

DAVID
A.
BRENSILVER



EXEC
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Sitting listlessly on the threadbare couch in his squalid, downtown Baltimore hovel, Dov Montana, a perpetually out-of-work documentary filmmaker, wondered how much his apartment would have rented for in 1970. He was no good at math. Even a legal pad and a calculator didn't come close to helping him figure out what was really just another manufactured exercise to keep his mind off his nervous breakdown.

Nothing was worse than the panic attack that had manifested itself in abject hypochondria and seemed like a torture that would never end. The heart attack he was sure he'd suffered came out of nowhere. It had

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been frightening, feeling for a heartbeat but detecting none, though his pulse raced like a hummingbird's. The spinning room had stolen his equilibrium, and he'd fallen to a kneeling position in front of a window, his forehead washing the panes with sweat while his hands failed to get enough of a grip to open it, hoping that the cool breeze would help him breathe again. Calling his father, a semi-retired physician, hadn't helped. Being diagnosed over the telephone with *not* having a heart attack hadn't helped even more. His father asking not what the symptoms were but rather whether Dov had any job prospects had only made things worse.

Nobody believed that he had testicular cancer, no matter how much he insisted he could feel a lump the size of the eye of a large newt. Nobody believed that he had throat cancer, no matter how many people he insisted feel the lumps he'd found just beneath his jawbone. "Those are your tonsils, Dov," people told him repeatedly, people that weren't taking him seriously. Distraction was the only thing that would keep him from the next life-threatening episode. But all the exercises he'd designed to do just that couldn't keep the emergencies out of his head—literally. When a blood vessel burst in his head, he could feel it spraying around in his brain like a garden hose. He could feel the warm blood escaping. He could feel the blood washing over his brain like warm bathwater; and he could feel it rising in his skull. Dov Montana needed distraction. He couldn't be left alone to think about the tremor that would come and go in the thumb of his right hand. It was about survival. And if that meant hooking his bootlegged cable back up, so be it, as long as the numbness in his legs went away. (He'd disconnected his cable hookup after an episode of *ER* convinced him that he had a brain tumor; his speech was slurred, his vision blurry.)

Self-medicating with what might as well have

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been a bourbon drip, and chain-smoking to keep the nicotine flowing, Dov Montana had finally been able to nurse himself back into a world that supplanted his panic with the more familiar mood of intellectual outrage. Watching television again, after a considerable layoff during which the medium had reinvented itself, to Dov Montana was like watching a *Miami Vice* marathon, in all its hot pastel glory, after having previously only known black and white.

Dov Montana was feeling a lot better. He was even back to laughing maniacally each time he tossed a cigarette butt out the window and onto the street below, where he knew the superintendent would sweep it up. He was able to watch the morning news on CNN again, albeit with the tolerance of an annoyed hornet. On this morning, some overstarched attorney named Conrad Rangefork Thistle III was pontificating that his client, a death-row inmate at a South Florida correctional facility, had the right to choose by which method he would be put to death.

Montana's patience had long been explosive, especially in the face of news-as-entertainment, super-sized sensationalism consumed in vast quantities by, as Montana referred to mainstream America, "the Nielsens."

Reared under the weighty burden of parental expectations, Montana grew up exponentially anxious about not achieving the kinds of success, either material or with regard to status, which had always been expected of him. He saw himself as a genius with lofty subscriptions to uncompromising excellence, unapologetic artistic integrity, and steadfast ideologies, but one who had never been duly rewarded, emotionally or otherwise. His numerous failed documentary concepts, dusty, unmoved stacks of time-yellowed documents littering the corners of his apartment, represented the ever-present fuel necessary for Montana's growing desperation.

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Not without a certain gift, Montana did, during the years of his formal education, enjoy the envy and adulation of schoolmates and professors alike, for his kaleidoscopically observant eye and pure, unfiltered imagination. However, since he left that comfort zone and entered the hourglass of reality, his condition had graduated from anxiety to panic. Despite navigating his way through a nervous breakdown, Dov Montana was still desperate to reconcile his life's toil and achieve the success he felt he so absolutely deserved. And so, watching the morning broadcast on CNN with his usual abundance of cynical disdain, Montana finally asked himself: Was this the opportunity to make an unavoidable artistic point? Was this his chance to arrive, once and for all, at the fruition of his long-roiling ideologies?

He picked up the telephone and listened for a dial tone, used to hearing, from time to time, none at all, and, upon discovering one, called the offices of Tude Entertainment, a second-rate pay-per-view reality-TV outlet, whose programming director, a guy called Lerz Feingold, was an old schoolmate and erstwhile colleague.

A secretary answered Montana's call wearily: "Tude Entertainment, Lerz Feingold's office."

"Ah, yeah, put me through to the fat man, would you, honey?" Montana asked, assuming the woman's voice on the other end of the receiver was most likely so exhausted from some moonlighting gig providing lap dances to the corporate sleaze of the entertainment industry.

