

TURN COAT

by
Steve Mobia

"It's so cold—you'd better get yourself a coat." Her creased face was bitter and barren, or at least Tom Mosh saw it that way. He recoiled from his mother's voice as he had all his life.

"Yes Mom, I know. Don't worry—I'll be fine." At that moment Tom felt a chill from an overhead vent. Norma's accuracy was a source of Tom's dismay. He rejoiced when she was wrong, for it was easier to shrug off her overbearing concern which had grown since his father's death a year ago.

Tom surveyed the array of machines surrounding his mother like guards holding back eternity with reinforcements of time; blinking and clicking in metronomic regularity, their plastic arteries joining hers. Unlike his father's death, this one was drawn out, a tired melodrama. "It's getting so cold," she said. "You're going to catch your death..."

She stopped speaking and her jaw slackened. A pallor grew over her furrowed cheeks. Tom had seen her like this many times and he wondered how much more he had to endure. His mother would appear to dive to some impenetrable depth but then surface without warning. Expectantly, Tom would lean forward, waiting for wisdom from death's door, only to be reminded that it was his mother as she had always been; nothing more nothing less. For almost three months Tom had played out his blood obligation, hoping that in the next visit she would offer a profound observation, something to touch Tom deeply. He yearned for an acknowledgment, a sign of understanding, but it never came—only a rasping wheeze from her cancerous lungs.

"All it takes is your signature," Doctor Median had confided. "She's suffering and you can spare her that." Tom twisted up inside. How could this young doctor, so unencumbered by pain, presume to understand it? He would watch Dr. Median enter the room to offer a glib gesture of concern, then motion with his fingers as if making a signature in the air. Tom would lower and shake his head in resigned defiance, refusing to bend to Median's sleight of hand.

At Securitech his boss, Vigil Tume, was growing more distant by the day. An increasing indifference greeted Tom's constant requests for time off to tend

to his mother. His fellow employees ignored him. It seemed he was slowly becoming a ghost, a forgotten occupant of the cubicle marked "Access Code Authorization". At first Mr. Tume had been conciliatory and had his secretaries deliver signed sympathy cards. But in time Tume ignored Tom's plight as the demand for his services slowed to a trickle.

"What if you gave a funeral and nobody came?" Tom thought to himself as he again sat in a rigid chair before his sleeping mother. Sometimes he too would doze off only to wake minutes later gasping for air. In a repeated dream she would pull him down with her into a pit of thick mud smelling of decay. The clammy substance filled his throat, smothering attempts to scream. His mother's grasp was only a desperate hold—no comprehension, only blind fear.

He couldn't remember the day he began to hate her. Was it the day she tried to lift herself only to collapse with a low fart as she relieved her bowels? Or maybe it was the time she sneered at him and criticized the shirt he wore, punctuating her sentences with coughs hurled like rocks. There were ample opportunities if he looked for them. And look for them he did—loose unsightly threads to pull at, unraveling Tom's blood bond. This change pleased Dr. Median who would nudge Tom's mood with a carefully placed hand to the shoulder, a squint, a hearty vigorous nod. Median was physically impressive, with tanned skin and toned muscles exaggerated even more by his sickly patients. At night Tom would feel his own slackened arms and yearn for the youthful energy and brashness Median exuded. The withered blotched skin of his mother grew more repulsive by the day. So after three long months, when that crisp white paper appeared, the clarity of the heading seemed like a gulp of fresh air: "REQUEST FOR TERMINATION OF LIFE SUPPORT."

Tom signed his name with a strained offhand gusto in awkward imitation of Median's self assurance, and even caught himself smiling as he returned Median's pen. His mother had been silent all day. Tom reasoned she had willed his move. "You can go now." Median said.

Tom stared back at the plugs in the wall socket, the umbilical lines, then again to the document with "Tom Mosh" boldly scrawled in jet black ink. Median withdrew the paper then escorted Tom to the door.

"Just one more little thing," said Median, clasping Tom's right hand as if to give a consoling shake. Instead Tom felt a cold object being thrust against his palm. Following Median's gaze, he turned back around toward his mother. Her bed was now upright and Tom had a streak of panic that at any moment she

would open her eyes and stare straight at him, accusingly. With Median assisting his aim, Tom raised the gun to eye level. "Now," said Median and, as if a nervous twitch, Tom felt his finger pull.

"The world is so corrupt. Look around you," Tom gestured emphatically. "People just don't care for each other anymore. I hardly ever go out anymore. I mean the streets are trashed, there's graffiti everywhere. I can't stand graffiti."

Talia retreated behind the padded laminated menu as Tom scowled at the graffiti covered windows of the Amourette Splendide Restaurant.

"Look at those windows. Can you believe the gall of those assholes? You can't escape it anymore."

Talia tried to smile. "I sure am hungry tonight. I was looking forward to this all afternoon."

Tom shrugged and let his anger settle. "Yeah it's good to get away from the screens now and then."

"I thought you'd be different somehow." Talia hesitated as if she said the wrong thing.

Tom just laughed under his breath. "It's always different. That's the problem with the world today. On the screens it's one thing but out here it's..."

"No I meant to say you...You seemed nicer on the screen, not as angry." Talia glanced down to the menu. In a series of photos, male body builders wearing chef's hats and nothing else held various entrees before their genitals. Talia's face flushed red.

"I used to like their noodle dishes here, but it's been years." Tom studied his menu. In front of their breasts, nude women in chef's hats held creamed and steaming helpings of lamb and poultry. "Don't you find this a little distracting?"

Talia looked back, stifling a giggle.

A waiter in a red silk smoking jacket who had drifted up to the table like a silent cloud, spoke in a deep suave voice. "Do you see anything to your liking?"

