

Gene Krupa's Never-Before-Published Science Fiction Story

by

Edward Desautels

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Knowing my mother would disapprove of and regard such an encampment with disgust, incomprehension, and a cold fish-eye, I make my office, my home, Ed Desautels Compound in the shadow of the abandoned Ortleib's brewery, whence come these amorous frenzies, these staggering bouts with the crack-whore aesthetician Esther Marie, these antipathies, these depraved tastes, this predilection for Camel wide-gauge lights, this melancholy which is caused by grief (nostalgia, for me), these transports wrought by denial, this sense of waiting, this unquenchable desire to watch Monday Night Football all season long drinking hushed bloody Marys until my skin turns orange. My mind is almost totally absorbed in the vivacity of these inflamed musings here in the center of Desautels operations, here in what was once the blocking room of the Stetson Hat Company. I've room enough to wander its industrial square footage, swing like Tarzan from the loop of chain suspended from a ceiling I-beam, reorganize space by wheeling around the quasi-Japanese screens I've fashioned from abandoned billboard panels—room enough to distract myself and indulge my whims, but still the Krupa manuscript lies paper-clipped on the desk before me. Beyond it, through the barred window of my office/rumpus room, the rotted water tank of Ortleib's rises skyward in the shape of a gigantic beer bottle, silent and empty above the rubbly Brewerytown cityscape. It's all crumbling brick, flaccid chimneys, burned-out auto and human hulks, blank stares, and expansive acts of meanness in this neighborhood. I put on a record of the Krup in the hope of establishing an ersatz rapport.

Gene Krupa: Master of the Hide Beaters, heretic, apostate, trap man, layer of rhythms: his magic rakes off a dusty, brittle 78 rpm platter of, naturally, "Drummin' Man." Loosed from the ball and chain of the Benny Goodman Orchestra, the Krup and his combo played it hot for the rugcutters, but on this afternoon they dominate and upbraid my mind's undifferentiated chatter, seek to slip beyond, to fill the volume of the Compound. And is it merely the musty fragrance of the dust sleeve, or has the essence of the Krup's perspiration been captured by a miracle of arcane recording processes now lost in an age obsessed by hygiene and olfactory masks?

Mongrel contemplations at best, I think, the thoroughbred kind driven by my heels into the floorboards as I pace around the blocking room and absorb the echoing waves of rhythm. Ignorant

improvisation animates my arms which beat the air before me in time with The Gene Krupa Trio. Solitude can be its own reward at moments such as this, inspiring in me that familiar, viscous self-awareness. But I've begun to wonder if it might not be quietude I desire from the imposing dimensions of this largely empty room. Certainly the pigeons in the rafters do not interrupt, their cooing, after all, nothing less than an urban "Ohm." And the mice in the elevator shaft only retreat further into its recesses, as if drawn there by the leathery aroma of congealed machine oil. Down that shaft, too, fly the final bars of "Drummin' Man" as the needle passes through the run-off grooves and bounces metronomically off the paper label disc. I reset the needle for another spin, then climb on my rusty bicycle to creak out enormous figure eights on the workshop floor: sixty-five feet to a loop. The wake my cycling creates ruffles the leaves of the Krupa manuscript as I make a pass close by my desk and—am I mistaken? or did someone speak? A Krupa monologue, it seems to me, is gathering momentum with each grinding shove of the bicycle's pedals: rasping, datedly hip, impossible.

