

Stuart Lem: War Hero

By Nick Hayden

I wanted to begin this story with a beautiful piece of poetry or an excerpt from a meaningful literary work. Here's what I came up with:

I can read with my eyes shut.

That's Seuss, not Shakespeare. Nothing else comes to mind. In a way, it fits. Be patient, and it may become clear. It might not, though. I'm still learning to write stories about myself. People want to read them, for some reason. I apologize if they're not worth reading.

It — and by “it,” I mean the interesting part of my life, the part people want to read about — began at a pretzel store in the mall, a place called Twisted Sisters. Two very nice nuns and one fat father ran the place. It was the only store I ever knew that gave a prayer request card with the receipt. I remember writing a lot of things on mine but never slipping them back in the box on the counter designed for the purpose. I was self-conscious about how “Pray for all the people in this mall with all their hidden problems and thank God for all their hidden joys and help me to survive work and thank you for my car but help it not to fall apart because I like it” would sound to people whose professional life was talking with God.

Every day after work I stopped to get a pretzel. Once, I was in a hurry and didn't stop; I felt unsettled and vaguely guilty the rest of the evening. You see, I liked routine. I found comfort in the slow movement of the line to the register, in the serene smile of Sister Nancy, who certainly understood the peace of the Lord much better than I, a 17-year-old boy, did. I relished the way she nodded when I ordered the same thing each day and how she had it already prepared for me. I enjoyed when, for the gall of it, I ordered a drink as well, and Father Richard, who manned the soft drink machine, handed me my Pepsi, singing Latin under his breath. And always, there hung the subtle mystery of Sister Hannah, who twisted the pretzels with a grave and solemn face, marking crosses

over them.

You will understand, then, my consternation when one Tuesday I walked up to the counter and found a new face. This was no nun. No, her blue eyes sparkled with the joy of life and living, with a youth's relentless desire to drink in experience. Her smile held passion instead of the peace I found so comforting. She asked my order with an intimate sort of friendship, as if all the world were her playmate.

This, my dear readers, was Miranda. If you have heard anything of my adventures, you have heard of her. This is how our first conversation went:

“Hello! Having a nice day? What would you like?”

“Um....”

“Do you need a moment?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know that pretzels are shaped to look like a person praying?”

That, I think, was the start of it all.

As alluded to above, I worked at the mall. I worked at a place called Nina's Knick-Knack Nook. I have no idea who Nina was, but I have long suspected she never existed, except as an alliterative advertising ploy.

The owner of Nina's Knick-Knack Nook, and my boss, was Boris. Just Boris. Maybe he dug up the rest of his name between complaints and curses when filling out his taxes, but his employees knew no other name but the one. Any other name would only have confused the issue. All great men of evil have single names: Stalin, Hitler, Mussolini, Napoleon, Judas, Brutus, Boris.

My memory of his facial features is not clear. I tried to draw a picture of him to jog my memory. I ended up with a cigar, a round belly, and a wide mouth with volume lines shooting from it. He ran the store from his La-Z-Boy in the back room, where he watched daytime soaps and talk shows.

Oddly, I enjoyed my work. At Nina's, we sold paperclips, staples, thumbtacks, sticky notes, pen caps, those things that go on the end of shoelaces, bobby pins, sticky tack (unofficially called “monkey poop”), tiny miniature flags, dice, used Happy Meal toys, pencil lead, tire valve caps, bookmarks, extra Yahtzee score sheets, thread and needles,

mouse balls, spark plugs, Q-tips, twisty ties — things like that.

So, one day, I sold a Bucket O' Pipe Cleaners to a nice old lady. When I get rolling, I can really *sell*. I said to her, "Look, ma'am, here's the bottom line: In a world of increasing specialization, pipe cleaners are astoundingly versatile." I then proceeded to list two-dozen uses of the product in question, even presenting a visual example in the pterodactyl I had made with pipe cleaners the day before. That convinced her, I think. She had grandchildren.

Boris was so glad to be rid of the "stinking things" that he made the monumental effort to leave his chair, stuff a Cuban in my mouth, and slap me on the back in a congratulatory move that nearly snapped my spine. I disposed of the cigar as soon as he turned his back.

"Excuse me, sir?"

I looked up from spitting out the cigar taste. I had bit into it with the force of the slap. "Welcome to Nina's Knick-Knack Nook." It had taken me a week to say that without stumbling over my tongue, rolling into a string of nonsense and apologies, and colliding into silence. "How may I help you?"