Tom, startled by the waiter, cleared his throat. "Bring me the usual."

The waiter squinted "The usual sir."

"Ah, the noodles. You know. I always liked your noodle dishes."

"Could you point out which one?" The waiter looked over Tom's shoulder.

Talia watched in curiosity as Tom reluctantly studied the photos: women as perfectly formed as the meal arrangements, their parted mouths luxuriantly yearning. "Eat me," they appeared to be saying. Tom's attention splintered, racing along the sloping curves of bodies. The menu contained more pages than expected, all displaying carefully lit perfectly placed models. Sweat bathed his forehead while he turned the seemingly endless pages to the waiter's delight.

"Difficult to decide. I know." The waiter winked at Talia

The bemused smile left Talia's face. It would be her turn next. The bulging feast of muscles, the firm yet tender morsels. The fusion of flesh form and flavor commingled, swelling from the confines of the lamented surface, offering to fill her emptiness.

"How about a dish we both can share?" Talia asked.

"Poultry, maybe turkey," suggested the waiter, winking again at Talia.

Tom swallowed, wanting the awkward ordeal to be over. "Fine, how about a chicken dish for both of us. Does that sound okay?" he asked Talia.

She nervously nodded.

The waiter suddenly broke into an exaggerated French accent. "Ah yes, there's a special on 'Poulet au Sel'. Very tender—it's made surrounded by salt. An intoxicating recipe for lovers."

Tom blushed. "And I would like a plate of ham and noodles as well."

"Wine?" asked the waiter. "We have a special on a deep red..."

"Well take it," Tom interrupted. "Bring us each a glass."

"Very well," the waiter glided away from them. After ordering, they were quiet, looking over and around each other, trying to find distraction in the sparse "continental" atmosphere and thankful for the waiter's absence. In brief glances Tom took in Talia's face, certainly less than perfect but nicely framed by buoyant brown curls. All her clothes had prints of roses and every piece matched. She had obviously given this outing some thought. Tom remembered that he also prepared days in advance and studied his new coat hanging nearby. He was proud of its ostentatious flare—the puffed sleeves, the crimson collar—something his mother would have never approved of.

Days of searching for something to wear to his mother's funeral had finally ended in a tiny alley shop called "Oneiricon". He had stumbled upon it by

accident while taking a shortcut to the main boulevard. Though the alley was strewn with trash and graffiti covered its worn brick walls, Tom found this neatly kept up shop with a blue luminescent interior and in the window, a full length overcoat. It was black with tiny rivulets of red outlining a vague web like design and took some study before Tom warmed up to it. The elderly sales woman put a high price on it and Tom couldn't bargain her down. "You want it, so it's a high price," she said with a shrill metallic voice as if she were speaking through a distant radio transmitter. Finally with decisive impulse Tom emptied his wallet. The woman nodded, not surprised by the purchase. At the funeral, his mother's few matronly friends shunned him. The new coat attracted notice but seldom mention by those he met. Even so, he had made a choice, a decision—and he swore to live by it. He would wear the coat everywhere and certainly on his first date with Talia.

Tom spoke in a tentative high strained voice. "Things have sure changed since the last time I came here."

Talia placed a napkin in her lap. "You mean the menus?"

"Yeah. Now that's a good example of what I'm saying," said Tom, pointing his index finger. "The corruption is everywhere. You can't order a decent dinner anymore."

Talia looked down into her lap, smoothing the napkin. "That's why I stay home so much. On the screens you can create just what you want to see. I like the way I can change things so easily. When I was little, my mom would dress me up different everyday. You know our family's in the wallpaper business and I liked all the patterns so much my mom made all my dresses with wallpaper patterns."

Upon her mentioning the word "wallpaper", Tom finally recognized that the designs on her dress were very much like wallpaper. And in the texture of the cloth, the stiffness of it, he saw the arranged bed room sets of Sunday newspaper supplements.

The arriving wine was sticky and sweet. Tom thought it more like thick sugary liquor than the real thing. Most of it remained in his glass. Talia on the other hand emptied hers within two minutes, obviously delighted by the taste.

Before long, the plates arrived. Though a lifelike mimicry of chicken and ham, the entrees were actually made of ice cream, sherbet, colored chocolate and licorice. Talia sliced into the vanilla section of the mock chicken, not at all

surprised by the forgery. She licked the ice cream from her fork with lips wet and open, then threw a sly grin at Tom.

Another spell of revulsion seized Tom as it had sporadically since his mother's death. Looking down into his own plate, the thin tangled noodles of licorice and icing resembled the scrawled "tags" that covered the apartments on his block. He thought of graffiti as a cancer of disrespect that corrupted everything. Looking back at Talia, he saw behind her the graffiti on the window, backlit by a streetlight—it framed her face, embracing and infecting her. She didn't notice, distracted as she was by the disguised desert. Tom wanted a meal of substance.

"I'm not hungry anymore," he grumbled.

Talia filled her mouth with another spoonful. While savoring its extreme sweetness, she shook her head in disbelief.

"Sorry Talia, I'm feeling nauseous. You stay here if you want—I've got to go. You can't get a real meal here. This place is just a glorified ice cream shop."

Talia swallowed. "What wrong? It tastes delicious."

Tom rose from the table, grabbed his coat and motioned to the waiter.

The red cloaked man approached. "Is something wrong with the food?"

Tom pressed a fifty dollar bill into the waiter's silken breast pocket. "Get the windows cleaned."

"We do clean them every week. But you know how things are around here." The waiter became alarmed and apologetic like a helpless boy, adding to Tom's revulsion.

Wiping her mouth, Talia stood and followed Tom to the door. "Hey, you can't leave me here."

