



# Escape Artiste

*Johann Stein*

He is imbued with the ennui of the immortals. High atop the Avatar Plaza residential tower, he languishes melancholy in his lavish loft studio apartment. A considerable fortune has been invested in his prestigious abode. In order to simply apply for potential tenant status, one must essentially be of the American nobility, which he is; the culmination of wealth-laden coupling dating back to the days of the ancients, when lineage was traced to gods, and power was claimed as divine birthright by the advantaged classes. A man such as this suffers stylishly. Ever-so-slightly disillusioned with his former, proper society, we find him currently mired in an existential despondency which serves to enhance his lonely pretentiousness. The loft is a colony of solitary refinement amidst the treacherous, demanding and exhausting backdrop of the urbane high life.

The exterior ramparts that enshrine him are remarkably pure and stalwart marble armor of a quality suitable for vainest deities. Yet within, everything must be of blackest hue, in the visage a Gothic Lords of Hades. From the walls to the silken drapes to the wardrobe to the vintage matching coffee mugs and ashtrays, the loft is ninety-five percent midnight. The light fixtures emit blacklight simply for eclectic effect; no modicum of dampened

photons could liven up his preferred moribund environs. The windows admit only the natural sunlight which has undergone filtering of an overcast atmosphere. Exclusive and eccentric, he has procured every manner of eclectic décor, as diverse as the original Model-T Ford: "Any color, so long as it's black."

Strive as he might, some books on the shelves reluctantly have bindings of dark purples, blues and bloody reds, and the tinge of their recycled whitish paper conspicuously captures the scrupulous eye. A canvas is mounted a few feet from the couch, in a place one might find the traditional television set common among lower orders of society. It is this canvas that glares with an abrasive contrast in the dimness, its paleness an affront to the shadowy world of an artist suffocating from silent angst at the blankness of the stalled project before him.

He is caught in limbo, between his plush-leather couch and the exposed virgin nothingness craving inspirational marring upon its surface. For the moment, the canvas assumes the character of a persona non grata to be avoided with excruciating disdain by the fatigued genius. He rests horizontally, with his back upon the soft-hide cushioning, the left leg draped upon an arm of his furniture, right leg jutting toward the floor, left arm betwixt head

and the soft corner of the couch, right arm held wrist side up and straight out and away from the artist. With eyebrows furrowing beneath thick-framed and lightly shaded glasses, he ponders the relevance of a vacant mind. The lips pout occasionally and are stereotypically complimented by a thin, trim, sterilized surgical-grade razor-sharp goatee. He has the expressions of a nicotine fiend who has endured deprivation for a few hours too long. The fingers of his right hand uncurl ever so slightly as he reaches for the pack of non-filtered continental cigarettes resting upon his chest. Peering peevisly into this package, he discovers but one delicate dark brown stick of refined and fine pressed foreign tobacco resting next to a black plastic lighter. He removes these two instruments of nihilistic indulgence from their disposable casing with his left hand, and the right hand crushes the depleted shell of a luxurious vice and elegantly flicks it into an imitation obsidian garbage receptacle (complete with black trash bag liner) in the corner of his loft kitchenette. Over the duration of his waste expulsion exercise, he has raised the sole remaining cigarette to his mouth and plucked the trusty lighter from its rest in order to agitate a flame from a middle finger-triggered flint and butane flux. Lighting this cigarette, he inches backwards in his consciousness to pondering the uncluttered expanse of his inner being..

He has one drag, exhales, and immediately follows with a second drag,

his face quietly declaring the mind's attempt at the profound meaninglessness of it all. This introverted reprieve exists in a scant few moments, long enough for the artist to admire the carcinogenic vapors twirl unconcerned, not at all doing enough to obscure the many superlative material possessions of his astronomically overpriced loft studio apartment. Were one to have studied his smoking habits, they would expect the third inhalation to be partaken after exactly seven seconds elapsed time from the second exhalation. Obedient to routine, he has the cigarette poised near his lips, the nerves of his face visibly anticipating another drag, and yet he hesitates. A thought has found means to immolate itself upon his ever-exacerbating mind, and has consequentially disrupted his smoking ritual. The inspiration he so longs for and lives for is rapidly approaching critical mass.