"Who's calling?"

"Tell him it's the voice of the revolution."

The secretary put Montana on hold for just over one minute before returning to tell him, "He's in a meeting right now."

"Fuck that," Montana interrupted. "Tell him that it's Dov Montana, and that if he doesn't pick up the telephone, the revolution's going to pass him by."

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She put him on hold again. Another minute.

"This is Lerz Feingold."

"Lerz Feingold, the dude with the 'Tude . . . Dov Montana here, voice of the television revolution. Been a long time."

Silence.

"Lerz, listen. You ready for the revolution? 'Cause I have the concept that'll change everything and leave every other network, media outlet, and studio in your wake, nevermore to bother your industry lead. A concept that will win a race that until now nobody else has had the balls to enter."

"Well, well. Dov M-m-montana. I'll be darned. Patron saint of unemployed, b-b-bohemian filmmakers everywhere. Still trying Dov, are you?" Feingold snorted. "Good for you. Last I heard you hadn't had anything picked up in years. Now, w-w-what was it you were calling about?"

"I'm dead fucking serious, Lerz. This is the voice of the revolution. No fucking around," Montana insisted. "Fuck all this reality-TV beating around the bush. I'm talking about giving your audience exactly what they all want to see but are afraid to admit in public. And you can reel in the big fish right now, Lerz, the biggest motherfucking fish."

Feingold had heard it all from Montana before.

"You're serious Dov, I know, of course you are. I remember hearing about a few of your pitches . . . your *failed* pitches. But nothing's b-b-been picked up, am I right? It must be tough. Tough business. Let's see. You wanted to shoot a documentary about assisted suicide, wasn't that it? Oh, and you wanted to film a d-d-documentary about the daily routines of an obsessive compulsive, I think? Follow around some poor sap that wore latex gloves all the time and a surgical mask, and carried around Clorox Wipes everywhere he went, wasn't that it? A-a-and . . . and you were going to exploit p-p-public perception? That

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this poor sap wasn't a poor sap at all, but just plain smarter than the rest of us, right? Wasn't that the perspective, Dov? Oh, let's see. I remember y-y-you wanted to stage an artificial one-man show starring a schizophrenic, or something. Some individual with multiple personalities that you would put on stage in front of a live, paying audience that would watch the m-m-man have at it with himself—"

"Themselves. The audience would watch the guy have at it with themselves," Montana corrected, exhibiting a sort of desperate patience that hurt like a self-administered root canal.

"Oh, right," Feingold continued, "and you were going to test experimental drugs on prison inmates, wasn't that it? And you h-h-had some word for the drugs, Dov. Something so very typical of you . . . now what was it? Psycho . . . psycho . . ."

"Psychofrantic. They were called psychofrantic drugs. Psychofrantic fucking drugs, okay? You about finished, Lerz? Yeah. That's right, you got it. I wanted to shoot some inmate motherfucker full of these psychofrantic drugs and induce an environment that would be like a prison for a voyeur. Mirrors everywhere instead of windows. But nobody had the balls, Lerz. Nobody had the fucking balls. Now, are you going to listen to me, or am I going to have to take the revolution elsewhere?"

This bothered Feingold. Bothered him very much. After all, he'd been in school with Dov Montana, and even worked—albeit briefly—with him professionally. Feingold knew as well as anybody that somewhere beneath all Montana's eccentricities was a spark of genius as undeniable as it was brilliant. A genuinely unique perspective that rendered everybody else's creative efforts, Feingold's included, altogether predictable. And to boot, Feingold, at best a bottom-feeder swimming the waters of a sensational genre, lacked any ideas of his own, or any artistic impulse

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at all, which made him perfectly suited to his job. Ostensibly, abundant fodder for the genre's blood-thirsty, rubbernecking audience that littered the streets and back alleys—and high school cafeterias—of Everywhere, USA, was at Feingold's ready disposal. But slumming somewhere in the middle ranks of his genre's food chain, more often than not, Feingold was left to nibble at regurgitated leftovers, already picked through by the programming juggernauts that fed at the top. Hearing from Dov Montana, who insisted that he had an absolutely killer proposition, was a real conflict of disinterest for Lerz Feingold. His charge being to keep up with the Joneses, Feingold couldn't afford not to, at the very least, hear Montana's so-called revolutionary pitch, lest Montana take the revolution, if there was one, elsewhere. When it came to the grabbing hands of the competition, Feingold perpetually, desperately hoped something sizeable would slip under every other network's radar and into his lap. He had no choice but to honor that desperation, really the only thing that kept Tude Entertainment in the clamor of the fray, and couldn't afford to let even one marketable idea slip through his stubby little fingers. However, when it came to giving an audience to Dov Montana, Feingold pretended he still had some pride and, therefore, some discerning latitude.