"We played at a popular club near New York till 2 a.m., then rehearsed till 5 for a recording of "Drummin' Man" that began at 9 a.m. It was afternoon by the time we cut out. Man, sessions like that can leave your head throbbin'! When that happens, I duck out for Bromo Seltzer." The Krup's pitch begins to dominate the music: Corky Cornelius's slicing trumpet riffs and Anita O'Day's left-handed vocal, even the Krup's own jungle majesty, are smothered beneath a gelatinous pyramid erected with blocks of jiggling, rubbery advertising text that exerts a terrible pressure on my inner ear. He goes on: "It's sweet music to feel a headache slip away, your nerves quit shaggin', your stomach settle down. That's what Bromo Seltzer does for me. Man, oh man, let me tell you: that Bromo put me right and, would you believe it? That night I was right back at it, layin' it to the rugcutters (that's jitterbuggers to you Philly cats). I use more energy on two swing numbers than a track star does on a mile run, but when I got back to the hotel room that night I just couldn't get to sleep. I paced around like a framed jailbird, flippin' cards into my Stetson fedora. Finally, somethin' moved me. You know? I started scribblin' down some sentences on the hotel stationery. Oddball stuff all the way, man. Ate Chinese that night, as I recall. Must've been the scallops in garlic sauce talkin', if you know what I mean. Took some Bromo"

One voice among the many having a go at an aria in the mind's perpetual opera, the Krup's rises then recedes as I struggle to reconstruct the circumstances by which I came into possession of the Krupa manuscript. I recall it was a mordantly overcast spring afternoon, very much like the day on which, by virtue of my tireless efforts, Victor Mature's "The Idolator" was accepted for publication by Lunatics for a Penny. I like to think of myself as an archaeologist of sorts, an unearther of marginal fiction penned by now-deceased semi-celebrities. Everyone, and I do mean *everyone*, makes their move in the writing game and celebs are no exception to the rule. I took a stab at it myself for a few years, working myself into a vaguely neurotic torpor, until the day on which my synapses began to fire with the random spray of an ill-

maintained Gatling gun. Mother and sister found me rabidly pacing around my desk in the ancestral Desautels manse in Newport, Rhodesia—Rhode Island, that is—muttering obscenities and effecting spastic charges at the legal pad lying on my desk only to dash out long, mysterious series of geometric shapes peppered here and there with the words “American Cyanimid.” Three months I spent “recuperating” in the Bybury nuthouse, then another two in a shabby, punitive convalescent home in Teaneck, New Jersey. I’d probably still be there today, were it not for the intervention of my dear, sweet Auntie Pediatricia. But that’s another story.

After my so-called discharge, two events led me to the scheme of excavating the fictions of the dead and semi-famous. It was on a mordantly overcast spring afternoon, much like the one on which I was later to receive the Krupa manuscript, that I read an article in the stroke mag *Patently Obvious* about punk rocker Stiv Batons. Stiv let slip that, in light of his (unstated) increasingly anemic musical career, he was plying his rapier wit to a book of short stories. I thought nothing of this bit of trivia and filed it away with all the other detritus of sensory input mucking around in the more seedy and suspect corners of my mind. Two weeks later, Stiv was dead: struck by a Paris cab as he stooped to retrieve a half-smoked Gauloise from the pavement. On learning of Stiv’s death, I recalled the book on which he claimed to be working and it occurred to me that despite its likely infantile and malodorous quality, there just might be a publisher willing to cash in on the name recognition factor. The texts could be “cleaned up” (ghost writing not being the kind of euphemism I like to throw around too lightly) and slapped together with some glossies of Stiv: a touching memorial revealing the never-before-seen dimension of this tragic punk rocker. It all came down to getting my hands on the manuscripts. As it turned out, the whole deal was a flop. Some sleuthing unearthed the phone number of Stiv’s agent who informed me that Stiv had indeed been speaking out the dorsal end of his alimentary canal when he let loose with the business about the stories. Still and all, I felt I was on to something.

In seven months I was able to put aside enough to buy a small ad in *Variety*. (My job as head counterman at the St. George Diner, 7th and Walnut, is not exactly a gold mine, but I more than get by.) The ad solicited unpublished manuscripts from the friends and family of the semi-famous dead folks who penned them. I offered, for a modest fee, to do some “light editing” and handle the details of submission. Payment received on any publication would be donated to the late semi-famous person’s favorite charity (a goodwill angle I played to the hilt when making my move on potential publishers). It was a scheme I considered a peculiar hobby at best, something off which I’d never make a nickel or a dime. I was right. There were few takers for those awful stabs, but in spite of this I did manage to see Hollywood cowboy Slim Pickens’ “Turkey Buzzards Tear Their Meat,” comic actor Bob Cummings’ “Even if they Pay to Play,” ever-the-butler Sebastian Cabot’s “The Madmen at Bicetre,” and Hall-of-Famer Dizzy Dean’s “The

Filth that Surrounds Them” through to publication. Then, just as I was beginning to lose interest, comes the Krupa manuscript.