It was the new girl from Twisted Sisters. I felt that some foundational law of the universe had been broken. First, she showed up where I went to get a snack, and now, she showed up where I worked. My poor, ordered life! Still, I waited patiently. She was a customer and you never pressure a customer.

"Um ... yes. This is going to be a silly question, but ... you haven't seen anything suspicious going on around here, have you?"

"Suspicious?"

"Yeah. In here, or out in the hallway there. Maybe a big guy, with a scar on one cheek and a dimple on the other. He'd have to smile for you to see the dimple, but it's there."

I tried to act like I was considering her question, but I only managed to say, "Dimple," to myself two or three times.

The pretzel girl blushed. "I'm sorry. That's okay if you haven't. Don't worry about it. There's nothing to worry about. Thank you very much," — she glanced at my nametag — "Stuart."

My co-worker stopped stacking those little boxes of paperclips to watch the girl leave. The more I think about the look on his face, the more I think I should have punched him

in the face. “Dude,” he said, turning to me when she left. “You should have asked her number.”

“Why? I don’t think I’ll see anything suspicious today.”

That’s when my co-workers started calling me Stu-pid instead of Stuart. Boris found it rather funny and wrote it as my middle name on my paychecks.

I had forgotten the incident by the time I punched out. If I had remembered, it might have made what happened next more comprehensible. Actually, no, I take that back. My view of the world was too narrow for me to understand what happened next.

Since I worked at the mall, I felt compelled to eat there. The food court, like most housing editions, was named to evoke peaceful images of nature. The Apple Glen, which offered no apples, was an orchard of tiles, tables, and trashcans with smartly placed fake trees and bushes.

This particular day I stood considering the menu at the Holy Cow! fast food restaurant. With some hesitation I ordered a Number One, without pickles. I sat with my Brahma Burger, Ambrosia Fries, and Chi-Tea in the most lonesome section of the food court. The deification of meat patties and strips of potato vaguely disturbed me. My habitual acquaintances at Twisted Sisters were religious people who just happened to sell pretzels. That’s a far cry from a poster bearing a golden cinnamon pretzel and the caption, “Buy this indulgence and deliver your taste buds from the purgatory of ordinary treats!”

So, there I was, eating my fries without ketchup as always and pondering whether it was ethical to eat my hamburger, when the pretzel girl passed by. I remember thinking, *That’s the pretzel girl*, and forgetting her. I only stared dumbly at her when she sat down across from me a few minutes later.

“Hi,” she said.

I blinked. I think it’s my body’s involuntary reaction to shock. I nodded and gave a little salute to acknowledge her. My mouth was full of potato mush.

I noticed several things about her. First, she wore her brown-and-white-striped work shirt and her Twisted Sisters cap. Second, her hair, brown like her shirt, hung far past her shoulders, maybe to her waist. I must have noticed it before, but it seemed new to

me. Third, I read the name on her nametag. Miranda. I had certainly never known her name. If I had been observant, I could have known the name of every employee at the mall. We were all branded the same.

“Act natural,” she said. “Talk to me.”

This was really embarrassing. In fewer than five seconds she knew I had no idea how to act around a girl. There are men who can ride bulls named “The Widower” longer than I held a façade of confidence.

“Hi,” I said. It seemed a good place to start. Then my well of inspiration, like my mouth, was dry. I took a sip of tea.

The girl leaned forward. “My name’s Miranda. I need your help. The nuns said I could trust you. Look over there, that way. Do you see a tall, muscular man with blond hair, built like a bouncer?”

I looked. I didn’t think to ask why. With what seemed like thousands of shoppers moving around me, it was a little like playing *Where’s Waldo*. I searched a long time, until my contacts hurt, before answering, “I see four.” One talked to a skinny girl with a dazed expression. Two sat arm wrestling at a table near the Moo, Shoo! Vegetarian Chinese restaurant. The last stood leaning against a white column that supported nothing. Every time I looked at him, he was running his hand through his hair and smiling at the passing women.

“Crap.” Now, I must apologize for Miranda’s language. She is not normally crass, but she was under great pressure at the time. “Look for a dimple,” she said. “He’ll have one on his right cheek, and a scar on his left. Don’t be so obvious about it. Look casual.”

The best I could manage was to fake an enormous yawn while twisting in my chair. The one talking to the girl had no dimple; he had bad teeth. I couldn’t see the arm wrestlers for the crowd cheering them on. The fourth man had disappeared. I told Miranda this.

