

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 that 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. 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 just 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 seen next to 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 unconscious 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 and 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 paused as if she had 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.

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 amused 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 laminated pages, 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..."

"We'll take it," Tom interrupted. "Bring us each a glass."

"Very well," the waiter glided away from them as Talia glared back at Tom for rushing the decision. 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 flair—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 every day. 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 bedroom 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 dessert. Tom wanted a meal of substance.

“I’m not hungry anymore,” he grumbled.

Talia filled her mouth with another forkful. 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’s 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 mailbox, he bowed his head. "It's just this 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 that 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 like tiny gunshots. Tom, his hands stinging from chemical contact, pressed the sponge into the fabric. The foam grew and concealed any possible progress. When Tom could see no trace of the coat anymore he paused exhausted, his forehead beading with sweat. For him, the foam sizzled with gunshots and angry cries as it became dark and slushy, reeking of vile odor.

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 he blamed for his predicament. “Why tag 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. He closed his wallet.

“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 awoke with a jolt. Over his bed, in front of him, the coat hovered in the air 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. Though Securitech boasted the latest protection innovations, the office of its president was resplendent in antique executive decor. These days Tume was rarely visible, cloistering himself in his private room behind an ornate vault-like door. All communications were through his six secretaries or by intercom. Tom approached the aisle of secretaries, each dressed in coral-colored pencil skirts with hourglass waists shaped by girdles. Today they seemed unusually somber, even when forcing polite smiles. At the end of the aisle, a woman with an especially pointed brassiere motioned for Tom to stop.

“We know. So sorry.” The secretary spoke into her intercom. “Tom Mosh is here to see you.”

All the woman stood and surrounded him, patting him down in a methodical choreographed manner. “Take it off first,” said a secretary with a practiced receptionist voice. “Take off the coat.”

As a group, they all found a place to hold and with businesslike efficiency, slowly slid the coat off Tom’s shoulders. He flushed with embarrassment as, though dressed, he felt suddenly naked when Tume’s heavy office door creaked open. Inside, a large man in his mid-seventies with pallid skin peered around the door—his face racked with fear, his jowls trembling.

Recognizing Tom, he gestured insistently, “Quick, inside.”

The windowless office was uncomfortably hot and clammy and 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 a leather-covered desk pad sprang upward on end, completely concealing him. Tume stood again and pushed down the pad, 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 former leadership qualities shriveled away leaving a bloated pale husk. He appeared on the verge of a perpetual heart attack.

"Here at Securitech, access codes have approached a new level of sophistication," Tume nervously sat and pressed his folded hands on the desk pad 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. "Mr. Tume, are you saying I'm a security risk?"

"It would be saying too much if I told you," Tume replied, trying to smile. "Don't worry, you'll receive a pension. And you won't have to expose yourself to danger by 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 flustered face tightened in agony as he pressed a desktop button.

The heavy door opened and one of the secretaries outside spoke. "Your coat, sir."

Tom turned. Outside, the secretaries stood together in formation 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 on 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 Norma, 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 then right, past a brown-tiled room with a dishwasher. He thought of his father’s electronic repair shop and the piles of devices rife 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 as he had long worked there. 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. Unassembled electronic boxes littered his mother’s house afterward. She refused to throw them out—instead, stacking and circling them around her bed like sandbags around a foxhole.

“Everything is so incomplete,” Tom mused as he entered a narrow room, stepping over buckets and mops. “Where could the restroom be?” He had used the diner’s restroom before but never remembered this convoluted passage.

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 inflicted on his coat.

A crunching of glass made Tom aware he was 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 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. One boy shouted, "Regel, Laudlo!"

From the alley's opposite end, two more boys appeared—one much taller than the other. 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. Instead of being united by race, these kids exhibited all variety of ethnic features.

