

Two Way Mirror

-- K.

Dinner at Alpha-60 was not awesome, overpriced and trying way too hard: Holograms of gamma ray bursts on the stall doors in the bathroom, booths covered in carbon fiber and the words 'YOU ARE HERE' in 10 ft. Bauhaus 93 rolling over most of three walls.

Some joker from Spain claims to be the first to serve baby eels on hot ice cream. Good for him. I couldn't eat a thing. Used to have to cross the city to eat pricey freaky food when I lived here, now it's a bus stop away.

Smoke down the ill stomach on the rooftop of the Eden. Kicking back on a suede daybed, I listen to the new 'Busy P.' and watch a silent Mya, 50 feet tall now, stretched out before me in an American Apparel swimsuit, clinging, with a fuck me grin, to the brick wall across the street, the words 'Not Ray's' pushing through her back on the brick.

Hunter, this New Vic Davy dumped on us after dinner, nearly shits his sweater vest when he makes the connection, 'But the 'D-Man' told me you were some kind of playwright!' he protests. 'I am,' Mya replies, unapologetic, whatever and Hunter turns his back on the ad.

He changes the subject to the dropping Dow Jones, the sub prime mortgage 'fiasco'... 'Things better change. They have to!' He howls at random passersby.

... A joint appears between my lips. I puff and offer it to Hunter just to hear his insides turn. Emily, the wifey, waves the smoke from her face and beams when she tells us about the condo they just bought on the park, 'for just under a million two.'

'Used to be a house of ill repute,' Hunter muses. Emily boasts that they've been together forever, only slept with each other, and I hear their marriage collapsing like a bridge in Minneapolis when they find out you have to screw some before you find you and that person you thought was life was just a passing moment.

High legs carry me to the street. My mind's in a grip. Mya kisses my ear. I hear jackhammers. Seeing streets being fixed is a shock, but according to the valet manager, some potholes last less than a week now.

The Corncob Man hollers and the New Vics snicker. I hear Hunter whisper 'Gentrified?' I buy a cob with cream cheese and chili pepper to pack the gap where the eels would've been.

A slap on the back and a 'hey hey!' It's Porkchop, dreads poking out of a strategically cut beret. He's wearing a singlet and high water plaid pants. I holler his name and he fives me.

The New Vic's eyes widen and I force them into an avoidable introduction. Porkchop

throws out his pigment coated hand and Hunter eyes it.

‘Don’t worry, it’s dry,’ He tells him and Hunter takes it weakly and wipes it on his pants when Porkchop walks backwards into traffic.

‘Where to?’ Mya asks. A cabbie wails on his horn. Porkchop says, ‘Little Bar now. Spinning in 10,’ pushes into the night and we follow.

I appear in the back cooler of Little Bar where a mustached leather man with a baggie’s making the cold more bearable for a potpourri of chemical craving strangers who need to bleed themselves of surplus words: ‘Ghettoized -- Ghetto birds -- Drive By -- Bullet holes -- Rent-controlled -- Painting sold -- Piñatas -- Head shops -- Hustlers -- Late night basketball with bangers in the park -- Roommate wanted -- laundry on site -- Students, painters, poets, musicians -- Up 'n' coming -- Studios -- Rehearsal spaces -- No heat but... hot right now -- Bohemian -- the deli where we used to go -- little cafes -- Conversations like we’re having now -- dark bars -- door clubs -- rooftops -- music scene -- the scent of spicy foreign foods carried through the air -- A boutique with ‘cute stuff’ -- The gallery -- The restaurant -- The ‘Times’ piece -- Crime’s down -- Time’s up -- Over -- So over -- the wig shop closed too -- Mixed use -- Condos -- Co-ops -- Babies -- Strollers -- Dogs -- Frisbees -- the needle park’s a dog park -- Used to be you could -- I remember when -- And the Tarot actually predicted the coming of ‘The Real World.’

‘Boring.’

‘So boring,’ somebody says.

‘That’s why I moved to the eastside,’ Mya slurs behind me.

‘Is it safe?’

‘Safe enough,’ she replies, Vodka certain, and everybody stops and tries not to stare at the leather man’s pants where he stashed the baggie, hot breath now the only proof of life between us.