Slipped beneath the door it was, not even an address on the envelope. It gave me the crawling fear to think that someone out there knew how to find me, but I consoled myself with the fantasy that the envelope, the manuscript, had not been delivered, as it were, but was, rather, a forgotten thingy of my own creation that, naturally, I came to detest, which I’d placed in the envelope as a stop-gap measure, a way to temporarily remove it from my sight. And I suppose it *is* plausible the envelope later had fallen from the waste bin as I was carting it to the dumpster where I’d intended, rightfully, to deposit it with the rest of the trash. So, perhaps I’m responsible for the so-called Krupa manuscript after all. Who’s to say? Can I ever really be certain, after all this time, that the phrases turned on those six yellow pages of lined, legal-sized paper are not the products of my own atrophied imagination? It’s a question that presents me with a dilemma of first-order magnitude: do I accept the manuscript as my own, cut it into tiny pieces, and place it, holding my nose, in the neighbor’s trash can (as was the habit of a wizened old writer with whom I once had the opportunity to chat)? or do I follow through with an attempt to get the thing published in Gene Krupa’s name and, by so doing, accept the manuscript as indeed his?

Direct and eternal, colored with strident disgust, the Krup’s voice again begins to infest my consciousness with the slow, groping efficiency of the slave-making ant. I’m trying to whistle a happy tune known as The Force of Sheer Will, but the Krup only beats out its rhythm. “I’m sick and tired of bein’ classified a noise-maker,” whines the Krup. I feel myself removed to a triangulated point from which I watch myself creak out my figure eights on the ancient Raleigh in the northeast quadrant of Ed Desautels Compound. Poised behind his pearl Slingerlands, the Krup has installed himself in the northwest quadrant, bass drum emblazoned with a vertical double bar in the skin’s left hemisphere on which is located the monogrammed crest: “GK.” His gray sharkskin suit is soaked through with perspiration at the armpits and around the collar, and the burgundy handkerchief poking out of the pocket of his double-breasted blazer is wilted despite the starch. Frozen, he is, the brush in his right hand poised almost effutely over the high-hat, the left brush nearly grazing the tom-tom’s skin. His eyebrows are raised and his head’s thrown back, mouth wide open revealing heavy white teeth and a coated tongue. “People,” he’s telling me, “somehow associate me with the role of the ‘mad drummer’ and think I don’t know anything about the music. But let me tell you, Ed, artistic drummin’ comes only with years of varied music and emotional experiences—mostly e-motional. You get that e-motion in there, E-man, and people start to say, ‘This cat’s got something fresh. Let’s see if we can dig.’”

For the eleventy-seventh time the “Drummin’ Man” 78 plays out to the scratchy, metronomic rebound of the needle. Thinking to myself that this “rapport” with the Krup is developing into another irritating episode of neurotica, I hit the coaster break and swing myself off the Raleigh. Laying the bike

down where it's come to a stop, I walk over to the photograph of Krupa I nailed to the wall some months ago. It is a silent thing, a dead moment, an heirloom: a scrap of father's life that must have inspired a now-and-then twinge over the piano man *he* never became. The inscription in the bottom left corner: "To a good kid who can really work those 88s. So you wanna lead the band, huh? Gene Krupa." The matter of the Krupa manuscript, I'm coming to realize, cannot be delayed indefinitely.