The evening air met both of them with an icy embrace unusual for summer. They were quiet for the first block, Talia hurrying to stay even with Tom.

As they crossed the street to a chorus of syncopated car horns, Talia finally spoke. "Is that it then... our date? Turn around and talk to me!"

Suddenly stopping and bracing himself against a graffiti ridden mail box, he bowed his head. "Is just the selfish insane world we live in. Don't take it personally."

"You think what you just did wasn't selfish?" Talia grabbed Tom's arm. He turned to face her. "I waited all week for this evening. And you're willing to just walk out on me and claim it's nothing personal?"

A whirlwind gust circled them, carrying the tenacious chill. In the distance, from the opposite side of the street a small crouched figure furtively approached, darting skillfully through the Sunday night traffic.

"My mother died last month," Tom explained. "I'm still trying to deal with it. I guess I'm not doing very well. I get these spells. It's hard to explain."

Talia softened and shook her head. Her wallpaper blouse crinkled as she crossed her arms, trying to keep warm. Tom moved hesitantly to embrace her when he heard a hissing from behind. He whirled around.

The small figure ran lightning fast around a corner, his footsteps barely audible. When Tom turned back to Talia she saddened. "I'm so sorry. The nerve of these kids."

"What?" Tom questioned.

"Your coat. That boy just sprayed your coat."

"Really?" Tom tried to catch his reflection in a shop window. "What does it look like?"

"I can't read it. Some graffiti."

"Oh no!" Tom as if jolted by a shock, threw the coat off his back and pulled the mark into view. It was word of five letters. Although he thought the first letter was an "S", Tom found the rest of the stylized lettering completely unintelligible. "Those assholes. Can you believe it. You said it was a kid?"

"Yeah, a little boy. I saw him when he ran away. Seemed like he was around ten or eleven."

"A boy," thought Tom as he bounded into his apartment, throwing his stained coat on a cluttered table. "Selfish bastard. I'll kill him—I don't care if he is a kid."

Tom was alone again, completely gripped with rancor. He pounded the walls. "Bastard! Just wait till I get you!"

Talia had tried to sidetrack his fury but had to step aside as he raged down the street, his arms thrashing out like an epileptic. And again in his room he cursed his decision to leave. His once proud coat lay wrinkled before him

shamefully across the table. He stared at the graffiti, the scrawled word defiant in its private meaning. Somehow he must have been a random target of some gang initiation, he thought. How could he have been so unlucky? Even if he knew what the mark referred to, he was sure it was trivial.

He slumped into a hard chair and cradled his forehead in his hands, rocking abruptly. He could not give up his coat. It was hard enough to see his neighborhood fall into disrepair, to watch the streets grow more alien and forbidding. But this was too personal an affront.

Before he left her, Talia had mentioned an all purpose cleanser her family used to clean wallpaper and was sure to work on the coat. But Tom had no patience, and left Talia alone on the corner.

Taking heavy strides to a small cupboard, Tom withdrew a spray cleanser and sponge. Returning to the coat, he saturated it, pulling the trigger on the spray bottle compulsively. In earnest, he began to scrub, the paint now releasing its stringent synthetic smell as if resisting the detergent. Foam bubbles exploded with the sound of gunfire. Tom gnashed his teeth as he pressed the sponge into the fabric, his hands stinging from chemical contact. The foam grew and overflowed the table, concealing any possible progress. When Tom could see no trace of the coat anymore he paused exhausted, his forehead beading with sweat. The foam sizzled with gunshots and angry cries, its color becoming dark and slushy, reeking of vile odors.

The screen on a neighboring table lit up with color. Talia was trying to reach him. Too absorbed in his task to notice, Tom fetched a towel from the bathroom. He daubed the festering foam, muffling the shots, quenching the cries. Then, taking a deep breath, he withdrew the towel. The word remained, even more entrenched as it bled further into the fabric.

Later, lying in bed, Tom tried to quiet his thoughts. He had switched off the screen for he blamed it for his predicament. "Why me?" he repeatedly asked himself as the insoluble word branded his vision. No matter where he looked, he saw it. One hour, then another went by. Finally around two in the morning, he dozed off.

In his dream he sought professional help. He was picking up his coat at a drycleaners shop. As Tom prepared to pay the smiling woman at the counter,

he looked at his coat, pressed and hung, sheathed in transparent plastic. There, through the plastic, he saw the graffiti. The wallet closed.

"You were supposed to clean this," Tom bellowed. "Look at it. It's still stained."

"We did what we could." The counter woman's smile became forced. "Isn't that the way it's supposed to look?"

"Of course not! Can't you see? It's been spray painted."

"I don't see a thing." The lady backed up cautiously. "Looks good to me."

"I'm not paying until you get the paint off! You've got to get the paint off!"

The lady's fingers slid under the counter to a secret alarm.

Intuitively, Tom knew he was in trouble. As he turned to leave, two small policemen blocked the exit. They were actually little boys around nine years old dressed as police who moved in on Tom, grabbing his arms.

"NO!" Tom screamed as he threw one boy cop to the floor, who instantly broke into tears. The other pulled violently on Tom's arm, trying to get handcuffs around it. Tom made a fist but the youth of the boy's face stopped him from striking. Instead he pushed the boy away.

"What kind of game are you playing?" Tom yelled as he turned back toward the door. The crying boy on the floor pulled a gun from his holster. It looked clownish and oversized compared to the boy. Tom stopped and held up his hands—but the boy, with tears still running down his cheeks, pulled the trigger.

