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Perspective Distortion

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Perspective Distortion

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Author Bio

Austin Clark: "My alphabet starts with this letter called yuzz. It's the letter I use to spell yuzz-a-ma-tuzz. You'll be sort of surprised what there is to be found once you go beyond Z and start poking around." - Dr. Seuss

PERSPECTIVE DISTORTION

AUSTIN CLARK

Bolivar Kay is an aging, out of work folk hero. Feeling useless and somewhat cynical, he has taken a job working as a dishwasher to try and make a living. In the kitchen, he befriends two individuals, Jim the old bartender and Heather Bellamy, a twenty-year old baker working her way through culinary school. Yet most of his coworkers, despite respecting his work ethic, think he is a little crazy, as he claims his birthday is somewhere around 1790. This is one of his stories from working in the kitchen.

*

Christian Greene's mind felt like a flat tire. The digital display on the dash of his rental car jumped suddenly from D, to N, to P, which it settled on with an alarming red color. His hand rested on the shift for a moment, before deciding, eventually, to reach up and twist the keys to turn off the car. He laid his head back in the chair and took a breath.

His half-formed thoughts told him. *Maybe it's because everyone in this God-forsaken country drives on the wrong side of the road.* But it wasn't that, his conscience scolded him, no matter how hard it had been to take that right-hand turn just now.

The door to the car sprang open and the coolness of the small air conditioning unit was instantly flushed out of the car by an almost palpable wave of humidity. His dress shoes hit the asphalt and moved him slowly towards the door, the promise of more refreshing air inside urging them onwards.

There was a path to get to a large, swinging glass door of the restaurant at the opposite end of the small courtyard. The flowers were just in the middle of their July blossom, proclaiming in natural fireworks the four-star rating of the building ahead. Cold air emerged from the doorway, pulling him in, fighting a desperate rearguard against the heat and humidity, giving him time enough to move into the elaborately decorated interior. He stood for a moment and breathed in.

"Can I help you?"

He opened his eyes, taking a moment to adjust to the darker ambiance of the interior. In front of him, slightly to his left and behind a small lectern, was a tall, imperious looking lady, with graying hair and an eagle face.

Christian shook his head slightly. "Yes, well, I was wondering where the bar was?" He cringed as his accent went off like a gunshot in the subdued, and thoroughly American, atmosphere of the place.

"The bar? It's in the back." The lady gestured with one hand. "Just follow the aisle down past the waterfall."

"Thank, thank you." Christian began moving, feeling the coolness invigorate the previously sluggish extremities of his body. He walked past the groups of perfectly spaced tables, some divided by extensive half-walls with plants and flowers drooping from them.

The waterfall tinkled to his left, the extent of the actual fall being only a few inches from the top of a half-wall to a small stone-studded pool about table level. The plastic drainage tube was stuck rather inartistically to one side and covered in green algae. Vaguely, he wondered whose job it was to clean it.

Few people sat at the tables and no one sat at the bar. Christian glanced at the clock as he pulled himself into one of the cushioned barstools. It was just the beginning of the dinner hour, and the four stars and price tag was bound to keep people away for at least another thirty minutes. He stretched his hands out on the dark wood counter, trying to pull his mind out of the sinkhole it had gotten mired in.

"Good afternoon, sir." A man had materialized in front of him, skinny and bald except for a ring of thin white hair around the back of his head. By the practiced way he balanced a large round tray on one hand and stacked the beer glasses on the counter with the other, Christian judged he must be the bartender. He wore the same dark purple vest and white shirt as the maitre d'.

"Afternoon as well, though it's a bit hot out."

The man nodded sympathetically, giving no outward sign of noticing the accent. "Yes, but it is July." He finished stacking the glasses with an expert flourish. "Can I get you anything? You look like you might need something."

Christian's hand went reflexively to his straight-combed brown hair, though he knew it was more the look in his eyes and the button undone at the top of his expensive Oxford shirt and tie that prompted the comment. "Well, something, something fairly dry," he said. "I've had quite enough wetness for today."