Working up some courage, I offered her some of my fries. She smiled at me, dropping from her deep thoughts, and took a few. For a moment, I imagined we were friends, silent in understanding. Then she had to ruin it and speak:

“Stuart, will you trust me? I need to tell you something, but you have to believe it. You will want to laugh, but it’s not a laughing matter.”

Trust her? Humans have a hard time trusting God, who invented the concept. How

was I to trust an almost-stranger? I would have to be a fool or a saint.

“I trust you.” You decide which I am.

She leaned further forward to reveal her secret. I leaned forward to meet her; I spilt my tea. It spread over the table like blood in a horror movie. Miranda jumped out of her chair to avoid it.

It was then I felt a prick on my neck. My fingers found something cold and metallic sticking into the flesh. I plucked it out. I don’t suppose you’ve ever looked at a small dart that you’ve pulled from near your Adam’s apple? Try to imagine it. That’s how I felt. There I was, dying in the middle of a mall food court, feeling that I should at least collapse to the floor so people would know I was injured. But I couldn’t move. I was paralyzed. I was a mime screaming for help.

Miranda, with her lightning reflexes, had collected a pile of napkins to wipe up the spill. I felt a pang of guilt for letting her do it by herself — the front of her work shirt was wet — but I could barely breathe. Slowly, I held out the hand holding the dart. It was like walking on feet that have fallen asleep. She looked at me with irritation ... until she saw it. In a moment she was at my side. She pocketed the dart.

“How do you feel?”

Some drool fell from my chin to my pants.

“Can you move?”

I shook my head with immense, agonizing effort.

“I need my purse. Where is it? Where — it’s in my car. Why’d I leave it in the car? Come on, you’re coming with me.” She wrapped her arm around me and hefted me to my feet.

I don’t remember exactly how we reached the parking lot. I think I tried to walk. Miranda told me later that she dragged me like a hundred-pound bag of soil. I do remember the glare of fluorescent lights on floor tiles and a lot of shoes. It was probably the only time in my life people thought I was drunk.

I opened my eyes to discover I sat in the passenger seat of a VW Bug. Miranda was at the wheel. My head slammed against the window as she made a sharp turn without slowing. “Hey, how’re you feeling?”

I didn't know yet. Some sense of feeling had returned to my limbs. "My head hurts." I touched a large bump on my skull.

"Sorry about that. It was awkward getting you in the car."

From the size of the bump, I wondered if she had even opened the door before slamming my head into it. "Where are we?"

"Driving."

I braced myself for an accelerated trip around a cloverleaf.

You might think it was my current state of mind that kept me from asking the important questions like "Where are we going?" or "Who tried to kill me?" or "Exactly who are you anyway?" You would be wrong. What kept me from asking those questions was a sense of self-preservation. If I knew nothing, I didn't worry. If I knew nothing, I wasn't responsible.

"I just barely got you the antidote before you locked up completely. I should have had my purse with me, but I didn't think I'd need it. Cap'n will chew me out for that." I noticed now a syringe nestled in the vehicle's flower holder and a petite, white handbag in the back.

I almost asked who Cap'n was, but I restrained myself. Better not to know.

"You're awfully quiet."

"I don't talk much." Yep, that's how suave I was. Stuck in a car with a beautiful young lady and I tell her I'm not interested in talking to her.

"I suppose I should thank you," she said. "If you hadn't spilt your drink, that dart would've hit me. I'd be in the Corporation's control by now."

I couldn't stop myself. It happened too fast. Afterward, I nearly clapped my hands over my mouth. "The Corporation?"

"The American Betterment Corporation. The ABC's of business, they call it. I can't tell you more unless...." She looked at me with an expression that made me think she was not as self-assured as she appeared. "I think I've lost anyone who would have been following us. We're going back to the mall. We'll go our separate ways."

This should have made me happy. Odysseus was returning home without all the mess of adventures and tragedies in between. How strange my life would have been if I had done nothing then. I can't imagine it; too much of what I now call *life* would never have existed. But I knew that Miranda needed help. She had told me so in the food court, and

her expression reminded me of the request. I thought nothing of owing her for saving my life. For me, that act was a gift, and you don't justify a gift with a counter-gift. I thought nothing of impressing her. If you think I sought to do so, you don't know the depth of my own self-image. No, I knew only she needed help and that there was no one else around to help her.

Of course, saying so took me five minutes to work up to. "Do you need help?" When I asked it, my breath came in short, anxious gasps.

