

D. Harlan Wilson

THE BUREAU OF ME

“Arise, devour much flesh.”
—Book of Daniel

ACT I

They marched into the office and announced that they were from the Bureau of Me. They wore black sunglasses and black suits and black ties. Stock g-men. They looked serious, eusocial, despite guestfriendly rictus grins.

“Me,” intoned Curd, rolling the word around his mouth. “That sounds familiar.”

Mz. Hennington cut them off. Maneuvering pointed sweaterbreasts, she lunged forward like a dogpoet and tried to take them out at the knees. They dispatched her without incident.

Curd slipped his fingers around the glock taped beneath his desk.

They removed their sunglasses. Affectedly. As if they were doing him a favor, or demonstrating that they possessed the efficacy to remove eyeware in a certain relaxed, levelheaded way.

They didn't have irises. Scarlet pupils marked the

round white eyes.

Curd pulled the trigger.

Click.

“Shit. Shit.”

One of them leaned over and placed a slip of paper on the desktop. He wasn't standing that close to the desk. Not within arm's reach, at least. In fact, he was on the other side of the room. Curd suspected an optical illusion. There were only two viable perps whose facilities might be responsible for the illusion: him, or them.

Irresolute, he picked up the note and read it.

**YOU HAVE BEEN CORDIALLY INVITED BY
THE BUREAU OF ME**

He turned the note over. Blank on the backside.

“Invited where?” asked Curd. But they were gone.

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That night, at his apartment, he rebandaged Mz. Hennington's wounds, then fucked her gently, from behind. Always from behind.

He came. He collapsed.

“I could use a cold beer.”

He rolled out of bed and went to the kitchen and opened the refrigerator. It was empty.

The door closed like a flyleaf.

“You have been invited,” said a seething, torpid voice. “Cordially.”

Startled, Curd turned around and almost fell over, forgetting to move his feet. He made no effort to conceal

the guyparts.

The man sat at the dinette table. He took a sip of beer, made a face, and tossed the bottle across the floor. It didn't break. Bleeding suds, it spun into a corner and clanked against a swell of empties.

“Invited where, dipshit?”

The man may have been one of the earlier visitors, only he had on a cape, and he blurred in and out of focus. It wasn't a misperception on Curd's part; the man's body produced the effect. Out of focus, he looked like a mothman, sitting there with tattered, febrile wings loosely folded behind him.

The man stood and released an electric chirrup. He adjusted his collar, walked to the front door and opened it. “You will not be invited again.” He added, “You drink [ur-word] beer.”

He slammed the door behind him. The latch didn't catch; the door creaked open and a trapezoid of sodium light extended across the room from the corridor.

Mz. Hennington came out wearing Curd's signature velvet robe. It was much too big and heavy on her and looked like an animalskin rug that she had draped over her shoulders. A breast hung free. “Who was that?” she said, knees buckling beneath the weight of the garment.

“Crepuscular shitbreather.” Arms akimbo, Curd flexed his pectoral muscles. “Who else? The Bureau of Me.”

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Curd finished the drink and ordered another one. “I need to start taking existence more seriously,” he said.

“I need to start existing more . . . properly.”

The bartender nodded. “Is there a proper way to exist?”

Curd finished the drink and ordered another one. “Yes. No. I meant to say I need to start existing, like, what’s the word . . . better? Better.”

The bartender nodded. “Is there a better way to exist?”

Curd finished the drink and ordered another one.

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The city smelled like burnt hair, burnt oil, burnt iron. Machinery in ruins.

Whenever he got too drunk, he called his mother. Payphones were harder and harder to come by, but eventually he found one. He touched a thumbscreen. He encoded the number. She answered.

“I’m drunk, mom,” he told her.

“Where are you?” she asked.

“It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter.”

“Ok.”

They fell silent. A spinner thrummed by overhead.

“Fuckerrr!” bawled Curd.

“What happened?” said his mother.

He closed his eyes, compressed his lips. “Nothing. I gotta go.”

“Ok. I love you.”

He hung up the phone and hailed a smartcab.

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“They say it’s unwise to indulge simultaneously in plastic and icevapor. A man might develop a greater affinity for one or the other, and then what? Holocaust. The merger of affordable merchandise and untoward evil.”

Curd changed the channel.

“When the entrails explode, we are reminded of the entrails. Seeing things incites mnemonic inscription. Where would we be without the eyeballs? And the eyeballs are connected to the thinkballs. And the thinkballs are the proprietors of language. And the thinkballs must be greased like mystic engines so as to most effectively and fluidly unleash the slickest verbiage. This is in accordance with the laws of some genre science fiction and horror splatterfare. The metallic aftertaste of everyday life and arterial sprays of hemoglobin do not disqualify the—”

Curd changed the channel.

A smiling [ur-word]. Spitting image of his high school geometry teacher, aside from the cavity in his neck that exposed the striations, the cables, the strings. The mutant epiglottis . . .

The [ur-word] nodded perfunctorily and said, “Look behind you.”

Curd’s head turned on a pebbled axis.

There was a man in a flak jacket chewing gum with pointed conviction, as if he had invented gum that morning and was still riding the high. Red pupils danced out-of-synch across expansive eyewhites. Curd said, “Can’t you dumbasses take a hint? I don’t wanna come to your goddamned party.”