"I hear you," the bartender chuckled and glanced down the under-lit rows of alcohol behind him. "I've got plenty, martini, gin and tonic, gimlet, take your pick."

"Eh, I'll go with the gin and tonic," Christian decided.

"Nice choice, we just put some fresh bottles of tonic in the fridge the other night." The bartender took a glass down from a rack behind him and set it smoothly down on the counter at Christian's right. "I'll be a minute. Would you like to look at a menu?"

Christian's stomach suddenly made its presence felt. The mention of the word *menu*, a term only indirectly related to food, caused it to almost collapse in on itself. "I think I may."

The bartender nodded, sliding a slim, leather-bound fold of paper

out from under the bar and placing it neatly in front of him. "Here you are," he said. "I'll be right back with that tonic." He disappeared through a doorway just to the left.

There was silence. The restaurant was almost deserted, with only an elderly couple sitting away to the right at a table, quietly spooning soup into their mouths, and the somewhat anxious murmur of a small group hidden behind a half-wall to the front where Christian had entered. He took another breath, his body almost completely cool by now, and looked down the bar.

It was polished dark and smooth, though distinctly out of its element in the menacingly bright sunlight slanting through the windows. Places like this were meant for evenings where the darkness of the wood got lost and the sharp details, like the edges of the plasma screen TV hanging at the far corner, would blend solemnly into the dim lights. Now, the sun washed out the rows of carefully polished glasses and the lighting under the bottles struggled futilely to project themselves over the rude brightness.

He glanced at the menu, noting the spirally written entrées and desserts. They looked indecipherably elegant and exotic. He looked at the TV screen for a change of pace, the sun reducing the baseball players to shadows and the muted voices of the announcers sliding faintly across the polished counter. It was amusing to him that even in the fanciest and most highbrow places, Americans must still have their baseball.

There were footsteps and a figure moved across the bar in front of him. Christian looked up, expecting to see the skinny bartender, but was mildly surprised to instead see another man in jeans, a baseball cap and a filthy looking chef's jacket.

"Sorry," he said, looking down at something behind the bar.

"Sorry for what? I just thought you had my drink." Christian watched as the man pulled a button-encrusted handle out from behind the counter.

"Ah, no, sorry. So that's what Jim was after," the man murmured, almost to himself. There was a rustle of ice and Christian saw him bring a large plastic cup up to the bar.

"Of course. Looks like you're getting a bit of a drink yourself. Must get hot cooking all of those meals on a day like today."

The man looked up and Christian was startled to see wrinkles beside his eyes and lines around his cheeks. He didn't look old, at least not in the elderly sense, but past middle age. He frowned slightly.

"I don't cook," he said. "I wash the dishes." He brought the handle up to the cup and, with a wrinkled and whitened hand, thumbed a button, letting a clear stream of water gush onto the waiting ice.

"Oh, well, sorry. I didn't mean..." Christian's embarrassment was promptly eased by the reappearance of the bartender, Jim, with a long glass bottle in his hands.

"Hey, Bolivar, are you pouring the drinks now?" he chuckled, setting the bottle down next to the rapidly filling plastic cup.

The man, Bolivar, gave a short laugh. "Not unless it is plain water. Looks like he might want something a little stronger, though." Christian looked down at himself. Was it so obvious?

"That's why I have this." Jim tapped the bottle. "Is it slow back there?"

"I'm caught-up, and I think Don decided to take a smoke break when he hauled out the trash." Bolivar's pruned fingers struck a straw into the cup. "So, this is my breath of air before the storm breaks over the plains."

"Good man." Jim took out a corkscrew. "You want a shot of this too? I don't think he'll mind."

He looked at Christian, who shrugged. "Take what you like," he said. "I'm just waiting for my drink." Jim plucked two more glasses from the rack behind him and scooped the trio full of ice.

"It's a Friday," he said. "I think I might indulge too, before the rush hits. Don't tell chef." He dug the tip of the corkscrew into the top of the bottle, and with a deft twist and flick, a satisfying pop echoed down the bar.