"We'll see." The shorter 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 other 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. 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 grinned as he opened a long shiny 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—opening the plastic bag to touch one of the rocks. It crushed easily, releasing a fine white power which clung to Tom’s fingers 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. Perhaps the powder was to be mixed with water, then loaded into the stapler? Then, pressing a button on the side would release the needle that could penetrate the skin, injecting the substance. As he inspected it, the sharp needle point accidentally pricked his skin, releasing a trickle of blood.

Tom put the stapler down and walked into the 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 tiles 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 bristling. The still air had an electric charge, as before a cloud burst. There, beside the table, his coat silently floated, filled out as though worn by a ghost. Its unyielding position felt accusing and judgmental. The unbuttoned opening widened revealing the dark lining inside that began to ripple as from a hidden wind. Then, like a

loosened camera bellows, the lining hurtled forward toward Tom. Before he could move, Tom was swallowed up by the engulfing material.

From inside, the black fabric looked to be extending in all directions—forming small inlets, folds, and surprisingly large openings without a defined shape. It seemed the lining had grown chaotic and cancerous. Though Tom could move, he felt fearfully constricted in the oppressive darkness.

Ahead, he began to discern someone curled up like a fetus on what appeared the floor of this uncertain space—a dark-haired young boy around eleven, dressed in a T shirt and baggy pants. What was this boy 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 gang member with the flashing knife Tom had seen earlier. Slow steady breathing revealed 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 violent gang he had just narrowly escaped, Tom stood to leave. Without warning, a hand closed swiftly 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 coat? 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 loose 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 that he was 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. “A hideout for your gang? 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 itself 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.”

It was the same boy again, this time stoned, with clouded vacant eyes that, nonetheless, noticed Tom’s presence.

“Hey man, not again, can’t you let me sleep?” The boy wiped his eyes. “So, how you like this stuff, huh? It’s fine this time, good quality—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 gotta get ready. My mom’s been liftin’ 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. Tells 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 homeboy named Tarnation—he and me got a plan. We'll run away and live in an old train station, broken windows and shit, but we can fix it up. It'll 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 tried another approach. "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, pulling his pistol from the blanket and waving it like a magic wand. "You're dealing with Deano, remember—Deano Dazzler! You want to see my act?" Deano gestured theatrically with his other hand.

From behind Tom, eight members of the Scrabble Clan appeared and, before he noticed, ran up to pin his arms back. Deano smiled to his buddy, Tarnation, who came over to join him.

"Hey Daz, show us that trick," said Tarnation to Deano.

Deano with a nimble practiced move, threw his pistol upward, out of Tom's vision. Snapping his fingers and then spreading open his right hand, he caught a falling cylindrical object. It was a spray can. Broadly smiling, Deano turned toward Tom. "You want to live, mother fucker? Prove to me you really want to live."

Tarnation joined in. “You old 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. “Ok, 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 and 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, Tarnation. Let him out.”

Tarnation clicked open a switchblade. Tom turned toward the sound as the boy jabbed the fabric behind him. With one swift 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 was probably 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. 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, letting his anger at being fired take hold.

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 it was still moving, two men wearing peculiar yellow uniforms bolted from the side door. Tom ran to a tall chain link fence but only climbed a short way 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 from the seated Tom, his voice and build was unmistakably that of Vigil Tume.

After spending time alone in the closed van, Tom had been brought by the yellow-uniformed people to a surveillance room before a line of monitor screens—all off except for the one capturing his moment of shameless defiance. Tom's image on the screen seemed like that of a stranger, worlds away. "I didn't join them. They tagged me."

"You're it then, aren't you?" Tume, with trembling cheeks, turned to face Tom. The yellow men to 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 looked away. "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? And 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 ringleader? 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 off his shoulders to 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. He wanted to mask the discoloration by making the lower, newly-painted section as straight as possible. Beige over a sky blue didn’t please him; nevertheless, it covered the graffiti. Even with the extra-thick paint, it took several coats, 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, Talia 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 was 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. "Even though some of our wallpaper is textured, this stuff always does the trick. Voila!"

She ran a sponge over the back of the coat. To Tom's 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 with 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 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.

As Tom gazed up, 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 spelled: “TOM MOSH.”