Aside from the hum of the cooler, the only sound I think I hear is that of my racing heart straining from vascular constriction until finally a big-eyed girl in a red beanie who looks like she's never had to ask for anything before in her life does everything but beg for another bump.

The leather man lies, says he’s out and the bar door locks behind me. Mya's stumbling from the lemon drops. I grab a Times -- A text... ‘After hours?’ Fuck no. Need A/C and weed to trim the edge.

The cab lights off but he'll take us and drops us and I'm standing on Atlantic outside Mya's new loft. My phone’s in the cab, now long gone and I’m out of money, so is Mya. With Mya’s I-phone I dial Checker and promise the driver 20 bucks to bring it back. I can

see the letters A-T-M glowing red a block south, squeezed between Lotto and Newport signs.

Between me and the money is 100 yards of near total darkness. The streetlights are out and every house is abandoned. The moon is hidden. The sidewalk I can see is covered in trash. It's still 90 degrees out. Roaches form clumps on discarded food and sweet spots on the cement.

If I was any higher, I might be stupid enough to score here, but this is no place for anybody at 4:30 in the morning. Mya grew up four blocks over and doesn't walk down this street at noon without Biggie on a long leash. Safe enough... I kick through trash and step on a pipe -- crack it with my Chuck.

I scan the darkness and find flickers like fireflies; baseheads huddled in gangways, on porch steps. Through a shattered family room window I spot shadows arguing. I hear a flint -- spin -- find nothing. My mind's playing tricks; can't tell if it's the booze, the weed or the blow.

I hear the streetlights on Pacific before I'm taken by the sick greenish glow. The buzz is a welcome sound. It brings to light to the street, the scene...

A brown 70's caddy rolls by slow, '50' booms...

'There's nowhere to run to when death becomes you
Some say your soul may burn in the flame...'

A big girl in braids laughs from the passenger's seat as she spots me waiting to cross. The kick slaps off brick buildings as the Caddy disappears to my right. To my left, a boney twig in gold hot pants and wig bends over a lowered Nissan negotiating.

A thug in white t-shirt and jeans holds up the wall of the convenience store. I cross for him. A beat blue Blazer guns it from the corner, blocks my path. The thug rolls to it, hands the driver two balloons, takes some cash. He turns to me, nods to see if I need any, and I slip past, a phantom.

Inside the store, above the head of the bearded checkout guy, replayed footage of 9/11 plays on the 13 inch TV that's suspended from the ceiling behind bullet proof glass. Two black planes hit the gray towers again and again. It's the anniversary.

A buggy kid in gold fronts and a bleached-out Knicks tank wants Lights. The checkout guy waves him off. The buggy kid's beanpole buddy jacks two orange Slices from the back fridge. I see nothing.

The kids leave talking shit. I hit the ATM and watch the beanpole shove a passing drunk down onto the sidewalk. He laughs. I laugh but not because it's funny. Whatever got me here is starting to wear off.

The ATM beeps. I snatch my money and head for the door. The checkout chuckles to himself, sure I'm there grabbing cash for rocks.

Back on Pacific a pretty girl in pigtails, no more than 17, hops into a minivan with a middle-aged dude in an MTA cap. Looks like he just got off work. I head back the way I came, into the shadows. I'm sober as shit now and realize I'm a summer's rent on legs; phone, Ipod, wallet.

'Go ahead, baby, jinglin' baby.
Go ahead baby, jinglin' baby.'

Can't get it out of my head. Porkchop must've put it there -- A big rat darts out from the inside of a McDonald's bag and misses my foot by an inch.

'Fuck!' I hop back and catch my breath.

Out of the corner of my eye -- a flash -- movement. A big dude pops up from behind a car 20 feet from me. He's charging me -- Bolts between cars -- Reaches for a pistol his waistband -- I rush and swing for his bulging bloodshot eyes. I catch the side of his head as he tackles me, head down, football-style. I tabletop -- land on my spine -- elbows -- head.

'Get off me motherfucker!' I howl, voice cracking.

He reaches for the dropped piece and I wrestle his head with my left arm -- swing and connect somewhere. He slams my skull on the cement.

'Yo dead, motherfucker!' He growls at me. 'Yo dead!' I twist and scramble to my feet -- He grabs my leg -- holds on -- I sprint -- left shoe still in his hands.