He set the glasses in a triangle and poured the sparkling fluid, sticking the cork back into place when he was done. Humming softly, he turned away and flicked his fingers across the labels of a few bottles before selecting one, turning around and repeating the ritual with the corkscrew. A solid splash of the select gin went into the glasses and a lime on the edge of each completed the process. Jim raised his and tilted it towards Bolivar.

"To Friday," he said. Bolivar picked up his glass and sipped it slowly. Christian took his, swirled it a little, and took a mouthful. It was good, strong and fresh. He felt some warm energy seeping back into his body.

"Capital," he said.

"Thanks." Jim nodded, taking another sip before screwing the corks more fully back into their respective bottles. "I think I needed that."

"Me too." Bolivar had drained the last of his drink. "Fridays are busy." He looked over at Christian. "In case you were wondering."

"No, no, I suppose you're right," Christian set down his glass. "It would only make sense."

"If you think about it," Jim shook his glass. "It's Friday night for everyone but us." He smiled as he took one last mouthful from his gin and tonic.

Christian took another sip and looked down at the menu again. The script hadn't gotten any less ornate, but he felt as if he could at least read it now. There was a clink as Bolivar gathered his and Jim's empty glasses.

"Are you looking to eat?" he asked. Christian nodded, eyes still on the menu.

"The cod is fresh, so you might consider that. Plus, seafood is good after a trying day. Might make you less homesick."

Christian's head snapped up.

"Just saying." Bolivar held the two glasses in one hand and his huge cup of water in the other. "But it is your choice."

"Okay. Sure," Christian said, looking at the man more closely. "What's the cod?"

"The Smoked Cod Penne Carbonara," Jim chipped in, putting one skinny finger on his menu. "It's good especially with a white Burgundy. Could I interest you?"

"Why not?" Christian said, sliding his menu toward Jim, his eyes still on Bolivar. "It's on the company tab anyways."

"Even more reason." Jim took the menu. "I'll put that right in. Excuse me, Bol."

"Have a good evening." Bolivar turned around and followed Jim out the doorway. Christian looked away, down the bar again, out the window near the opposite end. The sunlight was fading, not angrily bright in its last throes of splendor, but now dimming and giving the underlighting and the baseball players a chance to display themselves.

In the silence, his phone hummed against his leg. His hand reached down and dragged it, protesting with quick vibrations, from his pocket. The blocky white lines on the small screen read: Home. Sighing, he let it shiver once more before flipping it open and pressing the top to his ear.

"Hi, Daddy!" the small voice at the other end of the line said. "When are you coming home?"

*

"There is an English gentleman at the bar upstairs," Bolivar said as he turned the corner at the bottom of the bakery stairs. Heather looked up from the half-dozen chocolate cakes she was working her spatula over.

"Does he have an accent?" she asked, pushing the utensil back into the container of thick glaze sitting beside the sheet pan.

"Thick as molasses." Bolivar lifted his baseball cap and shook his thinning hair. "And something awful in the way of homesick."

"I told you it's creepy when you do that, right?" Heather slid her finger across the handle of the spatula, catching the glaze that had strayed from the blade. She licked it off with a perfunctory sucking sound and wiped it off on her white chef jacket.

"What?" Bolivar tapped his fingers on the stack of sheet pans and mixing bowls sitting at the edge of the sinks. "My Lord, what have you been baking down here?"

"I just got on shift an hour ago, so blame David," she said. "And you know what I mean."

"I'm sure I do not." Bolivar turned on the faucet, sending a spew of hot water down into the waiting sink, letting the crashing noise rumble between them.

"Yes, you do. Just because you're decades older than me doesn't mean

you have to play dumb. My baby sister plays dumb and it doesn't work for her, so it won't work for you."

Bolivar let the water run for a few more seconds, adding the mechanical hum of the soap dispenser to the sound of the pouring water. After a few moments, and after Heather had slid her cakes into the refrigerator, he flicked both off and watched the soapy water settle.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, picking up the largest mixing bowl, which was coated in some sort of peanut batter. Heather shrugged and glanced up as a ticket scraped out of the reader.

