

KAFKA'S LAST LAUGH

VAGABOND

THE PROTESTERS BARRICADED THE ENTRANCE TO THE NEW YORK Stock Exchange, effectively silencing the opening bell of trading for the day. The riot police lined up in formation. The protesters stepped forward with locked arms, creating a front line of defense. More riot police marched in from the north on New Street with shields and batons. The protesters stood their ground, shouting their demands. Some of them shouted because the lack of a voice had been building in them, some because their patience had finally run out, some simply because they found that the sound from their throats converted fear into courage.

A white-shirted cop with a captain's hat barked orders through a megaphone in an attempt to disperse the crowd. "According to PATRIOT Act IV this action is not in compliance with the Representational Grievance Clause 7 Section 1, which states that it is illegal to have more than 123 protesters at any protest. It is also not in compliance with Representational Grievance Clause 8 Section 1, which states that all protests must have gathering permits from the state to take place. This action is also in violation of Representational Grievance Clause 9 Section 1, which states that all protest must take place within predetermined free speech assembly zones."

The protesters snarled and booed and threw empty water bottles at the captain and his bullhorn. In the thick of them, Resister Fernandez, a young Puerto Rican woman dressed in black, pushed her way to the front line, then scanned the area, looking for possible escape routes, but there was no way out. The police had them boxed in from the east on Nassau Street and the west on Broadway, and now cops

advanced from the south on New Street. The irony of having one's back up against Wall Street was not lost on her.

A heady cocktail of memory, pride, adrenaline, and conviction gave her a surge of courage when she realized that she had been a part of the last rebellion where protesters broke out of the "free speech assembly zones," two years earlier. It had been after the election of Jenna Bush in Dallas, the G16 protests of 2022. She had spent years searching—in meetings and collective houses, at radical bookstores and anarchist community spaces, in the streets at demonstrations—for a way to find the system's fatal flaw and exploit it. Resister wasn't sure that she was going to find it protesting here on Wall Street, the very epicenter of the capitalist technocracy, but she was frustrated and it felt good to be out in the street again going toe to toe.

The energy broke like a brick through a window. On the front line between protesters and police, Resister threw her shoulder into a police shield as she tried to get a better foothold. She managed to get a good stance, and she lunged forward. The cop lost his footing. She immediately pushed into his shield again. This time the cop went over on his ass, and she came down on top of him, the shield wedged between them.

Another cop wielding a baton yanked her off the shield and dragged her into more open ground. Two protesters broke out of the mass of bodies and snatched her left arm. For a moment, she felt like a rag doll being fought over by siblings. One protester let her go and reached around to shove the cop in the chest. When he toppled, Resister was able to break free, but she tripped on a protester who was sprawled on the ground. She scrambled to get up, but now the cop was on her. She looked up just in time to see his club rushing toward her face. Excruciating pain exploded behind her eyes, and everything went white and numb.

• • •

Unconsciousness was ripped away from her as cold water flooded down her throat. She gagged and choked, struggling for air. It was a hell of a way to wake up. Her interrogators had a talent for stopping just before you felt like your lungs were going to burst. They gave her a few minutes to compose herself, then pulled her hair back, and the

water came rushing in again. When they weren't pouring cold water into her mouth and nose, the exhaustion of fighting to breathe settled into her muscles, and her body went limp.

In her mind, she had it all figured out. Instead of using the adrenaline kick to breathe, she would use it to break her bonds and then bash their brains in. But her body would not cooperate with her thoughts. It was locked in an instinctual survival mode. The adrenaline only came with the water.

Resister's chin rested on her collarbone as she spit up water. She watched a shadow on the floor, without the strength to brace herself for the right hook heading for her jaw. She knew it would bring momentary oblivion, and at this point she welcomed that.

• • •

When she woke again she was in a hospital bed. Her head was bandaged, as were her ribs.

A man sat by the bed. When he saw that she was awake, he leaned in. She could smell the breath mint he had in his mouth, noticed his hair was thinning. He was probably in his early forties but his haggard face made him seem older. He looked like someone trying to juggle chainsaws.

"Good. You're awake. I'm your court-appointed public defender. I have a meeting in fifteen minutes, so I'll have to go through this quickly. If you have any questions please save them till the end."

He paused. Seeing that she had enough intelligence to remain silent, he nodded and continued. "You've been in the hospital for three days. Your trial would have been tomorrow but I took the plea deal they offered. I couldn't speak with you about it; the doctors said it was best for you to be sedated for a few days."

The lawyer glanced down at his watch. Resister could see the clock counting down in his eyes.

"I tried to move the trial to a date when you could be present, but the judge felt pressure, both politically and from the media, to wrap up as many of these Wall Street Riot trials as soon as he could.

