

Self-Made Man

A short story and novel introduction

I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. But I am no philosopher. I am not a deep thinker of any stripe. My intellectual habits have been formed primarily by my training as a technologist and an engineer. I conceive and I create. I sketch. I plot. I tinker. But I've never really had to think much. Recently that's changed. I've been on a kind of search. I should probably introduce myself. I am Quincy Lomax. I am on the verge of becoming a self-made man. I'll be your narrator.

I record these words with the kindling hope that by the time this reflection is published in *The New Yorker* I'll hold a privileged position whereby my name will be known throughout the educated world, and when I tell a story, it will come with a built-in audience of wide-eyed habitués. People pine to know what fills the heads of famous folk. I shall be no exception. What is exceptional is that I don't recall ever having written anything before in my life. Not articles. Not essays. Not even grocery lists. But now I have this search and I feel the itch. I shall document it all.

To begin with, the search is about what it means to be human. How the experience differs from being, say, an Irish wolf hound or a Swiss cuckoo clock. I don't mind saying that I consider myself particularly qualified to explicate the idea. You see, I am the creator of the Lobot, robot companions to the rich and lonely. Not your grandmother's cyborg, the Lobot is one of the most important biotechnological breakthroughs of the past three decades. Part human clone, part android. Real human organs. Real skin, hair, and nails. All enhanced by high-functioning computational hardware. A real posthuman flesh machine. The kind Isaac Asimov and Philip K. Dick only dreamed about.

Have you seen the latest model? The 5.2cf? I've modeled the Caucasian female version after my good friend Octavia Wilde. Everyone calls her Pinkie. She's got three fingers and a thumb on each hand. She stands out at dinner parties. Yes, she's missing her pinkie fingers. Both of them. Jeweled thimbles adorn both stubs. Everyone seems to know her. So far, my search has led to her. She is oddly magnetic. I am in her orbit. I sometimes have a queer feeling as if I had a string somewhere under my left ribs, tightly and inextricably knotted to a similar string of hers. It is a truth universally acknowledged, that a single man in possession of a good fortune must be in want of a wife. But I assure you my search is not a search for a woman. It is not a search for love or companionship or some sort of intangible euphoria. That's too easy. It's been done too many times before. It is nauseating cliché and makes me want to vomit into a bucket. This search of mine is something greater. Something more sublime.

Pinkie was born into money. She's as much East Egg as I am West. She's got those graceful movements that only four generations of old money can produce. She knows how to flip her long, wavy auburn hair out of her eyes without a hint of pretention. She has a face that men notice, a face that women envy. Pinkie is plainly attractive in the way I figure all rich girls from posh Stepfordesque Connecticut towns are. Unlike me, she is a thinker. Philosophy. Religion. Anthropology. These are her domains. At times I am tempted to say she thinks too much. In her Franny Glass moods, she admits she's hard to talk to. Her eyes get all red and puffy. I feel like it's my responsibility to prevent her from jumping off the George Washington Bridge.

Just over a year ago Pinkie got married – to a guy I call Brom Bones. I loathed the man at first sight. He died four months later – decapitated, in a boating accident off the coast of Rhode Island under mysterious circumstances. I don't know much about what Pinkie's been doing since the ceremonial scattering of ashes, but I've been getting

used to crossing her path at some very fine black tie affairs, the kind with the guys who stroll about elegantly stroking violins.

We both live in Manhattan. Pinkie makes her home in an old brownstone on the Upper East Side. I dwell just below the clouds in an artsy penthouse overlooking Lincoln Center. It's a far cry from my modest beginnings. I don't mean for this to be a study in contrasts, but Pinkie is different from me in nearly every way. You'll probably want to know where I was born, and what my lousy childhood was like. Suffice it to say that I am from the Midwest. I won't bother telling you where, because the Midwest is all the same – vanilla at whichever end you lick it. I grew up in an aluminum-sided ranch house with one toilet and two plungers, with an ugly dog, a rabble of brothers and sisters of all ages, and a crazy aunt who lived in a small loft room above the detached garage.

Pinkie's invited me to Tabula Rasa, voted New York's most pretentious restaurant for the under-40 set. (She and I are both 34, by the way.) This is a place where chic smokers can still flaunt a Virginia Slim or tuck into an expensive cigar beneath bejeweled chandeliers without wrinkling the noses of neighboring diners. I await Pinkie's arrival as the cummerbunded waiter sets down a sweating bottle of \$400 champagne near an oil lamp supported by an art-nouveau lady in a flowing gown who holds the bowl of green crystal from which emerges the lamp itself. I hear Dean's voice whisper in my head. Dean is my older brother by three years. He's a writer and all. He lives in California where he somehow earns a living as a documentary filmmaker. Dean has a spooky whisper. He is critical of everything. He once said the U.S. army was practically as full of bastards as the Nazis were. Apart from jarheads, I am one of his favorite targets. He has often been my conscience, the white angel perched on my right-hand shoulder. At the moment he is telling me how ashamed I should be for drinking such expensive bubbly. "Just think what \$400 could do in some beleaguered

African nation.” The throaty whisper lingers. I leave the bottle untouched.

I can’t recall when or where I picked up this copy, but I am perusing the latest issue of HOTWIRE magazine to pass the time. Pinkie often keeps me waiting. She can do that. No one ever complains. I am told she is worth the wait. I first search the pages of the slick glossy for my name. I am often mentioned now in the pages of HOTWIRE. I saw a survey recently. In the past year, I have been the thirteenth most-mentioned personality in the magazine, right between Biggie Smalls, the guy who once hacked Helmut Kohl’s credit score down to zero, and Eddie Severe, who recently invented an air guitar he could sell en mass for \$69.95 – ubernerds with awesome technical chops. Pinkie currently ranks eighth, and I spot her name in an article on the GABA drug project on page 36. There’s the usual background info: The education bestowed on Pinkie by her parents had been expensive, athletic, and prolonged; and when they died within a few weeks of one another, she inherited her father’s techno-business. Though always unnamed, it is obvious that it is Fortune 500 worthy. She’s delicately labored to “bring it into the 21st century,” heading up projects like her matchmaking service for rich women (richsinglewomen.com) and the “Stage a Kidnapping” endeavor (getkidnapped.com), by which absurdly rich people pay large sums of money to be kidnapped in public and held for ransom for various dramatic purposes. And now she’s dipping headlong into neuropharmacology, developing the aphrodisiacal wonder drug GABA (gamma-aminobutyric acid), a pill that can make any two selected people want to spend the rest of their days together – or at least until they decide to stop taking the pill – despite how unattractive one or the other might be.

I almost finish reading the article just as Pinkie glides into the seat across from me, her lips bending into a smile. It’s the smile of familiarity. A comforting smile. It’s one that grants me permission to cut out the introductions and small talk.

“I see you’ve been busy this month,” I say. I show her the GABA article, but she waves the magazine away and continues to look at me as she straightens her dress. It’s a showy thing in lavender, something Grace Kelly or Audrey Hepburn might have worn at an Oscars ceremony. It smells expensive. Yet I look at her hands instead. I always look at Pinkie’s hands. Her eight fingernails are painted red. They match her lipstick and her ruby-encrusted thimbles. It’s a good look.

The waiter returns. I notice he’s wearing white gloves as he pours Pinkie a glass of champagne. He then looks at me with raised eyebrows but doesn’t say a word. I nod and he pours me a glass, too. I watch the bubbles, listening again to Dean’s chiding whisper.

“Oh, Quincy,” she says, settling into her seat with a noticeable sigh. “I’ve been thinking.” She pauses, looking around the restaurant, satisfied that no one is staring at her. “I want to get married.”