"As much as it pains me to do so, and against my better judgment, and as much as I'd rather not w-w-waste my time, I'll give you two minutes, Dov, two—"

"Lerz, you can keep your two minutes," Montana interrupted. "I can sum it up for you in two words."

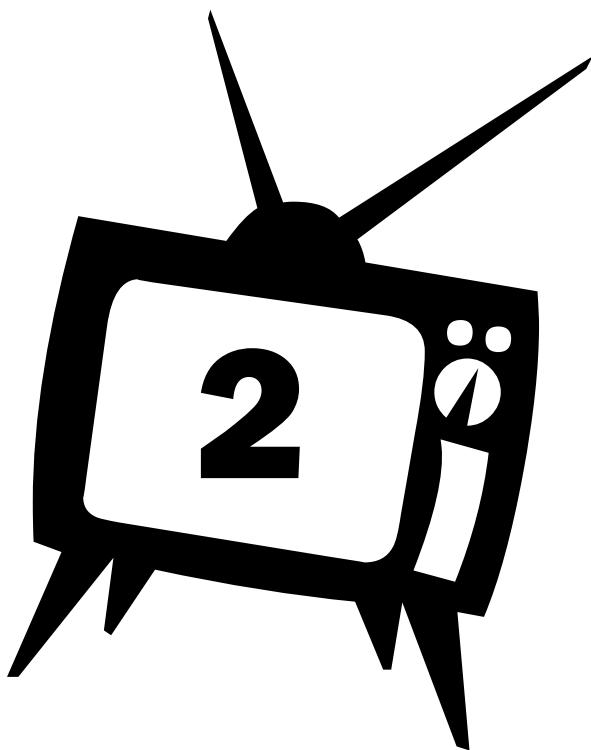
"N-n-not now Montana. I'm very busy. Some of us have work to do. But you wouldn't know about that, w-w-would you Dov? Make an appointment with my secretary like everybody else and I'll listen to your idea then. Let's just get this over with. I don't really have any interest in entertaining you or your ideas

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any more than that. I've got a l-l-lot of work to do. As it is, I'm sure I'm going to regret taking the time at all, but—

“Excellent choice, Lerz, very good. You're doing the right thing,” Montana interrupted with equal parts relief and arrogance. “Trust me, you're doing the right fucking thing.”

“Trust y-y-you?”



Dov Montana danced a peculiar sort of dance that made him dizzy, then patted himself on the back, literally. He headed out the door feeling like a critically acclaimed recitalist walking from the green room to the stage.

“What do you say, honey? I’m here to see the fat man.”

Feingold’s secretary was darling but looked tired. Montana mused that she probably rationalized the moonlighting gig he presumed she had as performance instead of prostitution, and silently applauded her push-up bra. Clearly a graduate of the best gum-snapping school in the world—the parking lot of a

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New Jersey strip mall—Feingold’s secretary snapped her gum and said snidely, “Oh, you. Mr. Revolution. You can go on in. He’s waiting.”

“Thanks, honey.” Montana smiled and, overtop of his favorite sunglasses, allowed his mind to wander, if only briefly, into her pants. A moment later, he was past the secretary’s desk, making a beeline for Feingold’s office, an imposing universe of black-and-white photos of tired personalities from forgotten productions. The office boasted a window that framed an adjacent, taller high-rise with mirrored windows that reflected the modest status Feingold’s real estate came with. Fish tanks teeming with a species Montana thought looked delicious adorned every wall of Feingold’s war room, and a faux-marble wet bar seemed somehow to validate everything, if for no reason other than because it played host to a gathering of familiar bottles. Feingold was a stout man adorned with a mountainous pinkie ring. He made a point not to bother extending a greeting hand. Since they’d last been face-to-face, years ago, Feingold, in Montana’s judgment, had acquired a rather unflattering fashion sense, considering his now abundantly ample girth. Most offensive was the earth-tone mock turtleneck Montana thought no portly fellow ought to ever wear.

No love was lost between them from Feingold’s point of view, either. Feingold thought little of Montana’s hippest poly-blend suit and designer knock-off sunglasses, and even less of his excessive fondness for dousing himself with Brut. Small talk would have been absurd, and so they got right down to it.

“Two minutes, D-d-dov,” Feingold pointed at a gaudy wristwatch and took a seat behind his desk, putting his arms behind his head, thus framing his gluttonous form.

“Right. So, what is it you and your network are trying to get at here?” Montana began his spiel. “What are we talking about when we say ‘reality TV’?”

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Are we talking about watching daffodils bloom—that's real, right? The human digestive system is real too, right? But we're not talking about putting that on TV, are we? No, Lerz, we're not."