"You were charged with 680 counts of seditious conspiracy to overthrow legitimate business interests; terrorism; and assault of six

police officers. I pleaded you down to a mandatory three-year sentence for aggravated organized protest.”

Resister involuntarily sucked in a deep breath of air as the lawyer continued.

“Seeing as you were charged with 680 counts of seditious conspiracy to overthrow legitimate business interests and no one who has ever been charged with even just one has ever beat it, I took what they were offering.” Defensiveness tinged the lawyer’s tone.

She sat up, her head buzzing. She wanted to ask him something, but her mind was so sluggish she didn’t know what it was.

She heard a thin electronic beeping. The lawyer hit a button on his watch and got up. “And that’s time. I guess I didn’t have time for questions. It’s all here in the file. If you still have questions, I’ll be back in a week. You can try and call this number,” he said, handing her a business card, “though because of your charges, PATRIOT Act VII only allows a monitored phone call every two weeks. That’s based on charges, not convictions. Take care and stay out of trouble.”

She flipped throughout the trial transcript, read the charges written in Orwellian doublespeak. Everything felt surreal. She wondered if she was stuck in a nightmare. Her head throbbed and her vision blurred.

When she got to the report of the Wall Street protest, which was at least four times as long as the trial transcript, a strange feeling came over her. She wasn’t sure what it was. It began deep within her bowels and rolled up into her throat. It began in short spasms just above her groin and moved up her diaphragm, into her chest, then rolled into her shoulders. It bubbled up into her throat uncontrollably, and finally it spilled from her lips as she erupted into laughter. She couldn’t stop laughing, and she didn’t want to. Lying in a hospital bed, looking at a mandatory three-year sentence after surviving a near death experience, she felt a freedom she had never even dared to imagine. The three other patients stared at her curiously, searching for a clue as to the source of her mirth. The laughter moved across the room, spreading like an airborne contagion. They too began to laugh.

Two nurses stuck their head into the room and were taken aback by the scene: four patients, bandaged and wrapped in flimsy hospital gowns, all laughing uncontrollably. The nurses looked around, searching for the catalyst, but they couldn’t find any. After a few

moments standing in curious wonder, they began to smile—and then to laugh.

Resister threw her legal papers in the air, chortling as she watched gravity do its thing. A doctor entered the room, surveying the scene. He quickly called for orderlies, then grabbed a syringe filled with a sedative. He seemed to instinctively know that the virus began with Resister and commanded the orderlies to hold her down. For some reason, the doctor and the orderlies seemed immune to the laughter, as if they had been inoculated against it.

The orderlies grabbed her, and now, like a switch had been flipped, she was in a rage, flailing, screaming obscenities. They struggled to hold her. As quickly as the laughter and joy had come, it was drained from the room.

The doctor injected her and a few moments later her consciousness slipped away like the laughter.

• • •

Resister sat across from an intake officer on her first day at Sunny Day Prison, Incorporated.

“My name is Ms. Selas,” the officer said coldly, overemphasizing the “Ms.” “After a rigid and thorough psychological evaluation, you’ve been selected to be a part of a special program known as Corrective Retail Operation Confinement—CROC. You may have heard of this program being referred to as Prison Malls. It’s a new initiative in prison reform partially funded by some of the largest retailers in the world—Walmart, Target, Bloomingdale’s, Dillard’s, Macy’s, The Gap, Banana Republic, Abercrombie & Fitch, American Eagle—in partnership with psychologists, neuro-market researchers, criminologists, and penologists. The goal is to explore the link between prisoners and free-market capitalism.”

Ms. Selas’s contempt for Resister was almost like a third party in the room. “A recent study found prisoners such as yourself have no respect for capitalism, and that is the source of your criminal behavior. The best way to rehabilitate you and others like you is to develop a healthy respect for capitalism. In doing so, you’ll channel all your desires and energies through capitalism. If you can learn to place the

proper value on your desires through capitalism and use it as a moral compass, you could be cured of your criminal tendencies.”

Not being one to let an opportunity to question authority pass her by, Resister asked, “What if I don’t want to participate in CROC? What if I just want to do straight time?”

“Your attorney didn’t tell you?” Ms. Selas tried to hide her smugness but failed.

“Tell me what?”

“Oh, that’s right, you weren’t at your own trial. CROC is a part of your plea deal.” Ms. Selas didn’t even try to hide the self-satisfaction that comes with working on behalf of authoritarianism. “It’s three years of CROC or eight years straight time—co-ed of course.”

Resister sat in stunned silence.

Ms. Selas continued. “You’ll be paid a prison wage.”

“And what is that?”

“Fifty percent reduction of one-tenth of the federally set minimum wage, minus 360 percent of taxes paid by the median household.”

Resister’s head was spinning. “What does that actually mean?”

Ms. Selas pulled out a calculator, even though she knew the answer very well. “That averages 0.7 cents an hour.”