“Oh, yes?” I pause. “Again?” Her words take me by surprise. It’s not something Pinkie is likely to say. I would have been less taken aback if she had told me she likes to pee on fire hydrants. That being said, I admit I have often wondered what it would be like to marry a woman with only eight fingers. Well, this particular woman with eight fingers. I figure eight is enough. I let my mind wander and entertain the thought once again. “Do you have anyone in mind?” I ask. The words seem to have come out slower than I intended.

Pinkie giggles like a blushing schoolgirl. I can’t be sure why. I am not trying to be humorous. Half of me wants her to tell me she’s thinking of me.

“No, Quincy. I’ve just been thinking about the *idea*.” She speaks these words slowly, as if I’m supposed to understand some layered meaning. She slides a cigarette out of her gold cigarette case. I am not a smoker but I carry a lighter for times like these. I am interested in being accommodating.

“Not satisfied with your Lobot?” I jest. I lean across the table to her and give her a light.

“Oh, don’t be silly, Quince,” she retorts – flirtatiously, I believe, cutting short the last syllable of my name. She takes a deep drag on her cigarette, exhales with a look of ecstasy and we are both engulfed in bodacious spirals of smoke. Pinkie is the last woman on the planet to need a companion robot. I have often thought her problem is finding time to be alone.

“How about me?” I suggest idly, leaning back into my chair and adjusting my bowtie with studied nonchalance. Pinkie is like a sister to me. Like an aunt. Like a mother. Like the girl next door. But sometimes when she looks at me her eyes go to saucers, and I wonder.

“You’re much too good for me, Quincy.” She tilts her champagne glass slightly towards me and runs a finger around the rim. She lifts, gives the glass a little shake and then samples it, wincing. Her eyes roll back and – I presume – she is satisfied. “You know, you’re different. And I like that.”

“Different?” I ask. This is not an adjective that interests me.

“Yes,” she explains. “You haven’t even touched your champagne.”

I look down at the shapely glass and touch the stem tentatively, wondering what she means. I can’t even remember if I like champagne.

“The men I’ve known all my life are money-obsessed.” She leans in closer to me. I can smell her lipstick. “It eats away at their souls,” she whispers. “Picks at them even when they’re sleeping. *Radix malorum est cupiditas.*”

I begin to confuse Pinkie’s words with Dean’s whisper. I pull the glass to my lips and sip at the champagne. It lights up my tongue with a metallic flare. I take a shot at translating the Latin: “The root of all evil is greed?” It is an old theme. It is an old and boring theme. It is a theme my brother Dean has drilled into my head.

“Subdue your appetites, my dear, and you’ve conquered human nature.” Pinkie pulls away from me in a sudden movement that sours her smile. Her eyes re-focus, beyond me.

I turn to follow Pinkie's gaze. A lanky fellow in a crisp black pin-striped suit catches my eye from across the room and starts in my direction. He moves purposefully. Visually, he falls somewhere between an undertaker and a London stockbroker. He already has a drink in his hand. I can make out the bobbing olives. I realize now that it is not me he approaches, but Pinkie. He sits down next to her without a word of explanation. I feel just a little deflated.

"Who's your friend, Pinkie?" He asks the question with a polished English accent, without as much as a glance in my direction, and apparently without expecting an answer. He simply throws a well-manicured thumb over his shoulder. Pinkie looks up at him. Her face is now without expression.

"Leave him alone, Peter," she pleads. She has no intention of introducing us. "And leave me alone as well."

The plea seems half-hearted, but Pinkie does not look happy. She reaches down beneath the table and produces another long, skinny, cigarette. With graceful prestidigitation she flips it into a corner of her lips. She lights it with cupped hands in one swift motion that conceals the lighter. Cigarette number two.

"Peter Pursewarden," says the pin-striped man, swiveling around to me as I reach for the bottle of champagne. He thrusts his hand out to me in a manner that suggests he might be willing to work for me or maybe even give me money. I can see straightaway he's got a lazy eye. It floats to the side as he speaks. "You can call me Pursewarden," he adds.

I am often at a loss for words among Pinkie's high-flown cronies. I don't bother with moving my mouth. I just offer a perfunctory nod to conceal my growing awkwardness. Several tables away I spot an elderly man accompanied by a beautiful Lobot – the FA model: female Asian. I wonder what she's thinking as she looks into the old man's eyes. I wonder what memories have been implanted in her, what she's programmed to think about him, not knowing he's her owner rather

than her particular man friend. I wonder which one of my guys did the programming.

Pursewarden scoots his chair close to mine, looking from the Lobot back to me. He is seated too close. And then he leans in to me and speaks my name as if he's trying out a pair of tennis shoes for court-comfort. "Quincy Lomax," he says. The lower half of his face twists into an overwrought smile. "I am pleased to finally meet you." He extends a hand that I mistake for a second shake. He has produced a calling card, as if he's a stage magician hoping to make an impression. He seems to think I am a child.

I consider getting up and going to introduce myself to the FA Lobot. I admire the elderly man for his good sense. He will surely have a splendid time this evening.

"She's delightful," says Pursewarden, referring to the Lobot.

I look beyond the Englishman – to Pinkie. She dramatically exhales blue rings of smoke that widen over her head and settle there like a halo. But she isn't looking at me. She's distracted by the elderly man and his escort. She has followed Pursewarden's one-eyed gaze, which is locked onto the Lobot.

"I know she's one of your entourage," Pursewarden says in a subdued tone with an ostentatious wink, quickly turning back to me. "Oh, yes," he adds quickly, raising the volume. "I am impressed." His comment seems sarcastic.

"I asked you to leave him alone, Peter." Her words come out slow, harsh. The jaw is set hard, the teeth perhaps even clenched. Her lips barely move. It's as if she's part of a ventriloquist act. She does this when she's angry, brooding. "It's time for you to leave us."

Pursewarden deftly ignores her, his good eye trained on me, the other one roving to take in the rest of the restaurant as he pulls up a chair to join us. "You are to be congratulated," he says. "Your star is rising, Mr. Lomax. I hear the Takahashi Corporation is interested in purchasing Far East rights to the Lobot design."

My chest swells a little, thinking of the glowing article making the rounds in the techno-community. “You read HOTWIRE then?” I ask.

Pursewarden avoids my question. “They could turn you into a billionaire overnight, I suspect.” He pauses to take in my reaction. “But you’re having some little difficulty sealing the deal with them,” he adds. This is no question. He is making a well-qualified assertion, and with authority in his voice.

I put down my champagne glass, feeling the blood drain from my cheeks. Pursewarden shouldn’t know this. This is confidential. It’s privileged information. Pinkie remains silent, her look becoming distant. The elderly man and his Lobot are holding hands across their table. He looks happy, dazed. Speechless.

“You should mind your own bloody business,” I tell Pursewarden in his own language. I have quickly become brusque, rude. “Just who the hell do you think you are?” I look down at the calling card in my hand as soon as I realize what I’ve asked.

Peter Pursewarden III, MA (Oxon.)

Treasurer, The Mutual Aid Society

One Sutton Place South

New York, New York

*Abundant opportunities for business and amusement
in the most fulsome surroundings*

“He isn’t interested, Peter.” Pinkie comes beautifully to my defense. This is the passion of a true human. I reach across the table to take her hand, but she appears not to notice. She picks up her champagne glass and throws back the drink in one unladylike gulp.

“The Mutual Aid Society?” I look from the calling card up to Pursewarden. I can’t decide which of his eyes to focus on.

“You’re not interested, Quincy.” Pinkie is tapping my leg beneath the table. I wonder if she is signaling to me in Morse code. I try to discern long taps from short ones, but to no avail.

“What is this Mutual Aid Society?” My question is directed to Pinkie, but she remains silent and Pursewarden takes up the reins. I suspect it is some bleeding heart nonsense.