Despite the hush that's fallen over Ed Desautels Compound, a quiet that normally would bring me some peace, I felt, rather, the onset of a slump, a heavy heart, so I slip out into the now-dark warehouse ghost town of North Philadelphia on my way to a spot beneath the Berks stop of the Market-Franklin Elevated, to rendezvous with my *amiga*, my familiar, the crack-whore aesthetician Esther Marie. Always a tonic for my agitation, our games offer me reassurance, carry me back to the peace and comfort of my gourd.

At Girard and Howard I stop at the Foodery and, through the perforated disc in the Plexiglas window, whisper a request to Binh the Silent. "A six of Ortleib's and two H. Upmann Naturals," I say. Binh nods and sounds the buzzer that signals to me the wall compartment cut at knee level is now unlocked and ready to receive my cash. I open the door and toss in two fives. Binh the Silent withdraws the cash and moves back into the store to collect my items. He knows the routine and the order I place is rather something of a formality; a formality, as I think of it, that seems at odds with the aura surrounding Binh. Binh became silent in the days when, not long off the boat from Vietnam, he operated The Foodery on a normal, walk-in basis: shot in the throat by a fifteen-year-old who wasn't even on the mescaline or being made to go through the motions of some dreary rite of passage or another. Tried, convicted, and sentenced as an adult, the kid was later interviewed at his prison in Allegheny County by a reporter from *The Philadelphia Inquirer*. The kid insisted the shooting had been all Binh's fault because of two grave errors: Binh hesitated. Binh made eye contact.

Binh the Silent returns with my order, places it in the compartment, and sounds the buzzer. I bend to retrieve my items. Next to the brown paper bag, which is already moistening with condensation, is my \$2.40 in change and an envelope that very much reminds me of the envelope in which I'd discovered the Krupa manuscript. On it, Binh has carefully printed the message: "For Esther Marie." Surprised, I glance up through the Plexiglas to Binh's sad, delicate smile. That smile is perhaps the only thing in the world that can truly inspire in me a sense of what it means to be self-contained. I try to return his quiet, knowing smile, woefully unsure of what's being communicated between us, and, as I turn and make off up Howard Street, the thought occurs to me that Binh's silence is something intrinsic; that speech, for him, would only sully his lemur gracefulness. Quite unaware of the content of his silent message, I understand it was a message nonetheless, a message to which I will make an appropriate

response in a way that will be unknown to me in its making. Thinking of Binh, I sense a gradual easiness inform my stride and, oddly, I'm acutely aware of the skeleton at work beneath my flesh.

It's quarter to one by the time I get up to the Berks stop. Esther Marie is leaning against a rusty trestle, smoking a cigarette, one leg drawn up under her boney ass, flamingo fashion. She keeps a low profile there, in the shadows, working mostly the car trade. To move into the streets of the neighborhood fronting the Market-Franklin Elevated is to risk a ritualistic beating at the hands of the Brewerytown-Fishtown-Kensington citizenry: the last gasp of a disintegrating neighborhood's counteroffensive.

Esther Marie, my one true friend in the world (not counting my dear Auntie Pediatrica, of course), minder of her own business, holder of the Ph.D. from Temple in aesthetics, excused her rudeness once for asking me why a graduate of the Wharton School of Business, magnum cum laude, chooses to live in a workshop in North Philly and hustle the counter at the St. George. "I'm sorry," she said. "Not my business. And are there, after all, such things as so-called reasons? I think we both understand the thing about reasons, the anachronistic nature of a notion such as cause-and-effect." Crack- whore, aesthetician, Esther services the artists and literati who inhabit the area, depraved souls who cannot make it through the week without being deconstructed. There is always a trace, you see, of the theoretician in the so-called artist.

"Ed Desautels." She husks my name through thin lips, smoke puffing out the syllables. "Edward: guardian of the money. DesAutels: of or from the altars. I've done my research. You're a species of priest." The cigarette smoke seems not only to drop from her nostrils, slip between her surprisingly perfect teeth, but to seep out of every pore on her body. It envelops her in swirls of battleships. "Bilingual homonyms crackle out of that last name, Desautels." She speaks in a sultry, dry, irritated drawl that comes off as playful ... or homicidal. I'm not sure I'm in the mood for either as she plods up to me in combat boots, sheer black stockings embroidered with spider web stitching, and a loose, flowery dress, perhaps three or four sizes too large, cinched at the waist with a kind of bandoleer. She reaches with what I hope is mock petulance for the beer I offer. Binh's envelope I hold aside, thinking it might prove a trump in the game she seems intent on instigating, here beneath the moldering Elevated in this thick, August, North Philadelphia air.