Tom jerked himself awake. Over his bed in the front of him, the coat hovered like a malignant bird of prey, its unbuttoned sides flaring out. Then slowly it turned around, revealing the loathsome graffiti to the sounds of gunshots, profanity and screams. Overcoming his fear with rage, Tom lurched up and grabbed the cloth firmly. Shouting, he yanked the garment out of the air and, still reeking of spray paint and cleanser, it fell limply onto the bed .

"Please see me in my office. Vigil Tume," read the simple memo. Tom had just arrived at Securitech to the usual bored sideward glances of his fellow employees. Only Mr. Tume's memo occupied the cleared desk. Open cardboard boxes stacked on the floor contained everything else he had been responsible for. Glancing up quickly he caught the gaze of the man in the neighboring cubicle who had been staring but now looked away. It seemed he was trying to read the "tag" on Tom's coat. Tom was resolute that morning after his restless night. Those street kids wouldn't make him throw out his coat. He would continue to wear it, despite the mark.

Tom picked up the memo and made his way to Mr. Tume's office. These days Tume was rarely visible, cloistering himself in his private room. All communications were through his seven secretaries or by intercom. Tom approached the circle of secretaries—their desks facing each other. Constant chatter always came from this area as the stylishly dressed women circulated loud whispers. Tom imagined them gossiping and he wondered what they might be saying, for they often chuckled at his entrance. Today they seemed unusually somber. The oldest woman who looked to be around seventy though she wore a short tight dress stood and pulled a key from her purse, signaling the others to join her. One by one the other six secretaries, each younger than the last, produced a different key and opened another of the seven dead bolt locks down the side of Tume's door. The last secretary, a redhead barely out of puberty, bent for the bottom lock—her skirt revealing the trim of her pantyhose. Over the years, Tume had added more locks to his steel plated door and with each one, a new secretary joined the ranks. Now all these women beckoned Tom. As he approached, they moved their hands under his coat—frisking his pockets, feeling his legs, chest and groin.

"Take it off first," said a secretary with a practiced receptionist voice. "Take off the coat."

Tom felt flushed with embarrassment as surrendered his garment to them. They all found a place to hold and pulled slowly and methodically, sliding the coat off his shoulders. Though dressed, Tom felt suddenly naked as the door squeaked open like a bank vault. Inside, a large pale man in his mid fifties peered around the door—his face racked with fear, his jowls trembling. Recognizing Tom, he gestured insistently, "Quick, inside."

Tom felt one of the secretaries slap his rear as he awkwardly entered to the sound of the door clanging shut. The windowless office was uncomfortably

hot and clammy. A musky smell dominated the dark wood paneled room. There was an unmade bed in the far corner near a kitchenette piled high with dishes. It was clear that Mr. Tume had moved into his office. Dressed in a tight double breasted gray suit, Tume slowly backed away from Tom without shaking hands.

"It's a dangerous time," Tume began as he fidgeted behind his heavy oak desk. Suddenly the ink blotter pad sprang upward on end, completely concealing him. Tume stood again and pushed down the blotter which appeared spring activated. "Ah, it's a shield. I'm sorry Tom, the safety switch is weak."

Tom attempted to laugh but couldn't. Vigil had never looked so fragile—all his leadership qualities shriveled away. He appeared on the verge of a perpetual heart attack.

"Access codes have approached a new level of sophistication," Tume again nervously sat and pressed his folded hands on the blotter as if holding it down. "I'm afraid your training doesn't cover it."

There was a silent pause and Tom felt he was falling into a black hole. "What do you mean? Can't I learn the new systems?"

"What do you do when someone can pick a lock on your home? You change the lock, right. The same here. If our present security access codes can be violated, we have to change everything, even our personnel."

Tom was incensed. "Are you saying I'm a security risk, Mr. Tume?"

"It would be saying too much if I told you," Tume replied, trying to smile. "Don't worry, you'll receive a pension. You won't have to expose yourself to danger coming to work. Stay inside, use the screens. You should be happy this happened."

"I'm not ready to just give up and retire!" Tom's voice grew uncharacteristically loud and shrill. "I'm only forty eight. I take pride in my work!" He rose to his feet defiantly.

Two penholders mounted on Tume's desk suddenly swiveled. In panic, Vigil reached out toward them just as one pen shot from its holder like a miniature missile, narrowly missing Tom's neck; its pointed handle penetrating a high wooden cabinet.

Tume grabbed his chest, panting. "Don't make quick moves Mr. Mosh. Not in my office. You must leave now, for your own protection." His pale face tightened in pain as he pressed a desktop button.

The heavy door opened. One of the secretaries spoke. "Your coat sir."

Tom turned. Outside, the secretaries stood in chorus line formation, the last most elderly one holding his coat, open and waiting.

The diner was empty that day. Tom sat alone at the long counter, his fingers absentmindedly tracing circles on top of a salt shaker.

"What's wrong?" spoke the cook's familiar voice. Though Tom had been to this diner often and though he and the cook recognized each other, they never exchanged anything beyond the usual. In fact, he always sat in the usual stool, had the usual expression and ordered "the usual". But today was different, the cook seemed concerned.

"I'm not needed anymore." Tom stared at his distorted reflection in the lid of the shaker. "For ten years I sat there, every day in that company doing something I thought...they thought was important. Today the boss said he's changing the locks."

"That's terrible," the cook commented as he put down 'the usual' in front of Tom. It was a hamburger, colorless salad and a pile of long fries. Without looking, Tom picked up the burger and bit into it, chewing listlessly. He thought again of his dying mother and how she had needed him to complain to. He hated her complaints. How could he burden anyone with his own? Again a wave of revulsion washed over him. "It might as well have been a gun," thought Tom. How quickly Dr. Median had pushed him away after signing that fateful paper. Tom was merely an obstacle, a dam in an onrushing stream of events. Mr. Tume obviously wanted to wash him away just as easily. A desolation so seized Tom that the casual condolences of the cook were laughably useless. With his hamburger half eaten, he felt a churning in his stomach, an encroaching nausea.