“It’s a supper club,” he explains as the overwrought smile returns. It almost consumes his entire face. “Members only. It’s all a rather private affair.”

I nod. I feel guilty for being curious, but I can’t hear Dean’s whispers. Now that I think about it I can barely remember his face.

“By invitation only, you understand” he continues. “We are some of the most influential and talented people from around the world who meet from time to time to exchange a little ‘mutual aid.’” He pauses to clear his throat, and his left eye floats toward the Lobot couple. “Pinkie here is one of our most illustrious members, aren’t you, Pinkie?”

Pinkie says nothing. Her face has become porcelain. But she doesn’t deny it.

“Would you like to join us, Mr. Lomax?”

I hesitate. “Well, what exactly do you mean by ‘mutual aid?’” I ask. I am thinking of Marlon Brando as the Godfather.

“For instance, I might know the name of the man at Takahashi who’s preventing your Lobots’ deal from going down,” he says, as if he has been prepared for some time with this tidy bit of information.

Pinkie pulls her cigarette from her mouth and stubs it out in the ornate glass ashtray to her left. She looks over to Pursewarden and exhales one last blue cloud that envelopes his face. “The supper club isn’t for Quincy. I’ve already told you: He’s not interested.”

Despite Pinkie’s pleas on my behalf, I can’t help but being curious now. Who is this Pursewarden fellow from Oxford, I wonder? How can he know about the deal that’s been on my mind now for the

past two weeks, the \$1 billion deal that I thought would have been sealed by now, the deal that has turned me into a thinker, a searcher. How does this funny, one-eyed Englishman know the grubby details? Does he really know the man who's been thwarting this deal? Can he influence him? Is this mutual aid?

"Quince." Pinkie's voice is plaintive. She pulls me out of my reverie. "The Mutual Aid Society is a bunch of the biggest, richest bores in New York." I know what Pinkie thinks of the money-obsessed men she's known all her life. But I could be a philanthropist, I reason. A heavyweight do-gooder. After all, a billion dollars is a lot of weight I could throw around. I hear Dean's whisper. It's distorted. I can't make out the words. I could give him some money. I could finance some of his pet projects.

"How much does it cost?" I ask. I figure there's a price to be paid. Pinkie lets out a long sigh of exasperation. I feel as if I've asked the wrong question.

"How much would it be worth to know who's preventing you from making a billion dollar sale?" Pursewarden retorts.

His response bothers me. Pinkie's reaction bothers me. Dean's distorted whisper bothers me. My instincts tell me to bring this conversation to an end.

"Well, Mr. Pursewarden," I say, "I'll think about."

Pursewarden takes a pen from the inside pocket of his tuxedo jacket and scrawls something on the back of the calling card he's given me. "This is the date and time of our next meeting. You may come as my guest," he offers, the same ridiculous smile plastered on his face again.

I nod slightly as he pushes his chair away and heads over to the elderly man's table where he stops briefly and bows to both man and Lobot.

I turn to Pinkie. "Why does that guy give me the creeps?"

"Because he's creepy," she says. She is in no jocund mood.

“How does he know about my business deal?” I ask. “I haven’t even told you about that.”

“Peter knows everything there is to know about everyone’s business. And that is unfortunate.”

“He does seem to have quite the keen eye – one eye on us and one eye on everyone else in the restaurant.”

“That’s because he has one glass eye – and it tends to wander a bit, you may have noticed.”

“What about it then?” I ask. “This supper club.” The waiter has returned and is setting beautifully sculpted plates of glazed seafood in front of us.

“You don’t want any part of this,” she says firmly. “Think nothing more of the silly supper club. You don’t want any part of this.”

“But you’re a member.”

Pinkie looks horrified. “All the more reason not to want to get involved,” she fires back. She then smiles at me and changes the subject.

II.

I am impressed as I walk the final blocks of E. 57th St. towards the East River, with the Queensboro Bridge on my left. I’ve never been to Sutton Place before. It is polished and posh. It reminds me of Pinkie. And I am glad I am dressed to the nines. One Sutton Place is a majestic 12-story building that looks out onto Roosevelt Island. Just inside the main entrance the liveried doorman greets me. I show him the card from Pursewarden and he makes a call upstairs before ceremoniously ushering me to a lone elevator set apart from the main lobby. Once the elevator doors open, the doorman hands me off to the elevator operator, a short, bald-headed, old man who greets me as “kind sir.” He manages to say it in a way that is far from patronizing. The inside of the lift is mirrored on all four sides, giving me a disorienting feel as I adjust my tie and straighten cummerbund. He presses the lone button, which I

notice is unmarked, and we ascend. The ride is smooth – but slow. We’re using outdated technology, I realize, as I hear the clank of chains as if someone is in the basement pulling us up by hand.

When the doors open once again, I step out onto a red-carpeted lobby. The ceiling must be 30-feet-high and is topped by an enormous umbrella of a chandelier, which reminds me of the Tabula Rasa. I’m facing an elaborately-carved double-door, which opens as I take my first step forward.

“Welcome, Mr. Lomax.” It is a third liveried doorman who now greets me. “Mr. Pursewarden is expecting you. Right this way, kind sir.” I follow him down a well-lighted corridor that opens into a room of great expanse. Red carpet, huge chandeliers, ornate sconces. But no furniture.

“This is the *Salle de pied perdu*,” the doorman announces rather ceremoniously. “The room of lost footsteps.” He turns to a hat rack and removes a Victorian style black top hat. “If you would be so kind, sir,” he says. “Part of the dress-code for the Society, sir.”

He places the hat on my head, fiddling with the black band that runs around the brim. It feels like silk. It is comfortable but surprisingly heavy.

“How’s the fit, kind sir?” he asks.

I nod. “That’ll do.” I reach into my pocket and bring out a tip, eager to put it into his hand.

“Not necessary here, kind sir.” He smiles and extends his hand forward, pointing toward the far end of the vast room. “Please proceed, kind sir. This is where I must leave you. Through the archway at the other end.”

I think the “kind sir” business is a little much as I make my way across the red carpet, trying not to look up at the elaborate chandeliers. I trust that the doorman is eyeing me closely and, for some reason, I am concerned that he not see me gazing up at the ceiling like a wide-eyed

schoolboy. I try to understand that feeling but am unable to put my finger on it.

When I reach the arch, I am again addressed as “kind sir” and ushered into the holy of holies by a black maître d’ by the name of Toots Sweet as I see by the gold-plated name badge just below his left lapel. I am standing in the belly of a cavernous dining hall, incongruously appointed with just six round tables, set for the most exquisite of dinners: white satin table cloths, crystal goblets, silver utensils, and gold lined china. I am shown to a seat at the nearest table, between the immaculately dressed Pinkie and Mr. Peter Pursewarden, MA (Oxon.)

“Ah, I thought you might come.” Pursewarden is again impersonating an undertaker. But here with the added flourish of the tophat with black silk banding – just like mine. He stands and extends his arms towards me and takes both my hands into his. “It is a most distinct pleasure to have you with us,” he adds. But I barely hear his greeting. I cannot but help fixate on Pinkie, who remains seated gracefully, her enormous dress flowing down around her and spilling out onto the red carpet beneath her and beyond.

Toots pulls out the plush-back chair to offer me a seat. As I settle myself into the chair, I take in my dining mates, the so-called “benefactors” – four men whom I recognize from the pages of HOTWIRE magazine. Arturo Menendez, the designer-baby pioneer; Calvin Janowitz, CEO of the Princeton-based biotech firm HCP (an abbreviation for Human Cloning Project); George Grosz, founder of the Savior Sibling Pilot Program; and Dr. Rudolph Schlicter, the distinguished professor of biomedical sciences at Columbia University, best known for his work in creating animal-human hybrids for purposes of cancer and AIDS research.