"Do tell," I mutter, opening an Ortleib for myself and unwrapping one of the H. Upmanns. I make no mention of the fact that her once wandering left eye is now perfectly in synch with the right, both fixing me with Mussolini intensity.

A slight snicker prefaces her delivery. "The word *hôtel* comes to mind, for one. Are you of or from the *hôtel*? Not very interesting, I'll grant. But in translation: altar and alter." She exaggerates the endings to make her point. "Now, alter is interesting. To make different. *Différent*, in French, non? Now we're getting somewhere. And the Latin root: alter, meaning other. Edward of or from the others.

Always a trace of the Other. This is true. A trace of Esther Marie in Edward, perhaps? A trace of the theorist in ... well, let's not think about that. "I'm trying to remember the line about whores who don't want money, seeing as I seem to be getting a freebie. The most expensive whores you can get? Is that it? As immediately as the thought establishes a taboo in my mind, I'm overcome with the urge to take Esther in my arms and, as the El blasts into the shit-stained, pissy Berks station above us, sparks firework down from the rails illuminating a peculiar beauty I'd never before realized in Esther's face. I bite my lip. "But there's one more," she says, her lips inching closer to mine. "Oh tell," she whispers. "Oh tell, Autels."

A delicious wave of melancholia seizes me by the throat and compels me to wrap Esther in my arms. Maybe because she got it wrong. DesAutels really means "from the Autel," a region in France. "I have something for you," I say.

"I've been hoping—"

"It's an envelope. From Binh."

"Another one of *those*?" She pulls away and shoots me a look. And I'm thinking, *another*?

I hold up the envelope and Esther snatches it from my hand. A disgusted smirk distorts her face as she undoes the clasp; a smirk that does nothing to diminish my newfound appreciation for the beauty I cannot seem to help finding in her features. From the envelope she withdraws a single sheet of lined, yellow, legal-sized paper and, as she begins to read, I hear something dangerously familiar in the words. "The Delaware cuts the valley's throat," she recites, "which bleeds an endless city, scored and squared, ruining in parallels for years." She pauses to sip at her beer and the phrase "dog, I am" comes to mind. "Clumsy in the rich shadows of a cobblestone alleyway twilight, I crash rattling cans of ripening trash." I know these words. I know them. Esther continues: "Dumb as a starving dog, I am drawn to the water where I wonder at the barges bearing slag beneath Franklin's bridge." Pleasure. There's a certain pleasure in hearing Esther read these words. "They *bruise*," (an emphasis of intrigued curiosity on the word "bruise,") "bruise the clouded ripples that tear at the muddy edge. Ashen coals buried deep beneath the slag, we're cooling with worn desire—"

"—smothering on the barges that churn toward an orange evening past the refinery fires." I finish the line, astonished. These words belong to me. At least in the sense of having juxtaposed them—words not capable of being "owned." Could they really be mine? I work my best poker face.

"You've read this?" says Esther.

"No." No lie. "Binh," I explain-defend. "He wanted me to deliver it to you. There was just something about that last line. An intuition. I think," here comes the cover, "you have an admirer." An understood nudge of the elbow underlines my comment.

We leave it at that and keep nervous company with each other until, at dawn, we make our yawning ways home, me to the echoey workshop that busy-bodies with the poltergeists of the good men

and women of Stetson, (one-time suppliers to the world of fedoras, slouches, and not-to-be-believed ten-gallons), she to her third-floor studio on Howard Street where she lives beneath a cadre of Rastafarians who more than once have overdrawn their bath and sogged the cornflakes and elbow macaroni in the cupboard of Esther's breakfast nook.

