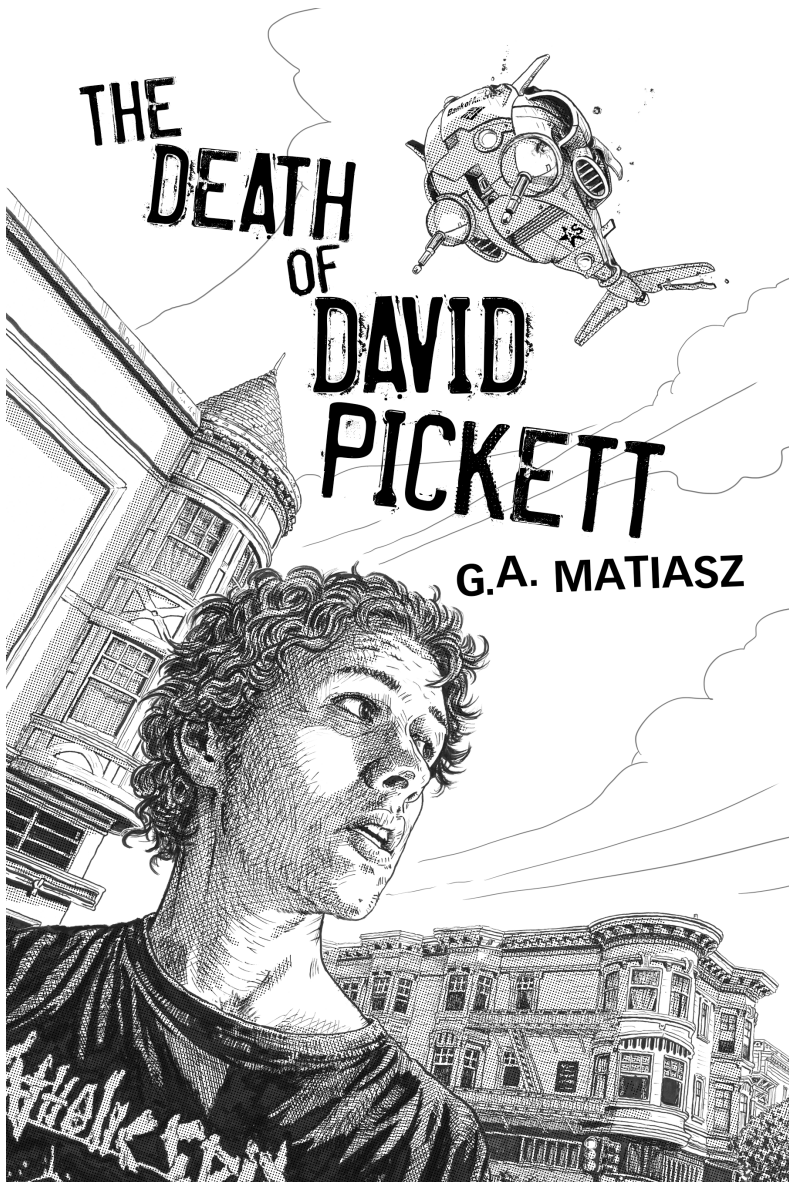


THE DEATH OF DAVID PICKETT

G.A. MATIASZ



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The Death of David Pickett

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For Kay
my broken grace

ONE

David Pickett's death upset a lot of people.

Jesse Steinfeld heard about it a little before noon on Sunday. He was in that state between sleep and wakefulness in his Mission District shoebox apartment when his smartphone rang with the incessant guitar thrum of Leonard Cohen's "Partisan." He fumbled for the phone on the headboard as a breeze played with drapes and sunlight.

"Yo," Jesse answered.

"Jesse, Dave Pickett is dead." The shrill voice at the other end belonged to Angie Markham. "Dave was driving back from Baja with friends when their car flipped. His abdomen was sliced open and he was bleeding out. The Mexican authorities tried to medevac him, but he was declared DOA at the hospital. They finally did it."

"Huh?" He grunted, still chasing the tail end of a dream. "Who did what to whom?"

"Assassinated Dave," Angie said. "CIA, FBI, NSA, AFL-CIO, whoever. Haven't you been listening?"

Jesse hung up. He'd never liked Angie's sharp, accusatory way of speaking, even when he'd had a brief relationship with her two years ago. He eased out of his double bed and walked three steps into the kitchenette, where he turned on the programmed coffeemaker. He walked a half-dozen steps back the other way into the bathroom for a quick shower and shave, washing away the

remnants of last night's Retromingent concert at the Korova Bar.

Jesse knew David from the city's music scene and the Bay Area's political milieu. They'd met, in passing, at the Skeleton Club back when he was still sleeping with Angie. At a party, happening, or concert he was aware of Pickett's crew as the storm on the horizon and of David as the eye of that storm. Jesse had stumbled upon a provocative rally turned street fight staged by David and his cohorts in support of bike messengers' rights a year ago, and had purchased six doses of a powerful designer psychedelic, jamrax, from David at Stumpy's six months ago. But Jesse still considered him only an acquaintance at best.

The aroma of Colombian coffee saturated the apartment by the time he had toweled off. He poured fragrant coffee into an oversized Foamy-the-Squirrel mug before he dressed from a tiny closet in the minuscule combination living/dining room. He put on black Converse high-tops, narrow black jeans, classic Catholic Spit black-and-white band T-shirt, and a black Dickies hoodie, then took his coffee onto the fire escape and relaxed.

David Pickett had been a fixture of Bay Area progressive politics for the past decade or so. He had a solid reputation as a community organizer, labor militant, and political powerhouse. Yet David's notoriety in edge politics was even more pronounced as a commie impresario, a left of the Left raconteur, and an anarcho-provocateur. He was the founder of What's Left?— an extremely popular website, a volatile social networking site, and a print-version zine with a circulation

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approaching two million. His powerful speech during the “Fuck Work, Fuck Borders” conference three years ago had gone viral, making him a rising star of the emerging revolutionary Synarky movement. And his popular podcast series “FSU” averaged more than eight million unique monthly subscribers.

Jesse soaked in the afternoon sun as he gradually caffeinated himself. The weather pattern was standard for San Francisco in midsummer; the overcast had burned off, leaving blue skies. The gray fog bank out past Twin Peaks looked like a line of surf threatening to break. The smells from a taqueria down the block wafted up to the fire escape. The thirty-six-ounce mug, having declared “Squirrelly Rage” to the world, was half empty.

David Pickett had also founded Drinkers United International, an anti-union of sorts inspired by Oscar Wilde’s quip that “Work is the curse of the drinking classes.” Under his leadership, DUI gained prominence through its tireless relief work for and armed defense of the poor and homeless after the 2021 earthquake. Its various front activities included mobile hiring halls and interest-specific social clubs. DUI became infamous, however, for a number of wildcat actions involving software coders, fast food workers, day laborers, sex workers, and the like—actions with a flair for the spectacular that often turned violent. The violent assault on the Bohemian Grove in Monte Rio by DUI was the stuff of legend.

Jesse rinsed the empty mug in the sink and set up next morning’s drip, then took the stairs down to the street. He had a freelance archiving job tomorrow but nothing that interfered with his boho lifestyle. First stop, Sam’s Sons

Deli for their Reuben sandwich. Second stop was Stumpy's Pub for a pint or three of Belgian ale. Jesse suspected that David's comrades and friends, perhaps even some of his frenemies and enemies, were already beginning to gather at Stumpy's. David's political milieu was Jesse's by acquaintance and happenstance. He started on a refreshing walk up Guerrero, past the homeless encampment stirring to life at the corner of 24th.

After the 2021 tech bubble collapse, out-of-work techies fled the Mission District, which effectively halted the neighborhood's contentious gentrification. But the popular movement to declare autonomy for the Mission District, and to call itself the "Mission Commune," had so far failed. The City of San Francisco disregarded petitions, referenda, elections, demonstrations, and street violence. Instead, it increased surveillance and harassment of the indigent and destitute, especially around rich areas. The Liberty Hill Historic District ahead was just such a tony neighborhood of mini-mansions and upscale condos in the midst of the Mission that escalated in wealth from east to west until it was virtually a walled enclave catercorner to Mission Dolores Park. No surprise that its residents paid dearly for a variety of private security services to protect themselves from the rabble living and breathing a mere street corner away. Top among them were patrols by unmanned aerial vehicles.