Schlicter is sitting in a wheel chair with what appears to be a mobile dialysis machine next to him. Stet is seated awkwardly in his seat, one leg stretched out beside him. All are wearing the matching top hats. Each acknowledges my presence with a slight nod as I sit down,

but none makes a move to introduce himself to me. It's as if they already expect I know who they are.

Pinkie is not smiling. She looks gravely disappointed even as Pursewarden seems pleased. "You shouldn't be here," she whispers to me. "You want nothing with a boring old place like this." The five men act as if Pinkie hasn't said a thing. They seem to be inhabiting a different world than hers. They remain all smiles, primed to settle in to watch a marvelous drama unfold before them. I look from one to the next man and recall a remarkable series of facts about each of them – what they've accomplished professionally in recent years, all from the HOTWIRE profiles, I imagine. I am surprised at how much I can actually recall about each one. I am pleased with myself, with my memory.

I can see that Pinkie wants to tell me something. But she's holding back. Perhaps she's observing some code of secrecy for this supper club. "I thought you would be safe," she adds, muttering just under her breath so the others will not hear.

"Tonight," Pursewarden announces before Pinkie can say any more, "you, Mr. Lomax, are our esteemed guest of honor." At that mention, all five men doff their top hats to me. Pinkie, however, looks away. "Mr. Lomax, you will have the honor of choosing the meal for tonight's dinner," he explains. "Toots!" Pursewarden thrusts his hand into the air and beckons the head waiter from where he is standing beneath the archway. "Would you regale Mr. Lomax with tonight's menu?"

Toots, drawing up next to me, stands especially erect as he begins to recite the menu from memory: "For your consideration, kind sir, this evening we offer the stewed rat platter, baked cockroaches *a la mode*, or poached stool pigeon in a spicy offal sauce with guano droppings." He paused to bow low. "As I say, kind sir, for your consideration."

I look at Pinkie, but her face has turned porcelain again – fragile, helpless. I wince and look from Toots to Pursewarden. I am searching

for even the slightest indication that this has been presented to me in jest. But both men remain grave. Everyone looks to me. They are awaiting my answer.

“On the house, this evening, Mr. Lomax,” says Pursewarden and he leans in toward me. “And should you decide to join the Mutual Aid Society, the next meal will be on you. I recommend the poached stool pigeon, by the way, but go ahead. Take your time to decide.”

The others begin to fidget.

I smile up at Toots. “The poached pigeon then please, Toots,” I say. It sounds better than rats, better than cockroaches.

“An excellent choice, if I may say so, kind sir.” Toots responds with one of those perfunctory nods I’ve come to expect from high-end waiters at chandelier-laden private clubs. He pivots on his heel and disappears through a door on our left, presumably to the kitchen.

Pursewarden rubs his hands together, seemingly very pleased. The other men behind him look at one another and smile, as if they are somehow relieved by my decision. Pinkie, however, remains unblinking, as if someone has unplugged her.

Toots is quick to return. He carries several silver-covered dishes on a tray that is perched on his outspread fingers. He is a graceful waiter.

“Here you are, kind sir,” he says, uncovering the dish closest to me. Pursewarden and Pinkie reflexively gasp, before getting hold of themselves. Pursewarden’s smile returns. Pinkie slips back to her porcelain existence. The three of us take in the main course. It’s a bird. A pigeon. Wings, head, feet, and all. Covered in a steaming brown sauce. I can actually see the steam rising from the bird. It stinks. Like something perhaps from the far east. Like an armpit. I then notice the guano.

I look to Toots as he uncovers the silver platter dishes for the other diners. He shows no hint of disgust. Pursewarden observes my hesitation.

"It's like *foie gras*," he says and takes a knife to his bird, cutting it longitudinally along the belly from tail to neck. Pinkie does the same. So do the other four men once they're served. I follow suit.

The dinner is a quiet one. The pigeon tastes remarkably like chicken. Dark meat. I wonder about the mutual aid.

Once the main course has been removed, Toots places several bottles of champagne on the table, uncorking one after the other, bubbles overflowing onto the table. It seems this supper club does handles a fair amount of spirits.

I look to Pinkie and notice that she is running a finger around the rim of her champagne glass. It is nervous habit. I have seen her do this before, but my eye is always drawn to the encrusted jewels that cover her pinkie stump. But I am distracted by a new jewel. A ring. With a rock. It is a ridiculously large rock. Like a diamond but with a bluish tint. I look up to see the color has returned to her face and she catches my eye. I wonder about her ring. I wonder who gave it to her. I wonder if she is now affianced.

I turn to Pursewarden. "You mentioned that you—"

Pursewarden is waiting. "Yes, Mr. Lomax?"

Pinkie is looking at me. She sees that I was looking at Pursewarden's hands. She is smiling now. It is a subtle smile, but it is a smile.

"This fellow who's been scuttling my deal with the Japanese?" I continue. "You said you might know his name."

"I did say that," he assures me. He makes no move to offer me any more information.

"I find that difficult to believe," I say.

"Do you?" Pursewarden shifts in his seat and takes a sip of his champagne. "Is that why you are here with us tonight? Because you are incredulous?"

"What's his name then?" I ask. I try not to sound demanding. My breath stinks.

“Toots!” Pursewarden calls out, “please bring Mr. Lomax the phone.”

Pinkie scoots her chair back and crosses her legs in ladylike fashion, the folds of her enormous dress enfolding on one another. It is as if she is readying for a show to begin.

Toots comes forward with a chunky old-fashioned desktop phone with a rotary dial. Pursewarden scrawls something on a piece of paper and pushes it forward in front of me:

Mr. Hiro Kobayashi
011-81-012-345-6789

“It’s Kobayashi?” I say. I am surprised. I had secretly suspected someone else.

“Phone him now,” says Pursewarden. The phone number is long.

I look at my watch. “But the time—”

“Yes, it is only five in the morning in Tokyo right now, but phone anyway,” says Pursewarden. “I’m sure someone will be in.”

“And say what?” I ask.

“Just ask for your man,” he responds. “And I’ll do the rest.”

I hesitate but pick up the phone. I have not used a rotary dial phone in over two decades. It has a nice feel. No beeps or pulses. It’s more like pulling a string. It takes a while. And then the ringing begins. It’s not a ringing exactly. It sounds more like a buzz-buzz.

“*Kon nichi wa.*” It is a woman’s faint voice. She sounds tired. I do not know even one word of Japanese.

“Mr. Kobayashi, please.” These are the only words that come to me. There’s a hesitation on the other end of the line and then an odd noise like someone is muffling the receiver.

“Mr. Kobayashi is not here.” It is a man’s voice now. In English. With a heavy Japanese accent. Understandably. “He has been missing for two days now. Who is this, please?”

Pursewarden writes a name on a piece of paper. It says, “Say you are Jimmy Jazz.”

“Jimmy Jazz here,” I say. “Calling from—” Pursewarden disengages the call by pressing his fingers down on the receiver.

“Jimmy Jazz is fine. You needn’t say any more,” says Pursewarden. “If you return to us in three days. Same time. We’ll continue this conversation then. If you decide to join our supper club, you will enjoy a little mutual aid beginning at that time. The decision is exclusively yours, of course.”

The evening continues with light conversation on topics of conspicuous frivolity. At the stroke of eight, Pinkie suddenly rises to tell Pursewarden that she will see me out. Pursewarden looks a little less than sure of the proposal but gives a perfunctory nod to express his cautious consent.

“On the third day then, Mr. Lomax,” he reminds me. “If you should decide you want to join our Mutual Aid Society. We’ll look forward to seeing you then.”