"Don't worry about it. I'm fine."

This, I thought, was a lie, a particularly female lie. My mom used to tell me she didn't want anything for Mother's Day, that she had everything she wanted in her kids. So, one year, I didn't buy her anything. The memory still left emotional scars.

"You might need someone to take the bullet again," I said. That made her laugh until she wiped her eyes. It wasn't *that* funny.

"You really have no idea what you're doing, do you?"

A truthful answer would have been: "Absolutely not. No idea. Zip. Zero. I'm as clueless as Inspector Clouseau." Instead, I remained silent. That was answer enough.

"You must tell no one what I am about to tell you. I am part of an underground resistance, but it's a different kind of resistance. We don't want to overthrow the government. We are law-abiding citizens. Our sources indicate that this mall has been infiltrated. The man you saw in the food court, we call him Vlad the Dimple. He's an enemy agent. He must be stopped. I need your help uncovering his plot and dismantling it."

I don't know what my face looked like, but Miranda laughed when she saw it. I laughed with her; it was a contagious, gorgeous laugh. Of course, I still knew nothing when we stopped, but I felt better.

"Yes, Stuart?" she asked, sounding very like my mom when she knew something was bothering me.

"Could ... could I be killed?"

"Well, yes, possibly. But it's not likely. That dart was meant only to paralyze you. You could fall dead at any moment, any day, sitting in your house. I sometimes wonder if half the people who come to the mall aren't dead already."

I don't know if she was trying to be funny. All I could think was, *Man, death would*

ruin my routine.

I didn't want to know more about Miranda's mission; I didn't want to do it. We were near the mall now, almost ready to turn into the parking lot. I looked at the clock above the dashboard. I was nearly late returning to work from lunch. That was excuse enough. I didn't need to be John the Evangelist to foresee the wrath of Boris upon my world. Only one uncertainty hovered over the guilt of not helping Miranda; if I could remove this, I could ignore the guilt.

"Will people die if you don't find ... if you don't stop Vlad?"

Miranda stopped abruptly in a parking space and pulled the parking brake before I recovered from the whiplash. "You still don't understand." Her lips curved petulantly, as if I *should* understand. "This isn't about bombs and guns and knives. This isn't physical combat. We live in a different kind of world. This isn't about killing people; it's about owning them. You sell people things they need. The nuns sell things people enjoy. The Corporation isn't like that." She stopped, breathing deeply. She had spoken with as much passion as any crusading minister. I didn't love her then — love takes time to grow — but I look at the memory and wonder how I didn't.

Still, she had given me no reason to stay, and the minutes were disappearing like pizza in a room of teenage boys. "I gotta go. I'll be late for work."

Her face was forced blank. "If you see anyone, call me." She took her purse. She found a pen and began to look for a scrap of paper.

"Just write it on my hand. I always write notes there."

She wrote her cell number there, underneath a faded "Change oil in car," which I hadn't done yet.

I sat awkwardly with my hand on the door handle, desiring to leave and wanting not to be rude. "Thank you for ... everything. Maybe I'll see you when I get my pretzel...?"

"Maybe."

I wished her good luck, too, though it was like meeting Jesus coming out of Gethsemane and saying to him, "Good luck with that cross thing. I've gotta play a friendly game of cricket with some of my buddies. Dreadfully sorry. Tell me how it goes, okay?" I mean, I had no illusions that Miranda's troubles were *that* bad, but I felt the ugly barbs of guilt and cowardice lacerate my insides with every hasty step back to Nina's Knick-Knack Nook.

Once I set to work again, I forgot my unexpected adventure. We were having a Thumbtack Clearance Sale (*All Colors and Sizes Must Go!*). Boris, whenever he saw that the thumbtacks weren't selling like hotcakes (the Fluff 'N Stuff Bed 'n Breakfast was across the aisle from us — no one slept there, obviously, but the booths were designed in the style of beds) — whenever he saw the thumbtacks weren't selling like the products across the hall, he'd mutter, "Just stick with it, Boris, stick with it," which I found hilarious. Today he caught me laughing and sentenced me to the most tedious job in the store: cleaning the staple board.

On one wall, we had a huge corkboard. We let customers take staplers for a test run there. Every couple months, Boris assigned one of us to clean it. This required six hours of fingernails digging under staples to wedge them out. Boris refused to let us use a staple remover; he thought it would ruin the cork.

It was during my second hour at the corkboard that Vlad the Dimple entered the store.