Jesse saw the drone whir around the corner from 22nd Street onto Guerrero toward Alvarado bearing logos for Ambassador Security and Bank of America. "Fucking PUD," he said under his breath. UAVs were often called PUDs, an acronym for the public—or private—urban drones deployed with increasing frequency in and around

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the Bay Area. Like the word drone itself, PUD was a somewhat rude term that had entered the vernacular. People who lived in the Mission had an explosive antipathy for PUDs, public or private, which went beyond the general dislike for being watched in public spaces. Except during riots, however, few people messed with heavily armed law-enforcement UAVs. Private urban drones were another matter, even though more of the private ones were allowed to carry and use weapons, thanks to California's castle doctrine. This one did.

The reason that the drone ventured beyond its turf was not immediately evident. The response to its intrusion was immediate and violent. Two powerful green lasers from farther down Guerrero pinned the PUD, barely visible in daylight, yet effective in causing the drone to react. Instead of retreating, however, the UAV held its ground, hovering above the LED streetlight.

"Cease and desist," a mechanical male voice boomed from the drone. *"You are in violation of section—"*

Five more lasers targeted the drone. Rioters used wrist-rocket slingshots, power catapults, stone bows, and human power to hurl rocks, pieces of brick, bottles, marbles, ball bearings, nuts, and bolts at the drone. Blinded by lasers, pummeled by projectiles, again the drone refused to retreat, for whatever reason.

"Cease and desist—" The PUD crackled, lost the final consonant, listed, then dropped a meter. A distant police siren sounded. The drone got off two wild shots before spiraling down to smash into two parked cars.

A roar of triumph greeted the PUD's crash and two dozen street people ran for the drone's twisted wreckage. An SUV with Ambassador Security markings skidded into

the intersection and three men brandishing guns piled out. But the crowd brandished firearms, too. The dozen individuals not holding guns began dragging the broken drone down the street, screaming “*Our streets!*” and “*Back the fuck off!*”

The crowd moved toward a pickup truck that had just pulled up. Three armed men hauled the drone into the truck as the security guards yelled, “*Stop, motherfuckers!*” By the time two cop cars arrived on the scene, the truck sped off and the other armed civilians melted into the neighborhood with the rest of the crowd, leaving both public and private cops frustrated, talking to each other.

Jesse left as police reinforcements arrived. He circumvented the confrontation’s dénouement with Sam’s Sons Deli once again in mind, replaying the fight as he picked up his sandwich. A flock of iridescent green-and-red parrots squawked in the palm trees above him as he walked along Dolores.

Stumpy’s was a dive bar, pure and proud, in the Lower Haight east of the Wiggle. Featuring a selection of sixty-plus draft and ninety-plus bottled beers, it had been unofficial headquarters for DUI, and David Pickett, for the past four years. Angie Markham also kept propaganda at the bar for her more staid Precarious Union, which was a direct reaction to DUI and to David’s bold, rabble-rousing political style. The rivalry between them often tried loyalties. Angie was eighteen years older than Jesse, and their relationship had been rocky. She drank heavily, and was often passed out by evening. He found her in her apartment one night raving, frantically brushing off imaginary spiders, desperately searching for her car keys and the money to buy more alcohol. Shaken and

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unnerved, never having seen a case of the DTs, Jesse nevertheless had the presence of mind to hide her purse.

Blatz's "Fuk Shit Up" blasted from the open door in the red-and-black facade. Jesse entered the dark bar, the atmosphere stinking of beer, sweat, cigarettes, and vomit, found a stool at the bar, and placed the sandwich on the worn wooden countertop.

"What'll it be?" the heavily tattooed bartender asked.

"Pint of Lucifer," Jesse said, and unwrapped his sandwich. As he suspected, a sizable crowd in the back was talking up David Pickett's death and the radical demo in Dolores Park later that evening. That and the takedown of the PUD. He didn't recognize anyone so he started eating in peace. The pint arrived. Sam's Sons' Reuben Combo was perfection. The pint was beyond perfection. When Jesse looked back up, Stenny Amps had materialized on the barstool next to him.

"Long time, Jesse," Stenny said. Jesse noted the covetous glance toward the sandwich and the lengthy longing look at the beer. The stench of Stenny's crusty clothing assaulted his nose. "Free Speech" by Citizen Fish played in the background.

"How's the band going?" Jesse asked, quickly draining the pint. "What's the name again?"

"Dead Girls Can't Say No," Stenny said, and watched as Jesse started in on the other half of the Reuben. "We've got a gig next Friday, at the Chatsubo."

"Good to hear it," he said between bites. "So, what's your take on David Pickett?"

"Nothing to say," Stenny said, with a dismissive wave of a hand. "He was off-roading with a bunch of his Drinking United cadre in the Sonoran Desert. Fancy Yamaha

motocross bikes. He took a spill, sustained a lot of damage from rocks, had a lot of internal injuries. Died from an internal hemorrhage in the abdomen. End of story.”

“Nothing untoward?”

“Not a goddamn nefarious thing about it.”

“Wow.” Jesse finished up the sandwich. “Glad to hear the real story. Lots of rumors going round.”

“Well, I got the genuine report,” Stenny said. “You heard about taking down that PUD? I was right there—”

“I was half a block away, watching the whole thing.” Jesse crumpled the sandwich paper and stuffed it into the bag.

“Oh, wasn’t that something.” Stenny offered a weak grin, then dodged Jesse’s eyes. “Ya know, I’m a bit strapped for cash until our show, and I was wondering—”

“Hold that thought,” Jesse said, and stood up from his stool, abandoning an empty pint glass and crumbs. “I’ll be back. Got to take a wicked leak.”

When Jesse got to the unisex bathrooms at mid-bar and turned back, Stenny had evaporated. *Fucking moocher*. There wasn’t much of a line, and he didn’t have much of a pee. Just as he was about to turn back for another beer, Ari Moser came out of one of the toilets.

“Well, well, if it isn’t Jesse the Zionist,” Ari said, with a sly smile. “How’s Romi these days?”

Romi was Jesse’s pretty younger sister whom Ari had been eager to sex up a while back. The man’s desire to sleep with her had been inflamed by her making *aliya* and then joining up with the IDF for her mandatory military service, where she served in the joint US/Israeli nuclear operation Wrath of God.

“Romi is out of the Army,” Jesse said. “She’s married

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and has a baby.”

“Shame,” Ari mused. “Buy you a beer?”

They were still on the edge of the scrum in which Pickett’s death was discussed and debated. Amenity’s “This Is Our Struggle” roared over the sound system. Cigarette smoke rolled from one end of the bar to the other. Ari had a Racer 5, Jesse a Black Damnation VI. They faced the mirror behind the bar, with Ari clocking every passing female.

“Too bad about the fourth Intifada,” Ari said, after a gulp. “What with Hezbollah still mired deep in what’s left of Syria and the rest of the Middle East reduced to nuclear chaos, it looks like Gaza is going to get razed.”

“Dude, I’m not playing that game,” Jesse said, and drank. “You win. I concede. You’re a better anti-Zionist Jew than I am.”

“Hey, dude,” Ari smirked. “No more pissing contest, okay? Your sister is still one smoking hot chick, Israeli or not. Married or not.”

“So, what do you make of Pickett’s death?”

“Way I heard it, he was down in Baja, working with the PRD-affiliated Authentic Labor Front.” Ari watched the ass of a voluptuous redhead as she sashayed toward the bathroom. “And there was something definitely not kosher about his demise.”

“How so?”

“Well, for one thing, it appears that the Arellano-Félix Cartel had a hand in helping the Federales run him off the road. For another, no hospital on either side of the border has any record of admitting him, alive or dead. For a third, US authorities are remarkably reticent about the circumstances around Dave’s death.”

“So, you’re saying this was political.”

“No doubt about it,” Ari said, finishing his pint. He caught the wink of a stunning brunette in the mirror from behind him. “So, dude, gotta run. Give Romi my regards.”

Jesse ordered a dark Armageddon ale and considered what he’d been told. Two for and one against David Pickett’s death being political. And yet he considered the odds to be even, he thought as he systematically worked on the pint. Stenny Amps was a freeloader and a bum and loved to exaggerate his own exploits. But he was not prone to wild conspiracy theories. Ari Moser’s more reasoned, if darker, analysis of the political implications of Pickett’s passing was more than offset by the tinfoil-hat idiocy of Angie Markham’s alcohol-fueled conspiratorial ruminations. Speaking of which...