It seizes him as thus:

He does indeed puff whimsical upon his continental, as he shifts his legs to the floor and motivates his torso to carry him into the locked, loaded, fully attentive and upright position. Arising as he inhales, he closes his eyes ecstatically. Moving silently, slowly and surreally, he begins taking half-strides in the direction of the taunting canvas. The eyes stay closed in these pivotal first steps, and though he lacks his peripheral vision, his intuition allows him to sweep the left hand holding his cigarette up to an ornate Ionic style protrusion

from one of the loft walls. This pedestal conveniently supports his favorite ashtray, upon which he brings to rest his burning batch of shredded, deadly vegetation. While the cigarette safely takes a smoking break, his eyes cinematically open like curtains at a premier musical with rave reviews. A restrained yet vigorous attention emanates from a centripetal focus of rising light in his occipital lobes, glowing and overtaking the silken fibers of his ego, his id, his everything.

Maintaining his slack-eyed gaze steadfast upon the characterless void, he takes the final half of his advance casually, his eyebrows crooked nonchalantly, as if he were secretly falling in love with something other than a reflection. The next step allows him to pluck a paintbrush stewing in a mason jar half full of hot-tar colored paint. This is done with his right hand and from a waist level tea cozy table, in a manner both delicate and carefree. His paintbrush trails behind him, held low and with the wrist facing upward, as if this were a rapier rather than cherished tool of artists, a weapon of elegance and refinement, of death with dignity. The left hand is held forward as if pantomiming holding a shield, this done in an effort to maintain balance and to appear all the more magnificent as he glances at a full length mirror in the corner nearest the unpainted canvas. Temporarily entranced at this pose, he registers it in his long-term memory so that he may practice and show it off to himself later. Continuing onward

in his trek to the canvas, he is but three feet away when he halts precariously, as if he's come upon a spring-loaded force field. The glowering whiteness before him is enough to make a man of his sensitivities retreat in repulsion and utter vexation, and he musters great personal resolve to dispel any last minute reluctances at carrying through with the project. Our artist is prepared to make his mark.

The right arm swings the brushing hand at an aggregate curvature, nearly at a forty-five degree angle. His brush doesn't touch the tapestry, but rather, it glides with hovering restraint over its surface and dashes upon it an oblique chaotic splatter of oil-thick paint droplets. This initial maneuver completed, the artist commands his hand to sweep in a backslash beneath the inversely colored star cluster and bequeath a moderately proportioned ribbon of black in an exponential curvature to compliment the first phase of his creative venture. This macaroni bent line extends from end to beginning of the splatter, connecting the whole mess together in an uncomplicated completeness. It is indicative of his perceptions, chaos and order intrinsically linking in an inky swath across an otherwise blank mold at odds with his intellect, his anguish, his miraculous visage of purity and self.

Or, at least, this is the affect his newly born creation has on his thoughts as his pupils dilate and his irises widen, permitting him to drink in the splendor

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of a job well done. He backtracks staggeringly, all anxieties diffused, his existence vindicated and suddenly clairvoyant of his ultimate purpose in life. These thoughts carry him as he struts backwards, sheathing the brush unceremoniously into its mason jar, continuing to the general locale of his favorite ashtray, returning his sweet, lovely last cigarette to his grasp and his lips. Taking a long, satisfying drag, he stands by his couchly point of origin in his sojourn, admiring with an appropriate, respectful distance between him and his mighty statement freshly painted on the far side of the room. All he needs now is a signature and it'll be ready for the gallery.

Alas, the high cannot last, it has a half life only slightly longer than a meteor careening through the stratosphere, a glam rock star ending their career in glitter makeup infomercials, an alpha male wild stallion abducted in the night and broken down into a plow horse to till the futile fields of a Chernobyl peasant – all very sad, comrade. In much the same manner he entered his creative exuberance, it leaves him, a decrescendo descent toward the subliminal static he is most accustomed to. The esoteric hysteria is entirely exorcized, and life returns to flavorless apathy.

The artist feels broken, exposed, spent

and lonely, and is trying desperately to cope with this return to the non-creative mindset. Instead of thinking through this phase, an involuntary impulse demands he follow up the fatalistic ballet with disconsolate routine. The eyes direct the head, then the neck, then all else beneath the brain to move with deliberate focus to his elegant antique telephone at the left of his couch, the receiver long absent from its hook. Staring through the painting as if it were an uninteresting stranger on a boring day, he presses the two smaller fingers of his left hand on the hook and lifts the phone to his ears with his right hand. Lifting the fingers pressure and hearing the tone reset, he redirects the fingers to dial unemotionally a number hardwired to the core of his involuntary memory centers.

Precisely half way through the second ring, there is a slight click and a sinister masculine voice with an immaculate tilt and pattern of speech slightly impeded by filed down teeth answers:

“Speak unto me thine wishes.”

And the artist responds:

“Bring me heroin . . . please.”

“Major affirmative, your Exclusiveness. Thou shalt bear witness to thine desires within the hour.”

And the artist hangs up. ☸