The staples had begun to take on designs in the same way that clouds look like animals and vehicles if one studies them long enough. I was dissecting a spindly spider when my coworker Jerry came to me. "Dude, this guy wants as many of those ugly green glittery pens as we've got. See what we have in the backroom, will ya?"

I looked to the counter to see who would want so many green glittery pens. They wrote in the color of regurgitated pea-flavored baby food — not a big seller. Vlad stood at the counter, flicking a bobblehead and smiling absently. I ducked into the backroom before he could see me. I shouted to Jerry that we had four boxes of the pea soup. (Why we had *four*, I don't know.)

"Bring them out."

I stacked them on the handcart and hid behind the boxes as I maneuvered them to the counter. "I gotta get back to the staples," I told Jerry. "You know Boris."

I could tell Jerry didn't like this; I think he wanted me to accompany Vlad with the handcart. Lucky for me, Boris had smacked him half unconscious the day before when he had forgotten to add the twenty percent Finder's Fee for helping locate the exact size and color shirt button a customer needed.

"Whatever, dude."

When Jerry left with Vlad, I hurried to the phone to call Miranda. The man had come

into my store! I thought God was hitting me over the head with a hammer — when it gets bad, it feels like Whack-A-Mole. I try to listen before that.

“Hi, this is Miranda Stoltz. I’m not available right now. Sorry, I really wanted to talk to you. Really. Please leave your name and number and a short message after the beep.”
Beep!

I couldn’t gather the courage to speak. Words sound much more ridiculous spoken than thoughts do — words mean something. I hung up and stood staring out the store entrance at the crowd. What was Miranda trying to stop? Did it affect *them*? The flowing crowd was a mass of clothes and jumbled conversations, but I loved them at that moment. A wild idea seized me. Had it been a normal day, I would have pondered it pleasantly as I continued picking out staples. But, on such a day as this, I began to act with hardly a second thought, only *Stuart Lem, you’ve gone mad!*

I walked into Boris’s office. I had to say, “Excuse me, sir,” three times before he heard me. With a glower and a press of the mute button, he turned to me.

“I need to leave for the afternoon.”

“Leave? You lazy, boy? You’re working for me. Why should I let you off work? So you can go tan those skinny arms like that sissy George Hamilton? What’s it for, tell me that? You ain’t no good out there. The world will eat the flesh from your pathetic, little bones. I’m protectin’ you, you see? You’ll stay here, you’ll work, and you’ll like it. If you don’t, I’ll make you eat our surplus packing peanuts until you do. Hear me, boy? Packing peanuts. And not the biodegradable kind, neither.”

“Jerry just sold all our green glittery pens. I thought if I left, you could keep the profits instead of paying them to me.”

He punched me out himself. I mean, he punched my timecard out. My face remained intact.

I waited outside the store until Jerry returned with the hand truck.

“Dude, what’re you doing out here? Get back inside.”

“Boris sent me home for the day. Where did the guy want the boxes?”

“Know that store in the south end they’ve been remodeling? There. Must’ve opened today. The sickest clothing store I’ve ever seen. If I had a girlfriend, I’d take her.”

By long association with Jerry, I knew *sick* meant *cool*. I was just behind the times, as always.

As I approached the store, I thought that perhaps *sick* wasn't too far from the truth. The whole place, I think, was lit by black lights. Employees slid through the darkness like strange mutants with radioactive clothing and army fatigues. Racks of shorts shimmered with light like columns of clones ready to come to life. The interior, from what I could glimpse through the confusion of people, resembled the set of a post-apocalyptic movie. I thought a Hummer lay twisted on its side, its shrapnel serving as clothing racks.

Dark neon lights proclaimed the name: Post-Mortem. And underneath, a slogan: Dead. Sexy. You.

I didn't want to go in. I didn't want to go within ten feet of the place. I felt (laugh if you will, I don't care) a physical field preventing me from entering. To a quiet, naïve, predictable boy like me, to cross the threshold was to see the words Dante saw inscribed at the entrance to Hell:

**I AM THE WAY INTO THE DOLEFUL CITY,
I AM THE WAY INTO ETERNAL GRIEF,
I AM THE WAY TO A FORSAKEN RACE.**

But I thought of Miranda and of how she had saved me from the dart. It didn't help much, but it forced me to realize that I must go in, whatever I felt. If I didn't, I was no man at all.