“Stay fucking right there, Jesse Steinfeld!” Angie’s piercing screech cut through the dense barroom din, even as L7’s “This Ain’t the Summer of Love” blared above it all. She was small, barely over five feet, but Jesse could see her from across the room trying to shove her way through the unyielding throng. He guzzled the rest of his beer in record time as he lost sight of her, but he could still hear her. “*Don’t you fucking leave!*”

He ducked down from his stool, then wove his way, crouching, toward the dazzling light of the open door. An agonizing minute later, he reached the door, the day, and freedom. He looked back to see Angie standing at the doorway, distraught. Jesse raced down the sidewalk and turned the corner on Fillmore. He ran past the grocery store murals, past Laussat Street, and past more murals adorning a Cambodian restaurant. Only then did he stop

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to catch his breath.

It was late afternoon, approaching evening. His smartphone kept ringing, so he turned it off. An airbus wheezed down Fillmore. He grabbed a ride by swiping his phone's Clipper app and settled into a seat next to an elderly man dressed in a suit and tie and reading audibly from a Bible. Jesse was enjoying the effects of his three pints of strong ale, so when he switched to a Muni train at Church headed for the park and the demonstration, he was feeling no pain. The sun was nestling into that fog bank above Twin Peaks.

The Muni rattled up along the west side of Dolores Park, giving Jesse a view of the rally in progress on the green soccer fields. He disembarked. Parrots wheeled overhead, chirping and shrieking. He saw Toby Barnabas get off the train, too. He was a tall lanky Mohawked man he knew from hanging around the periphery of Pickett's militant circles. He was dressed in black with a leather jacket sporting the familiar Mohawked skulls of The Exploited's *Fuck the System* album. Toby walked, chatting with his über-Goth girlfriend, Cynthia, "Tank Girl" on her leather jacket. They did not see Jesse.

Jesse didn't close in on the rally. Not right away. First he bought four Boston cream donuts. Then he circled around the rally, listening to the speeches as darkness descended. Perhaps four hundred people were standing around. A cop drone lazily wheeled above the gathering. Unlike the mob that immediately took down the encroaching PUD earlier in the day, an air of impending trouble hung over the crowd. No fan of anarchist smashy-smashy, Jesse nevertheless felt compelled to stay by the threat of sweet violence. He thought he saw Ari Moser among the rabble,

but lost sight of him. A wind had started to whip up, blowing snippets of words and sentences away. Much of the rest echoed unintelligibly around the park, along with Public Enemy's "Party for Your Right to Fight."

"...David Pickett was an enemy of the state, a target of every American police, security, and military agency..."

The gathering was overwhelmingly young, about evenly male and female, and dressed principally in black. There was a pungent smell of marijuana and tobacco throughout those assembled. People kept arriving as Jesse stayed at the margin. Toby and Cynthia were in the thick of it.

"...ickett's legacy was to stand for the helpless, to stand with the downtrodden, to stand against the rich and powerful. David Pickett was a friend of the impoverished multitude and an enemy of the wealthy few. D..."

The crowd had swollen to well over a thousand and many were masked up. It was fully dark now. The clinking of glass bottles accompanied the smell of gasoline. A tight knot of miscreants surrounded Toby and snickered at one of his jokes. Toby flashed something, quickly and surreptitiously, then hid it in his jacket.

"...time to avenge our fallen friend, our murdered brother, our assassinated comrade! It's time to wreak our havoc against the cops, against capital and state, against all the powers-that-be! It's time to MOVE!"

Hoodies came up, balaclavas were donned, black bandannas were tied around faces. Full black-bloc mode. And the mob surged toward 18th and Dolores, toward rows of businesses, toward the nearest police station.

"One, two, three, four; this is fucking class war!"

Glow sticks, flashlights, and lasers pierced the gloom.

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Here and there, a fiery torch burned. Jesse joined the crowd at the tail end as the crowd occupied the middle of the street. A second PUD joined the first, and both kept tabs on the march.

“Racist, sexist, anti-gay; SFPD go away!”

Tires popped, and car windows shattered. Car alarms howled and squealed. Bystanders watched the unruly march from upper-story windows. Gas masks appeared. Lasers lanced up from the protest onto the UAVs, the crowd hoping to keep the drones blinded.

“What do we want?”

“Dead cops!”

“When do we want them?”

“Now!”

Jesse could see the crowd marching toward the Mission Street Police Station. He moved to the sidewalk, where he watched the police quickly reinforce the line of officers behind the standing wall of steel barricades, between the station and the mob. The black-clad rabble roared in response.

“Whose streets?”

“Our streets!”

“Fuck the police!”

The mob used paint bombs, bricks, bottles, rocks, metal hardware, and debris, primarily against the station and secondarily toward the multiplying drones. Dressed in fire-resistant riot suits, the cops raised their shields and sprayed the crowd with tear gas. Pivoting UAVs also let loose a rain of pepper bombs and flash-bang grenades. By then, Jesse had moved to the opposite sidewalk and pushed his way down Valencia, past the riot proper and out of range of the gas. The second wave involved smoke bombs to

obscure the mob and people hurling Molotov cocktails, until the line of cops appeared engulfed in flames. One PUD veered away and crash-landed behind the station. But the shields and fire-retardant uniforms, plus a constant dry spray of sodium bicarbonate from nozzles in the station, rapidly contained the inferno.

Then the police launched liquid pepper spray and high-power microwave weapons, designed to dispense excruciating pain as subcutaneous heat or intracranial sound. The HPM antennas swiveled down from the roof and powered up with subsonics. The air above the riot rippled ominously. The mini-insurrection redoubled their attack—the projectiles, the paint and smoke bombs, and the Molotovs—plus their ace: glitter bombs. Thrown high into the air, the fine metal glitter bombs exploded and holy hell broke loose. Lightning streamers, sheets of lightning, ball lightning erupted between falling glitter and the microwave weapons in violent claps and crackles until the microwave devices short-circuited and the police station roof caught fire. Two PUDs shot sparks and careened into the building.

The battle for the station proved only a diversion, however. As soon as the glitter bombs went off, the cops had to respond to their burning building. The organized assault turned into absolute chaos as hordes of black-clad rioters ran into the heart of Valencia Street's restaurant row. Cars, stores, windows, restaurants, pedestrians—everything was fair game. Diners, indoors and out, ran for their lives. The sound of breaking glass punctuated the night. Smoke bombs blew up, roping the night air with thick, acrid clouds. Rioters brandishing pipes and wooden clubs felled gawkers and bystanders. Gasoline bombs

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blossomed into conflagrations. Broken glass carpeted the streets.

Jesse ran through the spreading anarchy hoping to escape it. He coughed, gasped, and his eyes watered. At 22nd, he froze. The plate-glass windows were broken, but the blinking neon signage—"Spencer's"—wasn't. A burly crew-cut man, dressed in chef's apron, barred the door to the partially trashed, empty restaurant. The restaurateur held a pump-action shotgun across his chest. "Come one step further, assholes," he bellowed. "*And you'll be eating this!*"

The crowd surrounded him in a half-circle, taunting him, but from a respectful distance. Suddenly, a tall, lanky, Mohawked man stepped into the space between them. He wore a black balaclava, and his black leather jacket bore a logo: *The Exploited. Fuck the System.* "Here's for all those shitty wages you paid me and my fellow workers! Here's for David Pickett!" He yanked a Glock from his jacket and fired 9mm rounds into the restaurateur. *One. Two. Three. Four.*

TWO

Bloody sunrise seeped along the eastern sky. Jesse huddled on the fire escape outside his apartment. To the northwest, the sights and sounds of the riot faded with the new day.

He hadn't slept all night. Terrible images burned his memory. The gun, flashing under streetlights. The four terrible shots. Each shot loud, tracing murder through the dark air. The shooter's arm recoiling. The restaurateur collapsing. The smell of cordite. The smell of blood. Blood flowing across the sidewalk. The shotgun lying on the sidewalk.

Jesse ran. Everybody ran. He didn't know how or when he got back home to his apartment. He just remembered cowering in the dark. Terrified. Crying. Praying.