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I wake up in Ed Desautels Compound after a fitful sleep charged by unsettling dreams and, after a clumsy turn at Krupa's Slingerlands, decide to pay a visit to Binh the Silent. Turning off 5th Street and heading east on Girard, I'm reminded of the whispering, bleary cityscapes of Edward Hopper as a muddy breeze tingles the sweat pooling at the back of my collar and a vague feeling of disorientation forces me to stop in the middle of the sidewalk, glance around, confirm my position in the city's grid. Even as I resume my progress down Girard, I'm taken with the curious feeling of waiting to be served, deli ticket pinched tightly between thumb and forefinger, mind wandering into territories that impress upon my consciousness a quiet torpor. And with the precision of illogic, it comes as no surprise to me to find The Foodery closed. Abandoned, it is, wooden sign flopping loose over the sidewalk from a single rusted chain. I tap on the Plexiglas anyway, step to the chained and barred corner doorway to which has been ducktaped an envelope: an envelope not unlike that in which I'd discovered the Krupa manuscript some months ago on that eternally mordant spring afternoon. I peel the envelope from the plate glass, draw it through the iron bars, and read the message printed in a careful hand: "For Ed Desautels." Tearing open the envelope, I withdraw from it a yellow, lined, legal-sized sheet of paper at the top of which is the heading: "Gene's Skins Fall Mute." Standing at the corner of 3rd and Girard, I begin to read.

Desautels climbs on his rusted bicycle and begins creaking out enormous figure eights on the workshop floorboards: six-five feet to a loop. The wake he creates ruffles the leaves of the Krupa manuscript as he passes close by his desk and—is he mistaken? or did someone speak? A Krupa monologue, it seems, is gathering momentum with each grinding shove of his bicycle's pedals: "I dare say I've mellowed a bit. I'd probably liken myself to a pitcher who used to throw very hard, didn't want to get outa the game, and started to pitch with his bean instead of his arm ... Don't misunderstand ... my taste for playin' hasn't dulled ... I've come to the realization that, considerin' my situation and the condition of the music business, I'd do myself a whole lotta good to cool it a bit ... No, I don't think I could make that one-nighter grind, or five-shows-a-day theater routine ... way beyond Bromo, man ... I think you can compare me to an old-time pitcher who lost his fast ball (am I repeatin' myself?); he pitches more with his head than with his arm ... Now I've mellowed ... Hell, I've grown older ... Since I was a kid

I always wanted to play with a symphony ... Before I call it quits, I'd like to make it just once ... But I'm feelin' too lousy to play and I'm sure I sound lousy ... I'm just too old to take it ... I intend to go on as I am now. I don't wanna push it ... I never felt more like playin' in my entire life ... But I have to cool it and follow a reasonable schedule ... I'm hopeful things will improve ... I manage to play a bit, lecture on the narcotic thing, make appearances for the Slingerland Drum Company, whose drums I've used for over 40 years ... I try to remain current, that's important ... You don't have to like everything new out there, but you have to know about it. All through my life, I've listened, adapted if I thought it right and necessary ... I'm just sorry I can't be more active, you know? But as the manager of the Steel Pier in Atlantic City used to say to me: "Gene, you work too hard. Really you should rest, take things a bit easier." At long last I'm takin' his advice. I'm searchin' for the beat without rhythm, the silent drum to which I always knew I grooved.

Gene Krupa died October 16, 1973, about 9:30 a.m. at his Yonkers, New York, home. The official cause of death was listed as heart failure, though it had been widely known that Krupa was suffering from leukemia as well as emphysema, heart problems, and other ailments. In the years following Krupa's death, there had been intermittent talk about the formation of a Krupa "ghost" band, à la Glenn Miller, Tommy Dorsey, etc. Apparently, that particular idea never progressed beyond the "talking" stage.

