Bullet in the Brain

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Anders couldn’t get to the bank until just before it closed, so of course the line was endless and he

got stuck behind two women whose loud, stupid conversation put him in a murderous temper. He

was never in the best of tempers anyway, Anders – a book critic known for the weary, elegant

savagery with which he dispatched almost everything he reviewed.

With the line still doubled around the rope, one of the tellers stuck a “POSITION CLOSED” sign in

her window and walked to the back of the bank, where she leaned against a desk and began to pass

the time with a man shuffling papers. The women in front of Anders broke off their conversation

and watched the teller with hatred. “Oh, that’s nice,” one of them said. She turned to Anders and

add, confident of his accord, “One of those little human touches that keep us coming back for

more.”

Anders had conceived his own towering hatred of the teller, but he immediately turned it on the

presumptuous crybaby in front of him. “Damned unfair,” he said. “Tragic, really. If they’re not

chopping off the wrong leg, or bombing your ancestral village, they’re closing their positions.”

She stood her ground. “I didn’t say it was tragic,” she said. “I just think it’s a pretty lousy way to

treat your customers.”

“Unforgivable,” Anders said. “Heaven will take note.”

She sucked in her cheeks but stared past him and said nothing. Anders saw that the other woman,

her friend, was looking in the same direction. And then the tellers stopped what they were doing,

and the customers slowly turned, and silence came over the bank. Two men wearing black ski

masks and blue business suits were standing to the side of the door. One of them had a pistol

pressed against the guard’s neck. The guard’s eyes were closed, and his lips were moving. The

other man had a sawed-off shotgun. “Keep your big mouth shut!” the man with the pistol said,

though no one had spoken a word. “One of you tellers hits the alarm, you’re all dead meat. Got

it?”

The tellers nodded.

“Oh, bravo, “Anders said. “Dead meat.” He turned to the woman in front of him. “Great script, eh?

The stern, brass-knuckled poetry of the dangerous classes.”

She looked at him with drowning eyes.

The man with the shotgun pushed the guard to his knees. He handed up the shotgun to his partner

and yanked the guard’s wrists up behind his back and locked them together with a pair of handcuffs.

He toppled him onto the floor with a kick between the shoulder blades. Then he took his shotgun

back and went over to the security gate at the end of the counter. He was short and heavy and

moved with peculiar slowness, even torpor. “Buzz him in,” his partner said. The man with the

shotgun opened the gate and sauntered along the line of tellers, handing each of them a Hefty bag.

When he came to the empty position he looked over at the man with the pistol, who said, “Whose

slot is that?”

Anders watched the teller. She put her hand to her throat and turned to the man she’d been talking

to. He nodded. “Mine,” she said.

“Then get your ugly ass in gear and fill that bag.”

“There you go,” Anders said to the woman in front of him. “Justice is done.”

“Hey! Bright boy! Did I tell you to talk?”

“No,” Anders said.

“Then shut your trap.”

“Did you hear that?” Anders said. “’Bright boy.’ Right out of ‘The Killers’.”

“Please be quiet,” the woman said.

“Hey, you deaf or what?” The man with the pistol walked over to Anders. He poked the weapon

into Anders’ gut. “You think I’m playing games?”

“No,” Anders said, but the barrel tickled like a stiff finger and he had to fight back the titters. He

did this by making himself stare into the man’s eyes, which were clearly visible behind the holes in

the mask: pale blue, and rawly red-rimmed. The man’s left eyelid kept twitching. He breathed out

a piercing, ammoniac smell that shocked Anders more than anything that had happened, and he was

beginning to develop a sense of unease when the man prodded him again with the pistol.

“You like me, bright boy?” he said.

“No,” Anders said.

“Then stop looking at me.”

Anders fixed his gaze on the man’s shiny wing-top shoes.

“Not down there. Up there.” He stuck the pistol under Anders’ chin and pushed it upward until

Anders was looking at the ceiling.

Anders had never paid much attention to that part of the bank, a pompous old building with marble

floors and counters and pillars, and gilt scrollwork over the tellers’ cages. The domed ceiling had

been decorated with mythological figures whose fleshy, toga-draped ugliness Anders had taken in at

a glance many years earlier and afterward declined to notice. Now he had no choice but to

scrutinize the painter’s work. It was even worse than he remembered, and all of it executed with the

utmost gravity. The artist had a few tricks up his sleeve and used them again and again – a certain

rosy blush on the underside of the clouds, a coy backward glance on the faces of the cupids and

fauns. The ceiling was crowded with various dramas, but the one that caught Anders’ eye was Zeus

and Europa – portrayed, in this rendition, as a bull ogling a cow from behind a haystack. To make

the cow sexy, the painter had canted her hips suggestively and given her long, droopy eyelashes

through which she gazed back at the bull with sultry welcome. The bull wore a smirk and his

eyebrows were arched. If there’d been a bubble coming out of his mouth, it would have said,

“Hubba hubba.”

