


3. Papa Art

histling an old advertising ditty through broken front teeth, Papa Art joyfully swung his headlight around the echoing darkness of the tunnel looking for a place to polish off his fifth of Killer T in peace. He nestled the bottle like a chick under his warm wing. He seldom wandered far from his nest below the Willamette Twin Pyramids, but he'd found this bundle alongside the tracks as if left just for him: three unopened bottles of Killer T and a power pack for his ImagMagik digi-cam. He naturally assumed it came from Taz the Razz. Who else would know to leave such a perfect gift? He stashed two bottles. Now he just wanted to drink himself numb without having to share the good fortune.

Papa Art was driven head-down into the faint cold light of the rail tunnel by too many regrets. He knew only two ways of shaking the bloodsuckers: numb the brain or thicken the skin. The former came easier and the cheapest anaesthetic still came in a bottle.

He was looking ahead to Random Acts on Thursday and hoped to do enough 'toos to help support his community. But for now the Killer T was his and his alone. His humble lifestyle asked only that the days float by in sodden reverie.

Taz promised to meet him at Random Acts. Papa Art would make use of *his* hands. Proud as a father, he couldn't quell the fancy of having his young protégé take over his mobile tattoo gig, The Body Canvas. With the ImagMagik Taz acquired dirt cheap—like ripoff—Papa Art didn't need steady hands to do designs. Still he wouldn't be tagging many more virgin asses if his hands twittered like dickie birds. Taz had skills, but like most Joyriders was too quick to temper. The kid had the brains of a broomstick, squandering employable agency talent, knocking around in SubZero all entangled in adolescent angst. Taz wasn't ageless like Peter Pan and his adolescence was totally mental.

In the low light, Papa Art tripped over something alongside the railbed. Heroically cushioning the Killer T so the bottle wouldn't break, he tumbled down an incline into the mushy gutter near the concrete containing wall. His headlight struck the wall and blinked out. He wrenched his shoulder something terrible. Pain like hot wire shot down his arm. Lying there, he clenched and unclenched his fist until the pain subsided. A quick inventory of his parts indicated he'd hurt his right

arm. Otherwise he was fine. His shoulder bag with ImagMagik and sketchbook was padded, absorbing the shock. He'd taken worse falls. He finally pushed himself to his knees, sharp edges of railbed ballast stinging his flesh.

Uncorking the Killer T, he knocked back a slug to dull the pain. Hot lava flowed through his body, strengthening his resolve. He tipped the bottle back for good measure, climbed to his feet and started whistling the ditty again.

His hands weren't steady, but his other senses were keen. His nose picked up an odor. Fresh kill. He heard a buzzing noise coming down the tracks followed by scuffling feet in crushed rock. A mote-filled beam of light speared the darkness. Shoving the Killer T into his armpit, he looked for a place to hide, eyes burning to discern shapes in ambiguous dark. He found a jagged black cavity in the containing wall. He pushed his stupefied body through it, crawling on his belly, cradling the Killer T in the crook of his arm. Just inside he scabbled around to watch as the single red beacon of a remote Searcher cruised down the track, scanning darkness side to side. The Searcher's rotors kicked up red dust as it hovered over the fresh kill. The scuffling sound was two of Gerta Hoffman's security goons following the Searcher, probably on cleanup detail. They wore light body armor, headgear with night vision and carried standard-issue ceramic-fiber disruptors with neural targeting. Serious hardware for cleanup duty.

The glossy mass of mangled flesh in the Searcher's red light was a far too-common sight in SubZero. The cleanup crews plucked Joyriders off the tracks with unaffected disinterest as though picking up litter in a park. Papa Art had found their broken bodies along the tracks before. Just one fatal miscalculation in their flirting gig and their hard bodies could end up intimately acquainted with a splatter screen on a Subterranean Light Rail.

The shorter of the two goons pulled a gaffhook from behind his back and rolled the body over. The upper torso and head were still intact, but the trunk had been ripped clean away and carried down the line. All Papa Art could tell was the remains had once been alive and human. With practiced precision, the short goon snagged a necklace, guided it with gaffhook over the dead man's head and held it up in his partner's headlight. Both goons assessed the value of the silver Russian-Orthodox cross dangling at the end of the hook. "Maybe we can melt it down," the tall goon said. The short goon nodded in agreement and dropped it into his finders-keepers bag slung over his shoulder.

"Fucking moles!" The short goon hissed contemptuously as the Searcher flashed several digitals for the record.

Then the tall goon stepped up, pulled his sidearm and blasted the skull for good measure. They both laughed.

"Look," the tall goon pointed to the ground. In their headlights, a bloody trail led away from the body. "Somebody else has been here."

Papa Art held his breath. Their headlights followed bloody footprints to the other side of the tunnel. A choking sound erupted out of velvet darkness as the

sudden glare of headlights nailed a trembling middle-aged Asian man in shredded clothes crouching against the wall, shielding eyes from the harsh light. The man started to whimper.

“Well, lookie here,” the tall goon said, putting away his sidearm and pointing his disruptor at the man.

The man stood up and raised his hands in surrender, blubbering broken English. “No shoot. Pweez. I go now.”

The goons exchanged a nod and lowered their weapons without a word.

“I go,” the man pleaded, beads of sweat forming on his forehead. “No stay down. Go back now. No shoot.” The man was not a Willamette. Probably an illegal.

“Go back to your nest,” the tall goon spoke evenly through his aspirator.

With their attention riveted on the illegal, Papa Art quietly snapped off a couple of high-speed, low-light shots on his ImagMagik digi-cam.

The trembling illegal backed away, watching the goons with distrust. “I go back now. No stay SubZero.”

“Yes, go back to your nest,” the tall goon agreed, “Tell ‘em to pack up, git out of these tunnels before we find them.”