“What? Is that legal?”

“Of course. We have to offset the cost of extra security measures.”

“So no one has protested this?” Resister asked.

“Oh, there was a short-lived backlash by those who were employed by these retailers,” Ms. Selas said dismissively, “but since they were not unionized and lacked organizational skills, that resistance was drowned out rather quickly by retailers promising cheaper prices with the new ‘prison hire’ initiative.”

“Wait. You said I was psychologically evaluated and found to be a candidate for CROC? When did that happen?”

“During your trial.”

“But I wasn’t there.”

“You didn’t need to be. You were protesting against capitalism on Wall Street. It’s obvious you’re a perfect candidate for CROC.”

“But it was also a part of my lawyer’s plea deal? Which one was it?”

“Both.”

Resister wanted to argue but didn’t know where to begin. She was

lost, and the irony of it all sent her further down the rabbit hole.

Ms. Selas pushed a button on her desk, and two correction officers came in. One of them grabbed Resister’s arms. Resister was caught completely off guard when the other seized her jaw and held her head up.

Ms. Selas barely looked up from her tablet. “These officers are here to administer your daily dose of Contentina.”

They squirted a tingling aerosol blast into her nose.

“You think you could have warned me?” Resister yelled.

Ms. Selas ignored the question. “Contentina is a nano drug used to monitor and transmit information such as body temperature, eye dilation, adrenaline, oxygen intake, and heart rate. It works by attaching itself to the nervous system. It allows inmates to be tracked through GPS by Prison Mall security monitors with applications that run on mobile devices. I’m mandated by the Prisoners Rights Act of 2017 to inform you that Contentina will also transmit corrective electroshock signals to the nervous system if it’s deemed that your behavior is working against your rehabilitation.”

Ms. Selas’s tone was mechanical and routine. Clearly she had given this speech many times before. She was completely oblivious to the horror written on Resister’s face.

“It’s been designed and set to your height, weight, BMI, and blood type. You’re being assigned to serve out your work sentence at Galleria Prison Mall, at the Nordstrom perfume counter.”

Resister felt herself begin to float out of her own body. Was she a character in Kafka novel? A Terry Gilliam film? Could this really be her life? Ms. Selas prattled on, as Resister pulled so far back out of the situation that she felt she was watching herself in a movie. What did her comrade Beaumont call moments like this? Dialectic displacement. She had never really understood before what that was. But there was definitely a sense of dialectic displacement as she felt everything from some far-off place.

“I don’t like perfume” was all Resister could think to say.

“You’ll get used to it.”

• • •

During Resister's first week of working at the perfume counter, she complained to Prison Retail Management, requesting reassignment. The chief neuro-marketer officer at the Galleria felt that it would help in her capitalist rehabilitation for her to overcome her nausea at the smell of perfume. Resister had never been around so much perfume for so long, and it irritated her to no end, which was reflected in her customer service. Her exasperated attitude with customers led to a lot of coercive electroshock jolts to her nervous system. She felt a constant queasy uneasiness in her stomach, but she didn't know if it was from the perfume or the electroshock. She went to see the prison doctor, who conferred with the chief neuro-marketer. They concurred that what she was feeling was a physical side affect of her social rehabilitation.

Resister finally managed to find out how to make a formal complaint and filled out the paperwork, in quadruplicate, against the warden of the mall, asking officially for transfer to a different position. When she turned in the paperwork, she was told that it would be two weeks before her complaint would be heard.

Due to her continuous nausea, she had a complete lack of appetite. The upside of this was all the friendships she'd made by sharing her meager rations in the food court with the other retail prisoners.

"You know, there's a really simple solution to your problem," said Slinky as he grabbed her synthetic milk substitute and took a swig. Slinky had been arrested for making guerrilla political videos in the park without the proper permits. He'd already done more than two years.

"What's that?" she replied.

"Stop fighting it."

Resister just stared at him.

"Look," Slinky said, his words flavored with his father's Jamaican accent. "Just give in to the nausea. Allow it to affect you fully. You'll be reassigned in no time, I guarantee it."

The next day, Resister took Slinky's advice. She let the nausea take over and vomited three times before noon. She thought of those as practice runs; she was learning to gauge how long it took. The next time she made sure to vomit on a customer.

The perfume counter manager sent her back to the prison doctor immediately, and the prison doctor sent her back to her prison dorm

cell. The perfume counter manager then complained to Prison Retail Management, and the next day Resister was selling shoes.

Three weeks later, the judgment on her request for reassignment came in. She and the other retail prisoners on her shift were unwinding in the common area, like they did every night before lights out. One of the guards handed a sheet of paper to her as he walked by. At first, Resister was confused—she wasn't even sure what it was. As she read, she realized it was a denial for the request to be transferred she had put in five weeks ago, that was supposed to have been answered three weeks ago. It informed her that she had to stay in the perfume department and that there would be no possibility of reassignment for at least another year.