“I’ll consider that,” I say. I am curious now. I make plans to return on Friday evening.

Pinkie grabs my hand and pulls me toward the entrance. Once we are alone under the chandeliers of the *salle de pied perdu* she pleads with me.

“Please don’t return here. Not Friday. Not ever. You don’t want anything to do with the supper club. Forget about Kobayashi. Forget about the deal.”

“But why?” I am wondering now if I ever understood Pinkie. “How can I forget about Kobayashi? How can a man just forget about a billion dollar deal? Kobayashi is a step on which I must fall down, or else o’erleap.”

She shakes her head at me as a mother would shake her head at her child. “There are too many puppets. Too many puppeteers. Leave town for a while. Go to the Bahamas. Or to the mountains. Go to Tibet.”

“How about Japan?”

“Go to Japan then,” she says.

I doubt if Pinkie really knows what’s best for me. And then a thought pops into my mind.

“Purserwarden,” I say. “Do you think he has anything to do with the disappearance of Kobayashi?”

“Well, of course I do.” She doesn’t skip a beat. “Of course! He has everything to do with it.”

So this is the mutual aid, already being set in motion. I shake off the feeling of a growing euphoria that feels wrong to me. I hear Dean’s voice. It is shrill now. Piercing. I leave my tophat with the doorman, and Pinkie takes me down the elevator and into the lobby, where she sees me out.

“Remember what I said: Do not return here. Give it no further thought.” Pinkie’s voice seems to have merged with my brother’s voice. I hear both now when she speaks. I think I feel Dean’s presence, but I can’t see his face in my mind’s eye. It’s as if I never knew what he looked like. Like he’s always just been a voice to me. Right now he seems no more than an extension of Pinkie.

“Will you be here on Friday?” I ask. I really have no idea what to say at this point. But I want her to feel complicit.

She looks reluctant to answer, but then nods.

I begin to walk out toward the street, but turn back to find Pinkie standing in the same spot, watching me. “Pinkie,” I call out. “Are you engaged?”

She says nothing. She acts as if she hasn’t heard me. But she looks down at her hand. I turn away toward the curb and the waiting limo. “For you, kind sir,” says the doorman as he holds the back door

open for me. "Mr. Jones will take you anywhere you desire. I trust I will see you again, kind sir."

III.

It's been raining now for three days. Not hard, but a constant drizzle. I am walking alongside the Queensboro Bridge again. When I reach Sutton Place I am immediately shown up to the Supper Club. I enter into the exact same scene as three days ago, but this time the four benefactors are all welcoming smiles. Pursewarden greets me with his usual overbearing gregariousness.

"I've given a great deal of thought to this," I say, without actually being able to recall now any of the thought that went into my decision to return against Pinkie's wishes. "I'd like to know the next step in the process. And," I pause, searching for the correct expression, "— and I am ready to contribute. I have decided to join your mutual aid."

Pinkie lets out a dramatic sigh. She is disturbed, I know, but she is trying to hide it. Her lips are painted a sanguine red today, her cheeks hollow and white. "Listen to the children of the night," I think. "What music they make!" She stares into my eyes, but I cannot hold her gaze, and instead turn toward Pursewarden who reaches out to shake my hand. The four benefactors doff their top hats to me ensemble.

"We are pleased," he announces, looking around at the benefactors as they are nodding with the vigor of pleasure. He studiously ignores Pinkie, though she is quite difficult to ignore, sitting there as she is in a yellowed wedding dress, the color of mayonnaise. I notice she reaches down and twists the diamond ring on her left hand.

"Please, have a seat, Mr. Lomax. Be comfortable." Pursewarden himself takes a seat across the table as Toots pulls out my chair. I sit directly across from Pinkie. I am anything but comfortable. My tuxedo is damp. My shirt is too tight. I am nervous with anxiety, but I hear Dean's voice. A tiny whisper: "To venture causes anxiety, but not to venture is to lose one's self.... And to venture in the highest is precisely to be

conscious of one's self." I ponder the words like working a jigsaw puzzle when Pursewarden pulls me back to his attention.

"You are hungry?" he probes, hopefully.

"Yes," I lie. I could care less about food. About eating. Toots remains at our table, standing solicitously over us, awaiting the next directive.

"Good." Pursewarden rubs his hands together as if to warm them. "You'll recall that last time, supper was on the house. This time the meal is on you."

I look to Pinkie, but she will no longer make eye contact with me. She's looking somewhere beyond me. Toward the kitchen, it would seem.

"Yes, yes, of course," I say. Why should I care who pays for the meal, I wonder.

"Splendid," says Pursewarden. "Toots, my friend, would you please present Mr. Lomax with tonight's options?"

"Certainly, kind sir," Toots answers robotically, followed by a quick bow to the table. To my surprise he disappears into the kitchen, leaving the doors to the dining hall swinging behind him. The men are all silent now. Looking at me. The smiles have disappeared, replaced by stares that bore holes into my face. I fidget, crossing one leg and then the other. I feel like I could throw off sparks, or break a window—maybe rearrange all the furniture.

There's a commotion behind me. I turn to see Toots returning from the kitchen. He's accompanied by another liveried waiter. They are struggling to carry an enormous canvas bag, having a devil of a time managing to hang on to it. Whatever it is inside, it's alive and squirming, thrashing back and forth. And then I hear strange muffled grunts. I wonder if they want me to slaughter a lamb or a fattened calf. O heavens, I wonder, do they expect me to eat a live animal? My stomach catapults.

The two waiters bring the canvas sack to my feet, holding it down. I think of a fish on land, how it flips and flops and struggles to suck air.

Toots begins to speak, but Pursewarden holds up a hand to stop him. “Mr. Lomax,” he says to me. “You have two options for tonight’s meal.” He motions to the waiters to reveal the contents of the sack. I notice the squirming and thrashing about has stopped. Toots releases the drawstring to reveal another canvas bag and pulls the outer bag all the way down now to reveal a man, his head is covered by a potato sack. The drawstring is pulled close around the man’s neck. I hear the muffled grunts from him again and realize he must be gagged beneath. He could be slowly suffocating. His hands and his feet are bound with thick rope. The scene seems familiar, as if from a movie.

“*Ecce homo,*” Pursewarden says with striking bravado, pointing to the bound and gagged man, who is no longer making any thrashing movements. I suspect he is glad to be out of the canvas sack. “I give you for your consideration Mr. Hiro Kobayashi of the Takahashi Corporation, Kyoto.”

I am stunned. The missing Kobayashi. He is here. In a canvas sack. Bound and gagged. But as I look about the table – to Pinkie, to the benefactors, to Pursewarden and the two waiters, I think of Pinkie’s HOTWIRE profile and stagekidnapping.com. Is this some sick joke then, I wonder?

“The choice before you for tonight’s supper then is Mr. Hiro Kobayashi—spit-roasted, basted, and glazed—or a piece of yourself. One of your body parts.” Pursewarden looks to the benefactors before continuing. “We’ve decided on your left arm, but just from the elbow down. Or, you can walk away from the Mutual Aid Society as if you’ve never come. As if you never decided to join us. Keep your arm and we set Mr. Kobayashi free, and even pay for a first class ticket back to Kyoto, to his family, to his wife, to his two children.”

“You don’t have to do this!” Pinkie blurts out. She moves to stand up, but stops short as if she risks transgressing some code of club conduct. She wants me to leave. She can’t say it, but I can see that she wants me to leave.

“But you’re a member of this group, Pinkie! And you would dissuade me?”

“You are right. I am a member of this group. And I’ve got scars to prove it.”