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At Ed Desautels Compound, I sit at my desk and take up the matter of the manuscript. Large, expansive script, at once agitated and confident, covers the six yellow sheets of legal-sized paper. When I remove the paper clip from the upper left-hand corner, the image of the clip remains behind in a residue of oxidation. Numbers have been added in a vertical row in the left-hand margin, the sum having a dollar sign in front of it: \$476.72. Certified public accountants would marvel at the precision with which these numerals have been written and it occurs to me that they most likely were not put there by the same hand responsible for what I've been referring to as "the Krupa manuscript." Then again, the hand sometimes submits to the will that drives its purpose. Unlike the text, the title at the top of the first page, casually printed in half-inch block letters, suggests a third hand. Written in pencil, a soft, fat lead, smeared as if written by a left-handed somebody-or-other who'd just finished eating a runny cheesesteak sandwich, the title confounds: INTO THE ANEURYSM. And beneath it, ridiculous, I think, chuckling to myself, at myself: "by Gene Krupa."

I'm beginning to come to grips and can't help taking up a notebook and ball-point pen. I begin copying out the text in a hand in which I can at last invest some confidence.

"Snakes shed their skins along the riverbank, then recede quietly into the muddy water, the surface of which lusters with a petrochemical sheen. Spanish moss appears to rise up out of the river into the boughs of overarching trees. With the veins of moist wood in which critters stir unseen, the long webs of moss intertwine and from this creepy network emerge the gaping faces of which only Münch dared to dream; acne-scarred faces as large as Quonset huts yawn in the interplay of light and shadow: the filmy moss fleshing out the skeleton of branches. Now and then, great mottled birds lurch upward from beneath the moss which momentarily clings to their tail feathers. I watch them labor into the sky, feathers and moss drifting down like ash upon the forest and the river. These are the great forest birds, descendants of urban pigeons, genetically predestined to lose their ability to fly twelve to sixteen months after having matured and successfully mated. It's a sad and wondrous thing to watch these huge birds pass through a transformation that falls pitiably short of returning them to their dignified reptilian origins.

"Their metamorphosis begins in the eyes, which lose their lids and harden into crystals that suck light to reflect an amethyst ray that blazes in the dark undergrowth. Gradually, their feathers begin to drop off, starting at the head and progressing through the breast, the wings, the tail. Exposed to the elements, their skin wrinkles and hardens. Their legs grow thick and meaty from walking. Soon, confined to a relatively small patch of forest floor, they run out of prey (what few ground-creeping insects and worms there are to found are quickly depleted). Either they starve or, worse, are collected up by the artists who live in the shadow of the monorail, to be kept as household pets. The birds, however, are not long for life in the company of these humans. They become emaciated on a diet laden with herbal teas, become depressed, shrink into dark corners, and, ultimately, lose all will to live. Addicted to the pity these pathetic creatures arouse, some artists attribute most, if not all, of their creative impulse to the powerful emotions percolating within them at the awful sight of these bald, dying, flightless birds. Personally, I find the things dirty and loathsome, winged or bald. When I hear their infernal cooing in the vicinity of my habitation, I let out the cats.

"So, the great bird flaps off over the forest on what may, perhaps, be its final flight and as it disappears from view I turn my attention back to the river running ever more shallow as I move down stream. Years of experience have taught me how to pick out the channels in this muddy river—a rock here, a fallen tree there, a rusted automobile on a broken stretch of asphalt shot through with creeping vegetation, a piling from a bridge that no longer stands—all are guideposts that correspond to a maneuver to be made with the pole I use to nudge my pontoon away from the shallows.