"Don't be sorry, just don't do it. You know, it's really weird when you read people's minds. So keep it to yourself or don't play dumb." She plucked the ticket from the machine. "Who the hell is ordering a cheese platter right now?"

"Not our Englishman," Bolivar said as he sloshed the bowl into the next sink. "He just ordered the penne and cod. I do wonder how long they extended his stay by."

"There you go again!" Heather waggled the large chef knife she had retrieved from the rack at him. Bolivar shrugged.

"By the way he looked, it must have been at least a week." He grabbed for a silver brillo pad on the far side of the stack of bowls, but missed and had to take a step forward. "His phone went off as I was leaving too— must have been his kids."

"You are without a doubt the creepiest old man I have ever met," Heather said, shaking her head as she set down the knife and moved to open another fridge. With a deft movement, she pulled out the sheet pan with all the blocks of cheese laid out in an irregular yellow grid. "And I really hate cheese."

"I'm sorry." Bolivar dunked another mixing bowl into the water. It made a disgusting slurping sound as he pushed it under.

"No, you're not," Heather said, setting the pan down and beginning to unwrap the individual parcels of cheese. "Or you shouldn't be. It's what you do, after all. It's kind of like your job."

"I meant about the cheese," Bolivar said over his shoulder, tossing the scrubber aside and beginning to haul the various bowls into the third sink, overfilled with pink sanitizer. "And my job is washing dishes."

Silence stagnated in the artificially cool air for a few minutes. Heather's knife clicked and groaned through the various densities of cheese. Somewhere in the room, a machine stopped grinding. Bolivar shook his head, thinking of the gentleman at the bar. He ground the silver mesh of the scrubber into a stubborn spot on a bread pan. At the corner of the table, the ticket machine croaked again.

"Dammit!" Heather let the knife clatter onto the cutting board. "I'm not done with the stupid cheese platter! If this how the rest of the night is

going to be..."

"It is Friday." Bolivar had stopped scrubbing and was staring into the sudsy water. Heather shot him a piercing glare.

"Yeah, well, doesn't mean I'm any happier about it. Aren't people at my age supposed to be partying or something on Fridays?" She began to rewrap the individual chunks strewn across the cutting board. "Isn't that what you did when you were young?"

"That was a long time ago," Bolivar sighed, looking up at the round-cheeked baker. "I find it hard to believe sometimes how old I am."

"What is this, your midlife crisis?" Heather rolled her eyes, depositing the cheeses carelessly back onto the pan and dropping a garnish on the finished platter. "You're almost two hundred freaking years old." Bolivar didn't say anything. "Well?"

"Well." He stopped washing and dumped the measuring cup he was holding into the third sink with a disproportionate splash. "Well, I feel old and useless. How's that? I feel useless and you're young and, well, not useless."

"You're not useless." Heather ripped the ticket from the machine and peered at it. "Crème brûlée, fantastic." She looked up. "You're a huge help here. You've been here, what, two months and already the cooks trust you the most."

"That's not the point." Bolivar was elbow-deep in the sanitizer, fishing for a mixing head.

"Then what's the point? You're telling me that, because I'm just out of high school, you feel useless?" Heather placed the cheese platter on the third tier of the metal rack behind Bolivar, who had found the missing implement and fairly threw it onto the drying space.

"Yes," he grunted. "It's nostalgia; you'll understand when you're my age. If I—"

"Whoa!" Heather poked her head out from behind the fridge door she had opened. "I doubt I'm going to live to be your age."

"Good point," Bolivar paused and then sighed, moving back to the first sink to begin the washing process all over again, this time with several small half-pans. "But you know, if I were your age, I would be able to *do* something. Something big, something to help more than just a handful of restaurant staff."

"Geez, thanks a lot," Heather said. Bolivar stopped scrubbing and hung his head. Heather snapped the refrigerator door shut and placed the crème brûlée in the center oval of a waiting dessert plate. She looked over at Bolivar, who hadn't moved. "What?"