“What’s so funny, bright boy?”

“Nothing.”

“You think I’m comical? You think I’m some kind of clown?”

“No.”

“You think you can mess with me?”

“No.”

“Mess with me again, you’re history. Capiche?”

Anders burst our laughing. He covered his mouth with both hands and said, “I’m sorry, I’m sorry,”

then snorted helplessly through his fingers and said, “Capiche – oh, God, capiche,” and at that the

man with the pistol raised it and shot Anders right in the head.

The bullet smashed Anders’ skull and ploughed through his brain and exited behind his right ear,

scattering shards of bone into the cerebral cortex, the corpus callosum, back toward the basal

ganglia, and down into the thalamus. But before all this occurred, the first appearance of the bullet

in the cerebrum set off a crackling chain of ion transports and neuro-transmissions. Because of

their origin these traced a peculiar patter, flukishly calling to life a summer afternoon some

forty years past, and long since lost to memory. After striking the cranium the bullet was moving at

900 feet per second, a pathetically sluggish, glacial pace compared to the synaptic lighting that

flashed around it. Once in the brain, that is, the bullet came under the mediation of brain time,

which gave Anders plenty of leisure to contemplate the scene that, in a phrase he would have

abhorred, “passed before his eyes.”

It is worth noting what Ambers did not remember, given what he did remember. He did not

remember his first lover, Sherry, or what he had most madly loved about her, before it came to

irritate him – her unembarrassed carnality. Anders did not remember his wife, whom he had also loved before she exhausted him with

her predictability, or his daughter, now a sullen professor of economics at Dartmouth. He did not

remember standing just outside his daughter’s door as she lectured her bear about his naughtiness

and described the truly appalling punishments Paws would receive unless he changed his ways. He

did not remember a single line of the hundreds of poems he had committed to memory in his youth

so that he could give himself the shivers at will – not “Silent, upon a peak in Darien,” or “My God, I

heard this day,” or “All my pretty ones? Did you say all? O hell-kite! All?” None of these did he

remember; not one. Anders did not remember his dying mother saying of his father, “I should have

stabbed him in his sleep.”

He did not remember Professor Josephs telling his class how Athenian prisoners in Sicily had been

released if they could recite Aeschylus, and then reciting Aeschylus himself, right there, in the

Greek. Anders did not remember how his eyes had burned at those sounds. He did not remember

the surprise of seeing a college classmate’s name on the jacket of a novel not long after they

graduated, or the respect he had felt after reading the book. He did not remember the pleasure of

giving respect.

Nor did Anders remember seeing a woman leap to her death from the building opposite his own just

days after his daughter was born. He did not remember shouting, “Lord have mercy!” He did not

remember deliberately crashing his father’s car in to a tree, of having his ribs kicked in by three

policemen at an anti-war rally, or waking himself up with laughter. He did not remember when he

began to regard the heap of books on his desk with boredom and dread, or when he grew angry at

writers for writing them. He did not remember when everything began to remind him of something

else.

This is what he remembered. Heat. A baseball field. Yellow grass, the whirr of insects, himself

leaning against a tree as the boys of the neighborhood gather for a pickup game. He looks on as the

others argue the relative genius of Mantle and Mays. They have been worrying this subject all

summer, and it has become tedious to Anders: an oppression, like the heat.

Then the last two boys arrive, Coyle and a cousin of his from Mississippi. Anders has never met

Coyle’s cousin before and will never see him again. He says hi with the rest but takes no further

notice of him until they’ve chosen sides and some asks the cousin what position he wants to play.

“Shortstop,” the boy says. “Short’s the best position they is.” Anders turns and looks at him. He

wants to hear Coyle’s cousin repeat what he’s just said, but he knows better than to ask. The others

will think he’s being a jerk, ragging the kid for his grammar. But that isn’t it, not at all – it’s that

Anders is strangely roused, elated, by those final two words, their pure unexpectedness and their

music. He takes the field in a trance, repeating them to himself.

The bullet is already in the brain; it won’t be outrun forever, or charmed to a halt. In the end it will

do its work and leave the troubled skull behind, dragging its comet’s tail of memory and hope and

talent and love into the marble hall of commerce. That can’t be helped. But for now Anders can

still make time. Time for the shadows to lengthen on the grass, time for the tethered dog to bark at

the flying ball, time for the boy in right field to smack his sweat-blackened mitt and softly chant,

They is, they is, they is.