Interruption

by Phillis Ideal

As soon as he neared his neighborhood newsstand, handed over the exact change and had The New York Times in his hand, Irving switched from feeling he had no choices, to feeling he had a future. It was like making a prison break from a terminal sentence, as long days droned on, the incompetent boss gave orders and the mindless work piled up. *I could die tomorrow of stress and is this how I want to spend my life?* But as he leafed through the paper, his dark thoughts of loss and a lack of meaning lifted, his heart picked up a beat, and his step grew lighter. Music, museums, and theater: the newsstand was his life support system. *"Not dead, yet!"* he could think.

But that day, just as he got his wallet out of his pocket and was a few steps from his newspaper stand, he felt an arm on his, pushing him over to a shaded portion of the sidewalk, interrupting his ritual. A young black man with a knit cap pushed a gun into his chest. "Don't do anything stupid and give me your money."

This baby-faced robber with black pools for eyes, framed by smooth chestnut skin, bore a familiarity for Irving. Growing up on the fringes of Bedford-Stuyvesant, he played with the neighborhood black kids, a welcomed reprieve from his strict religious upbringing. For many years he owned a small factory in the same area, hired Jamaican women, knew their kids, celebrated birthdays and graduations, attended funerals when the sons got shot, and gave some structure to the drug-infested neighborhood. He had one of the most complete jazz collections in the area, and could be found most weekends in a club listening to live jazz and talking to the musicians who had become friends. When his factory business dried up, he was talking weekly to the IRS to negotiate a payment plan to resolve a past-due balance of $80,000. He understood money problems.

Available online at *«http://fictionaut.com/stories/phillis-ideal/interruption»*
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“Man, times are tough,” Irving said. “This is all I have on me.” And showing him the $17.27 he had on him, looked at him with a what's happenin' man? expression.

The young robber looked downcast and said, “You are okay, man. Thanks.” And stuffed Irving's money in his jacket.

“Take care, man,” Irving said, as the robber walked away.

And the robber turned around and said, “You too, bro.”

Irving returned to the newsstand. After paying for his newspaper with some loose change that had not been confiscated, he resumed his walk to work. But he felt drained of energy, out of his body and had lost track of time. He had a pain in his chest and thought he might be having a heart attack. After walking ten blocks, he saw his reflection in a store window and realized he was walking lopsided; his entire body was pulling to the right. And he felt an enormous weight on his right side. He looked down and saw he was holding a metal bar in his hand. He had picked up the metal bar that secured the pile of newspapers instead of picking up his newspaper. And he was carrying this weight like a baseball bat ready to swing out and strike.

Published: Notausgang: emergency exit Pure Slush Vol.2 is edited by Matt Potter and published by Pure Slush, May 2012

Word Count: 542