"I'm sorry," he said at last, picking his head up and spinning on his heel to face her, his non-slip shoes protesting with a squeal. "I appreciate that I am of use here, but it's not the same." Heather shrugged.

"I wouldn't know." She reached under the table and picked up the blowtorch. "Why don't you help that British guy you were talking about?"

"Eh?" Bolivar picked his hat off his head and scratched his bald spot.

"Help the British guy," Heather repeated, reaching for the lighter that was hanging next to the spatulas and tongs on the rack above her. "You're clever, Mr. Folk Hero, you should be able to figure something out."

Bolivar placed his cap deliberately back on his head.

"Perhaps," he said slowly. "But where to start?" There was a hiss and a pop as Heather lit the blowtorch. Bolivar gave her a wary look. "It still makes me nervous when you do that."

Heather shrugged, painting the flame across the top of the yellow custard.

"You'll get over it."

*

The Smoked Cod Penne Carbonara had been delicious, but it hadn't made Christian any less homesick. When he finished, he ordered another gin and tonic and watched the light begin to fade away in the windows, blending the bar together and letting the atmosphere show through.

People had started to trickle in from the front. In response, waiters had issued forth to meet them from the back, at a doorway near where he sat, all clad in identical purple vests and white shirts. He had eaten his cod and penne automatically, watching Jim serve a couple who had seated themselves at the far end of the bar. His mind replayed the conversation he had had with his wife. She had sounded exhausted. They had kept it short, because he had been waiting on dinner, but he had promised to call back the next morning. He sighed and shook his gin and tonic, draining the last of the drink from between the fissures in the ice.

"What's eating at you?" Jim, the bartender, appeared in front of him. Christian set down his glass, another O-ring appearing beside the dozen already burned by moisture into his sliver of space on the countertop.

"Nothing major," he said.

Jim raised his thin white eyebrows before resting his elbows on the counter. "I don't think so," the bartender replied, lowering his voice a little. "I see almost every emotion sit in front of me at some point or other during the night. You seem put out."

Christian shrugged. "Fine, yes, I am." He sat a little straighter. "My stay here in your America has been extended by almost two weeks."

"Good for you?" Jim raised his eyebrows skeptically.

In response, Christian's fist thudded onto the polished dark wood surface in front of him, causing the ice to shift in his spent glass with an rustle. "Not so." He stated. "The almost two weeks more that I will be staying here happen to include my youngest daughter's birthday. She's turning five." He paused, shaking his head.

“Oh.”

“Yes.” Christian looked the bald bartender in the eye. “Additionally, I have been here almost a week already, moving from place to place. This town was supposed to be my last stop.”

“I’m very sorry.” Jim shook his head, straightening up. “I just thought I would ask.”

“No, no, thank you.” Christian sighed. “It needed to be said. I just have to explain it to my wife now...”

“I’m sure she’ll understand.” Jim glanced to his right as the ticket machine behind the bar scratched to life. “I don’t mean to pry, but what held you up here?”

The alcohol spurred another emphatic slam of his fist into the counter, which rustled again the ice in the glass. “My company,” he began, “makes cameras.”

“Cool,” Jim encouraged, glancing down at the slip.

“Usually. I’m here demonstrating new lens technology.”

“Alright.”

“And,” Christian sighed again, “as an afterthought, they decided to ship some examples over, just two days ago. So they postponed my meetings here for two weeks. I just have to stay.”

“Jackasses.” Jim turned and selected a bottle from the row behind him. “With your daughter’s birthday so close too.”

“It doesn’t get put on the company calendar,” Christian said.

Jim set the bottle on the counter. “Listen, since you’re going to be here for a while,” he said, reaching for the corkscrew and twisting it into the bottle’s top. “Do you have a business card? I know some people who might be able to...ah...” Jim creased his brow, giving a sharp pull, muting the resulting pop with his hand. Christian’s own hand moved down towards his wallet.