"The restroom. I need to use the restroom."

The cook making a mock grimace motioned to the rear of the long diner. "Hey, that was good meat. I had some myself. What's wrong with you?"

Hunched over, Tom slowly made his way back, around some shelves burdened with stacked dishes and through a door. A dark greasy corridor angled left than right past a brown tiled room with a dishwasher. He thought of his father's electronic repair shop and the piles of devices with problems and the

sight of his dad studying some circuit with a magnifying lamp. "At least I know I can fix these," he would say, leaving his personal life to disrepair.

It was his father who helped Tom get a job with Securitech Alarm Systems. In fact, his dad was troubleshooting one of Securitech's control boxes the day he died. "Heart attack triggered by electric shock," said the coroner. Norma blamed her husband's death on fear of success, a trait she insisted had been passed on to Tom. Unassembled electronic boxes littered her house afterward. She refused to throw them out, stacking them instead around her bed. "Everything is so incomplete," Tom mused as he entered a narrow room, stepping over buckets and mops.

"Where could the restroom be?" Past a row of odorous garbage bags he pushed on another door. It knocked against a metal trash can on the other side and refused to open further. In frustration Tom pushed again and after great difficulty and much noise, the door finally opened, knocking the can over and spilling its spoiled contents.

The cold fetid air made Tom realize he was outdoors. It was an alley pressed narrow between high brick buildings. There at a short distance, blanketed in graffiti, was a plastic outhouse. His stomach knotted as he slumped toward the enclosure which greeted him with a wretched odor wafting from inside. Opening the door, Tom saw the hole completely filled and overflowing with urine, excrement and flies. Revolted, he backed away to retrace his steps. But the sight of the opposite wall froze him in position — he recognized one of the tags sprayed over the encrusted bricks. It was the one branded into his thoughts—the same mark as inflected on his coat.

Suddenly there was a crunching of glass and Tom was aware of being watched. He heard whispers from behind a nearby dumpster. Sensing immediate danger, he darted for the diner door but from around the dumpster three stocky young boys ran up, brandishing sticks. One of them, a mulatto, spoke as he blocked Tom's path. "You can give us our coat now."

The oldest of the boys didn't look over twelve, yet their ferocity shocked Tom who turned away and walked quickly back toward the outhouse. If he could make it out of the alley he hoped to avoid a fight. The mulatto shouted, "Regel, Laudlo!".

From the alleys opposite end, two more boys appeared, a Filipino and a Hispanic. They spoke with self-righteous assurance. "You got no right to wear that. Give it back!"

"But it's not yours. Just cause you marked it doesn't make it yours." Tom saw from their hard unblinking stare that it was no use arguing.

"We'll see." The Hispanic boy ran up and pushed Tom with surprising strength. Almost falling back he struck at the boy's face, only to miss as the short boy ducked the punch. The Filipino reached for something bulky in his pants pocket. Tom turned to run, but the narrow alley trapped him. Another four boys joined the first group—one who looked Chinese and a dark haired youngster Tom took to be Indian. Then from behind Tom felt a crack on his head and saw a shower of sparks. He started to fall forward, but caught himself and pushed up through the nearest three boys, who struck him again with boards. Out of the four boys now before him, he saw one who was white who grinned as he opened a long glinting knife.

"Just give us the coat!" yelled the boy with the knife.

"No!" Tom made a sudden leftward lunge toward the diner door and managed to open it. He slid through and slammed it behind him.

The cook was serving an elderly customer when Tom, head bent down and panting, re-emerged from the back. The cook gave him a quizzical smile. "Guess you really had to go."

"There's a gang of kids out there." Feeling his neck for blood, Tom slid onto the cushioned stool. "Real young kids."

"Oh, the Scrabble Clan," said the cook, "they're not too friendly, are they?"

"Scrabble Clan?"

"Yeah," said the cook. "The Scrabblers or the Scrabs—same gang. Only little children join it but they're in competition with the older gangs to prove how bad-ass they are. They don't care about race, they care about age. I put up a sign: 'Restroom to be used by customers only.' I put it out there every morning, but you think they care?"

Upon entering his apartment, Tom felt foreign objects in his coat pockets. He threw them out on his kitchen table, wondering how he came by them: an

odd injector mechanism resembling a stapler and a plastic bag of small chalky rocks.

"Scrabblers," thought Tom as he slipped off his coat. Examining the back, the angular word fell now into recognition : S-C-R-A-B.

He placed some ice cubes in a pillow case then raised it to the back of his head. As cold bathed his soreness, Tom inspected the strange objects on the table. He opened the plastic bag and touched one of the rocks. It crushed easily, releasing a fine white powder which clung to Tom's hand as if by magnetism. Quickly, he withdrew his hand and raised it to his nose. It had a vaguely familiar smell, similar to chlorine cleanser. The stapler device had a retracting needle and a chamber for liquid. Apparently the powder was to be mixed with water, then loaded into the stapler. Pressing a button would release the needle that penetrated the skin rapidly like a sewing machine needle, injecting the substance. The sharp needle point pricked his skin as he inspected it.

Tom put down the stapler and walked into his bathroom to wash his hand. "Why would people go to such extremes to screw themselves up?" thought Tom. And these were kids. He remembered the hard glassy gaze of the children. They had absolutely no respect for him. Without respect there could be no empathy and so permitted any atrocity. Tom felt the warm sink water flush away the white powder. He wanted to purge himself of the pollutions of this world but felt bogged down, under siege, having seen and heard things that were a permanent fixture in his thoughts—intractable rubbish that refused burial or burning. A sudden fever raced through him, pulling like an undertow. The bathroom floor seemed loose and sliding. He clutched the sink for stability.