Pacing without pattern in a froth of sweat, Montana headed uninvited for the wet bar and poured himself a late breakfast of cheap twelve-year-old scotch, pulling back his graying mane of shoulder-length hair and keeping it off his forehead by slicking it back and behind his ears with perspiration. He drank a gutful, nearly chewing it out of pure excess energy, and lit a cigarette, dragging hard on its yield and exhaling a toxic lungful a moment later, before continuing to pace.

"Then w-w-what are we talking about here, Dov? Really, I don't have time for games. All of a sudden you're an expert on programming reality TV? Is that it? Look, y-y-you have an idea? Spit it out. Otherwise—" Feingold was already regretting the meeting and noticeably irritated. He looked at his wristwatch.

"Listen, Lerz. The Nielsens, they want what they're afraid of. They want to live vicariously through their fears, their nightmares. They want blood, they want suffering—"

"Again with the expertise," Feingold pointed out. "The nerve you have, coming in here and telling m-m-me my business."

"Lerz, listen, take it easy. I'm just saying I have what the people want. The revolution, man, it's about burning down the bush you've been beating around so long. I'm not telling you your business, Lerz, I'm telling you I have what they want. And I'm offering it to you. I haven't even spelled it out for you and already—"

"Well then, Dov, why don't you g-g-go ahead and spell it out for me," Feingold suggested.

"The tangibility of death, Lerz. The Nielsens want the tangibility of death. Not accidental death. Death that can be forecasted and anticipated, death they can expect. Lerz, they want what they fear most. All this vir-

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tual crap, all this desensitization at the hands of the captured unexpected, fuck that. Lerz, they want to get to know somebody and revel vicariously in the expectancy of his mortality. They want to roll around like pigs in a trough of anticipated bloodshed. They want to watch a guy waiting to die. They want to watch a guy that knows he's going to die. They want to experience his life in the face of his death, in one episodic chapter at the inevitable apex of so-called reality TV, live and without commercials. That, Lerz, is what they want."

It had been well beyond two minutes. Montana figured the meeting was going pretty well.

"Lerz, I'm talking about death row. Death fucking row. Think about it, some living ghost sitting in some cell, just like the ghost before him, waiting. Doing nothing but waiting. Waiting to die. Talk about reality TV. I don't imagine some fucker on death row thinks there's anything more real than his calendar, do you? What's a guy on death row do? Huh? Lerz? You know what he does? Nothing. He doesn't do a goddamned thing. He waits. Waits his turn. He thinks. That's all he does. He thinks a lot, that's for sure. Thinks so much he just can't stand to think anymore. But guess what?" Montana was dripping with sweat, his graying hair sticking to his forehead, the smoke from one cigarette after another pouring from the angular leadership of his hawklike nose, making him look like some sort of a ridiculous dragon or dinosaur. He was out of breath but not nearly out of energy.

Lerz Feingold was staring right through Dov Montana, looking for an answer to the absurd riddle that stood before him. Lerz Feingold was pissed off that he was actually entertaining the likes of Dov Montana. Lerz Feingold had to swallow his bilious pride just to think about getting involved, on any level, with Dov Montana. Standing before him, at least with regard to the programming for Tude Entertainment, was a rash that no salve could possibly cure.

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“Lerz. Don’t think too much, it doesn’t suit you. You know it’s the only right thing to do. You know that. ExecTV!” Montana displayed an invisible poster in the noxious air. He waited, staring his obtuse host in the eyes, eyes that glared back at him with the bitterness of envy and that putrid aftertaste of partially regurgitated pride. Sure, Feingold had a choice. Throw Montana out of his office. That was one choice. At the very least, that would allow him to indulge in a modicum of long-awaited satisfaction. Or he could cannonball back into the polluted waters that ran below the broken bridges between them. That, of course, would be very hard to swallow.

“Say again? ExecTV?” Refocusing, Feingold tried hard to cloak his prudent interest in the legitimate fabric of irritation.

“ExecTV, Lerz. ExecTV.” Montana was pretty confident he’d at the very least secured the attention of his overnourished quarry.

“L-l-look, Dov,” Feingold reached forward with his stumpy arms as though trying to reason with a problem child. “I’m not usually one to hang on to a grudge, b-b-but Dov, w-w-we’ve got some history here. It’s just not that easy, you walking in here after all these years saying you’re the big fish—”

“The biggest motherfucking fish,” Montana corrected.