I try to picture Dean, but all I see is a vast whiteness that turns into an ethereal Pinkie. I listen for Dean’s voice but hear only hers. Pinkie’s voice is not very convincing. I slowly realize that my anxiety is the dizziness of freedom. I’ve been given opportunity’s calling card. Does anyone really believe that I shouldn’t be expected to take it? I try to push Pinkie to the back of my mind. But that is more difficult than it would appear. She sits in front of me as a bride ready to give herself away, but to what? For what?

I look to Kobayashi. He is still. He is breathing now without labor. He seems to me inhuman. It is the canvas bag. Faceless, bound, gagged. Like a steer. He is an animal.

“Gentlemen,” I say, “tonight we shall have Mr. Kobayashi spit-roasted, glazed, and basted.” I pick up my napkin, unfold it, and place it on my knee. I am not a little proud of myself. I look first to Toots, expecting him to acknowledge the order with his usual “kind sir” address. But he says nothing. Kobayashi begins thrashing and squirming again and the two waiters immediately subdue him. Pursewarden and the benefactors, they too say nothing.

Pursewarden stands up, his chair scraping against the hardwood floor. “I’m sorry, Mr. Lomax.” He is shaking his head. Shaking his head like an imbecile having a fit. “You’ve not chosen wisely.”

Wisely? I look around the room, from face to face, to see the same blank stare.

“Even after knowing that Mr. Kobayashi is a father and a husband,” Pursewarden winces, “you still chose to put him to death? And without much hesitation, I might add. Even now I see no regret in your face.” He looks from me to Toots.

“Miss Wilde, kind sirs and benefactors,” Toots announces, “tonight’s meal will consist of Mr. Lomax’s organ meats.” He speaks these words as if announcing that desert will be served chilled.

I really have no idea how to respond. But I want an explanation. My organ meats? What exactly does that mean? They’re going to cut out my kidneys and liver? Are they going to eat my pancreas or the contents of my stomach? “But you gave me the choice,” I say, “not Toots. You said ‘choose’ and I chose!”

“Indeed you did.” Pursewarden strides over to me, his hands clasped behind his back. “We firmly believe in choice, Mr. Lomax. We firmly believe in the exercise of free will. I asked you to choose, yes. Nevertheless, you chose wrongly. That’s the funny things about free will. Not all choices are equal. You are free to choose wrongly. And, yes, you did so. All of us have been given much the same choice in our own time. We accepted the personal sacrifice – to show our commitment to a common task and to one another. We didn’t choose to sacrifice someone else! Pinkie there gave up two fingers. Georgie-Boy over there—” He points to George Grozs, the man in the wheel chair – “sacrificed both kneecaps. And Schlicter over there, his kidney. And I myself gave up my left eye.”

Pursewarden opens his left eye wide and sticks his thumb and forefinger into his eye socket and pulls out his eyeball. “Touch it, Mr. Lomax. Hold it and squeeze it. It’s no more than a fancy glass egg.” A sacrificial egg.

It looks gelatinous and slimy. I don’t dare touch it. I look instead at Pinkie. Her hands now cover her face. I suspect her eyes are puffy. I wonder if she is crying.

“Shall we?” Pursewarden asks. I think he’s talking to me but look up to see that he’s focused on Pinkie. She drops her hands, sits up straight, then gets up and approaches Kobayashi. He is still now, but I can hear him panting, like a dog. Pinkie reaches down and pulls the bag from his head to reveal a sweat drenched face. His mouth is duct-taped. It is a familiar face. A very familiar face. He is squinting, but his eyes are not right. Not as they should be.

He attempts to scream something through the tape. His words are muffled but the import is clear. He is warning me – but of what? His face is so distorted with rage I cannot focus on it. I look instead to his left arm. It’s missing from the elbow down, replaced with some kind of bionic prosthesis. He has no hand. No hand of flesh anyway. His left arm terminates in a carbon-fiber sleeve trailing cables connected to a pulley at his elbow. His steel fingers are twitching. I recognize the hardware.

Pursewarden motions to the waiters to take the man away. I watch them as they stuff him back into the canvas sack and pull the drawstring closed. And he is whisked away, flailing. He is no animal.

“But—” The truth is dawning on me. “That wasn’t Kobayashi.” I turn to Pinkie. She is shaking her head. The man was clearly not Asian, not Japanese. He looked exactly like—

“It was Quincy Lomax,” she says. I hear the rain beating hard now against the windowpanes. “You were looking at yourself.”

The benefactors are nodding.

“Or should we say,” says Pursewarden. “You were looking at your creator.”

“Creator?” I look around at everyone. “Creator?”

“You are a Lobot,” Pursewarden continues. “MC 5.2. The most advanced yet.”

“Aha! This is part of the initiation ceremony, right? You’re all having me on in a kind of initiation ceremony.” I turn to Pinkie for confirmation, but she is shaking her head.

“It is an initiation rite,” she says. “But it’s not you being initiated. It’s him. You are a Lobot, Quince, but not just any Lobot. You are Quincy’s self-made man, supposedly a cloned improvement of himself. And in some ways, that’s true.” Your organs can regenerate, for instance. You may in fact be immortal. I could shoot you in the temple without causing much damage. She takes my left arm into her hands and pulls up my jacket sleeve. “You have implanted memories – of me, from my life. And you have implanted memory packets from literature. Most of the things you say are merely regurgitations of some famous literary mind or the musings of some philosopher – Kierkegaard, Salinger, Aristotle, Shakespeare, Washington Irving, Harriet Beecher Stowe and all three of the Bronte sisters. I’ve heard you quote them all. Your experiences are the scenes from a thousand movies. Your knowledge from hundreds of issues of HOTWIRE magazine. You are a highly functional computational machine – with emotional investment.”

“This isn’t true,” I say. This is absurdity. This joke’s gone too far. “I am Quincy Lomax. I am creator of the Lobot. I am on a kind of search. I am on the verge of becoming a self-made man.” This line sounds too familiar to me – like a hypnopaedic proverb.

“Othello,” says Pursewarden. “To test you.”

I see the Moor in my mind’s eye.

“Act I. Scene 3. Lines 204-205,” he quizzes.

“To mourn a mischief that is past and gone is the next way to draw new mischief on,” I say without hesitation, quoting from Shakespeare’s tragedy, when I realize that Pinkie is tying my arm the table.

“No,” I say. “It can’t be. It is an abominable joke to make a man question his very existence.”

“Another quotation. It’s Samuel Johnson, I believe.”

“You are essentially no different from Siri,” says Georgie Boy, who judging by his demeanor seems to be enjoying this whole scene. He

shuffles forward, careful not to upset his dialysis machine. “You’re just a bunch of electric pulses, atoms – and when the plug is pulled, poof!”

“You expect me to believe I am an automaton – a machine without feelings? You expect me to believe I am soulless and heartless?” I say. “You think wrong — I have as much soul as you, — and full as much heart. It is my spirit that addresses your spirit; just as if both had passed through the grave, and we stood at God’s feet, equal — as we are.”

“From Jany Eyre, I believe.” Pursewarden shakes his head. “You are the creation of Quincy Lomax. You are a flesh machine, growing body parts for real people to use. We just thought you might be different. That you’d move beyond our programming, that you’d achieve some measurable level of humanity.”

“No!” Pinkie now has my arm secured to the table with string and nails.

“Where were you just before you met Pinkie at the Tabula Rasa last week?” Pursewarden asks.

I struggle to remember where I was, where I got the copy of HOTWIRE. But I don’t remember. I can’t remember. There is nothing. There is blackness – blackness and distant memories of a childhood, faceless family members, architecture, geography, maps. All my memories are of distant days. The rest is fuzz.

“Try to picture your brother Dean,” says Pursewarden. “Tell me what he looks like.”

I try. But again I cannot. I can only see Pinkie. She is rather lovely. She is a different Pinkie than the one who stands before me in her wedding dress. Or is she? She is the voice.