After drying his hands, Tom re-entered the kitchen but suddenly halted, the hairs on his neck standing on end. The still air had a bristling charge, as before a cloud burst. There, to side of the table, his coat silently hovered, filled out as though worn by a ghost. Its unyielding position felt accusing and judgmental. The unbuttoned opening widened and the dark lining inside began to ripple. Like a camera bellows, the lining accordioned forward toward Tom. Before he could move, Tom was swallowed by the material.

Inside, the black fabric appeared to extend endlessly in all directions forming small inlets, folds, and surprisingly large openings without a defined shape. The coat pattern was not apparent, it seemed the lining had grown

chaotic and cancerous—enveloping the world. Though Tom could move, he felt fearfully constricted in the oppressive darkness.

Ahead, he began to make out someone curled up like a fetus on what seemed the floor of this uncertain space—a dark haired young boy around eleven and dressed in a T shirt and baggy pants. What was this boy was doing here in the confines of his coat— had he been captured in the same way and perhaps murdered? Closer inspection revealed that this was the boy with the flashing knife seen earlier. He heard slow steady breathing—the boy was only asleep. Tom marveled at how sleeping people lose all threat. With closed eyes and slack jaw, the youth of the boy was more pronounced; he might as well be a helpless fetus in this dark uterus. But remembering the gang he had just narrowly escaped, Tom stood to leave. Suddenly, a hand closed around his ankle. "Hey mother fucker!" the boy shouted. "What you doing here man? I'm gonna fuck you up."

Tom fell but braced himself. Rolling to one side, he pulled from the boy's grip. "This is my coat. Hear me? What gives you the right..."

"Hey who made this thing? Did you?" The boy spoke loudly as he sat up.

Tom jumped to his feet. "It doesn't matter. I bought it with my money."

The boy smiled sarcastically. "Do you have any idea where this thing came from?"

Taken aback, Tom looked up into the void, wondering how on earth the material could have gotten so big. "It was new when I bought it."

The boy laughed "Hey this coat's no virgin." From inside his pants, he pulled a small handgun and waved it casually as if tracing the "SCRAB" tag in mid air. "No more a virgin. I saw to that. It was me sprayin that night. Now it belongs to the scrabs."

Tom refused intimidation. "You can't just come in here like this."

"You're shittin' me. Open your eyes."

Tom stood back, groping for composure. Somehow, he forgot being lost in his own coat lining. All he could now see was the boy's gun barrel that grew larger by the moment. "What do you need it for?" Tom asked.

"A hideout. The cops are on us right now."

Tom shook his head in disbelief. "How old are you?"

A streak of anger seized the boy as he took aim. "Old enough to blow you away."

Impulsively, Tom ran back and dove into the fabric with a sheer rush of panic—arms flailing, forcing himself through the layers of convoluted cloth. But there were no shots fired. Instead, a deep throbbing repetitive bass rhythm filled the air—as if from a boom box or car trunk woofer.

The enveloping darkness gave no protection. Tom felt an imminent ambush lay around every pleat, the loud music heightening his dread. Before long a foul suspicion he had resisted held his thoughts: the coat had turned adversary, harboring these frightful children and snaring him in this maze. The boy seemed more at home here than he—but was this reason enough to let the gang have it to use as they please? Is an intruder in your home less of one if he moves in casually rather than breaking a window? After all, these were just kids, little kids.

Tom paused as he heard the music recede. He wondered if the drug found in his pocket was causing his predicament. Surely the boy and the gun were only figments of the dark. And yet, searching for light, he saw none.

What he did see faintly in the distance was a torn mattress bleeding mildewed cotton. As Tom approached he noticed someone small lying under a faded plaid blanket, repeating three words in a groggy, slurred voice: "She's gotta die."

Tom recognized the voice just as the boy's young face reappeared: this time stoned, with clouded vacant eyes that, nonetheless, noticed Tom's presence.

"Hey man, can't you let me sleep?" The boy wiped his eyes. "So, how you like this stuff huh? It's fine this time—you feeling it?"

Tom's eyes darted along the blanket, searching for the gun. "I didn't get your name."

"Deano Dazzler" the boy replied. "I'm a magician. I make people disappear." He moved his hand under the blanket. Tom backed away.

"You a little jumpy today. Guess you didn't do enough."

Deano pulled out the injector device Tom recognized. He extended his hand to Tom. "Here, you need some more staplin'. Try a little more. I got to get ready. My mom's been liften this stuff and selling it to her friends. All that's gonna stop today. She's history."

Feeling a knot in his throat, Tom swallowed hard. "You're going to kill your mother?"

"You think its right to jack my drugs? She come up with this big story about needin money for food and shit. That's no fuckin excuse to steal from me. Hey a mom should stand by her son, no matter what. So she didn't. That ain't right."

"She's your mother," Tom spoke with a sudden rush of concern. "Doesn't that mean anything to you?"

"Hey, she didn't want me. She tell me that all the time."

Tom knelt down, overcome with sadness. He should have cared less about this kid's addicted mother but a sudden sickness, a seizure of loss took hold—and this boy who had threatened his life, who had not shown the slightest respect became Tom's mission. "Deano, look at what you're doing to yourself. You're killing yourself with this stuff."

Deano looked back with narrowed eyes, his chin tightening. "Me; at least its me that's doing it. You know what I'm sayin?"

"What about your dad? Don't you care about him?"

"Shit. They say he's in jail. I don't know. I don't even remember him."

