

VENICE IN THE AFTERNOON

by Tom Lombardi

It's cloudy out. So I go to the Assisted Suicide Center on Venice Blvd. It doesn't mean I'm gonna off myself because it's cloudy. There just happens to be a kind of puzzle of clouds in the sky the moment I decide to head over there. I find it fitting, this weather. Then again, if it were sunny, I suppose I'd also find that fitting.

The girl behind the counter is big-boned and pretty in a jock sort of way, like maybe she played volleyball in college. I wonder if any dudes who come here to end their lives instead walk out with her number, but then I notice that she's got a piercing in her lower lip which seems to suggest otherwise. Don't think about it, man, is what that piercing seems to suggest. I got a boyfriend, it seems to be saying. Or maybe she's a lesbian. In fact, this might be the kind of establishment that employs lesbians. Not that I'm a fan of places that don't employ lesbians. Just sayin'.

She's staring at me now, having averted her eyes from her computer monitor. So I clear my throat and say, "I'd like to, you know, go."

"Right on." She starts clicking a computer mouse. "That'll be three hundred and fifty dollars." I hand her my Visa, which is, aptly, issued by the California Unemployment Development Department as part of some scam they got going with Visa. As she takes the card she smiles in a sweet way that makes me suddenly think my impression of her is wrong. But that's why I'm here, isn't it? I don't interpret situations very well. I tend to think everyone's against me, except for dogs, but I don't like owning dogs, they're too much responsibility. I just like petting them. There should be a place where you pay five bucks to spend an hour petting someone's dog. They could issue Frisbees and tennis balls and treats before you enter the pen or whatever holding bin they've got the dogs in. So

long as you didn't have to clean up their crap it'd be a nice place to go whenever you're feeling down.

"I'll need to see your I.D.," the girl behind the counter says, "then just fill out this form and we'll be with you shortly."

I take a seat and fill out the form. Typical questions: D.O.B., Sex, Social Security, In Case of Emergency, etc. Under reason for assisted death I chose Other and then write: "Can't seem to catch a break." Then I look up to see a fat guy in an enormously red golf shirt sitting in the corner, also filling out a form. I cross out what I put down and jot: "Unlucky." For some reason I think this will sound better coming from the lips of my family members at the wake. "He was unlucky." No one can really argue that. They'll nod, and say things like, "I suppose he was."

Meanwhile the fat guy in the corner looks so sullen I'm wondering if he's a plant; you know, seated there all day to turn off newcomers. Then a gun shot erupts from the back, and we hear what sounds like a body hitting the floor.

It's silent now, and that makes me uncomfortable, so I say, "Careful what you wish for," to the fat guy.

He nods warily. He's got some pretty serious dermatitis around his mustache and eyebrows, pink and flaky patches that admittedly force me to revert back to the form. Then again, I'm starting to get pretty nervous about what's about to go down, and so I feel the need to fill the air with conversation. "What'd you put?" I ask him. He looks at me with a blankness that has me turning away again, and then I feel a kind of sting in my spine. "Huh?" he says. "What'd you put down," I ask, secretly wishing I hadn't asked him a thing, "you know, for the reason?"

"Oh." He stares down at the form. "Anger."

"Huh." I feel a smile as big as a banana growing on my face. "I could have put that too."

"What'd you put?"

"Unlucky."

"Whoa, that's good." He scratches a flaky eyebrow. "That's really good."

"I think so."

"I'm going to change mine."

I'm worried this might raise suspicions. I mean, what are the chances, two unlucky guys in the same day? "Then again," he says, suppressing a cough with a hand that looks like a blob of pizza dough, "anger's pretty good."

"Anger is amazing," I say, "you can't argue with that."

"You got a cigarette?"

"Sorry, I quit."

He lets out a sigh and says, "That's a bummer."

"It's one of the few things I enjoyed out there," I tell him. "Hey -- what'd you put down for the note?"

"I was just gonna do that, as a matter of fact. What did you put?" He picks something from his ear -- maybe a rash in there too? "That is, if you don't mind me asking?"

"I just wrote down 'Later.'"

"Later?"

"You know, like, see you later."

"That's good -- that's funny."

"You think it's too, you know, arrogant or something? Flip, maybe?"