I entered. My eyes adjusted to the dim light. I felt almost as guilty as if I had entered a lingerie store. I tried not to look at anything. I saw combinations of colors Picasso wouldn't use, usually on shirts with only half the material needed to complete them. For a long time, I mistook the shorts, little more than strips of cloth, for swimsuit bottoms. The jeans weren't quite so bad, but I wasn't sure anyone could fit in them. I wandered the store, trying to look like I was browsing, but I was more skittish than a school of fish.

"Can I help you with something, sir?" The speaker, a young woman of indeterminate age, wore an iron rod through her nose.

"No, no ... I'm just looking." I swallowed. If this lady worked with Vlad.... "Have you seen a girl here wearing a brown and white uniform?"

The woman shrugged. "I'd look over there. There's a bunch of people."

For the first time since entering, I looked up and embraced a wider view of the store. Green light flooded the back corner; it looked a little like the unearthly glow of Emerald City. A banner hung, proclaiming, “Envywear — On Sale Today Only.” Confusion jostled beneath the banner.

Thanking the employee as politely as I could — I wanted her to know I *was* thankful; customers are too often rude or unthinking — I threaded my confused way through the store. Girders, oil barrels, a half-smashed brick wall blocked my way, each cunningly utilized to display wares. The truck sputtered flames as I passed, a clever trick that nearly sent me running from the store. After far too long, with searing eyes and questions I should never have been made to ask (*Why would anyone want the Jolly Roger on the butt of her pants?*), I arrived before the writhing, raucous crowd.

It was the equivalent of a small-scale riot. I saw Vlad standing on a raised platform, shouting to the crowd below. I had heard him without understanding his words, thinking it was part of the store’s eerie soundtrack. Now I could understand the words, if just barely.

“Don’t fight, ladies, don’t fight. Yes, this outfit, perfected by famed designer Izaak Yipnushka, is one of a kind, limited edition. We have only fifty available for sale. That’s right, only fifty. Yes, save your strength, first come, first serve. This is a one-of-a-kind opportunity. With the purchase of this form-fitting, beauty-enhancing blouse and these slimming, celebrity-inspired slacks, you will rise above the rabble of humanity and stand attired as sharply as any goddess — until now they have been only statues, but you are flesh. Who’s first?”

The mob of women pressed forward. Miranda might be in there, but I did not dare to enter or else my eyes might be scratched out. A young lady, so slender it surprised me she had the strength to force her way forward, pulled herself onto the dais. Vlad shook her hand with a laugh of triumph and embraced her. He retrieved a hanger with the most putrid green clothing I had ever seen. “This is yours exclusively. Take it. Now, I have a green pen here, somewhere. Here it is, take it. Under these black lights, what you write upon your outfit will be evident to all, but out there, none will know it but you. Come, write something across your shirt.” He handed her the pen and whispered some words to her. A few seconds later, he held up the outfit for all to see. She had written, in large, flowery letters, one word — ME. The crowd cheered; the woman proceeded to the

checkout counter.

“Who’s next?”

I edged around the crowd, hoping to find Miranda. Without her, I had no courage to do anything. If she was not here, I would leave this wild, disturbing uproar and head home, forgetting the strange nightmare in the familiar settings and routines of mundane life.

I walked around the crowd; I slipped behind the counter; I moved, cautiously, behind Vlad, so I could look out into the crowd. I found stacks of boxes and two employees hanging up the Envywear — there were many more than fifty. It was possible he would run out of pens first.

All this time, shouts of violence and cheers of conquest alternated. I saw three other women win their outfit. Each decorated it with the word ME, one in endless repetition down the pant leg, another with a score of exclamation marks. Starting to despair, I looked out into the crowd and saw Miranda in the middle of the writhing female mass, still wearing her Twisted Sisters cap.

This, I think, was the hardest chore of that day. I did not feel comfortable around ladies, except in my role as a salesman. To squeeze through the press of anxious, agitated, angry women was, to me, more terrible than a mob of violent men, for I was a man also; among women, I was among an alien culture; and the culture grew more strange with the number of women present.

But I did enter the fray. I won’t describe it. I barely remember it except as hot, boiling, steaming minutes that lasted much longer than the seconds on my watch can account for.

I grabbed Miranda as any drowning man grabs a life buoy. She flung me off without looking my direction. “Miranda!” I shouted. She glanced at me; she did not seem to recognize me. Desperate, I grabbed her arm again. “Miranda!” This time, she pushed me away.

