands embraced, and they felt each others' warmth, and tuned-in to the rhythm of each other's heartbeats.

"I feel like I'm in a movie," she spoke gently, "and yet, it feels more real than real life."

"It does feel that way," he agreed, but there was refrain in his voice. They remained silent, listening to each other's minute movements.

"We will remember it, that makes it real." she said.

Eric didn't reply. He has already learned by then that memories are never real enough.

When they woke up the sun was peeking over the horizon, painting the sky a crimson-blue gradient, and the birds were chirping energetically. They were cold, heavy from sleep, half wet from dew, and their limbs felt stiff. They didn't mind it. They snuck quietly out of the garden the same way they came in, and carefully climbed over the hedges and the decorative fence. When they were back on the street, walking arm in arm, Lina glanced back and said: "It's a shame that such a beautiful garden has to be so lonely all the time."

A sudden clang brought him back to reality. It was the door, opening. Two guards led him into the main hall, and gave him back his cloths. As he was shedding the rough fabrics and putting on his old self, he took the chance to reflect and take inventory. He was tired, and stiff; he lost a lot of money on this unrealised vacation; and in the end, he didn't get the girl. Who knows if he'll ever get to see her again. And still, despite that and everything he's been through in the past couple of days, he couldn't quite manage to feel sorry for himself. He always knew it superficially, but what he'd seen made it undeniable, and impossible to forget: He was one of the lucky few.

It manifested to him, as his thoughts wandered on, that there are two kinds of evil in this world. The first evil is direct, brought on by all sorts of maniacs and

opportunists. They occupy all walks of life; businessmen and criminals, terrorists and presidents. They stand out, but they are the minority. The second evil, and the far more common one of the two, just sort of happens all by itself. At least, so might say all the ordinary men, who are just doing their jobs. Sadly, it is out of our control, might say all those who see a loose thread but are too scared to pull it. If we don't do it, someone else will, say those who put themselves before all others. And so, evil happens all by itself, and no one is ever to blame.

It occurred to him that some of the people he met on this trip were kind, and some were mean. But none of them tried to wrong him personally. Not the guards, not the inquisitors, not the legislators. No, the faults of every system are buried in the empty spaces between the lines. Those dark corners that nobody sees, and nobody wants to talk about. In that darkness lurks the root of all evil, either too high or too low for anybody's paygrade.

Sullen but glad to leave, Eric presented himself to the guards, and they led him, pushing him from behind, through the white monotonous corridors and the blue unclean floor. To his surprise, Officer Bunker and Officer Parker were waiting for him there, having idle conversation. They seemed tired, but easier than last night.

"Working hard, eh?" Eric grinned. He could relax now that the worst was behind him. And as crazy as it sounds, he was glad to see a familiar face.

"Hands behind your back," Bunker said, "you know the drill."

Eric frowned. "Any chance you can tie them to my front this time?"

"Sorry, kid," Officer Bunker said, with regret in his voice, "I wish I could."

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