“It’s you, isn’t it?” I ask Pinkie. She has a kitchen chopper in one hand and an unlit cigarette in the other. “The voice.”

Pinkie looks into my eyes and sighs. Her lips have turned from sanguine to vermillion. She raises the kitchen chopper and brings it down with a brutal swipe, cleaving my arm in two. I wince, expecting

pain. Expecting a great deal of pain – and the splash of blood. But none comes.

Pursewarden unties my detached arm from the table and holds it in his hands. He turns and shows it around to the benefactors.

“They’re going to use you for spare parts,” Pinkie whispers to me as Pursewarden is turned. “When I run out, you follow! You hear me? You follow. As fast as you can.”

Pursewarden takes the arm and fits the elbow end into to a slot in the middle of the table, connecting it to some unseen contraption which appears to bring it back to life. But I see that “Georgie Boy” has some remote, hand-held device by which he is controlling the arm. My arm!

I look down at my left elbow. I don’t feel as if anything is any different. To my mind, I still have a left arm. There’s no pain. There’s no sensation. No feeling. I wonder again what they’ll do with my organ meats.

“A demonstration,” Pursewarden announces. He is arm-wrestling against my detached arm, unable to bring it down. “A demonstration of super strength.” He is pushing with all his might against the arm, his face turning red with increasing pressure. Sweat forms on his brow. His teeth are clenched as he works against Georgie Boy’s remote control. My arm is a strong arm.

And with a whirl of white. Pinkie dashes off in her enormous gown, holding up the hem of her dress to prevent her from stepping on the material. I sprint off with her, grabbing her hand with my right one. She takes us through the archway and past the elevators to a small door in a far hallway. It’s a dumbwaiter and we both barely fit together inside. Pinkie slides the doors closed behind us and pulls the chain and we descend through the shaft in darkness.

“You chose to destroy yourself,” Pinkie whispers to me. I almost mistake it for Dean’s guiding voice of reason. “I didn’t think you’d do that.”

“But how could I know?” I ask. We are pressed up against one another. I can’t tell where I end and where Pinkie begins. I can smell her dress. I can feel it. It is softer than it looks. And she is harder – all bones, it seems. We descend further, but very slowly. Quietly.

“They programmed you to fail. To want to join the Mutual Aid Society. To follow the money. To disregard morality,” she explained. “Quincy was sure you would be able to move beyond their ‘programming’ –our programming— and essentially become human.” When Pinkie stops speaking I can hear the squeak of the dumbwaiter chain. Other than that, there’s darkness and silence.

“Have you?” Pinkie finally asks. “Become human?”

I do not know what to say. I thought I was human.

Then we hit the bottom of the shaft and Pinkie pulls apart the doors, letting a shaft of bright light in. We’re in what appears to be the basement scullery. Pinkie gets out first and then pulls me out.

“We’re going up those stairs. They lead to the street.”

I follow Pinkie through the dank hallway and up the stairs. The door leads out to a side alley filled with fire escapes. The rain is coming down in long knitting needles. We take just a few steps before we’re drenched, looking like a sorrowfully soaking bride and groom. I look toward the main covered entrance of One Sutton Place.

“There’s one there,” she says, pointing at one of the lookalike liveried doormen.

She pulls me in the other direction, and just as we are about to take flight on foot, an unmarked white van turns the corner from E. 56th Street with screeching wheels and before I can fully take in the scene, the vehicle recklessly jumps the curb, blocking our path on the sidewalk. The side door slides open and out jump two men in ski masks and white jump suits. I hear a gasp and a scream from two pedestrian witnesses across the street as I am grabbed by the jacket of my tuxedo and thrown into the van. The other man grabs Pinkie and tosses her in beside me. They both jump back into the van, the door slides closed

again and there's a great deal of commotion – and darkness. Except for one tiny red light.

"I told you, you'd get yourself into trouble." It is Dean's voice. I hear it clearly. I hear the car tires squeal as we peel away from Sutton Place. Pinkie is silent next to me. I can't even hear her breathing. I focus on the red light as I hear my captors removing their masks and breathing deeply. I hear the whir of mechanical equipment and then feel a hand on my back.

"Quince?" It is Pinkie's voice. But she sounds different. Not at all out of breath as I continue to struggle to catch my own. "You're all wet, baby."

The van has slowed down now. Probably in traffic a few blocks from the river. We've made at least two left hand turns so far.

"Cover your eyes with your hands," she says. "We're going to switch on the halogen lamps. It'll seem very bright. Have you got them covered?" Her voice is solicitous and sweet.

I shut my eyes tight and cover them with my hands like playing hide-and-seek. "Yeah," I say. "They're covered."

"On three – one, two, three." And then a flash of blinding light. As I slowly remove my hands I am smothered in the brightness from huge open-bulb reflective lamps that look imported from a photographer's studio. As my eyes adjust, the first thing I can make out is a moustache – one of those European-style, handlebar moustaches.

"Is this the first time you've been kidnapped?" says the voice. Dean again. It is sarcastic, caustic, biting. And then I see his face. A face with a handlebar moustache and a large television camera in front of it. I continue to look into its red light, which is now gently pulsing.

"Dean?"

"Smile, Broo. You're on camera. And, I won't tell Mom, but you're in a hell of a lot of trouble." This is an odd thing to say because Mom is dead. She died a horrible death. A long time ago. I remember it now.

There's a man sitting next to Dean, knee to knee, to his left. He's holding a ski-mask in his hand. "That's an understatement," says this second man. He is Asian, well-built, wearing nothing but a sleeveless black T-shirt and the tattered white jump suit. He is not a guy you'd want to wrestle with.

"Kobayashi," he says. "I'm Hiro Kobayashi."

"And I'm your brother, man," says Dean, putting down the camera. He looks at Kobayashi. "It's going to look good on film, that kidnapping. You've really got some flare for abduction."

Then I notice for the first time that Pinkie is sitting next to me. But she's no longer wearing a bridal gown. She's wearing tight blue jeans and a T-shirt that says "getkidnapped.com."

"How's your arm?" she asks. "Feel funny?"

"But how—" I am confused. I look around for the dress, but when I turn around to look behind me I see half a dozen stacked bodies. On top is Pinkie, lifeless, still in her wet and yellowed bridal gown. I look from the bride to the Stage-a-kidnapping Pinkie. "What is this?" I demand.

"Take it slow, Mr. Lomax," says Kobayashi.

I see that he has some mechanical contraption in his hands now, along with a needle and syringe. It's the largest needle I can ever recall seeing. I hear a click and feel the cuff slide over my right hand.

"It's okay, Quince," says T-shirt Pinkie, who secures the cuff before I can resist. "It's for your protection." She slips the other cuff onto her own hand.

Kobayashi lifts the syringe and gives a test squirt upwards.

"They're Lobots, Quince. In the back."

"Cleaning up your mess, Lomax" says Kobayashi in a heavy Japanese accent.

"You going to deactivate me, too?"

Dean laughs. I am not sure why. He's running the camera again. It's focused on me.

“Guess it worked,” says Kobayashi, looking at Pinkie. And I notice her hands. She has pinkies! Jeans, a T-shirt – and pinkies! All ten fingers.

She sees me looking. “Yes,” she says. “They’re new.” She wiggles her fingers. All of them.

“What’s happening here?” I demand, hating the fact that Dean has his camera trained on me. Hating the fact that there are “dead” bodies stacked like firewood behind me. “And why is the camera running?”

“Part of the documentary,” says Dean, matter-of-factly. “About Quincy Lomax, creator of the Lobot. And how his Lobot people banded together to kidnap him, ‘enhance’ him, and make him a pawn of some sick Lobot conspiracy to replace humanity with their own kind.”