“Sure. I’m on a business trip. They almost drowned me in them.” He tossed down two slips of paper, with dark red lettering and blue stencils. “There you go, one for me and one for the company.”

“Fantastic.” Jim picked them up and examined them in the atmospheric glow of the bar. “I’ll keep it in mind.” He tucked them into the breast pocket of his vest.

“No problem.” Christian sighed. “Can I have some tea, maybe?”

Jim raised his eyebrows. “You don’t help the stereotype,” he said. Christian waved him away.

*

“Hey, Bol.” Jim’s thin face appeared in the space between the dish counter and the long setup that extended over the top of it. The rumps of the four different colored drink racks poked over the top like cheap page separators.

"Hello." Bolivar paused, one hand still on a trio of sauce-filmed dinner plates. "What did you find?"

"His trip's been extended by almost two weeks, because they're shipping him some new technology, or something, from England," Jim said, resting a hand on the shelf. "He's missing his daughter's birthday."

"Oh."

"That's what I said. But here," Jim rummaged with thin fingers in his vest pocket. "I got these." He handed Bolivar a pair of red-lettered business cards. Bolivar wiped his hands on his jeans and took them, looking them over in the bright, sterile light of the kitchen.

"Business cards," he mused.

"Yeah, well, gotta go. I hope those satisfy your curiosity." Jim's face disappeared. "I'll hook you up with another rack from this side."

"Thanks, Jim." Bolivar reached up to pull down the brown plastic rack Jim had indicated, before glancing behind him at Don, who was half-heartedly scrubbing a sizzle plate. "Don."

"Yeah?" The pock-faced young man looked up from the triple sinks in front of him, his hooded eyes blinking once as he focused on his co-worker.

"Can you watch this station?" Bolivar asked. Don glanced at the small pile of pans and plates at the end of his sink. "I'll take over there when I come back."

"Sure, okay." Don dropped a half-scrubbed pan into the water. "Where are you going?"

"To make a phone call," Bolivar said.

*

Somewhere in England a phone rang. A man had just loosened his belt after the night's late meal and was looking forward to untucking his shirt when the jangling of the white phone at his bedside table interrupted him.

"Hello?" he asked into the receiver. A nervous female voice greeted him. He paused to listen.

"Eliza, I don't discuss business this late." He glanced at the digital bedside clock. He usually didn't do much of anything this late, but for some reason the outing with his wife and her brother had become a catalogue of time-consuming annoyances. The voice persisted.

"What?" More noise. Her voice sounded a little whiney.

"They lost it? And they call us now?" He pushed off one shoe with the toe of his other. First, the brother had been late by almost a half hour, making excuses about bad traffic and a busy day at work. Personally, the man thought the brother a bit of a delinquent. Who would show up late to a five-star restaurant where your brother-in-law was treating?

"Right, America is a few hours behind. But they lost it?" His other shoe came off. Then to compound their troubles, and perhaps because of,

the brother's lateness, their reservation had been given away and they had to wait almost an hour to be seated.

"You're sure?" He gave into the urge and untucked his shirt, holding the phone against one shoulder as his other hand pulled the lavender fabric out of his pants. Once seated, they had been overlooked by the wait staff for a good twenty minutes and he finally had to pay a visit to the maitre d'.

"Okay, fine. They had the right stuff. This sets us back a little. Do we have anyone over there?" There was a pause and frantic clicking on the other end. Of course, if that had been the end, it might not have been so bad. But the brother had ordered his steak well-done, which guaranteed another long wait.

"Mr. Greene?" He chuckled. What a name. Better than his brother-in-law's. What kind of parent names their son Beverly and raises him to take his steak well-done? "Okay, well, have we changed Mr. Greene's flight yet?" More clicking.

"Yes, sir, just now." The man sighed, glancing at the clock again. That had been another wait and a half. It was almost like someone wanted to make him sit and listen to the idiot babble of his reluctant in-law.