I don’t know what it was. The Stuart Lem of that morning would have left, a little hurt, a little dejected, but mostly relieved to have escaped. For some reason, I grabbed Miranda by the arm and began to pull. When she struggled, I grabbed her by the waist and half-carried her. By force and sweat and the pain of scratches and punches, I freed her from the crowd and, finally, from Post-Mortem. I sat on the bench outside, gasping

for air, slick with sweat. Miranda sat on my lap. I clutched her tightly so she wouldn't run.

"Ah ... I love you, too, Stuart."

With a jolt, I threw Miranda off my lap. She nearly fell to the ground. She laughed at me. "It's a joke. You were cradling me."

"I was trying to save you."

She sat beside me. I had a thousand questions but didn't ask one. She sat beside me as naturally as if we were friends just come across each other. She barely looked to Post-Mortem. "I didn't expect to see you again."

"Neither did I."

"Are we even now?"

She said it, I thought, with disdain. "I didn't save you in exchange for saving me," I answered. "When you saved me, it created ... I don't know. I worried about you. I see hundreds of people pass through here everyday. I don't know any of them. I knew you." I paused; her face was inscrutable. "I did save, you, didn't I?" I was beginning to fear it had all been an act.

The change on her face was almost like ripping Sunday off a daily calendar and finding Monday. Her eyes were pools of failure in a hollow face. "I can't go back in. They've made it too powerful. I never thought I'd succumb.... You care nothing about clothing, do you?"

I thought I dressed nicely enough; well, I had to look down to remember what I was wearing, but still, that didn't mean I didn't care, did it?

"No, not really," I said. "All my shirts look alike."

"You need to go in again. You need to stop Vlad. This is the testing ground."

"I don't understand."

She touched my shoulder. "Stuart, I don't know all the answers, either. The Cap'n might, but he's not here. But he told me once that we don't fight men. We fight ideas and systems. I won't try to explain why or how an outfit or technology or a fellowship or a piece of entertainment become deadly weapons, but they do. You wouldn't have pulled me away if you didn't understand."

Fine. I believed every word of it; or, rather, I believed as much as I understood and wanted no more. But what I really wanted to know was this: Was there a way I could

have someone else do the job?

“What do I need to do?”

“I don’t know. You need to stop the sale.”

A horrid thought entered my head. “Will I have to fight him?”

“I wouldn’t recommend it. But if it’s the only way, hit him hard. The Cap’n told me once that people misunderstand violence. Thoughts and talk don’t lead to violence; they require no action. But beliefs must be marked with violence. Beliefs demand actions, and actions cause conflict. That conflict, at times, is physical. When it’s right, we must not hesitate.”

“Sounds like a lovely man.”

“If you knew him, you’d understand. You need to go. It will only be harder if you wait.”

“Easy for you to say.”

She squeezed my hand. “I didn’t work with nuns without credentials. I’ll pray for you.”

Such a statement is so light and so weighty, depending on your frame of mind. At the time, it was weighty. It was enough to give me courage to stand. I didn’t step forward, though.

“Go, Stuart. Hurry. I’ll be here. I might be able to help yet.”

The first step was the hardest. Each step became easier after that.

I approached the counter, thinking maybe to sabotage the boxes of Envywear somehow. I saw a line of ladies ready to make their purchases. The cashier worked slowly. Watching her, I saw the sour, grumbling attitude of one who hated her job. She tore the outfits from the customers’ hands, roughly scanned them, thrust them into bags, and swiped credit cards with venom. Inspired, I walked next to her.

“I’ve come to relieve you. Go home.”

She obeyed without protest. In seconds she snatched her purse from a back room and joined the crowd around Vlad.

“Ring me up, or I’ll call the manager.”

I turned to look at the woman first in line. She set a large, red purse on the counter and stared over it at me with small eyes framed by large, square frames. I became the salesman at once.

“Ah, the Envywear, yes. It’s quite a popular item today. Let me scan this thing. \$129.95? It’s not worth that much. If it was up to me, I’d sell it for \$12.95.”

As a salesman, it’s not only my duty to sell, but to inform the customer about her product. If she still wants to buy it, it can’t be helped.

“Twelve ninety-five?” the woman said. You would have thought her husband had surprised her with a three-week tour of Europe. “Yes, I think that’s what he said, actually. I heard him say something like that. The computer must be wrong.”