“Whatever,” Feingold blurted, simultaneously releasing a mucus-laced, garlic-seasoned burp. “But Dov, the way this works, around here, I mean, is that w-w-we put a great quantity of resources to work on each of our productions. A lot of time and energy goes into each programming effort because, Dov, audiences are f-f-fickle. They like a winner, know what I mean? We cannot afford to s-s-slip up. It’s about ratings. Like any trend, we’re trying to ride the crest of a wave, Dov, a-a-and we can’t screw around. I can’t screw around,” Feingold added. “Dov, w-w-we’ve got

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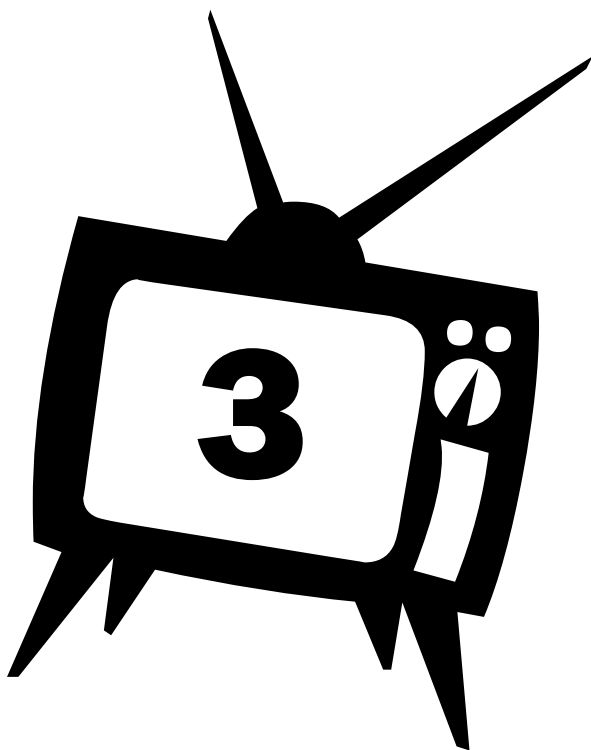
history. And it's not too good. Even if your idea were really terrific, and marketable, too—"

"Lerz, listen," Montana encouraged, lighting another cigarette from the previous one and putting his empty tumbler on the wet bar. "You digest all this, whatever you need to do. I'm not going to stand here and try to convince you of something that's inevitable. You're not that stupid." Montana knew the measure of his host's self-esteem pretty well. "Somebody's going to give the Nielsens what they want, somebody's going to give them the revolution, gift-wrapped and commercial-free. And it looks, at least from my point of view, like you don't have the balls. And, shit, if that's the case—"

"J-j-just relax." Feingold's attempt to hide his requisite curiosity was failing. Sure, he was leery. But he was stuck. Feingold pushed the intercom button on his telephone, directing his secretary to make reservations for two at a nearby Indian restaurant. "Dov," Feingold briefly massaged his saddlebag-like jowls, "l-l-let's have lunch, you and me. And I'll explain where I'm coming from, okay? A-a-and you can keep trying to convince me." Feingold seemed to regain a bit of his confidence.

"Yeah, sure Lerz. Lunch. Sounds great. But I'm not fucking around here. Either you're going to reel in the motherfucking big one, or you're going to let the revolution pass you by. Up to you, man. But I'm telling you, I'm totally serious." Montana lit another cigarette from the previous one and put on his designer knock-off sunglasses, signaling an end to the elastic two minutes he'd originally been allotted. Smiling the smile of victory, and ever so slightly scoffing at Feingold, Montana turned to lead the way to lunch, stale cigarette smoke trailing him like a loyal pet.

"I'm serious, Lerz. Serious like a fucking brain tumor."



Lunch was awkward and less than relaxing. Conversationally circling each other like fighting tigers, Montana and Feingold ate heartily, the former imbibing a formidable quantity of drink of a twelve-year-old nature. The dialogue between the two focused on the matter at hand. Montana delved ever deeper into the designed and well-constructed imagination that had brought him—them—to this point.

“So, you know about this guy on death row in Florida, right?” Montana began rhetorically. Everybody knew about the Killer Castrator; everybody, at least, with even a passing interest in what the twenty-four-hour cable news networks had to offer on

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a slow news day. Feingold knew exactly who Randall Snell was. Knew all about his crimes. But that didn't prevent Montana from usurping both sides of what could've been a conversation.

"And his nutcase lawyer, ah . . . this shameless, self-serving motherfucker . . . hold on, I have it here somewhere—" Montana rifled through the pockets of his poly-blend suit, though most of the pockets had been sewn closed by the manufacturer. Remembering it was in his back pocket, along with his 1980s-style wallet with the Velcro, Montana yanked out a matchbook cover, turned it over and right side up, and announced: "Conrad Rangefork Thistle III."

Feingold had heard of him, too. Everybody had. Everybody, that is, who had an interest in what was going on in living rooms across America on those dull days when local stories made their way onto national broadcasts. Thistle and his client, Randall Snell, known in the media as the Killer Castrator, were household names in South Beach, and familiar to those around the country who watched enough twenty-four-hour cable news broadcasts to catch an update on the trial whenever the networks were between bigger stories. Feingold knew who Conrad Rangefork Thistle III was, but sat relatively quiet.