"Okay, good. Tell him to ignore our last call and come home. By the time we can get another camera fitted and over there, it will be next month. Don't need to give anyone a free vacation." There was a nervous laugh on the other end.

"Is that all?" He sat on the edge of the bed, rolling his eyes. Knowing his luck tonight, it wasn't. On their way out of the restaurant, he had managed to lose his keys. More time wasted.

"Very well. Good night, Eliza." He hung up the white phone and shook his head. Maybe now, after all of this, the fates would let him get some sleep.

*

"Thanks." Bolivar stepped out of the dry storage doorway and back into the bakery, setting the small phone down next to the mixing machine where Heather was working. She glanced at him and stopped the beater.

"No problem. Have a nice chat?" She shoved the arm holding the beater up with a clunk, pulling the small utensil off the machine and letting it rest in the bowl of creamy white frosting.

"I did, actually." Bolivar stopped by the ovens and inhaled the scent of the baking bread. "Had a nice talk with a lovely British lady named Eliza." Heather made a choking sound, the mixing bowl nearly tumbling to the red-tiled floor.

"Jesus! You made a call to England?"

"That's where his company is," Bolivar said. Heather slammed the bowl down on the table and grabbed her phone, her thumb flying over the buttons.

"God, Bol! Did you think before you did that? It's going to cost a fortune!" She looked up from the phone, her cheeks flushed underneath her scattering of freckles.

"No, it won't." Bolivar leaned against the ovens, calmly looking at the flustered baker. "It doesn't even exist."

"What?" Heather tilted her head, narrowing her eyes.

Bolivar shrugged nonchalantly. "It doesn't exist. Did you finish checking your phone?"

Heather looked down at the sleek electronic device in her hand. Frantically, she pressed a few more buttons. Then she stopped. She pressed the buttons again, this time more slowly. She held up the phone and looked at Bolivar.

"Damn," she said.

Bolivar smiled. "See? If you get a bill, just give it to me. But you won't." He straightened and plucked a truffle from a sheet pan in front of him. Heather shook her head, shoving her phone back in her pocket.

"That's weird. Do you do stuff like this often?" she asked, turning back to the bowl.

"Whenever I need to," he said. "You take it well."

"Thanks," she replied, bent over her concoction. "How'd you get past chef for this long?"

Bolivar chuckled. "Chef is in the middle of preparing steak medallion entrées for a table of six." He did a little twirling dance to the doorway. "Now, I've got some scrubbing to attend to."

*

"Smile!"

Heather looked up from the crème brûlée she had just finished burning over, only to be blinded by a sudden flash of light.

"Ah!" She recoiled, throwing one arm up. "What the hell! I'm still holding the torch!"

"I waited until you turned it off," Bolivar said politely. "You know how nervous you make me when you are behind that thing."

"Doesn't make you any less of an asshole," Heather grumbled, stooping to put the blowtorch back under the table.

"Look what was in the British fellow's package." Bolivar was standing in the doorway to the bakery with his baseball cap on, but otherwise not outfitted for work. He was holding up a palm-sized, silver box of a camera, the front still aimed at Heather.

"What?" Heather straightened up, arching one eyebrow. "Didn't you take care of that last week?"

"Getting him home, yes." Bolivar stepped into the bakery, setting the camera down on the table opposite Heather and resting his hands on the edge. "But I had to make sure his package never arrived, or else suspicions

would be aroused.”

“Really?” Heather opened the fridge behind her, taking out a strawberry garnish and tossing it onto the freshly-seared crème brûlée. “So you just stole it?”

An annoyed look crossed Bolivar’s face. “No, not really,” he said. “I intercepted it.”

Heather raised her eyebrows. “You stole it.”

“No,” Bolivar said firmly. “I found the warehouse where it was being shipped from and offered to deliver it for them. They took me up on it.”

“So they just let you carry away their stuff?” Heather looked down at her dessert, frowning. “Where’d the chocolate go?”

“On your left; it was probably David working this morning.”

Bolivar pointed to the bottle of melted chocolate just above Heather’s head. “Admittedly,” he continued, “it helped I was driving a company van and wearing the appropriate outfit.”