The morning was painfully clear. Not a shred of overcast in the sharp blue sky, not a wisp of fog over Twin Peaks. The sun sluiced golden over East Bay's hills. Jesse unsteadily grabbed the railing to his fire escape and pulled himself up. Trembling, he stumbled into his apartment, fumbled for the light in his kitchenette, and turned on the coffeemaker. He noticed the vaguely familiar rumpled waxy bag on the kitchen counter. Awful recollections flooded his brain as he opened the bag. It was filled with crumbled donut cake, flaked chocolate icing, and smeared vanilla custard. The stink punched him in the nose. Jesse leaned over the sink and vomited. He continued to throw up until it became uncontrolled retching, then dry heaves. He collapsed onto the linoleum and clutched his aching

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stomach.

He got back onto his feet, weak and shaking. He turned on the faucet and rinsed away the puke until the fresh smell of coffee replaced the rank odor of barf.

Time to get out into the morning and to the day's job. Jesse showered, hosed the vomit from his mouth, put on an orange Burning Bush T-shirt and a gray sweatshirt, and hefted an empty thermos. He bought copies of the *SF Chronicle* and *San Jose Mercury News* and drank half of the coffee before settling onto a bench at the Mission Playground and Pool. A police UAV floated along the street. "Local Militant's Death Triggers Mission Riot," the *Chronicle* proclaimed, whereas the *Mercury News*' headline was more blunt: "One Dead, 326 Injured, 144 Arrested in Anarchist Riot." He read the reports on the Valencia Street riot, including the opinion pieces about the incompetence of the police to protect anyone or prevent damage to local businesses, then ripped out the articles on David Pickett's death. Folding the crisp pages into his back pocket, he discarded the remainder of the newspaper. Jesse needed time to analyze the news items, with more than caffeine to fuel him. His favorite cafe, Hopwell's, was down the block.

"Fill 'er up," he said as he presented the waitress his thermos, then looked at the menu. "I want the breakfast special."

He switched on his smartphone while waiting for his meal. Forty-two messages, seventy-one texts. Eighteen of the voice messages were from Angie Markham, the first ten ranging from "Where the fuck are you?" to "You asshole!" Four from her were simple hang-ups. Twelve texts out of twenty were of a similar nature, including

three all-caps messages: “THEY MURDERED DAVID PICKETT!” Her tone changed abruptly after he’d fled from Stumpy’s. The calls and texts that followed begged him to call her back and please forgive her, pleading, “We need to talk” and “We can work through this.” Jesse felt a pang in his heart, but he deleted them all, then switched his phone to vibrate. Best to keep a meditative state of mind, he thought, and avoid confrontation. And nasty messages.

When breakfast arrived, he concentrated on the food, savoring each bite between each breath. Only when he’d cleaned his plate, only when he’d paid the check, only when he’d stepped back into the burnished San Francisco morning did the terrors of the night before return. He felt oddly refreshed, however, for not having slept in nearly twenty-four hours and returned to the apartment for his equipment.

“Shit,” Jesse mumbled when he reached his door at the top of the stairs. He pulled the card from between door and jamb. Beneath the SFPD logo, the card read “Investigator Michael Van Cornin” above the usual address and telephone contact information. On the back, a cellphone number had been written, in pen. “Shit, fuck, piss,” Jesse said.

Jesse snagged a notebook, pens, markers, label maker, and his first-generation Apple Fetch, which he stuffed into his knapsack before rushing out the door. He took the direct route over to Valencia and then north until he was surrounded by drones, idling cop cars and conferring police officers—and rolls of yellow crime tape. The sidewalk around Spencer’s Restaurant was completely sealed off for a quarter block in each direction. The

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Mission Street Police Station was open for business, despite obvious signs of damage. He tried to look inconspicuous even as he minutely observed his surroundings. Once past all the wreckage, he turned east at the homeless camp on 16th Street and walked to 2930 16th.

The old, four-story, red brick building occupied much of the block. Known as the Redstone Labor Temple, or simply the Redstone Building, the structure was home to scores of labor unions, nonprofit organizations, and various and sundry artists. Jesse entered using a duplicate key and a combination to the Digilock. He had access thanks to his friendship with graphic designer and silkscreen artist Marco Loyola, who shared a fourth floor, west-facing office with an artist collective calling itself Chicanosaurus. Once in the funky, poster-and-mural-encrusted lobby, he climbed the stairs. He tread carefully down the fourth-floor hall because Marco's fellow collective members were not very welcoming of Jesse's white ass. The door chimed with the opening notes of Victor Jara's "Venceremos." Fortunately, the musty office was unoccupied.

Jesse had studied Library and Information Science at City College, interned in Digital Archiving at UC Berkeley's Bancroft Library, and had remained sporadically employed ever since. He'd met Marco through the William James Work Association, a worker-run temp agency operated by David Pickett's DUI, at the onset of the Marco's multiple sclerosis. Jesse started working for him scanning, digitizing, massaging, and cataloguing the artist's work and papers using Photoshop software and Macintosh computers. Marco used the office

space primarily for storage of his prints and files, as advanced MS now kept him confined to his tiny Inner Mission cottage.

Jesse had spent hours taking in the contents of the office while working for Marco. The floor-to-ceiling filing system that took up most of one wall; flat file drawers and vertical hanging racks, constructed of varnished, weathered oak. The iconography in photography, silkscreening, painting, lithography, even graffiti depicted historical political, religious, and artistic figures from Spain and the Americas. He spread out the contents of his knapsack over the work table by the window, then lifted the window shades, mindful not to disturb the reflector telescope positioned with a focus on the BART plaza a block away. Pen-and-ink drawings painstakingly rendering aspects of the plaza were taped on the window jambs near the telescope.

The Fetch picked up a Wi-Fi signal immediately and Marco's password worked. The office boombox had a mixtape of *corridos* and *norteños* he played low. He put in a solid two hours on Marco's archiving project. In the process of scrupulously labeling and alphabetizing a cardboard box full of document CDs, he discovered a cryptic item. One CD in a worn white sleeve bore a dingy Post-it that read: "HOOLIGAN-X = D PICKETT?" CDs were antiquated technology and electronic players were ancient history, so he was at a loss. He put the sleeve and its contents into the knapsack before turning his attention to Pickett and the riot. He looked up a number of local news websites, laid out the pages ripped from the *Chronicle* and *Mercury News*, opened the notebook, uncapped the pen, and started to write. The sun claimed more and more of the table as it edged into late

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afternoon. An hour and ten minutes later, Jesse had three paragraphs written in the notebook and a new mixtape of Latinx resistance music in the boombox.

Notwithstanding some intriguing aspects to Pickett's biography, it was how he died—whether it was an accident or murder—that mattered to Jesse now. Pickett died Saturday, July 15, at approximately 5:20 pm, after the Ford station wagon he was driving overturned on Highway 1, ten kilometers north of Mulegé. According to the *Chronicle*, Pickett and his four companions were returning from a scuba expedition at Bahia de Concepcion when the car and the dirt bike trailer it was towing flipped shortly after noon. Except for minor scrapes, none of the other passengers were seriously injured. Pickett's injuries were far more serious—his abdomen cut open and his intestines perforated. The *Mercury News* claimed that a sixth person, a local fisherman and guide named Arnulfo Cassias, had also been present but uninjured.

Pickett's injury warranted, first, transportation by helicopter to Hospital Angeles Tijuana, and then to UC San Diego Medical Center, where he was pronounced DOA. First on the scene, the Federales conveyed David to the hospital and arrested his diving buddies before ultimately transferring custody of Pickett to the California Highway Patrol. The CHP rushed him to San Diego. Somewhere in the midst of all of this, the FBI got involved.

The reporting was incomplete, inconsistent, and secondhand. So far, no evidence had surfaced for or against the involvement of these law enforcement agencies in Pickett's death. There was also no information as to

whether the diving excursion was business or pleasure. The *Chronicle* cast doubt on the FBI's contention that Pickett's expedition had been innocuous. The *Mercury News* had little to say for or against the FBI, but pointed out that David's diving companions were still in jail. Their diving equipment, three motocross bikes, and two duffle bags of undisclosed contraband from their dives at Bahia de Concepcion had been confiscated.