"So, this candy-ass Thistlefork," Montana tuned in his most luring and convincing tone, lighting another cigarette, pouring the remnants of his tumbler down his throat, and blowing a few smoke rings into the space between himself and Feingold, "fucking guy's quite a piece of work, eh? CNN had this whole thing about how he actually defended his own wife's rapist. I mean, what the fuck? Man, that's just trying way too hard."

"Ex-wife," Feingold corrected obstinately and superfluously. He politely beckoned the waiter to the table and asked to have a look at the dessert menu, which he read like a classic volume.

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“Ex-wife, whatever the fuck she is.” Montana brushed Feingold’s interruption away like a fruit fly that just happened by on its way from table to table. “Fucking lawyers. This Thistle character, so I’m watching him on television, watching him with his obnoxious, buttoned-down aesthetic, stupid goddamned ascot, plastic goddamned hair, listening to his moral goddamned evangelism. It’s all over his face—prime-time desires, twenty-four-hour aspirations, self-righteous little cocksucker. The guy is standing there, right, with microphones sticking in his face like big, fat, electric dicks. Lights, cameras, the whole enchilada. And he’s telling the world that his client, the Killer Castrator Randall Snell, has the right to decide how the state’s going to execute him. Talk about the cat’s fucking meow. Think that was Snell’s idea? ’Cause I’ll tell you right now, some living ghost, some living, breathing, expiring ghost, just waiting to die, sure as shit isn’t thinking about how. That motherfucker’s thinking about nothing but his calendar, the time and space between then and now. Christ. Defended his ex-wife’s rapist. That sure as hell didn’t get him anywhere, did it?”

“S-s-sure it did.” Feingold ordered the dessert special, an Indian culinary equivalent of the chocolate soufflé. “It got people’s attention.”

“It encouraged people to revile him. It encouraged people to lump him in with all the other scumbag lawyers,” Montana countered.

“He is one of the other scumbag lawyers,” Feingold pointed out reasonably. “But it g-g-gave him a name. And no matter what color that name is painted, it’s s-s-still familiar. Any name that’s familiar, any name that’s a household name, is still a name, which is m-m-more than he had before that.” Feingold was letting fly a modicum of his pop culture experience. “Yes, Dov, Mr. Thistle might have embarrassed himself in your eyes, and perhaps he even rendered himself completely repugnant to many,

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even m-m-most. Most women, that's for sure. But you'll see. Guys like Thistle—"

"Guys like Thistle," Montana interrupted, "guys like Thistle will go as far as they have to go to cement their names in the morass of celebrity. A guy like Thistle is so relentlessly driven by his own agenda that he'll definitely welcome the opportunity to wrangle a bit of unconventional legal strategy. Are you kidding? That guy's got the word 'unconventional' tattooed on his legal vocabulary. He defended his ex-wife's rapist, for Christ's sake!"

Feingold had chocolate all over his face, through which he offered, "You k-k-know what they say, right? N-n-no press is bad press . . ."

Montana blinked dramatically, frowning his brow and shuddering off what he figured was a gross misuse of a cliché he wasn't familiar with. "No, I guess fucking not," he coughed; smoke fighting with each syllable for release from his mouth. "I mean, just look at the Killer Castrator, for Christ's sake. Fucking went on a killing spree. Just ripped his victims open with a knife—cut their heads off, basically. All those mutilated gay men. And as if slashing those poor motherfuckers open and decapitating them wasn't enough, this psycho decides to castrate 'em?" Montana seemed purely and absolutely fascinated with the psychology behind such violence. "At least he didn't cut their balls off first, before he killed 'em. Did 'em a favor, that's for sure. I mean, Christ. It's totally fucking crazy." Montana's voice carried. He made no attempt to keep it down. Didn't particularly care that his percolating metabolism, fueled chiefly by a steady diet of caffeine, cigarettes, and anxiety, essentially caused him to yell at instead of speak to whomever was receiving his lecture, and whomever was within earshot. Montana waved his empty tumbler in the air, like shaking a tambourine, a gesture that required immediate attention. The waiter, a timid yet amicable college type, chirped about their needing refills

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on their drinks and hustled across the dining room to the bar where, through nervous energy alone, he communicated to the bartender the need to hurry the order along. Maybe he thought if he didn't provide adequate hospitality he'd be sliced, diced, and physically emasculated right then and there, like the victims he couldn't help hearing so much about.

"Okay, Dov. So, if I'm to understand, this is what you're g-g-getting at: putting the cameras to this guy Snell, is that right? P-p-putting the cameras in Snell's cell and bringing his life on death row to living rooms across the country, is that it? Do I understand correctly, D-d-dov?" Feingold asked, bored with Montana's spiel.