Tom closed his eyes. He couldn't reach Deano through the years that separated them. Security meant nothing to him, he'd never known it. "So if you kill her, where are you going to go?"

Deano paused a moment. "Well the Indian homy named Tarnation—he and me got a plan. He runaway and live in an old train station, broken windows and shit, but we can fix it up. It be the scrabble clan's house man, scrabble house—I like that."

Tom threw up his hands and stood, angry and embarrassed by his own loose feelings. "Listen," he said gruffly, "just give the coat back to me."

"Why?"

Tom reflexively formed a fist but then relinquished as he held out an open palm. "Hey I just lost my job. I can't afford another one."

"Another job?" Deano enjoyed the jab.

"Another coat."

"You should try doin what I'm doin."

Tom shook his head and paced impatiently. "Yeah, you tell me what you're doing. Look at you."

"Hey I'm just taking a break. But break time's over now." Deano jumped up holding his pistol. "You're dealing with Deano remember—Deano Dazzler! You want to see my act?" Gesturing with his other hand, Deano threw sparkling glitter into the air.

From behind Tom, eight members of the Scrabble Clan appeared and, before he noticed, ran up to pin his arms back.

"Hey Daz, show us that trick," said the Indian boy to Deano.

Deano with a nimble practiced move, threw his pistol upward, out of Tom's vision. Snapping his fingers then spreading open his right hand he caught a falling cylindrical object. It was a spray can. Broadly smiling, he turned toward Tom. "You want to live, mother fucker? Prove to me you really want to live. You folks think you know everything—always tryin to teach us somethin. If you really know who you are, you've got to tell it to the world. Use the can, tag something." Deano held out the spray can.

Tom tried to wrestle loose. "I hate graffiti!" Held back by these children, he felt profoundly humiliated.

Deano suddenly dropped his smile. "You gotta deal with us. Get that through your head! We want you to do it, that's all you need to know." He thrust the can up to Tom's face.

Tom could smell the odor—the same as emanated from his coat the night of the spraying—that loathsome mark perhaps made with this very can. He breathed in, the harsh stench obliterating all else. He closed his eyes, held his breath but the fumes overcame him. Tom stopped resisting and the gang turned his arms loose.

Exhaling, with a dazed defeated expression, he took the can. "If I do this. If I prove to you I can do it, will you leave me alone?"

"Fuck Yeah," Deano grinned.

Tom shook the container—inside, the mixing ball clattered. "Just write my name on something?"

"Shit, you too smart." Deano shared a smirk with his friends.

Tom nodded in concession. "How do I get out of here?"

Again Deano snapped his fingers. "Yo, Laudlo. Let him out."

One of the boys clicked open a switchblade. Tom turned toward the sound as the boy jabbed the fabric behind him. With one downward motion, he slit the material as a piercing light shown through the cut. Its brightness stung Tom's eyes and he raised an arm to shield himself.

When Tom put his arm down, he was standing outside the Securitech offices. It was past closing, though, being summer, the sun still blazed down on the simmering parking lot. Tom looked for the gang but saw no one. He was wearing his coat and in his hand, he still held the spray can. Though the Scrabblers were not in sight, he sensed they were watching. Remembering Deano's instructions, he stepped toward the white concrete walls.

The building resembled a small fortress with tall narrow windows to prevent break-ins. He found a spot located on the other side of Vigil Tume's office and imagined that Tume might still be in there. He couldn't remember when he had ever seen Tume leave the building. It made sense that a man of such overwhelming insecurity wouldn't submit to dangers lying between work and home—he probably he lived in his office. Tom touched the wall, feeling its coarse surface—this would be the spot. If he guessed correctly, he was right behind Vigil's desk. "As close as I'll ever get to real power," thought Tom.

Suddenly a charge surged through his body, a defiance that tapped some reservoir of energy. He felt exhilarated, unafraid of consequence. After a quick look back at the empty lot he pressed the spray button and delighted as the black paint shot forth onto the pristine white concrete. He dashed off his name "TOM MOSH" with an abandon that was the obvious work of a novice. At once, a shrill alarm sounded.

As if waking from a dream, Tom felt dazed, unsure what to do. A windowless van screeched into the lot. While still moving, two men wearing peculiar yellow uniforms bolted from the side door. Tom ran to a tall chain link fence but only climbed three feet before being grabbed. Again he was in darkness as the van door closed.

On a wall mounted screen, a paused video displayed Tom spraying his mark, from the back, his tagged coat clearly visible.

"We know the Scrabblers are a gang of kids, horrible fucked up kids. Mr. Mosh, why did you join them?" Though the inquisitor faced away, the voice and build of the man was unmistakably of Vigil Tume.

After an hour alone in the closed van, Tom now sat in a surveillance room with a line of monitors—off except for the one capturing his moment of shameless defiance. It seemed to Tom a stranger on the screen, worlds away. "I didn't join them. They tagged me."

"You're it then aren't you?" Tume turned to face Tom, his trembling amplified. Two yellow uniformed men on either side had hands on their guns. "What are you making those kids do?"

Tom stifled an impulse to laugh. "Yeah those kids are so easy to boss around." He looked at the surveillance equipment. "You're involved with the cops?"

"I'm involved with security. We have our own private police and occasionally work with the city cops but I don't trust them—they're paid by the government." Vigil leaned forward, eyes squinting. "You know, sometimes you can't even trust the people in your own company. At least you didn't bring a gun. There's been too much of that lately." Tume turned away again. "But we do listen to police radios. It's seems a woman in the neighborhood was found murdered today and the cops say the Scrabblers were involved."

Tom shook his head. "Today?"