I run chest first down the center of the street waiting for the bullets in my back. I can see Mya and Biggie saturated in the security lights on the front of her building. She's squinting, blocking the light with her hand. I'm hauling ass.

'He's got a gun! He's got a fucking gun!' Mya stands frozen. Biggie starts to bark.

'Get inside,' I tell her. She stays. I run into the path of a black Chevy pickup. It squeals to a stop. I'm dripping sweat. My shirt's covered in blood. I've got road rash down my back, side and arms. There's a bullet size hole in my elbow gushing red.

'Oh my God, are you shot?!' Mya cries. The tatted-up driver of the pickup hops out onto the street. 'You alright, man?'

I check myself, catch my breath. 'I'm alright.' The driver grabs paper towels from his truck.

‘I saw you. Didn’t see him,’ the driver tells me. ‘Which way did he go?’

‘That way,’ I nod back to the darkened block. ‘He was on the ground when I left him.’

‘He try to jack you?’

‘Yeah.’

‘Call the police,’ the driver tells Mya.

‘What he look like?’ the driver asks.

‘6’1, 6’2”, tight curls, big blue t-shirt, crack eyes.’

‘You wanna go? I’ll drive you back.’ the driver looks to me, ready.

‘Yeah, let’s go.’

‘He’s got a gun,’ Mya yells at me as I climb in the truck.

‘Go in the house. We’ll be back in a minute,’ I tell her.

We turn back up the pitch black block, rolling slowly.

‘Unless he hopped on a train, he’s still here,’ the driver says.

‘Fucker came out of nowhere,’ I tell the driver.

‘Fuckin’ crackheads are everywhere.’

‘Thanks for stopping, man.’

‘Don’t worry about it. I live here for twenty years, man, and now they’re starting to put up all these nice buildings and shit, but it feels like people are just getting crazier. People are fuckin’ insane, man. That him?’

The driver points past me, to the sidewalk on the Pacific end. It’s him, at least it looks like him, but now he’s got a bike, a ten speed. He’s sweating, looking pissed-off. We slow and I lock eyes with him. He stares right back. The fucker’s pumped.

‘What’s up?’ I ask, coolly, nod. He dumps the bike against some cars.

‘You need somethin’?’ He dog eyes me, jaw tight.

‘That him?’ the driver whispers.

‘Yo, you got a problem, motherfucker?’ He steps to the truck, ready to do it again. My heart rattles against my ribs. I can’t see his hands.

‘Drive,’ I tell the driver.

‘You sure?’

‘Yeah. Just go,’ I tell him, nowhere near sure.

The driver takes his hand from the .38 snub that’s appeared on the seat between us -- Puts it on the wheel and pulls away, disappointed. ‘So was that him or what?’ the driver pushes.

‘Fuck! I thought it was, but now I’m all fucked up ‘cause he didn’t have the bike before.’

‘That’s the guy you described,’ the driver reminds me.

‘I know. I know. I don’t know. I see him. It’s him. But the fuckin’ bike, and then I freak ‘caus I’m thinkin’ about the gun.’

The driver looks over to me, all ice. ‘Don’t worry about the gun,’ he says. ‘Just chill. We’ll go around the block again.’

The driver rounds the block. It’s a ghost town now. No heads. Not a flame. Two squad cars fly past, lights off. We turn back onto Atlantic. Two more squads are parked in front of Mya’s. A wiry cop talks to her. A stocky cop with a goatee pets Biggie. I get out of the truck.

The cops turn. The stocky cop asks, ‘you okay?’

‘Yeah, you guys are fast.’

‘We just got a call. They picked up a guy two blocks down fitting your description,’ the wiry cop tells me, ‘you wanna take a ride?’

‘Let’s go.’

I thank the driver of the pickup. We shake. I climb in the squad. They hit the lights, no siren. We blast down Atlantic as I retell the story.

‘People think this neighborhood’s safe. It’s not safe,’ the stocky cop tells me.

‘What were you doing out at 4:30 in the morning?’ the wiry cop grills.

‘Left my phone in a cab. Had to grab cash to get it back.’

‘This guy had a gun?’ the stocky cop asks.

‘Yeah.’

‘You see it?’ the wiry cop questions, unconvinced.