"Look, Dov," Feingold began to explain, his hands out in front of him as if he were hiking a football, "I get where you're coming from, really, I do. T-t-there is something readily appealing, from a reality-TV programming point of view, about the day-to-day routines of this poor sap on death row. I mean, the execution itself, of course, b-b-but even that, nowadays, it would be so anticlimactic, really. It's a nice little idea, Dov, really, it is. It's just that, well, I'd really need some time to think it over f-f-from several angles, consider all the usual targeting, how much we could squeeze out of it. I've got to tell you, I'm a b-b-bit surprised that you'd lower yourself artistically," Feingold put in with a bit of superiority. "I don't know, Dov. I'm not sure that's the direction we want to head in, do you k-k-know what I mean?" Feingold's distrust of Montana's intentions wasn't without reason. Feingold was skeptical but prudent.

"Look Dov," Feingold continued. "It's not crazy, a-a-and it's not t-t-totally over the top." Feingold took a moment to at least pretend he was chewing his food. "Let's be honest . . . talk frankly, okay Dov? I'm going to come straight out with it, a-a-and you know w-w-what I'm going to say."

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"I'm not sure our history w-w-will allow me to trust you, Dov. There, I said it. I don't trust you. Even if I wanted to." Feingold wore the expression of a satisfying purge. "The fact is, m-m-my opinion of you—"

A fresh cigarette lit, the muscle of twelve years bolstering an already flammable unpredictability, Montana scoffed with annoyance at Feingold's sentiments. "No, fuck that, Lerz. Fuck that. You going to hold a grudge forever? What? Because your career didn't start with a bang right out of school? Because you had to endure trial and error, pay your fucking dues, like everybody else? What the fuck, Lerz? It's been years. Years, for Christ's sake."

"Y-y-you screwed me Dov. Plain and simple. You screwed me." Feingold was fighting back, the anger of remembrance on his side, the assault of indifference on the other, nobody playing nice.

"Oh fuck you, Lerz," Montana bit back. "That's all trivial bullshit. Poor you. Poor fucking you. Jesus Christ. You're pathetic if you even consider letting the goddamned revolution parade past your sorry ass just because of some bullshit when we were students, for Christ's sake, Lerz."

"We were out of school, Dov, and y-y-you deserted me, so you could go and hold up some convoluted ideology, so you could be a hero for all your smelly little bohemian friends. All your holier-than-thou pretensions. It was our break, Dov, our b-b-big break, and you went and sabotaged the whole goddamned thing. You had to go and walk out on me. Y-y-you walked right out. No concern for anyone else involved, no conscience, no sense of consequences, just you and whatever point you thought you were trying to make. Goddamn you, Dov. You left me to be the scapegoat so you could disappear into whatever holier-than-thou artistic head-trip—" Feingold used his udder-like fingers to draw quotation marks on the carcinogenic air between them, "—and you probably

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had it planned all along, y-y-you sick son of a bitch. Was that it? Was that it, Dov? A few of us get handed our careers on a platter, right out of school, and that wasn't good enough? What was it, you selfish bastard? W-w-what was it?" Feingold was getting pretty heated up, his jowls vibrating gelatinously. "N-n-nobody took me seriously for a long goddamned time after that, Dov, nobody took me—"

"Who the fuck would take you seriously now, Lerz? Just look at you, you and your pandering gig feeding mediocrity to the Niensens. I'll tell you right now Lerz, I don't take you seriously. Not if you're going to dredge up nonsense like this. Christ, man, get a hold of yourself." Montana started to rein himself in a bit. He held his empty glass in the air, his other hand circling above Feingold's empty glass as well, trying to lubricate the conversation back to a mood of productivity. The waiter trotted to the table with the gait of trepidation.

"Listen, Lerz," Montana altered the tenor of his voice, lighting one cigarette from another, "here's the thing: I can't change your perceptions of the past. Can't do anything about that. But listen, you're doing okay now, right? So, as much as you might never understand my conscience, I think I can appreciate yours. And the appetites of your audience feed a good portion of your professional conscience, your sense of responsibility to Tude Entertainment, right? And my interest lies in giving them what they want, what you and I both know they want. And what they want is Snell. Maybe it's still subconscious with most. Maybe it's still nameless. But not for us, it's not. We both know that what they want is Randall Snell. Randall Snell, waiting to die, going to die. Listen, Lerz, fucking race riots? They've all seen 'em, live on TV. School shootings? Seen 'em time and again . . ."

Montana figured, as fortunate as Feingold was to have the abundant fodder for his audience readily available in the papers every day, he was even more

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fortunate that a guy like Montana came along when he did, to help him graduate from beating around the bush to burning it down. “Okay, D-d-dov . . .” Feingold smeared the chocolate around with his napkin in an attempt to wipe it off but instead, essentially, finger-painting his face with the melted yield of the cocoa bean. “Are you ever g-g-going to get to the point?”