Jesse shook his head over the mounting contradictions between official news accounts and between the news and the rumors he'd heard. When David Pickett's death became known to San Francisco's locals, last night's riot had erupted. The Bay Area media was heavily criticizing the SFPD for failing to anticipate the mayhem at the police station, the wholesale destruction to the Valencia Street business district, and the murder of Spencer's restaurateur, Samuel Barbier. Grainy videos of the murder from a PUD were in continuous rotation on every TV outlet. The SFPD had a BOLO out for the murderer as well as a call for witnesses and any information related to the murder.

Jesse reviewed the information he'd written up and remembered the CD when persistent noise from the waning afternoon outside intervened. Seven cop drones converged on the airspace over the BART plaza with a growing clatter. He popped the lens covers off the telescope and looked through the pre-positioned instrument. Six Mission District Latinos stood, clustered, in the middle of the plaza, as scores of cops, in plain clothes and in uniform, carefully approached. The cops had their guns leveled. Two more PUDs whirled over. Four of the youngsters started to raise their arms. Was

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that a bottle of water or a gun in an upraised hand? Suddenly, shooting rang from the plaza. “Holy shit,” Jesse breathed, but didn’t take his eye from the lens. Volley after volley shattered the sunlit day. When the gunshots stopped, all six young men were lying motionless on the square. There was blood everywhere.

He shoveled everything into the knapsack, dropped the window shade, turned off the music, and made sure the office door was shut and locked before sprinting down the stairs. He was at the BART station within five minutes, but by then there was a full-on police cordon in place, cops and police cars holding the line, with more men and vehicles arriving every moment. The early evening sky was jammed with UAVs.

Jesse hovered around the periphery of the police barrier. However, it soon became clear that there was no getting near where the police killed the six young men. The crowd outside the cordon was growing larger. And angrier. He walked south on Mission, stunned and staggered. Police sirens wailed. He climbed his apartment stairs, tossed his knapsack onto the couch, and eased out his window to stand on the fire escape in the cool of the evening. The orange sun got entangled with Sutro Towers on its way toward bloody sunset.

He remembered three grandparents, an aunt, and two cousins who died, as had two high school classmates, a college professor, and now David Pickett. But he hadn’t personally witnessed any of their deaths and now, within twenty-four hours, Jesse had seen seven people shot dead. Gunned down. Murdered. He turned on his smartphone but his fingers shook too much to use the tiny virtual keyboard. So he re-entered his apartment, switched on the

Fetch, and activated its communication apps.

There were seven additional voice messages, eight more texts, and an email from Angie, all of which he deleted without opening. Jesse had ended their relationship, a kind of death, but a gutless one. He'd never called it quits; he just stopped seeing or contacting her. He wasn't proud of his behavior, but he couldn't yield to the pull of his heart. The remaining messages—thirty-eight voice mails, sixty-six texts, and twenty-one emails—fell into several categories. Eight were wrong numbers/addresses and thirty-odd were advertisements. The rest were an assortment of messages, texts, and emails from friends and acquaintances about David Pickett's death. Asking "Hey, did you hear..." and "What do you think about..." Some "Sorry about..." and "Hope you're...". He'd dealt with all the emails and texts and was working through the last third of the voice messages when he heard: "This is Investigator Van Cornin with the Homicide Detail. I need to speak to a Jesse Jacob Steinfeld at his earliest convenience."

How did Van Cornin know his smartphone number? Did he have to worry about Van Cornin hounding him at his apartment? He opened a browser on his Fetch to look up Van Cornin's SFPD biography. Jesse saw on the social media newsfeeds that a demonstration, Occupy the Mission, was set for Wednesday at Dolores Park. He continued deleting phone messages. The last message raised the hairs on the back of his neck.

"Jesse, this is David Pickett, calling you from beyond the grave." The voice sounded loud and present, inflected with David's signature gravel and a bit of a chuckle. "You and I haven't been real good friends. Didn't know each

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other well at all, matter of fact. But, now that I'm on the other side, I need you to take care of that thing with Toby for me. It ain't cool, what he did in my name."

The voice on the message hung up. Jesse sat, dumbfounded. What kind of shitty joke was this?

He kept the message but turned the phone to vibrate. Time to visit Kevin Farley. He'd contracted Kevin's services when he'd gotten himself into a jam. Jesse handled other people's data as a digital archivist, but in trying to cut corners and save costs, he'd let a client's work get hijacked and held for ransom. Kevin had recovered the stolen data without paying the ransom. But Farley wasn't answering his phone and his website only offered appointments for the next day, starting at 11 a.m. Jesse took the first available appointment.

Between thinking about the call from Van Cornin and the one supposedly from David Pickett, Jesse's fears kicked in. He ran down to the corner taqueria, Goyaalé, for a burrito and the corner liquor store for three bottles of Chimay Tripel, but neither food nor alcohol nor several hits of prime indica bud alleviated his anxieties.

THREE

Jesse awoke the next morning, showered, and downed copious amounts of coffee. To jeans and T-shirt he added a “Groucho Marxist” sweatshirt. He switched on his Fetch for news of the deepening turmoil in China and NATO’s counter to the Ukrainian/Moldovan invasion of Romania, only to quickly turn it off. He ignored his new phone messages, the preponderance of them from Angie. Instead he hefted the knapsack, with Fetch, CD, and notebook inside, locked his apartment, and ran down the stairs to his apartment building two at a time, hoping not to run into representatives of the SFPD on their way up.

Kevin lived in a three-story Victorian house in the heart of the Inner Mission, surrounded by sketchy public housing and colorful Precita Eyes murals. During the heyday of Silicon Valley, Kevin made his nut and then some, more than enough to retire and purchase the Victorian. He lived alone. A server farm occupied the air-conditioned basement, supporting his various and sundry web enterprises. The second-floor rooms had been modified to accommodate a high-grade hydroponic marijuana farm—insulated for moisture, heat, and light; vented and filtered through the walls and attic. Solar panels covered the roof, and a biofuel/electricity generator and windmill shared the backyard with a chicken coop and rabbit hutch. Kevin had the ground and third floors for his residence, the whole structure properly defended by bars, alarm systems, armed robotics, 24-hour

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mobile surveillance, and an on-call private security patrol.

It was approaching noon when Jesse knocked. The porch was sunny and spacious. As he waited, listening to birds chirping and chickens clucking, he sensed that various surveillance systems were checking him out.

“Come on in,” Kevin said through a speaker as the front door unlocked. “I’m upstairs, in CentCom.”

The door closed and locked behind him. The dark entryway was spotlighted at the far end. The lighting anticipated him as he progressed through the living room, up three flights of stairs, and down a hall. The door to CentCom, short for Central Command, was up another short flight of stairs and wide open.

“Jesse, my boy.” Kevin swiveled his sizable bulk in an Aeron chair modified for his mass. “What can I do you for?”

Kevin was obese by any standard. Dressed in a light-gray sweatshirt, dark-gray sweatpants, and unlaced silver-gray track shoes, he was surrounded by a dozen flickering computer screens. Central Command occupied the top floor of a turret tower running the house’s northwest corner to just above roof level, with panopticon windows providing a panoramic view of the Mission. Jesse slung the knapsack onto a table near the door.

“I need your investigatory talents,” Jesse said, and took the only other chair in the room. “I’ve got a mystery here that’s bordering on the bizarre.”

“Gotcha.” Kevin smiled.

“What’s it going to cost me?”

“First things first. Tell me your problem.”

Jesse pulled out his smartphone and replayed the David Pickett message. Ambient air conditioning kept the

atmosphere odorless. “I want you to tell me as much as possible about this message. Who sent it? Was it really from David, or did somebody engineer a fake message? And, I know this would be beyond your abilities, but can you hazard a guess as to why somebody would want to send me such a message?”

“Wow.” Kevin extended his hand and closed his pudgy fingers on the phone. He searched through several cables next to him, pulled one up, and attached it to the smartphone. “Mind if I port your phone? I’m first going to record the message, then I’m going to access your provider. This should take a minute or two.”

In five minutes, the screen in front of Kevin was divided into several quick-reference video panels. He didn’t like working to music, so the sounds of the neighborhood mingled gently with the hum of electronics and the clack of his keyboard.