"It's a matter of the heart. So. I don't think you can quantify it."

"That's what I was thinking! I mean, you know, what we're about to go through, or whatever, it's sort of, you know, implied."

"Implied. Yes. I'd say so."

"Hey! You got a lot of family members?"

He starts biting his nails, and just before he answers I go, "Don't answer that, man, it's cool."

"No. No. No. You asked a question. I'm going to answer it."

I love this guy! His attentiveness is really palpable. Maybe that's why we're both here, we focus too much on what's going on at all times, like, when someone asks a question, you take it to heart. "I live with my mother," he tells me, and suddenly I'm imagining his corpse, lying in a casket while some white-haired woman -- she's

probably fat too -- wails over it, mascara raining along her peachy cheeks.

"What about you?" he asks before he goes to scratch at another eyebrow, this time with a pudgy thumb.

"Yeah, I got a family. But, you know -- it's not really working out."

He thinks about this, and then he laughs. And then we're both sort of laughing at my family, until the pierced girl speaks up:

"Roger Deacons? You can go in now."

"Roger," I find myself saying, "you look like a Roger."

He stands up, and then his arms begin to spread with an impressive wingspan, with meaty slabs of fat hanging from his biceps. "What the fuck is that supposed to mean -- dude?"

"Nothing." There's a flutter in my chest as I sit there. Is he going to hit me?

Roger breaks into a smile so serene that I'm suddenly relieved, and possibly at peace in his presence. Then his massive paw, as soft as a hot dog pun, comes at me and I'm shaking it, squeezing it harder than I should probably. "I'm just kidding," says Roger, his little eyes smiling. "Listen," Roger then says, "I'll see you in hell, all right?"

I laugh so hard that I find myself clapping, and then I'm no longer clapping as I watch Roger waddle away to his demise and so I say, because I just can't help it, "Hey, Roger" -- he turns around, he's got that rash on his forehead too -- "may you rest in peace!"

Roger points a pudgy finger at me and smiles before following a little Asian man in a lab coat into a back room.

Alone in the waiting room, I'm trying not to focus on the pierced girl behind the desk. I'm sure she gets that a lot, in this place, patients staring at her, dying for her to plead them to leave, or something. But my decision is final. On the way over here, for instance, I saw a bearded man picking through a garbage bin. He was like a seagull, this guy, desperately searching for a french fry, or whatever Seagulls comb the beach for. And I walked past him and nodded and it sort of hit me that I'd made the right step and, wouldn't you know, I even picked up my pace. But just before I got

to the Assisted Suicide Center, which has all kinds of celebrity donors, by the way. Just before I got here I thought I could do anything. I mean, if I'm going to end my life, I should do something outrageous, something I'd never done before . . . like, maybe rent a Segway, and cruise along the boardwalk, stuff that Swedish people do on vacation, with Euros burning in their pockets. Or maybe I could call one of my brothers, but chances are they'd only judge me, especially if I told them what I was doing. "You're going to get killed," one of them would say. "That's the point," I'd say. "Why don't you just get a job?" he'd say." It takes me a while to realize that blood is leaking onto my tongue. I'm loving the taste of it, frankly, even though I cease biting my cuticle. This Roger. Maybe they're taking his temperature. Maybe they're asking him questions. Like in the military, maybe he's considered too unhealthy for such a thing. Maybe they'll tell him to go back out there and believe in himself! Maybe they'll --

The gunshot was not so much loud as dull, almost sounded like a cap gun, to be honest. Only, this time there's no sound of the body hitting the floor.

"Jesus," I say, and the girl behind the counter acknowledges me only momentarily before returning to a web site or whatever.

The gun goes off again.

"Roger's really putting up a fight," I find myself saying. She keeps clicking on that goddamn mouse; she's got to be used to this, this has got to affect her. She probably goes home after work and takes a thirty-minute shower, and then, while drying off, she feels bad for the environment. People can't take thirty minute showers anymore, and that makes me even sadder. The state of the world, etc.

I want to keep talking, I'm desperate to talk to this pierced girl. That's another reason I'm here. I love to talk, but never seem to have many to talk to, with the exception of my annoying brothers.

POP!

