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The Spirit of 76

AFTER THE REVOLUTION, Abel Zimmer feared he would be arrested. So, he put on weight, grew a beard and had his wardrobe downgraded. Abel Zimmer was modeled on a real citizen. As he stepped from the museum, the streets were vibrant, full of free men and women; and in the buzz of the avenue, he perceived the influence of the Revolution. Abel crossed Presidents' Plaza. On the steps of the National Library, a man was giving a speech. *We New Americans seek not to recreate church or state, but to awaken our conscience to a new ethical principle--of nonreligious and nonlegal community!* Abel moved through a crowd of arms and signs and stopped at a bus stop.

He had been on a train when he conceived the idea of a stolen identity, a life he could assume when rebellion came to town. It had been a year since the government fell. In that time, Abel's voice took shape; so that as he boarded the bus, he was aware of re-conditioned patterns in his psyche. He passed his ID card under the reader, and his face flashed on the screen. He felt as constrained as a man in prison. More so. As a convict he imagined speaking with plain, blunt speech. He might have sent messages home and kept an uncensored diary. In the closeness of the bus, something in his face betrayed his thoughts. His mouth was turned down too much. Placards on the bus called for *Revolt against militarism and nationalism; For anarchism and free ideas.*

To his downtown home he was commuting in the opposite direction from his old house in a suburb of Yorktown. He had enjoyed re-arriving home from work each day to his family. He had a large, clean house, tended by a gardener, a housekeeper, and a chef. Now Abel worked a split shift as a guard at the museum. He wore an unfriendly expression on the job. The interior lights of the bus came on. He motioned to a woman with a yellow purse to take a seat. Having sat, she turned her face away from him. He chewed on the fact that he would have to get arrested to see Judith again.

He had been disloyal to his wife by building a double-life, which he justified by his ties to the state, his interest in protecting official confidences. Abel did not allow himself to think of his wife; most of the time her name was repressed. His eye roamed the aisle, trying to identify the Intelligence officer on board. Last week, he witnessed a man being handcuffed and taken from the bus into a waiting van. What was the facility they took the ex-President's men for questioning? He blocked it from consciousness. It was not a name his new self would have known.

As more passengers boarded the bus, Abel felt his skin tighten. This was an effect of his re-conditioning, which, if he were arrested, would save him. He became docile and impenetrable, his face unreadable. Abel entered a warped sense of time. Noises from the bus moved through a gelid pool in his head. It was an undetectable defense mechanism. The same icy state subsisted in the museum, among the mass of works and tourists. Abel pulled the wire at Columbus and King. The bus slowed. *It slows for me*, he thought. He passed from the bus. A piece of his old self, keeping to nooks and crannies, would meet Abel at moments, would tinker with him

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by supplying anecdotes, dreams, and suggestions. He was not walking down the street, but along mental channels. It seemed he was in a tunnel. Overhead, he heard a marching of feet. He beheld himself in an ant's body. Another insect came forward bearing a grain of sugar. When Abel's ego re-emerged, he was outside the apartment with his hand on the knob. He slid his card across the lock, and the doorknob clicked.

A daybed, which dominated the room, was occupied by a sleeping individual. Abel regarded the table, with its drugs, dried fruit, pretzels, prune juice, scissors, and notepad. He set his ID down. He stood at the man's side. They shared a string of traits. His beard was growing, and he was gaining weight. Abel had power over this man, whom he kept in a state of dependency. The bed's occupant opened an eye. It moved to and fro and found his keeper.

G-g-good m-m-mornin, b-b-boss, the man stammered.

It is evening, Abel, Abel responded.

He paused.

Abel leaned into the man and placed a pill in his mouth. After swallowing, the man's eye mellowed. Abel turned to the notepad and reviewed the figures there. He considered his predicament. The original Abel Zimmer was starting to deteriorate. The new Abel was faced with a decision. The man in bed would die soon. If the body was discovered, a death certificate would rob Abel of his disguise. On the other hand, he could dispose of the corpse and continue in this form forever. He emptied the commode. It had been a profound communion, listening to the drugged Zimmer retell his experience. Now the subject was emptied out. Abel looked at the man in the bed looking back at him and felt sorry for taking his life. The act had been deeply considered. He appreciated the effect of the drug, especially the silvermine the psyche slowly offered. Abel was able to incorporate this man's memories by syncing with him at a lower dose. He read another page of the pad. The figures predicted a dimming of cognition, then cardiac arrest. Abel would have to act soon.

Abel heard his old self utter this was Zimmer's final night. His mind flashed on a feast. He decided to make Zimmer his last meal, to symbolize their year of symbiosis. He left the bed, walked to the kitchen, and opened a cupboard. His hand sought a can of stew. He was reminded of supping with Judith. Once, they drove to Canterbury and were snowed in for two days. He loved the anonymity of the town amid the blizzard. *Can I recreate the past?* he wondered. With Zimmer he had, they'd gone back in time, and he realized he would miss the man. Abel knew his story and was able to finish his sentences. When the stew bubbled, he ladled two bowls, dividing the meat in half. He sensed the other man's hunger. Abel wished to spend this night as his true self, breaking bread with the dying man. He would explain his rationale; at some level the other would understand. He placed both bowls on a tray and, with sudden sentiment, decided to light two candles. Abel passed the night-blackened window, its reflection giving a distorted view of his head.

He passed from the kitchen, bearing the tray.

When he returned to the room, Abel Zimmer was gone. How had the

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narcotized man managed to stand? He was not in bed, nor beside it. Abel set the tray down and walked into the hall. His heart thumped. On the floor were spots, which looked like ink, which led to a door, which Abel opened. He thought he saw a corpse in the dark. His hand reached for the switch. The room filled with light. The figure on the floor faded and left behind an auric outline. Abel frowned; his brow knitted. There was an error in the experiment. If Zimmer had been hiding his resistance to the drug, then a piece of him remained autonomous, untouched by hypnosis. Returning to the bedside, he noticed something else was missing. Nervously, he lifted items from the table. He checked under the bed. He opened the door and gazed in two directions.

He cursed.

Zimmer had vanished with Abel's ID.

Zimmer could be anywhere. Abel was incensed, but he needed to be cerebral, even if it meant losing time. Sounds of the upstairs family grew pronounced, with their voices and footsteps going back and forth. Zimmer had gone forth from the building, and sooner or later his unusual card activity would signal Intelligence. Ideally, Zimmer would return on his own. He'd left the pills. His escape may have been an impulse, unplanned. Abel thought about where a man with no friends might go.

Abel shaved his beard.