I exhale. “Sounds like a super-cheesy 70’s movie.”

“I wish it were,” says Kobayashi, who sticks me in the shoulder with the needle and depresses the syringe. It stings. It burns – unmercifully. But only until Kobayashi removes the needle. I prepare to lose consciousness. But I feel nothing out of the ordinary, other than an increasing clear-mindedness. Has he given me Pinkie’s wonder drug? I’m hoping Kobayashi will stick Pinkie with the needle next, so we can live happily ever after. I like those kinds of endings. Never mind my search.

“An antidote,” explains Kobayashi. “You better pray it works.” He shakes his head. His face remains grave.

Pinkie is opening what appears to be an oversize tackle box.

“An antidote?” I turn to look behind me once again. At the Lobots, looking like lifeless human bodies. Three men and three women, including Pinkie with her jewel-encrusted stubs and her wedding gown. All 5.2 models, I believe. Pinkie definitely had me fooled. “An antidote for what?” I ask.

The T-shirt Pinkie removes a familiar mechanical contraption from the tool box. It’s the same kind of mechanical arm I saw on the other Lomax. She fits it into my arm, connecting it at the elbow.

“You should begin recovering your memory over the next 24 hours,” Kobayashi explains. “You’ve had some memory loss, I imagine.”

I think back to the fuzziness. The whiteness. The blank spots. “Yes,” I admit. “I couldn’t even picture Dean.” The thought now just seems silly. How could I forget my own brother’s face, especially with that atrocious mustache?

“The Lobots ‘psychologically highjacked’ you,” said Pinkie.

“Highjacked?”

Pinkie looks at Kobayashi. Dean’s camera is still running. “Hiro coined the term. He uses it to refer to a situation in which a creature seeks to gain control of its creator – for whatever purpose.”

“This has happened before?” I ask.

Pinkie and Kobayashi look at one another. They shake their heads.

“No,” says Pinkie.

“Not until now,” adds Kobayashi. “Not until you.”

I begin to recover more memories. Pinkie has my mechanical arm attached and it’s working. I can move my fingers. I run a mechanical finger along Pinkie’s cheek. She unfastens the cuff from my other hand and from hers. I guess she’s convinced I’m not volatile. I have become the bionic man. I think about arm-wrestling.

“Mr. Lomax,” says Kobayashi. “You created a line of flesh machines you call Lobots, cleverly named after yourself. For the principal purpose of growing human body parts to be harvested for extremely rich people who, well, require organs and other body parts.”

“A dreadfully silly thing to do,” said Dean. “I’ve always told you so. You know how nature has a way of burying its undertakers.”

My head is beginning to ache. More memories are returning. I can recall performing surgery on a Lobot’s eyeball to harvest the cornea, removing a Lobot’s kneecaps, and harvesting a kidney from yet another one. “Robots for the rich and lonely,” I say. “I thought that was the idea.”

“Not the principal purpose,” explains Kobayashi. “That’s one reason the Takahashi company got involved with you. We were considering backing this idea with a billion dollars, my friend, even as we’ve had all manner of protestors breathing down our necks. Use biotech to save lives – it was simple proposition.”

“But you were too good,” adds Pinkie. “Your Lobots soon began to object to being harvested. They began to think in much too sophisticated ways.”

“One Sutton Place was created as a living quarters for the Lobots,” says Kobayashi. “Is it coming back?”

My head is now splitting with pain. I am remembering One Sutton Place. The Lobots that I programmed to refer to me as “kind sir” as a sophomoric joke, the tuxedos, the top hats, the chandeliers and champagne. Pursewarden and the four benefactors. All Lobots. Toots and the other waiters and doormen, Lobots too, And there are more. A whole building full of the Lobot community. Absurd!

“And you built a Lobot of yourself and one of Pinkie,” Kobayashi continues. “You call it The Didymus—a Lobot modeled after a real person, essentially an enhanced clone.

I look back at the deactivated Pinkie. Lifeless. Limp. Why had she spirited me away from them, I wonder.

“They rebelled and found a way to learn and apply the technology you created. They figured out how memories are implanted. How memory can be tampered with, how it can be erased – or suspended, really. And they decided to use this technology on you.”

“The Mutual Aid Society?”

“Yes, Lobots. All of them. Bastards!” Kobayashi spits. “And now we’re trying to round them all up, deactivate and destroy them. These six,” he throws a thumb toward the back of the van, “escaped from One Sutton Place. I look back there again, and this time notice the Lobot from the Tabula Rasa. The Asian female 5.2 version.

“The memory packets,” I say. “They were trying to convince me I was a Lobot. That I had implanted memories – from issues of HOTWIRE magazine and books and movies and –”

“And HOTWIRE isn’t even a real magazine, you understand,” continues Kobayashi. “It’s just a data stream of input all about the ‘people’ and inventions the Lobots wanted you to know about. They created the back stories of their lives, about their supposed inventions, and all the rest.”

I can feel the van pulling over to the curb and stopping.

“What did they hope to do with me?” I ask.

“They wanted to torture you, first – and then make you into one of them,” says Kobayashi. “They wanted to control Quincy Lomax, creator of the Lobot.” They wanted to be master of the creator. They probably wanted to eat you from the inside out.

“Why?” I think of the “organ meats” comment.

“Because you were cutting them up for spare parts. They took offense,” says Pinkie. “That’s why they tested you. They wanted to see how much you would follow the protocol of their programming and memory implantations.”

“They were actually trying to test your morality, see if they could change you – to be like them.”

“First the disgusting dinner,” says Kobayashi. “Yes, we know all about it. Not fit for human consumption. People just don’t eat batshit, Lomax.”

I think back to the meal – just a few days before. Choosing the menu.

“And the second test – on your morality. Testing to see if you’d put human welfare above your own greed.” I shrink just a little. “And you chose to kill me.” Kobayashi shakes his head. “And it turns out it was Didymus-you in the sack.” He lets out a little laugh but quickly stifles it. “We have one last mission here in New York. Get out.” Kobayashi slides the door open and he and I both get out, along with

Pinkie and Dean, his cameras still rolling. One Sutton Place is straight ahead at the end of E. 57th Street. It's a perfect view.

"The plunger," Kobayashi says to Pinkie, who bends back into the van. She brings out an explosives plunger.

I step out of the way and can now see into the front of the van. The driver is staring straight ahead at Sutton Place. He doesn't blink.

"Nine, eight, seven, six—" Kobayashi counts.

The driver turns to look at me.

"All the other Lobots, they're in there?" My work has come to this?

"Five, four, three, two—"

"They're all in one building?" I ask again. The driver – he looks eerily similar to Kobayashi.

"One!" Kobayashi leans on the plunger, which is really just a remote detonator. A rumble is followed by a boom and a crumbling.

"Controlled implosion," explains Pinkie. "No one will be harmed." They had it all planned out. Dean is catching all this on camera. One Sutton Place imploding in on itself – now just a huge pile of smoking bricks. I watch it crumble. I stand on the sidewalk and just watch it fall in on itself. It will look great in the movie. Every great movie has an explosion – and no one is ever really hurt.

It seems like five minutes before we all pile back into the van and shut the door. Dean still has his camera rolling. Kobayashi sits calmly in his seat. He closes his eyes, lost in thought.

"So, the Lobots, they're all gone now? All deactivated?" I ask. "Is that what you're telling me?"

Dean lowers his camera and switches it off. The red light dies. "All but two," he laughs, looking at Kobayashi, who's sitting next to him.

"All but two," Kobayashi mimics. "Kind sir."

Pinkie turns to look at me. I remember Brom Bones. The accident. The decapitation. The scattering of ashes.

"But that's the end of the movie," adds Dean.