Suddenly I'm imbued with the spirit of Roger, I'm convinced he'll come storming out of the back room, riddled with bloody holes so big you can stuff quarters inside his flesh, and we'll go grab a beer

and laugh about all this. But then his body hits the floor, or what sounds like a wary gorilla falling off of a table, and I'm so overcome with dread and sadness that I find myself slipping into the chair and yawning violently.

"They're ready for you," the pierced girl says.

On the counter is a picture of J. Lo on a magazine, the headline promising insight into her failed marriage. For a woman going through the perils of a divorce she's looking really hot. I wouldn't mind being in J. Lo's kitchen right now, sunlight spilling through the expensive windows, maybe there'd be an orchid on the counter, and I'd ask how it's going; J. Lo pouring me some seriously robust coffee into a Gigli mug, or maybe it'd say Monster-in-Law on the mug, and then she'd say, with her pretty mouth, little piano keys for teeth, "Asi asi." "Is that Spanish?" I'd ask her. "You ready?" the girl at the counter says. "Jesus," I say back, standing up now, my legs gone rubbery, "I feel like Gumby."

She smiles, sort of. She's heard it all. I hand her the form. I'm sweating so bad my eyes are stinging. "So," I say, my heart panting in my chest as I go for one more joke, "you seein' anyone?"

Her smile has officially gone obligatory.

"I'm a real catch," I tell her, flailing, feeling crazy and full of sweat. I can't seem to come up with a good one-liner in this situation while she blinks at me.

"Later," I say.

"Good luck."

"Thanks."

A door appears to have been opened as that Asian man, who may be Korean, stands near me. "Tough day at the office?" I say to him. I'm back, that is, the one-liners. Then again, his countenance is so serious I'm starting to lose my balance, and next thing I know he grabs me by the T-shirt and drags me through the door.

I'm leading him all of a sudden down a hallway the end of which has another door that's the color of a rotten plum. Meanwhile, along the walls I'm hoping for some encouraging words, maybe some inspirational posters, like a no-legged man rock-climbing with the

words So Can You! inscrolled beneath the area where his legs should be. Rather, they're just cinder blocks -- the walls -- painted in a kind of boring mustard that, I'm sure, is meant to keep the patients depressed. Or who knows? More than likely, there was no plan. More than likely, this place used to be a pharmacy, or any number of individualized stores that corporations have rendered obsolete. That's another reason, I'm thinking, that I'm here -- I tend to think everything has meaning, every little bottle cap in the world, every piece of chewing gum stuck to the underside of a bleacher seat; every mustard cinderblock in the wall. Man, I really wish there were posters!

The Asian man is speaking now in a pretty relaxed tone. "Just go, quietly, through that door," he says. As opposed to screaming? Did Roger scream, I wonder? When I turn to acknowledge him I realize he's stopped at some point in the middle of the hallway. I smile at him, hoping he'll tell me to come back. He merely motions for me to move forward. His lab coat is perilously pressed, it seems. My palm meanwhile is soaked from sweat, and my underarms are burning and I turn the doorknob, slowly, still waiting for Asian bastard to stop me.

At first, the sunlight is blinding. What happened to the goddamn clouds? The light in Los Angeles is specific as hell, it's not like the light in the Northeast of America, where I grew up, where everything is always being bathed in shadows, rained on, sleeted on and covered with pissy snow and all kinds of elements. Out here, for the most part, sidewalks and people, they bake under the light in a way that makes you think the sun is not indifferent or lifeless but just kind of bored. On the other hand when it rains in the winter you start to worry for all the hapless creatures in Malibu setting their alarm clocks and switching off bedside lamps in cliffed houses and imagining them awakening to find the house sliding down a hillside in a torrent of rain. As my eyes adjust to the blinding sunlight, it's a courtyard I'm standing in, and the first thing I recognize is grass so green it instantly has me wanting to jump on it or maybe walk around in bare feet. There's a woman, I'm seeing now, sitting on a

sole bench in the corner. She's topless, I think. No, she's breast-feeding, her hair running down her face in thick, caramel strands. This has too much meaning, I think. I wonder if she'll pat the bench beside her, but she doesn't. So I walk toward her, thinking I'll ask if she saw Roger, where the hell is Roger? I should take off my Converse and feel the grass. All my life, wearing stupid sneakers. That's all I ever seem to have worn in this world, socks and sneakers.