"Inevitably, I reach a point at which clots of silt choke off the river's flow. The Aneurysm, I call it. Here, the water seeps into the low, flat forest bed creating a fetid swamp stagnant beneath a shroud of

algae. Only the most ancient, hardy, and adaptable flora and fauna can make it in this inhospitable environment. A few humans manage to hack out a living in the Aneurysm. Of course the artists have been removed here by act of law and their needs are seen to by charitable organizations who occasionally hold their noses and toss the proverbial bone. There also are my clients, the dealers in black market gasoline and petrochemical products salvaged from the abandoned refineries whose great holding tanks dot a path that indicates the course once taken by the river. They have their own code out here. They play hardball and they shoot. Suspiciously they trade their products with people like myself, the few willing to venture into the Aneurysm with the kinds of provisions they need: salt-fish, corn meal, cured tobacco, distilled spirits, hand tools of all kinds, illicit weapons, clothing. But the most highly-valued product a supplier like myself can provide is a dog trained to kill. Of these they have special need”

Later, taken with my renewed enthusiasm for this writing business, I dash off a letter to my Auntie Pediatricia:

Dear Auntie Pediatricia:

I am writing a science fiction story, making my move in the game of genre fiction. In order to devote 100 percent of my energies to this creative endeavor, I think it will be necessary for me to quit my job as head counterman at the St. George Diner, 7th and Walnut. I have great hopes, however, for my science fiction project and can even envision an entire collection growing from this seminal story. But, to cut to the quick: dear Auntie Pediatricia, I know you’ve always been behind me, even when the rest of the family was threatening to write me into their wills and set me up in a high-rise condo in Terrytown with a view of the Tapanzee Bridge. I know you sensed, but did not share, their bitterness over me being the only Desautels to break out and make it as an unmitigated failure. They stewed in their own juices, but you cheered me on all the way. And now, I suppose, it comes down to a question of what to do for the man who has absolutely nothing. Well, Auntie Pediatricia, I’m making my move to an even grander nothing, a nothing in which I’d like you to be a part. Auntie, could you find it in your heart of hearts to finance this move into the void? I should think a check in the amount of \$476.72 should do it. Auntie Pediatricia, when the snow falls this winter in feathery large flakes, would it be natural for me to think of it as nuclear fallout, given my frame of reference in composing this sci-fi lalpalooza?

All My Love,
Eddie

* * *

Out in the sooty, humid midnight air, I drop my missive in a letterbox, then make off for the Berks stop for rendezvous with Esther Marie that, now, can be nothing other than professional. There's a new bounce in my step, and that certain "itch" that can only be cured by a good deconstruction. I go hard at the mere thought of what she's likely to do to "Into the Aneurysm." When I get there, however, Esther Marie is nowhere to be seen. In the gloom beneath the tracks, I kick around empty cans, wander up the trestle against which I've grown so used to seeing her lean. An envelope rests on its concrete piling, an all too familiar looking envelope. On it, in angular script, the message, "To Whom it May Concern." I open it and begin to read.

I am silent. I am smoke. I've given up the business. Strange dreams have pushed me to the edge of my wits. I have dreams in which all the men I've ever fucked are gathered around me in a large room, about the sized of the Goodyear blimp hanger in Akron, Ohio, and they all have the face of Mahatma Gandhi. Then I have dreams about all the men to whom I've administered [she actually uses the word, like an officious MD.: administered] blow jobs, and they've gathered together in the Rose Bowl. They commence to doing the "wave" while chanting: 'The analytical phase is particularly interesting!' And they all have the face of Franklin Delano Roosevelt. Then I've dreams in which all the men who've ever complained to me about their wife's frigidity gather around me on the island of Crete. They fan me with palm fronds and bestow upon me offerings of grilled seafood marinated in a mixture of olive oil, lemon juice, oregano, garlic, and black pepper. And all of them have the face of Ignatius of Loyola. And then ... and then ... then I have dreams in which all the men who've ever asked me to beat them, humiliate them, urinate into their expansive, avuncular faces, faces that belie the encephalopathic mutations taking place behind their abnormally close-set eyes, changes in the brain cells that flog the horses of their infarcted libidos toward the abandoned incense factory in which every man is transformed into a human Job Johnny—all these specimens prostrate themselves before me on a Frisbee the size of the moon and the color of overcooked asparagus, a color that emits the boozy, sour aroma of pay phone handsets. All of these men have the face of Reid Flemming, World's Toughest Milkman. And then"

I fold the note, stick it in my breast pocket, and wait. And wait.