“Okay, let me see here.” Kevin perused the screen. “I’ll be able to run some diagnostics, both on the recorded message and on the message as routed through your provider to your smartphone. If you want me to continue, we can discuss payment.”

“By all means.”

“My basic rate is one fifty for thirty minutes.” He smiled at Jesse. “For friends, it’s a hundred. That’s for any part of a half hour.”

“Give me an hour, to start.”

“Right,” Kevin said, and turned back to the screen. “Let’s start with the recording. There are plenty of apps out there we can run this recording through to verify its veracity. Or lack thereof.”

Kevin fast-forwarded through scores of podcasts and

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YouTube recordings of Pickett's copious speeches, talks, lectures, monologues, debates, spiels, and the like, processing them before running the smartphone message through the same software.

"You participating in the *huelga general* tomorrow?" Kevin asked as he worked.

"The what?"

"The general strike. To protest killing the homeboys and David Pickett."

"I haven't been paying much attention lately," he deflected. "By the way, can you help me with something else? Something minor. Can you tell me what's on this?"

Jesse handed Kevin the sleeve and CD, minus the Post-it.

"Talk about stone knives and bearskins." Kevin examined the disk before feeding it into a computer slot. "There are twenty-three PDFs here of what appear to be legal documents."

"Can you print them out?"

"Will do," Kevin said, then pointed to a far corner of his desk, once again engrossed in work. "Printer's there."

Jesse picked up the papers from the printer and the CD from Kevin, then sat down to read the printed contents of the CD while Kevin worked. The first two pages were the copy of a cover letter detailing a Freedom of Information Act filed against the FBI by a broad coalition of progressive California organizations. The Chicanosaurus Art Collective had been party to the FOIA, with a "cc" sent to Marco Layola. One midnight in July, Synarkist guerrilla cells attacked the Bohemian Grove's meeting with waves of hang gliders and microlites. They bombed the secret get-together with vicious psychochemical drugs

and livecast the whole operation. The FBI used the attack as a pretense to conduct mass raids, detentions, and arrests against the wider progressive community. The remaining pages were of the actual FBI documents referencing the Bureau's actions, but they were so heavily redacted Jesse had trouble deciphering them. Somebody had conveniently marked up the originals in five places where the moniker HOOLIGAN-X appeared. From what Jesse could glean from context, HOOLIGAN-X was not an FBI confidential informant but an undercover agent. He was also high up in the leadership of the Bohemian Grove protest and a member of DUI.

"Damn," Kevin said, with twenty-five minutes on the clock. "So, the weird news is that the message on your cell appears to be authentic."

"Meaning what?"

Kevin turned his attention to Jesse.

"The message itself doesn't seem to be composed of different snippets of David speaking, the segments pieced together into some jerry-rigged whole. That's my analysis, backed up by at least three separate tests. First, I looked at the words of the message themselves. Then I cataloged Pickett's previous words from past podcasts and YouTube's and compared them to the words on the message. Finally, I analyzed the background noise on the message itself. In my humble opinion, that message is real. Authentic. Genuine. Every digital test that I can throw at it or run it through proves it. Either that or this is the cleverest, most sophisticated forgery I've ever run across. CIA-level forgery. No. Fucking *Mossad*-level forgery. Which is ridiculous. Why would anybody be interested in counterfeiting a message from David Pickett?"

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“Good question.”

“Good question, indeed.” Kevin cocked an eye. “So, who’s this Toby?”

Jesse told Kevin about Tobias in a rush—their acquaintance, seeing him in the park before the riot, witnessing the restaurateur’s murder—in a cathartic confession.

“I can’t say for certain that Tobias gunned down Spencer’s owner,” Jesse said. Pledged. “I need to know what I’m dealing with here.”

“Back on fleek.” Kevin returned to his screens. “There are only three possibilities here. One: David is still alive. Two: David is somehow communicating with you from beyond the grave. Or three: The message is fake. Our next step is to track the message from your phone to where it was sent. Meaning I start with your smartphone; trace the signal to your local cell tower, down along the wire or fiberoptic line to the wireless access point and the multiport switch where its routed through a T1 or T3 or microwave backhaul; then back out the backhaul on the other end, up through that switch to the far cell tower, and finally out to the origin cellphone. It sounds long and complicated, but actually, it’s quite simple and quick. Or potentially so.”

He busied himself with keyboard and mouse, then sat back. After fifteen minutes, Kevin frowned and leaned into the screen. His fingers typed furiously. This time, he concentrated on the computer’s activities for the next twenty minutes, only to shake his head in disbelief.

“That’s impossible,” he mumbled.

“What’s the matter,” Jesse asked.

“The trace. It worked, but not the way it was supposed

to. Every hop and stop was correct, and trackable, except that they aren't. I can't resolve where the hell the call came from. The source, the starting device, or the precise route it took. It's a fucking mystery."

"How's that possible?"

"I can't even begin to tell you. I ran the trace twice more. It resolved correctly each time, but it wasn't the same. I can't explain it. It doesn't make any sense. I don't know about you, but I don't believe in the hereafter or that David Pickett is calling you from it. Which means he was either still alive when you got that message, or this is all an elaborate hoax."

"Okay, so what do you want me to do?"

"You only owe me for an hour. I'll keep running traces on this, trying to figure it out. I'm a dog with a bone now."

Jesse gave Kevin his fee via Square. He noticed a pile of Day-Glo cardboard glasses with reflective foil for lenses in a rack next to the door, like old-school 3-D glasses or eclipse shades.

"What's this?" He picked one up.

"Cheap PUD scanners." Kevin continued typing. "I wired 'em to intercept public and private PUD broadcasts and project them onto the lenses. Just press the 'third eye' symbol on the bridge to switch broadcasts."

"Cool!" Jesse grinned. He slipped on a pair and was immediately hovering one hundred fifty meters away, nine meters in the air, observing a traffic accident on Potrero. Pressed the switch and he sailed over Mission residences toward Bernal Heights. If only he'd had a pair when the six young men were gunned down in the BART plaza. "I'll take a couple."

"They're free. I want to give people the power to watch

the watchers.”

“Thanks for your efforts on the message.” Jesse slipped the Fetch back into the knapsack. “Let me know what you find.”

“I’ll let you know tomorrow morning.” Kevin smiled. “Meantime, I got a little surprise for you. Check your email when you get home.”

Kevin had spent more than three hours on Jesse’s issue. On the trek back to his apartment by way of Cesar Chavez and the homeless tent city along its sidewalks, Jesse did some grocery shopping for staples at People’s Picnic. A TV screen above the checkout stand carried a live broadcast of the joint press conference held by the mayor’s office and SFPD where the murdered restaurant owner was lavishly mourned; the rioters were mercilessly condemned, the six dead youngsters were dismissed as gangsters committing crimes, and the proper authorities were only mildly excoriated.

Chú Giáp, a cheap Vietnamese restaurant that served excellent phở, was crammed. A hangout for the city’s precariat, the establishment had witnessed a pitched ideological battle between David Pickett’s DUI and Angie Markham’s PU over union raiding that descended into a screaming match between the two. The place had been a favorite of Angie’s, who once said their soup was the best cure for a hangover. Jesse stopped his heart from clutching with the memory. He couldn’t commit to the relationship out of fear and couldn’t tell her out of more fear. He picked up a quart of thin sliced beef and noodle soup to go. Exiting, he noticed Stenny Amps entering, but both avoided acknowledging each other. He was in his living room fifteen minutes later, the groceries put away in his

kitchen, his Fetch open and logged on, a second card left by Investigator Van Cornin in his pocket. The smell of cilantro with beefy broth scented the air.

The Internet buzzed with the call from an *ad hoc* coalition of Latinx and progressive community organizations to occupy the Mission tomorrow. The police identified the six Latino men who died as Mara Salvatrucha members and arguments raged over whether they had displayed guns in the inconclusive UAV videos being broadcast by the media. Rumors continued to swirl around government or corporate involvement in David Pickett's death. David remained a riddle wrapped in a mystery inside an enigma. Lively discussions over plans for the Dolores Park rally on social media were quickly superseded by angry debates about the call by a loose network of anarchist, ultra-leftist, and Synarkist groups for concurrent antifascist black bloc actions.