“Right. Here it is.” Montana was fully loaded with the wisdom of twelve years. “So, we’ve got this scumbag Thistle pining for his fifteen minutes, whining for his client’s right to choose how he’s going to die. A candy-assed, celebrity-seeking lawyer clamoring for his fifteen minutes, ostensibly claiming his only interest is in serving his client, right? So, what would serve Snell? What would best serve the walking fucking dead? Nothing. The End—the goddamned end—that’s what’ll serve his client, the homophobic motherfucker. And so what? Thistle’s trying to get the media’s attention with this freedom-of-choice shit? This right-to-choose bullshit? Toward what? Dead is dead is fucking dead, right? So, what, Thistle’s going to whine about a stay of execution for his sick, demented, homophobic sadist of a client? Why? I’ll tell you why. For a chance to stand in the spotlight. Whining maggot.” Montana was fired up like a fresh batch of napalm. “Thistle’s scheming,” he continued with a smirk of disdain on his face, “his machinations, masturbations, just acting. And he loves this role. Just imagine what the motherfucker would do for a bigger audience.” Montana looked straight at Feingold who looked straight back, but averted his eyes from the steady stream of second-hand smoke Montana was blowing.

“Lerz, this is a guy who’s just waiting with open hands, hands that are begging to be played right into. I’ll do you one better.” Montana lit another cigarette and stared into the bottomless void that was his empty glass, but made no gesture toward a refill. “I’m a documentary filmmaker, right? And a pretty brilliant god-

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damned filmmaker, if I do say so myself. And anybody who knows filmmaking, anybody who knows anything about documentary filmmakers, knows I'm the cat's meow. Ain't a brighter star, know what I mean, Lerz? So, listen, I'll tell you what. I'll, ah, why don't I head down to Florida, look this Thistle up, pay him a visit. I mean, think about it. Think about it logically. This Thistle motherfucker, this guy's going to do his homework, right? Presumably? Brilliant goddamned filmmaker pays him a visit—no matter how culturally obtuse the asshole is, and I'm sure he's pretty culturally obtuse, he'll make it his business to know who the hell I am, right? I would, that's for sure. So Lerz, what do you say? Let me take a run at this guy. Let me feel the guy out, get a sense of how big his appetite really is." Montana pulled the hair off his face, a trail of smoke seeping from his beak-like nose.

"Check it out, Lerz. So, I go down there, right? To South Florida, wherever, and I say to this Thistle, 'Look, Mr. Thistle-the-third, my name's Dov Montana, and I'd like the opportunity to film your client Mr. Snell. To film a documentary that will clearly illustrate the unusual cruelty of the death penalty and its ghastly, barbaric, antiquated properties.' Thistle will jump in with both feet, knowing exactly what kind of attention a documentary like that will drop in his pompous lap. Am I right? Lerz, for Christ's sake, man, it'll play right into his strategizing, you know it and I know it. We both know it."

"O-o-okay, Dov. So you want to pitch Thistle the idea of filming a documentary about the barbaric—"

"*Ghastly* barbaric," Montana corrected spastically, "the unusual cruelty—"

"—You want to pitch him the idea of a documentary about the unusual cruelty of the death penalty, u-u-using his client Randall Snell—"

"The Killer Castrator," Montana added for effect and for punctuation.

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“And you think Thistle will go for it, l-l-look at it as an opportunity—”

“Fuck yes, Lerz, fuck yes, I do. I think he’ll take what he can get, do whatever he’s got to do. Not to save his client’s ass, necessarily, but to bask in the afterglow of his own repugnant fifteen minutes. I sure as hell do think so, yes.”

Feingold let the moment hang there awhile, in the stale air. The two minutes Feingold had allotted Dov Montana seemed so long ago, so very long ago . . .

The moment hung between them for such a pronounced duration, Feingold could quite easily have ordered another Indian equivalent of the chocolate soufflé, but did not. That would have been absurd. With Montana, though, Feingold secured the right of first refusal. That was as far as he was willing to commit. Wary? Sure. Leery? Definitely. Brainless? Not quite.

“Okay, Dov, look-it. G-g-go down there, to Florida. Feel this guy out. See what his reaction is. L-l-let’s take this one s-s-step at a time . . . if we do at all, okay? But w-w-we’ll send you down there, okay? It’s on us, Tude Entertainment. Just see what you can come up with. Be subtle though, okay Dov? Is that something y-y-you can do? Be subtle?” Feingold couldn’t really believe what he was hearing bellow forth from deep within his cavernous frame. Sponsoring Montana’s trip to Florida and his meeting with Conrad Rangefork Thistle III was essentially putting a deposit on Montana’s idea, putting a claim on ExecTV, lest Montana take his idea—the revolution—elsewhere.

Montana let Feingold pick up the check. He couldn’t have paid it anyway. Not even the tip. Buttoning the jacket of his poly-blend suit, his cigarette dropping ash all over the place, including down between his jacket and shirt, Montana sniffled a bit and offered: “You know what they say, Lerz . . . Never look a gifted whore in the mouth . . .”