“Now how the hell did you get those?” Heather looked crosswise at him, pausing with her hand and bottle only halfway down to the tabletop.

“Do you want me to tell you all my secrets?” Bolivar chuckled. “I used to do this stuff for a living, you know.”

“Fine, whatever. You are still the creepiest old man I’ve ever met.”

With a deft flick of her wrist, Heather painted a thin, abstract line of chocolate across the expanse of the dessert plate.

“So I decided to have some fun with the contents before I punched in.” Bolivar began to manipulate the buttons on the camera, with slow, arthritic movements of his fingers. Heather rolled her eyes.

“Here,” she said, reaching out with one hand while licking some extraneous chocolate syrup off the fingers of the other. Bolivar plunked the camera into her grip.

“Hello, Bol. Not goofing off too much, I hope.” The skinny, bald figure of Jim moved in through the doorway. Bolivar shrugged bashfully.

“I’ve got five minutes,” he said.

Jim patted him on the shoulder. “Just giving you a hard time.” He looked across the table at Heather. “Is that my crème brûlée?”

“Sure is.” Heather’s eyes were still on the camera. “Geez, Bol, why’d you have to snap it just then?”

“Snap what?” Jim asked.

Heather waved the camera. “Bol decided it would be funny to take a picture of me,” she said.

Jim raised his eyebrows. “Nice camera, where’d you get that?” He held his hand out and Heather dropped the device across the gnarly expanse of his palm.

“It was why the British gentleman was almost kept here,” Bolivar explained. “It is amazing. He almost missed his daughter’s birthday for

something that tiny.”

“Hey.” Heather shook her finger at him. “That tiny thing probably costs more than your paycheck.” Beside them, Jim shook his head.

“No kidding.” He whistled softly through his teeth, turning the silver device over in his hand. “It’s a nice picture though.”

Heather scowled at him. Bolivar took back the camera from Jim and looked down at the small, crisp digital screen. On it was an image of Heather, caught slightly bent over the small yellow custard, blowtorch in hand with a skeptical arch to her eyebrows. He tapped lightly on the glowing screen.

“It’s a keeper,” he said.

Heather rolled her eyes. “Boys are stupid.” She slid the crème brûlée onto the wire rack to her left. Jim gave a chuckle.

“We’re not boys,” he said, taking the plate in one hand. “Probably least of all Bol here.”

Bolivar shuffled his feet. “He got home alright?” he asked, looking up at Jim again.

Jim frowned. “I think so. He came in the next morning, I told you, right?” He took the dessert in both hands, looking at Bolivar more closely.

“Yes, yes, you did,” Bolivar conceded. “He ordered an omelet.”

“I think so.” Jim nodded slowly. “He was happy as anything. Wouldn’t stop talking about what he was going to bring back from America for his little girl’s birthday.”

“That’s sweet,” Heather said. The ticket machine croaked. “Goddamn it, do all these people eat dessert first or something?” She ripped the ticket out and glared at it.

Bolivar raised the camera, confused by the tiny buttons and unfamiliar symbols stamped on them. But he found the one that pulled the view out, encompassing the whole corner of the bakery, including Heather and Jim, who still had the crème brûlée couched in his hands. He hit the button on top, just as he had figured out on the way to work. The flash glared again and Heather cursed.

“What the hell, Bol!”

“Sorry,” he mumbled. Jim laughed.

“Are you going to make a documentary?” he asked, moving towards the door, the large oval plate now balanced professionally on one hand.

“Maybe.” He looked down at the fresh sliver of reality caught on the machine in his hands. Jim was smiling slightly, his eyebrows up, regarding him quizzically through the small screen. Heather was looking absently at the slip she had just tacked to the shelf above her head, her hand caught in mid-motion as it fell to join her other resting on the table.

“Just document me when I’m paying attention,” the real Heather grumbled. Bolivar nodded and looked up. Jim had left. The clock read five.

“I guess,” he said. “I have work to do.”