

The Safe Room

night. Then he found himself inside another dead-end bar with the other dead-enders. A working

“Haven’t heard from him since the last job. Before the war. He saved me last time.”

Noon.

Once in a while, the dark clouds would unexpectedly dissipate, and the sun would come out as if you were dreaming a beautiful dream while still inside of a nightmare that you were still having. This happened just frequently enough to deepen the horror of their existence. Then, just as suddenly as it happened, it would turn dark again as the clouds rolled back and thickened as to be almost completely impenetrable to light and returned the people back to reality. For one infinitely sweet but fleeing moment, t

he felt a sudden compassion for the starving creature and pitied it as he watched it eating the steak eagerly, as the dog stared at him. Later in the week, he was still starving when he found the dog again. He shot the dog and cooked it for dinner. Hardigan had no regrets. He had leftovers for the rest of the month. Ring ring-- Ring ring.

He re-entered his office and scrambled around his desk, searching for his phone. He wondered if it was a client. He suddenly felt a little bit flattered and anxious at the same time. Someone trying to call him. He felt like he existed in some way and he felt validated. He picked up his phone and pressed a button on the side of the phone. The black-plastic phone cover slid off the keypad with a low snick. An antenna projected out of the top of the phone. He pressed the phone to his ear and answered: "Hello?" All he heard was hiss.

Then he heard a voice in his mind. "There's a patrol car coming right now to your location. You're getting raided, meet me at the usual room."

It was the Lieutenant. He made a gap through the horizontal slats of the blinds with his whitened shaky hands and looked out the window at the fog, but he couldn't tell for sure who was out there because the fog made everything difficult to see.

Through the streets, long black-and-white city patrol cars came rolling out of the night-fog to the front of Hardigan's apartment building, driving past boulevards where sex workers were walking up and down the sidewalk. The sidewalk was cracked. Everythin

the blue light look grayish-green. The sirens dopplered at a pain-inducing decibel through the street, penetrating even the multi-layered nuclear-blast proof windows. The patrol cars stopped below Hardigan's window as the sirens ceased and the megadecibel sirens calmed down. Police stepped out of the black-and-white autos from both sides of them carrying batons and guns on their sides.

Hardigan should've left the city when he realized how bad it was, but he didn't have the money. Eventually, everyone would end up as a victim, he thought to himself. Who would be the next victim of the city? Time to move again before the cops move in looking for non-existent money to loot. If they found only the crinkled Andrew Jackson—and no Benjamin Franklins—they wouldn't spare him any wrath from batons. Everything good he'd ever heard about the city before moving here was a lie, he thought. His face and guts contorted in psychic pain, as if trying to close up the conduit to some room where the pain was coming from. Outside his window, there was the noise of some sirens. Hardigan peeked out the blinds for some visual details, but he couldn't see much. It was too dark and foggy. The street lights were busted and hadn't been fixed for a month. But then a blue and red siren and lights blaring came through the street. The lights appeared green and red and Hardigan's retina burned with a painful sensation as his ears were ringing from the obnoxiously high decibel sirens. The sirens were like a conduit for pain that opened into his inner ear. He shut the window.

Seated at his desk, he pulled open the top right drawer and pulled out something black and shiny. A gun. It reminded him of himself in the days when he was not broken. His cognitive dissonance over the situation of the world he lived in was too great. He could never get over the strangeness of this sick, disappointing world. Maybe he should've never left his home of Lake View Hill. Home, not going through the same routines everyday like a recurring dream. He set





The street was empty except for a few dark-coated men with their hands in their coat pockets, as if concealing guns in their coats. They gave Hardigan sideways glances as he passed on the other side of the street. Hardigan tried to ignore their furtive glances. He focused on the feeling of his hand holding onto the pistol grip of the gun in his waistband and mentally prepared himself in case violence struck out of nowhere.

Various rundown stores lined the sidewalk. He watched the people walking. Sex workers walked up and down the paths motioning towards cars riding by looking at what was available. Wrigley's sex-hormone chewing gum wrappers were tossed out onto the ground next to reds smoked to the filters. Andrew Jacksons were exchanged hand to hand. He walked through the scene toward a hidden location, the safe room.

He reached the location and waited. He had arrived at the safe room, a room where the police surveillance cameras couldn't see, cleverly hidden in a walled-off district.

He reached into his outer coat pocket and pulled out a lighter. A sharp snick came out of it. The sphere of orange-yellow light emanating from the lighter flame cast the texture of his face into a dark relief of abstract p 0.2 (f)321.66 cm BT 50 0 0 50 0 0Tm 94t



Then, the shadow behind him moved. He reached inside his coat pocket and felt the gun in his waistband through a hole he made in the coat pocket. He was afraid it was a creep and pulled out his pistol.

It was the Lieutenant, and they went inside the safe room.

The Lieutenant offered him a cigarette. "Want a smoke?"

"I smoked forty cigarettes today. Yes, I counted."

"Won't find reds for under ten. Got any Soylent?"

"No. All I have is an Andrew Jackson."

"If that's all you have, why'd you leave the Department? Detectives don't make money."

"Why do you call me? We can't be seen together. Supposed to be a war. Left when I had the feeling I was going to be transferred to another district imminently. My gut told me it was to

“No. Something wrong?” The Lieutenant stopped and looked at Hardigan curiously with a questioning glance.

“It’s been this way exactly for years, day after day. I’ve been keeping track. There is something wrong with the sky. Something is wrong with reality.”

“Well, I think you’re right.” The Lieutenant began chuckling.

“Exactly. I can’t even remember the last time I saw the sun.”

“How do you know the sun exists? How do you know that? It’s all a lie.”

The Lieutenant pulled out a gun fast. But Hardigan was faster. He struck the Lieutenant’s inner arm with his fist and knocked the gun out of it. He pulled his own gun out and fired two shots straight through the Lieutenant’s chest.

The Lieutenant’s body slumped to the black