‘He went for it in his waistband and it dropped down his pants.’

‘Shaky hands. You’re lucky. These guys over here don’t give a shit about nothin’. They’ll shoot you in the face for a fiver,’ the wiry cop informs me. ‘There he is.’

Our headlights hit the same ten-speed, twisted on the sidewalk next to another squad. A crazy tall cop has the same guy pinned against the wall of a four-story tenement. The suspect looks back at the squad I’m in as the stocky cop lets me out. ‘That him?’ he asks.

The suspect shoots daggers at me. ‘Fuck this shit! I just saw this faggot! I didn’t do shit!’

‘Settle down,’ the wiry cop tells him.

‘Fuck this!’ the suspect spouts, struggling in the cuffs.

‘That him?’ the stocky cop asks again.

‘I don’t know. He didn’t have a bike before. It’s him, but...’

‘But it’s not him,’ the stocky cop offers, detached.

‘The bike’s throwing me off.’

‘He probably had it stashed,’ the wiry cop explains.

‘Bitch ass faggot!’ the suspect howls.

My stomach’s all acid. Everything’s stuck... words. I know it’s him but what the fuck -- if I’m wrong...

‘Say it again,’ I tell him.

‘Say what?’ he says.

‘Say what you said to me when you came at me between the cars with your hand in your pants,’ I spit.

‘What the fuck you talkin’ ‘bout?’

‘When you went for the gun, motherfucker!’ I yell. ‘Tell me I’m dead,’ I order him,

voice cracking. 'Tell me I'm fucking dead!' I'm shaking. I want to smash his fucking face in with a bat. I want to put a gun in his mouth.

'I don't know what the fuck you sayin', but these boys take the cuffs off and I'll make that shit happen,' he tells me. The stocky cop backs me off, walks me over to the squad.

'I'm 99% sure that's the fucker that jacked me, but the bike... It's the 1% that's fucking me up,' I tell him.

'It's the 1%.'

'And he didn't get anything? Wallet, phone?' the wiry cop asks me.

'No,' I sigh and consider the bottom line. He didn't get shit. He didn't kill me. I fought him off. I got away.

'Fuck!' I yell at the street and swing. 'Fuck it. Let him go,' I tell the wiry cop. He shakes his head, annoyed. The tall cop puts his key in the cuffs then notices something next to the bushes.

'Hold up, soldier, what's this shit?' he asks the suspect, keeping one wrist locked.

He reaches down and snatches a wallet from the sidewalk, hands it to the wiry cop. The suspect looks back at it as the wiry cop inspects the ID inside. 'Nah, man. That's bullshit. I didn't touch that shit. You can't put that shit on me,' the suspect tells them.

'You don't look like Mr. Epstein,' the wiry cop informs the suspect, 'well maybe the hair,' he cracks, then searches and finds a woman's change purse, another wallet and a credit card all scattered in the bushes. The wiry cop holds up the find in the headlights and looks to me, 'you sure you don't want to press charges?'

I say nothing.

The scene before me goes soft. I hear dead leaves rustle somewhere. I see the suspect in my head. I picture us together tonight, a dimension over. The suspect's standing in a police lineup, in a blue shirt behind a two-way mirror. I am on the other side. The tight curls on his head touch between 6'1" and 6'2". The guys on either side him know they're not the one. He can't see me but he knows who I am, his victim. And I know who he is, my assailant. I point him out and they put him in a cell.

The suspect's staring at me.

I look away.

'We have his information now, so if you still want to, you can come down to the station in the morning and do it,' the stocky cop informs me and hands me his card. Without

looking at it, I stuff it in my pocket. I thank him and climb into the back of the squad.

Twenty minutes later, I'm sitting on Mya's bed. She picks the rocks and glass from my back, head and arms and follows it up with swipes of peroxide. I'm foaming all over. It burns like a motherfucker.

'Why didn't you?' she presses me, wincing.

I don't have an answer for her. I just know that what happened tonight was bigger than me and some crackhead.

I shower. Can't sleep. I take three big slugs of Jameson from the bottle. The sugar screws me more. I climb in bed stunned, buzzed, head throbbing. I pass out.

I wake up in the morning and Mya's glaring -- Tells me I mumbled 'nigger' in my sleep.