For emphasis, the short goon fired another burst from his disruptor into the mangled body alongside the tracks.

The illegal backed up step by step, “Yes, go now. No shoot.”

“Go on then,” the tall goon coaxed, “What’re ya waiting for? Go tell ‘em.”

The illegal spun around suddenly to run. The tall goon lifted the disruptor. The weapon burped. A blue volt shot up the man’s spine, electric shock branching out through flaming nerves. Papa Art swore he heard synapses frying like ants tossed onto a grill. The illegal dropped to his knees on the railbed, slumped over, twitching, wisps of smoke rising from blackened fingertips.

Papa Art captured the disruptor’s pyrotechnics as the knees of the illegal, dead on his feet, buckled. Ecstasy overwhelmed disgust.

“Never mind,” the tall goon said flatly. “We’ll tell ‘em ourselves.”

The short goon chortled like a bloodthirsty hyena. “Fucking Moles!”

Curled up in his cubby, Papa Art’s heart pounded. He could taste the acid in his mouth.

Within minutes, a crewcar pulled up towing a flatbed with several bodies piled on. Papa Art blinked with disbelief; Joyriders never made that many mistakes. The cleanup robot shoveled remains into a scoop and dumped them onto the flatbed. The tall goon sprayed the ground with disinfectant. Then the Searcher cruised on down the track, red beam scanning side to side.

When they were gone, Papa Art sat up in the dark cavity inside the containing wall. He uncorked the Killer T. Either these two goons were rogues put on cleanup detail as a disciplinary action or Gerta Hoffman was purging SubZero. Too many questions. After a few serious shots of brain killer, Papa Art wiped his foaming mouth with the back of his dirty sleeve.

Clutching his ImagMagik in one hand and Killer T in the other, Papa Art inspected the cubbyhole. It was a narrow shaft—not long, maybe fifty meters—with a dim light at the other end. He cradled the bottle and belly-crawled toward the light. The farther he went, the brighter the light. Then he heard the sound of thunder.

Papa Art hadn't always been a drunk. He once taught Art History at Metro Combined until virtual ed and the advent of expert programs collapsed the university system. Why hang around a campus and study with Papa Art when you could jack into a virtual classroom and learn from the masters, deconstructing a figure with Picasso or practicing your controlled drip with an entranced Jackson Pollock? Papa Art still kept his degrees rolled up in a tin tube back at his nest for sentimental reasons. They were worthless now, so brittle he couldn't even wipe his ass with the paper they were written on.

After he lost his job at Metro, Papa Art tried for awhile to make something of himself. He finally fell to drink. Repeatedly kicked out of malls and bullied by NuWorld security, he dragged himself into a dried up culvert to be found days later, starving and dehydrated, by Happy Jack of the Willamettes. They accepted him into their tribe, huddled together in crowded lamplit chambers under the Twin Pyramids. Though life was hard, the Willamettes made few demands on him. They valued a teacher like Papa Art if only to access his knowledge in rare moments he was both sober and lucid. Papa Art was sober half the time and half of that was spent sleeping it off. Unlike most Gleaners, the Willamettes still believed in rising above their condition. Papa Art brought the tribe a promise of renewal with SubZero artists slung up in webworks painting underground murals. *Beautification*, they called it.

The narrow passageway opened into a large grotto. A shaft of light filtered down from an opening several levels above. Papa Art dropped about a meter onto the concrete floor. The walls of the cavern were awash in bright, bioluminescent colors. Exquisite murals imitating great masters with thoughtful adaptations of content elevated the work to a new level of originality.

He stood in the middle of the chamber and turned round and round. He didn't know of anyone who could have done this, at least no one in the Willamettes.

Papa Art recorded details from the murals so he could convert them to tattoos. The most remarkable mural was a fitting interpretation of one of his favorite paintings: Henri Rousseau's "The Dream." Painted on stuccoed walls, the intricate color and complex organization of the underground mural equaled that of the original with at least fifty variations of jungle green in subtle glow mixed with surreal light from above and lit from below by some source of unnatural light projecting strange fiery fish patterns onto the mural. The way the light from the two sources blended with bioluminescent paint transformed the whole into a genuine masterpiece.

Dictating into his digital journal, Papa Art could barely contain his excitement over the discovery: "Just as the world of fantasy in Rousseau (the jungle) complemented human existence (the nude figure on the divan reaching for a flower

just beyond her reach), so does the unreality of SubZero (a symbolic jungle) merge with a human need for risk, voyeurism and extreme behavior (the naked porn star, Foxy Hart, on the leather couch). Foxy reclines in the flesh of ultimate vulnerability, reaching beyond her erotic materiality to grasp the unwilting flower of immortality. The human mind grasps fantasy and reality together, needing both, one defining the other. Fantasy (the jungle/SubZero) is rich and colorful—green, beautiful, mysterious. It is masterful. Through this mural, the inner light of the human spirit emerges from the depressive bowels of SubZero. But there is something malevolent lurking behind the jungle green, something felt not seen.”

He broke away from the entrancing mural and noted with great interest the roaring sound in the background. Though it sounded like thunder, it was actually this miraculous waterfall. He couldn't see where the water originated. It spilled through a long fissure, flowing down in a thick sheet over a buckled concrete wall. Maybe a pipe had broken. The wall was stained and mossy, surrounded by painted forest scenery. Such a major fracture in the infrastructure would have been detected. Maybe the earth's movement caused a rupture through which an underground stream now flowed, forming a pool below the waterfall. Underwater light mingled with reflections of bioluminescent mural on the pool's surface. The undulant waves of radiant energy had a mesmerizing effect.

If he didn't know he was three levels down, he'd have sworn he'd found paradise.