"And now we know who the oldest Scrabbler is." Tume paced nervously in a small circle. "Because you're the oldest, they'll think you're the ringleader. Who would have guessed? From a such good family too. Your dad was a fine man. And what would your mother think? As soon as she dies you turn bad."

Tom's jaw dropped. "You told them I was a gangleader? Why?"

A resigned grimace crossed Tume's face. "We have private police but no jails — can't afford them."

Tom slumped backward a moment but suddenly bolted to attention. "Let me call someone." He squirmed in his seat. "Someone who can be a witness."

"What more witness do we need?" Tume gestured to the screen. The image sprang into motion: Tom finished his tagging then, as the alarm sounded, he ran out of frame. There, instead of his name on the wall, were the words: "SHOT MOM."

Mr. Tume freeze-framed the graffiti. "Why the public confession? Had it in for one of the kids? That lady was just a poor drug addict—would've died soon enough anyway. But she did have a son in the Scrabblers."

Tom was confounded. "It can't be true. I didn't write that!"

"Mr. Mosh," Tume spoke slowly with awkward hesitation. "It is on the video. You do see what I see, don't you? Now I may not be out walking around but nothing around here escapes my notice. When you came to work wearing that coat it was obvious."

"What was obvious?" spoke Tom, his voice raised. "That I was a murderer?" Tom jumped up and threw the coat from his shoulders onto the floor. "That's it. This thing turned against me. I wouldn't have done the graffiti if it wasn't for..."

"Tom please." Tume turned to the guard on his left. "A man blaming his clothes for his actions — what next?"

The color didn't match but Tom tried to even out the horizontal line, stretching his arm to the limit. He wanted to mask the discoloration by making the upper paint line straight. Beige over a sky blue didn't please him, nevertheless it covered the graffiti. It took several coats, even with the extra thick paint, but finally he managed to hide the tags.

He dipped his roller again. Doing these first hours had actually been a pleasure though he wouldn't have admitted it to the judge. He loved the illusion, temporary as it might be, of a building without graffiti as the builder originally intended it.

After touching up the side wall of a surplus store, he went back to the street corner to study the evenness of his painting from a distance. If not for Talia's testimony, things could have much worse, he thought. Though Tom had deserted her that night, she grudgingly attended the court and through her easy honesty convinced the judge of where Tom got the mark. To Mr. Tume's dismay, Tom was only found guilty of vandalism. Instead of jail time he chose public service.

The next day, Talia brought over the cleanser. When she arrived, Tom had just awoken from a frightful dream: He had seen Norma, his mother, again. She was sitting on a long bench in an abandoned train station, along with her packed bags. She was wearing his coat. Though Tom felt invisible and disembodied, she spoke to him in a clear voice with uncharacteristic cheerfulness: "This is certainly a strange coat Tom but...well, it works. It keeps me warm. This station is so drafty." She seemed so pleased Tom didn't have the heart to tell her

that no train would ever come to this abandoned station. Movements near the raised platform shifted his attention. There were creeping furtive children quietly hiding. Agitated expectation was in the air. Then Tom saw him, Deano Dazzler, dressed like a stage magician in red cape and top hat. He walked up quietly behind Norma as if she had unwittingly volunteered for his next trick. She didn't see him, only beamed a glorious smile, looking off down the rusted tracks. With a slow deliberate movement Deano pulled his 38 out from the folds of his cape and took aim close range at the back her head. "No!" Tom shouted as the gun went off. At that very moment, Talia rang the doorbell.

The cleanser worked beautifully. It was a green gel that had to be left on the coat for fifteen minutes and doused with water occasionally. "My dad always gives a free bottle when he sells a wallpaper roll," said Talia, carefully tending the gel. "Some of our wallpaper is textured but this stuff always does the trick. Voila!"

She ran a sponge over the back of the coat. To Toms amazement, no trace of the mark remained. He looked up into Talia's eyes as if miraculously cured from a fatal disease. "Presto, chango," she said with a sparkling smile. He knocked the sponge from her hand and embraced her.

From Tom's corner vantage point he could see the entire block. It was his fourth hour and the block had a beige ribbon that ran like wainscoting along the walls of the storefronts. Because he enjoyed painting in peace, he chose to do most of his work on Sunday afternoons when the businesses closed. He knew he had just created an illusion, the illusion of a wholesome neighborhood, but how tempting it was to believe it—to forget the wet paint, to believe in mutual respect. He thought of Talia and the evening they had planned together. For a moment all sensations of this fresh lined radiant world held him suspended, cradled in contentment.

A small hissing sound, like a balloon deflating, distracted him. It came from nearby. Walking back to the newly painted surplus store, Tom saw him, looking back over his shoulder with a mischievous grin.

"Hey Deano!" shouted Tom.

Deano didn't answer but scurried away, leaving words behind on the wet paint: "SHOT MOM." Tom ran to the wall. He'd have to let it dry first before repainting the spot otherwise the spray paint would mix with his own,

producing a darkened smudge like a bruise. "You bastard!" he yelled down the street as Deano darted into an alley. Tom slumped to the sidewalk, staring up helplessly at the graffiti.

Over time, the words lost their foothold, falling into unrecognizable abstract shapes. It was as if he were staring into a void, the words anonymous, referring to nothing in particular. The letters, loosened from bonds of meaning, shifted out of alignment, orbiting each other. Elements of a forgotten code, characters in flux—the insecurity of it all overwhelmed Tom. He anticipated the drying of the paint, an end to the flux—the letters would then stay put so he could attack them. And over the extended minutes of his sitting, they did begin to slow, to lose their boundless potential. It might have been a jolt of electricity, a plunge into icy water, a spear through the chest, but it was merely the recognition of what the rearranged letters now spelt: "TOM MOSH."