The man collected him in a sack.

Curd didn't go down easy. He ran around the place for awhile, slamming into walls and pictures and appliances while screaming out lines from trashy pulp B-movies, passing them off as his own. But the man was stronger and faster than Curd. Not a fair fight. But a fair outcome, given the constituency of the players.

Quadrifoil jabs, scripts, perforations.

Smell of primevality . . .

Somebody beat him with something, somewhere, maybe in the trunk of a car, maybe somewhere else. He had to swallow his blood for a long time. He got used to it.

"This is how things progress," a voice said. "You start in one territory. Then you move to another territory, and you grow. And the people who gladrag you grow. That is progression, [ur-word]. Growth at every starpoint on the constellation of eternity. It is a simple process."

Thud.

Time passed.

Then they unzipped the sack and took Curd out and blindfolded him and tied him to a metal chair.

"I need to call my secretary," he said.

"Secretaries belie the cult of little men."

"I need to call my mom then," he said. "I'm still shitfaced."

"You are sober as a stone god."

Curd tried to stand, to break free. No strength. He had been tied loosely too. He was disappointed in himself. "I don't deserve it, but everybody gets one phone call. Lend me the arm of common courtesy."

Somebody punched him in the nose. He tipped over

backwards. Somebody kicked him in the ribs. Somebody else kicked him in the chin and he heard either a toe or his chin crack. Curd concluded it was the toe; rainmade curses and echoic hopfrogs followed him into unconsciousness.

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He awoke sitting upright, neck straight, locked into position.

Effluvial light shone through a window beside the table. He blinked.

He had been served a plate of sunnysideup eggs and raw white bacon garnished with a rotten sprout of parsley. There was also a small glass of orange juice atop which had been placed a folded slip of paper. Sans utensils.

Without thinking, he picked up a strip of bacon by the tail, tilted back his head, and slurped it into his mouth like an escargot. It hurt to chew—stabs of pain riddled his jawpiece. He spit the bacon onto the plate, confused and horrified that he had attempted to manhandle it.

The room had red walls and smelled of fresh paint. Empty, aside from the table. There wasn't even a door.

The scene outside the window looked more like a CGI landscape than a real vista. It might have been. A kind of prairie or savannah rolled away from his vantage point in every foreseeable direction, extending to the horizon. He spotted a few blue tarns and swamp-like regions, and he saw a distant knoll or fell, but for the most part it was all grass and reeds bending in a diplomatic breeze.

Curd tried to open the window. It wouldn't budge. He put his ear against the window. Dull fizzing sound. The ear grew cold. Hair stood on end.

Tentatively he opened the slip of paper. It read:

EATING PIGMEAT IS BAD FOR YOU

He crumpled the note and threw it aside.

Squawking, he swiped the plate of food and the orange juice from the table and they smashed against a wall.

Growling, he lifted the chair over his head and slammed it against the floor. He dropped pistonlike elbows and fists upon the chair until it broke apart.

Crying out, he flipped over the table and kicked off its legs. He used one of the legs to bash holes in the walls. Clouds and flakes of plaster sifted across the room.

And then he screamed, a real scream, a true and unbridled scream, full-throttle, neck swelling into a trunk of purple tightropes. Blood vessels popped on the skin beneath his eyes. He slashed the air, reveling in cutting noises that weren't there.

Curd waited for the tantrum to subside before throwing himself through the window. Daymares of rhymed poetry pageturned across his [über-word] as he fell, fell, fell . . .

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. . . and landed on a dark, wet street. He fell on his side and knocked his head against the asphalt. Dizzy, he

struggled to bring the world into focus . . .

He rebuilt the world with calculated squints of acuity.

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“This is a bad one, Mom,” Curd spit into the phone, wiping cold bangs from his eyes. It had been raining all night. He felt like it had been raining his whole life. He recognized the melodrama in his emotional core. And he milked the core like a snapaxle.

Static. Raindrops.

“Mom? Are you there?”

“Yes, honey. I’m here.”

“I’m hurt.”

“Really? How so?”

“I hurt my soul. My soul hurts.”

“The soul is disconnected from the body. It’s inside the body, but it does its own thing. Anyway you can’t feel it. It must be something else.”

“Like what? My aorta?”

“I’m not sure. Maybe. Unlikely, though. We can’t really feel our internal organs. They’re in there. But they do their own thing too.”

“Ok. I gotta go.”

“Be careful now. Try not to drink so much.”

“I always do. Try, I mean.”

“Good. I love you.”

He hung up the phone and hailed a smartcab.

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Despite extensive wounds, sores, bruises, and a sprained

ankle, he forced himself to fuck Mz. Hennington. No foreplay. No lube. She looked at him over her shoulder, gazing purposefully into his eyes, as he stared at her ass and conjured images of medieval orgies and cheering crowds.

He couldn't come.

"It's all right," said Mz. Hennington, the sinewy knobs of her spine accentuated by the room's necromantic blacklights.

"I know," Curd said coolly. "I've come before. I'll come again."

"I know you will. Let's try later."

They slumped onto their backs and stared at the ceiling. They listened to the soft revolution of fanblades overhead. Curd lost himself in the intricacies of the apparatus's spinning turbine. Mz. Hennington reached over and took him by the hand.

They locked fingers and fell asleep.