Kevin's email attachment, in MPEG format, was a crude video that Kevin had obviously enhanced. The opening panorama was aerial, shot at night through streamers of smoke and pillars of fire. A crowd ringed a confrontation in progress. Black-clad protesters surrounded an individual dressed in a white chef's smock, brandishing a shotgun, in the middle of a block. There was no sound. The video was granular. A tall lanky Mohawked man, dressed in black, stepped out of the throng and pulled a gun. Four muzzle flashes. The white aproned man fell away.

Jesse identified a figure on the fringe of the crowd. Blurred, stunned, through smoke and flame. He recognized himself.

FOUR

Jesse woke to the Skype chime on his Fetch and the vibration on his smartphone. He rolled out of bed and smacked the start button for his coffee maker before opening his Fetch and beginning the Skype session. Kevin's pixilated image appeared on the screen.

"Tracking a particular cellphone involves three related dimensions." Kevin launched into this discussion before Jesse was completely awake. "Three axes form a mobile tracking field. The x-axis is the provider, which acts as a gateway for the cellphone user's messages and furnishes the IP address, which piggybacks on the mobile phone's MSISDN, or phone number, of the SIM card. The y-axis is the GPS signal from the cellphone when it's turned on. The z-axis is the triangulation of all messages from that cellphone through available network cell towers."

Jesse poured himself a mug of coffee when the percolation reached its peak. He opened the apartment window, then took the Fetch in one hand, the steaming coffee mug in the other hand, and stepped out onto his fire escape. Knots of people moved continuously along the street in the foggy morning light.

"I used one of my most sophisticated trackbots, ran six separate top-of-the-line traces, and got six separate results for each of these mobility factors." Kevin rattled on. "Each time I ran down that one voicemail, I got a different provider and a different cellphone number. Six different providers and six different phone numbers. The

cell tower triangulations were similarly mixed. The cellphone broadcasts originated from the corners of Haymarket Street and Pall Mall in London; Delancey and Suffolk Streets in Manhattan; Rue Daguerre and Gassendi in Paris; Avenida Presidente Mararyk and Hegel in Mexico City; Avenida Paseo and Zapata in Havana; and Guangfu and Meiyuan Roads in Shanghai. The GPS positions were completely bizarre, avoiding densely inhabited locations altogether—the middle of the North Pacific gyre; Mount Tahat in the Sahara Desert; a half mile underwater in the mid-Indian Ocean basin; fifty miles above the earth in the mesosphere over Hudson Bay; the Amazon basin at the borders of Peru, Colombia, and Brazil; and Antarctica's subglacial Lake Vostok."

The small groups of people grew larger, formed crowds, then miniature parades. The people stayed on the sidewalks until they couldn't be contained there, finally spilling into the streets. Everyone moved north.

"The data from the trace, from the six traces, is patently false. Or, more accurately, deliberately forged. Faked or not, the digital information I accessed the first time I ran the voicemail should not have changed. But it did. Five subsequent times. And that should be impossible. Someone, or more probably, something changed that digital history. A bot, or some bit of software, is out there changing, no, camouflaging history every time I attempt to read it."

"But to what end?"

"I haven't the faintest idea. If David's still alive, he's doing his very best to hide it. And if David's dead, someone's going to a fuck of a lot of trouble to disguise it."

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Jesse eased back in through the window, into his apartment, balancing the Skype session and an empty coffee mug. He made a decision.

“I’ve got something to do,” Jesse said. “And I’ll need your help.”

He explained the hack he wanted from Kevin as he completed paying the hacker his due. After ending the Skype session but before turning off the Fetch, he checked a local news broadcast for updates on the Occupy the Mission rally. Police departments and public transportation agencies estimated that more than two million people were likely to attend the event, a guess bolstered by aerial shots of thousands exiting from the 16th and 24th Street BART stations in peaceful, orderly crowds. People were being instructed to tune radios, smartphone apps, TVs, and computers to live transmissions of speeches from the rally once it started.

Jesse dressed in neutral deep blues, avoiding logos and graphics on his shirt, windbreaker, and cap, making sure he had nothing except essential ID and money in his pockets. He jammed a pair of cardboard PUD scanners and his cellphone into his front pockets. Then he climbed down from his apartment and exited his building, joining the throngs sweeping up the street. Drones darted above the throngs as parrots wheeled and squealed further into the overcast sky.

Along the way, Jesse tested Kevin’s flimsy PUD scanner. He was momentarily overcome by vertigo with a soaring view over the crowds massing along the street he walked. Once used to his altered perception, he used the “third eye” switch to change PUD broadcasts randomly before refolding the clever device into his front pocket. He

stopped for a cup of coffee and a breakfast bagel. He wolfed the bagel down with gulps of java as he walked, thinking about what Kevin had said. Was David alive but trying to mask his whereabouts? Or was he dead and was someone or something setting up a “false flag” operation? In either case the question remained: why? Why was so much effort being expended to fake a deceased David’s identity, or why was a still living David in need of such elaborate camouflage? Why the cryptic message, and why had Jesse been targeted to receive the mysterious call? At 18th and Guerrero, it was obvious that every street in every direction was completely filled with people, all of them headed toward Dolores Park. Jesse took a detour to the Mission Street Police Station, where he was confronted by a suspicious pair of cops standing guard.

“State your business,” the one with a blond crew-cut demanded.

“I need to speak with Investigator Van Cornin,” Jesse said.

“And who are you?”

“He left a card asking for me to call. My name’s Jesse Steinfeld.”

“Wait right here.” The blond cop backed into the station.

Several minutes later, he returned.

“Come in.”

“If Van Cornin isn’t here, I can come back? I’ve got a demonstration to go to.”

“He’s here. You can see him.”

Jesse found the police station a tempest of activity, most of it frantic and harassed. After all, the building was entirely surrounded by thousands upon thousands of

demonstrators, albeit all of them en route to the rally in Dolores Park. He was ushered past a reception desk to a waiting area, where he sat with the dregs of his coffee. The station's thick walls muted the yelling, chanting, and singing from the crowd. A bank of twenty-four video screens behind the reception desk rippled with airborne image after image—no doubt shot by UAVs—of sidewalks, streets, and the park entirely congested with people. The police officer running the displays kept punching a console and cursing, and a sergeant loomed behind him, his expression dark. A vein in the sergeant's forehead bulged. Here and there, a screen would flip off, then back on, and the picture would be replaced by a video of the police massacre of the six gang members in the BART plaza, or of the black bloc protester killing the restaurateur. The officer would switch off the errant massacre and homicide streams with a curse, then replace them with an appropriate PUD view. But the screens kept changing back. Jesse smirked. Kevin was indeed running the hack.

“Jesse Steinfeld?” A harried man in sharp civilian clothes approached and extended a hand. “Thanks for responding to my request to meet. We’re busy today, and a bit jammed. If you don’t mind, we’ll take this into one of the interview rooms.”

The man gestured for Jesse to take the hall ahead of him. The investigator was lean and graying. He held a file folder in one hand and a cellphone in the other. The windows in the interview room faced the waiting area, the reception desk with its wall of videos, and the entrance still under guard. After he settled Jesse into a chair, the investigator took the chair opposite him, across a table.

“Do you know why I asked you to come in today?” Van Cornin asked.

“I take it has something to do with the demonstration against this police station last Sunday evening.” Jesse had decided to play it cagey, though not too circumspect.

“This is related. But before I talk about my actual concerns, I’d like to point out that we did notice that you participated in that assault on our station.”

Van Cornin pulled out four photographs from his folder and slid them across the table, one at a time. All were of the Sunday evening riot in front of the Mission Street Police Station. The first two showed an indistinct white blob on the far edge of the mob, circled in red. The second two were copies of the first two, blown up, the white blob again circled in red, the resolution lost in pixilated graininess.

“Recognize these? They’re shots of you at the riot.”

“Damn if I can tell who they are.”

“Take it from me, these are photos of you. If need be, we can use some pretty sophisticated computer tools to determine that this was you at Sunday’s mob action.”

“Okay, I never said I wasn’t there. But I was clear across the street, nowhere near the fighting. I attended, but I didn’t participate, as you claim. I never shouted anything. I never threw anything. I never even heard any police warning to disperse, or any warning that failure to disperse would result in arrest.”

“That’s because we were too busy fending off a pretty serious attack on our station by armed and dangerous terrorists. We didn’t have time for niceties like warning you all to disperse.”