She looked down at the work nametag she had taken off a few minutes before, which, in addition her name, read "Shoe Department."

Suddenly Resister began to laugh. Realizing that she found absolute and absurd elation in the incompetence of the system, which gave her hope that there was a way out of all this, she laughed and laughed uncontrollably. The other prisoners asked her what was so funny, but she couldn't answer. The laughter made her knees weak and she fell to the floor. The other prisoners looked down at her, and smiles broke out on their faces—and then they too began laughing. A virus of joy spread across the common area of the prison dorm. Resister held up the mall warden's denial. One of the prisoners took it and read it out loud. Well, he started to, but one by one laughter took each of them until finally the prisoner reading collapsed mid-sentence, guffawing.

Through tears of laughter, Resister looked around and saw the others laughing, and she realized she'd found a way out. Laughter liberated them from the search for logic within the illogical. It validated for them what they had known all along—that the system was a joke. They laughed because the key to their freedom was always within them. The absurd simplicity of it all was just too much for them to contain, even if they didn't fully grasp it at the moment.

Prison dorm cell security forces were perplexed at the riot of laughter that had prisoners wriggling on the floor. They called in the prison doctor, a nano security biology officer, and the chief neuro-marketer. The nano security biology officer activated a fail-safe riot program

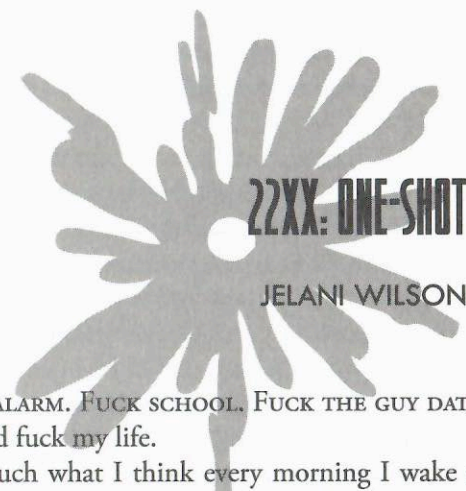
in the Contentina, but it seemed to have no effect. Endorphins produced by the laughter blocked Contentina's effect.

None of the prison staff knew what to do at that point. This only served as more fodder for the prisoners' howling. Out of sheer desperation, the guards dragged them one by one back to their cells. All the while the convicts laughed at the guards.

The warden called an emergency meeting of Prison Mall officials. There was a flaw in Contentina. Something needed to be done. If it got out that endorphins from laughter blocked the electroshock of Contentina, they would lose control of the prisoners.

An hour later, Resister sat on the cell floor, her back against the wall, still chuckling quietly to herself. She was already planning how to grow this resistance of hilarity beyond their cellblock, how to not only break herself out but as many of the other prisoners as she could. Then it struck her. She had removed herself from thought processes that kept her from imagining turning the world upside down. The more she thought about how warped and surreal the world had become, the more she found an absurd humor in its flaws.

Then the most dangerous thought rushed out of the depths of her subconscious: as long as you could find a way to laugh at the madness, they couldn't reach you. And if they couldn't reach you, then they couldn't beat you. This laughter at the absurdity of it all brought the mad reckless optimism every revolution needs. This wasn't just a threat to the prison. It was a threat to everything. Laughter was the means by which everything could change.



FUCK MY SNOOZE ALARM. FUCK SCHOOL. FUCK THE GUY DATING Delia Darlington. And fuck my life.

That's pretty much what I think every morning I wake up these days. You guessed it. I'm a jaded teenage manchild with a chip on my shoulder. The name's Sasha Sangare. That's the kind of name you end up with when you got a Russian mom and a Malian dad.

Who's Delia? We'll get to her later. It's a long story. You don't want to make me late for class, do you?

I'm a sophomore at the Institute, in case you didn't know. From the name you'd think it was a shining citadel on a hill. It's actually inside a terraformed dome on the desolate moon of Phobos orbiting Mars, nestled inside the Stickney Crater, spinning round and round above yet another planet for humanity to run into the ground.

The Institute was built by the AFIP (Armed Forces of the Inner Planets), which makes us all tools for the military, even though students don't classify as enlisted. I shouldn't complain, though. There are still kids starving, or forced to be slaves and soldiers, or who at least never got the chance to test into exclusive Martian high schools for kids too smart for their own good.

That's my excuse for being at the bottom of my class, by the way. My parents didn't like it either.

If it wasn't time for my nanomechanics class, I'd give you the campus tour. Just don't let the bright, sunny day fool you. It's a holographic sky projected on the inside of the dome. The cumulous clouds glitch every once in a while.

Anyway, Prof. Tsai is giving summations of final projects today.