“I don’t know that the computer’s wrong, but I’d sell it cheap because we’re trying to get rid of the things. We’ve got boxes and boxes of them over there. See, right there, you can see the corner of one. I’m surprised anyone buys them. They’re ugly. Envywear? I’m surprised it sells anywhere.” I chuckled at my rhyme, but the woman didn’t notice. She looked quite solemn, and not a thing in the world, I think, would bring her out from herself. I saw the others in line looking angrily at me and muttering, not talking to anyone exactly, but talking loud enough so everyone could hear.

“If you ask me, we have much nicer blouses and slacks over there, right there, see, by that hobo made of coat hangers. I’d look over there.”

And, after a few seconds’ reluctance, she left the Envywear with me and followed my advice. The area by the hobo held some nice things, or, at least, articles of clothes I could accept as wearable. I threw the outfit behind me and helped the next customer.

I repeated variations of the same tactic, and four of the next five were convinced not to purchase. After that, my job became much easier, for those in line noticed what those in front did and approached me, leaning near and asking, as if it were a great secret, why the others hadn’t bought the outfit.

I was rather enjoying myself when I felt a tap on my shoulder. It was Vlad, of course, standing far above me and smiling grimly, his dimple daring me to laugh.

“Didn’t get enough at lunch today, huh? Came for dessert?”

Maybe I’ve seen too many movies; maybe I was caught up in the success of my salesmanship; maybe I was plain scared out of my head — whatever the reason, I said something no sane person in my situation should ever say: “Leave now, Vlad, or I’ll be forced to hurt you.”

Can’t really think of a movie where that question is answered with a fist to the face. I didn’t even fly into the far wall like I should have. I only fell, rather lamely, to the floor. I

was crying, too, I think. I certainly didn't want to get back up. The man was *strong*.

If only he had been one of those honorable villains, one of those bad guys who rough you up and tell you to get out. No, Vlad was a vindictive one. I had taken the dart's poison instead of Miranda, his target; I had escaped and recovered; I had pulled Miranda from the store; I had foiled his operation — he wanted no more of it. I heard, later, that the women, seeing him punch me, grew a little less fond of the clothing; a few left straight out. Most stepped back a bit to wait until they could approach the register safely.

Vlad picked me up roughly and threw me into a stand of sunglasses. My memory isn't clear at this point, but I fancy the stand was made of barbed wire. It felt like it, in any case. Then he picked me up again and threw me against the wall I should have hit after the first punch. I think (and I write this shamefully) I was calling for my mommy. Ah, but mommy didn't come; a boot did.

I had never killed a spider — I took them outside when I found them in the house — but I had to find a way to level this man. I grasped frantically for a weapon of some kind. I could see only blurs. My hand found something. I found my feet with some wild, sudden strength. I found him by smashing into him with my dazed and damaged body. I swung blindly. I connected. He fell.

It was several minutes later, after I wiped the blood off my face with a green Envywear blouse, that I could see a shoe in my hand and a stiletto heel mark on Vlad's forehead.

Miranda took me to the mall's medical center. The nurse there, armed with only Band-Aids and aspirin, told me to go to the ER. Miranda drove me; she thought the ambulance would take too long. I apologized for getting her seats all bloody. She was really nice about it.

She explained the situation to my parents, somehow, who rushed into the ER, sure Boris had done something awful in a fit of rage. My parents rarely mentioned the incident afterward; whatever Miranda had said, they trusted her.

Vlad didn't die, for which I was glad; but I met him again, later, to my grief. Miranda told me that a foundation run by the Cap'n would purchase the remaining Envywear and

dispose of them. When I was settled in a hospital bed with nothing broken but everything bruised to the point where a good break might have been a trophy of sorts, Miranda came in and, asking for a moment alone with me, said goodbye.

“Thank you, Stuart. Don’t talk. I have to say this, and then I will leave. I didn’t mean to get you mixed up in this. I can see that you don’t like it. I don’t blame you. But you did better than I could have hoped. You will not see me again at Twisted Sisters. You will not see me anywhere at the mall. I have assignments elsewhere now. But I wanted you to know that I’ll miss you. We might have been friends, you and I. I feel it, though I hardly know you. But I have seen how you act — despite your protests.” She looked at me with such a sweet expression on her face, I thought I could fall quite in love with her. And, with that innocent, sorrowful, proud expression, she leaned down and kissed me on the forehead. “Goodbye, Stuart.”

She left. And, if God had not been kind, I would never have seen her again. But God is kind; and his kindness has some of what we might call cruelty in it. But it is only because his kindness is so fierce.

That, however, is another story altogether.