“I was there. You have pictures. I wasn’t doing anything

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illegal. I was observing the action, not taking part in it.”

“What about these?” Van Cornin pulled two more glossies from his folder. They showed a barely recognizable Jesse taking in the PUD takedown on Guerrero three days earlier from down the block.

“Where am I doing anything illegal? Or even inappropriate? I’m an innocent bystander!”

The investigator slid the pictures back into a pile, tapped them into alignment, and slid them back into the file.

“There were a dozen clandestine, violent anarchist organizations there the evening of the riot, escalating the street fighting into a full-blown insurrection. We have surveillance and intelligence on several hundred known terrorists who were involved—”

“I already told you, I wasn’t involved. I’m not a part of any violent anarchist group, and I certainly wasn’t at that demonstration as part of any terrorist attack or militant organization. I was there, sure, but all I did was watch what happened that night.”

Van Cornin glared. Jesse refused to be cowed. Their staring match was interrupted when a fellow cop entered and whispered in the investigator’s ear. Through the interview room windows, Jesse glimpsed the frenetic pace of the police in the rest of the station. Massacre and homicide videos now dominated the screens behind the reception desk.

“I’ll get back to your role in the riot. Now, let’s talk about what you did after the assault on the police station. After that mob of yours rampaged up and down Valencia, laying waste to everything on the street. After you and your crew killed Sam Barbier, the Spencer’s Restaurant

owner.”

“What the fuck do you mean, my mob, my crew? I didn’t riot. I didn’t kill anybody.”

“The video’s been all over the media. Showing the whole damned murder. In digital detail.”

“Do you mean *that* video?” Jesse jammed a finger at the twenty-four videos at the reception desk. A quarter of them showed the Valencia Street homicide. And not the abbreviated video shown by the media, but the full version that Kevin had sent him. “Go ahead, bring in a screen if you want. Magnify the video to your heart’s content. You know damn well what it will show. That I ran up to that confrontation in front of that restaurant when it was in progress, when that fucker stepped out and blasted the restaurant owner. There was nothing premeditated about that, not on my part. That fucking video proves it.”

“I find it difficult to accept that you were around for the assault on the UAV and in the crowd during the riot and then wound up in front of that Valencia restaurant when the homicide occurred—and it was all a coincidence. I don’t believe in coincidence. If I were writing fiction, all these ‘coincidences’ would come off as extremely contrived.”

“Look, I did nothing wrong. And nothing illegal. If you want to charge me with a crime, do so. If not, I’m getting fed up with this so-called interview. I’ve got a demonstration to go to.”

“You’re telling me you don’t have any connection with Tobias Barnabas?”

The investigator stopped for effect. They waited each other out in silence. The wall of videos was settling back to covering the demonstration outside.

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“Is Toby Barnabas wanted?” Jesse finally asked, cautiously.

“We haven’t charged this Tobias Barnabas with anything,” Van Cornin said, now equally cautious. “Let alone with the shooting of Spencer restaurateur Samuel Barbier. However, we consider him a person of interest in the homicide of Barbier and would like to talk to him. Unfortunately, he seems to have gone to ground.”

“Off the record,” Jesse said, after a pause. “I know Toby Barnabas only in passing. He’s not a friend, and barely an acquaintance. For the record, the man in the video may or may not be Toby Barnabas, but I don’t know who shot the restaurant owner on Valencia last Sunday.”

The pause was even longer this time.

“We’d be grateful for your help,” Van Cornin finally said. “Any help you could give us, in catching whoever murdered Sam Barbier.”

Jesse left the police station and walked into streets crammed with now hushed demonstrators. Someone had managed to scrawl *He Lives!* in dripping red spray-paint on the station’s facade. He noticed Ari Moser across the jammed space, and they exchanged salutes. No one moved, and a glimpse through the PUD scanner revealed that Dolores Park was packed solid with demonstrators who spilled into the surrounding neighborhoods in every direction, occupying everything for blocks around. The rally had started. Speeches echoed from nearby cellphones and the far-off park.

“They are gunning down our young men in the streets.
¡Como perros!”

There was no mass movement possible, but people could still move individually as long as they did so

carefully. He eased his way gradually up 18th toward the park, beneath spirals of parakeets in flight, using the PUD scanner to scope out his surroundings from drone height. It appeared that the antifascist black bloc, tens of thousands strong and growing, had positioned itself on the northern edge of the massive demonstration, occupying the streets from 16th to the old Armory.

“¡Basta! It’s time to say ‘enough!’ No more!”

Additional police cars raced from the surrounding city to join the cops who’d taken up a northern perimeter around the black bloc, sirens wailing, anticipating what was to come. “They say there are four million of us at this demonstration,” a woman with earbuds marveled next to him, “occupying these streets.” The antifascists, now numbering in the hundreds of thousands, had decided not to wait. Jesse reached the intersection of 18th and Dolores and noticed a tall female Goth, her leather jacket emblazoned with a “Tank Girl” graphic, walking casually up Dolores beneath cawing ravens and strings of *papel picado*. Cynthia.

“The police and FBI are stormtroopers for state and capital. *¡Ellos son asesinos!*”

Figures all in black rushed the police lines, thousands of them, wave after wave overrunning the police cars, overturning them, setting them ablaze, ignoring the paltry clouds of tear-gas wafting around the battle. Dancers plumed in ostrich-feather headdresses paraded by. He followed Cynthia at a cautious distance. She would stop, look around surreptitiously, then start walking again when she gauged the coast was clear. He kept tailing Cynthia, ignoring Angie Markham across the street as she gesticulated plaintively with one hand while holding up

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one corner of her *An Injury to One Is an Injury to All* banner with the other hand.

“¿*Quién se beneficia?* Comrade Pickett’s murder is political, but so are the murders of our young *hombres*.”

Jesse played coy following Cynthia, who pretended to wander even as she kept to an obvious direction. She dissembled once again at the corner of 19th, feigning interest in a peddler’s handmade beaded jewelry and *cempasúchil* bouquets. Not-so-distant explosions accompanied columns of smoke and flame racing into the sky amid fleeing flocks of frightened parrots. Glimpses through the PUD scanner showed the rioting black bloc now rampaging up the 101 off-ramp and on-ramp. Storming heaven.

“To our *compañeros de correrías* in the *Bloque Negro*, we salute your bravery even as we disagree with your tactics and politics. *¡Tu lucha es nuestra lucha!*”

The antifascists quickly overran the eastern freeway, surging toward the intersection with 101 running north and south. Trapped cars honked ineffectually. “The governor has just declared martial law,” someone nearby said while listening to a smartphone. “The National Guard is mobilizing from Treasure Island.” Children waved copal incense sticks as they passed. Cynthia glanced stealthily around, then ducked into a bank of hedges.

“*¡Solidaridad con el pueblo Mexicano!* These are not just our streets, this our land. Without our land, there can be no freedom. *¡Es mejor morir de pie que vivir de rodillas!*”

Olive-green motorcycles, jeeps, armored personnel vehicles, anti-riot trucks, and tanks full of troops wearing urban camouflage rumbled across the Bay Bridge and down 101 toward a confrontation with the expanding riot.

Crows gathered on wing for the battle. Cynthia hugged a smirking Toby amid the shrubbery. Jesse's smartphone rang with the incessant guitar thrum of Leonard Cohen's "Partisan." When had he turned the ringer back on? He answered. "Jesse, this is David Pickett."



About The Author

Born in 1952, I was a late hippie and an early punk. I began self-publishing at 17 with a high school underground newspaper, and burned my draft card at age 18. Essays from my publication *Point-Blank/San Diego's Daily Impulse* have been reprinted in *Semiotext[e] USA*, the *Utne Reader*, and War Resisters' League's short-lived youth publication *SPEW!* I have also published essays in *Against The Wall*, the *New Indicator*, *Draft NOtices*, and the *San Diego Newsline*. My first science fiction novel *End Time: Notes on the Apocalypse* was published in 1994 by AK Press and was reprinted in Portuguese by a Brazilian publisher, Conrad Livros. I live in San Francisco, where I write a monthly column of news analysis and political commentary for Maximum Rocknroll under the name "Lefty" Hooligan. The 2018 speculative mystery "The Death of David Pickett" is a prequel to my 2016 near-future science fiction thriller *1% Free*, which are published through my business 62 Mile Press.

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