

## Cinderers

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#

They say you should always start small. Burn a tree, perhaps; a parked car, road signs, a traffic light. Not us. We, for starters, burned Mr. Kalmanson's flat – including two fine leather chairs, forks and knives (two dozen pairs), a lifesize (ugly) wooden horse, and Mr Kalmanson himself, of course

'Oy,' said Huey, 'add a little six kilohertz, and I can't hear the bedroom.' I heard the bedroom just fine, and also the kitchen, the living-room and the toilets. Mics and earphones of the highest quality, and a stills camera, black and white, of course. Louie gave it some more six K, and exactly then Kalmanson's stupid wife chose to take her leave of this world with a deafening cry.

'Shit!' roared Huey and tore away the earphones.

'I thought she'd scream higher,' said Louie. 'It sounded like, I don't know, B Flat?'

'Almost two K with annoying overtones. I hope we can take it out in the editing.'

'We'll see,' said Louie, and Huey put on the earphones again. In the flat the shuddering bodies fell still, as did one of the mics in the kitchen, burned despite its thermal casing. Annoying, but what can you do. The fire began to die as the gas filling the house was consumed. One kilometre north I saw the lights of the fire-engine turning in desperation. Nails on the road. The firemen our brothers, but the siren would ruin our recording.

Later, equipped with backpacks, sleeping-bags, a grenade-launcher and much good will, we lay in wait under cover of a giant Sony billboard by the highway announcing that "This Is No Television – It Is Reality". Drexler's tanker leaves Ashdod at one hundred kilometres per hour towards Haifa. Half an hour later Schwartz's truck exits Chedera towards Tel Aviv at ninety kilometres per hour.

Drexler carries cooking gas, and Schwartz – detergents. When and when will they meet? And how?

Boom.

Huey didn't let me film in 8mm. Noise. In my opinion there is nothing like the grainy look of real film, but sometimes you have to make allowances. I used high-resolution video, and Dewey had to take care of the rest of the sound equipment by himself. A clean recording, aside from the part where the burning Schwartz, flying out of the truck's window, landed on one of the mics and crashed it. Nu, nobody's perfect.

#

Louie disappeared in the middle of dinner. One moment he was there, absent-mindedly playing with his broccoli while examining the flame-thrower for tomorrow's job – and the next his plate was orphaned.

'Do you think he'd mind if I ate it?' asked Dewey.

'Eat,' I said. 'It's good for you.' I never understood those vegetarians. I passed him the plate.

'Say,' said Dewey with his mouth full. 'Doesn't it strike you as odd...'

'What?'

'That he, like, disappeared?'

'Who?'

'What do you mean who? Where's your brain?'

'Listen,' I said, 'Let's not play games. If you want to ask me something – be specific.'

Dewey knows me and knows there is no point arguing.

'Louie. Disappeared. Don't you think something here doesn't add up?'

I thought about it. 'No,' I said. 'He probably took a break. He'll be back soon.'

'Look,' said Dewey. 'I wouldn't be surprised if he disappeared any other time, but in the middle of dinner?'

You could say that for Dewey – occasionally there is something in his twisted logic.

'There is something in your twisted logic,' I said, 'but I don't think we can do anything about it.'

'He's not right,' said Dewey.

'Don't exaggerate,' I said. 'He did a nice job with the trucks today. Doing is everything, the rest is nothing.'

'No – yes – that is, sure. That's not what I meant.'

'Don't be a pain,' I said. 'Why don't you finish here instead.'

And I went.

#

When I came back I found Louie, leaning over building plans and writing comments in a little notebook. Huey was looking over his shoulder. 'What's that?' I asked.

'The elevator shaft for tomorrow. I'm just working out how much of Eve we need.'

'Eve?'

'Extreme Velocity Explosives,' said Huey.

'That's right,' said Louie. 'EVE.'

'Oh,' I said, and looked around. Huey wasn't there. 'You know,' I said, 'doesn't it strike you as odd...'

'What?'

'That he, like, disappeared?'

'Listen,' said a voice.

'Who?' said Louie.

'What do you mean who? Where's your brain?'

'Listen,' said Louie, 'Let's not play games. If you want to ask me something – be specific.'

I know him, and I know there is no point arguing.

'Huey. Disappeared. Don't you think something here doesn't add up?'

He thought about it. 'No,' he said. 'He probably took a break. He'll be back soon.'

'You're ignoring me,' said someone.

'Look,' I said, 'I wouldn't be surprised if he disappeared any other time...'

'There's something in your twisted logic,' said Huey, 'but I don't think we can do anything about it.'

'He's not right,' I said.

'Don't exaggerate,' said Louie. 'He did a very nice job on Kalmanson's flat today. Doing is everything, the rest is nothing.'

'No – yes – that is, sure. That's not what I meant.'

'Hello? Do you hear me?'

'Don't be a pain,' said Louie. 'Let me finish here.'

And he went.

#

'You have to stop,' said the voice. Its proud owner, a small, red-haired, bespectacled demon, gave me a warning look over his plate of asparagus.

'I'm only helping them,' I said, mixing the pasta. The red-and-white chequered tablecloth caught my eye. I wondered what would be the sound of its burning. Maybe if we turned on a big enough fan, we could blow away all the tablecloths in the restaurant and then send out a jet of gas...

'Who, exactly?' enquired the demon and tapped his golden monocle. 'The world? Israel? The eleven people you killed?'

'Huey and Dewey,' I said. 'They're artists. They – we – will have an exhibition. Besides, nobody was killed.'

'Ha ha,' said the blond and pushed his sunglasses slightly aside. 'I'm sure the families would love to hear that.'

#

| An elevator rises from its shaft, wrapped in flames, and takes off into the city's skies like a metallic phoenix, clumsy and burning, an orange glow gathering over the roofs and water tanks of the towering city of Tel Aviv, the metal cables singing as they drag behind, caught in sodium fire, a tail of steel sparks marking a trail in the evening's heavens...

'Beautiful,' said Louie, hunched under his earphones. He didn't bother looking. The remote mic inside the elevator caught the cries of the passengers as well as the thunder of the flames. A light westerly wind blew.

'I think,' said Dewey from behind camera No. 2, 'that it's going to land somewhere in Florentine.'

'Maybe,' I said, distracted, awed by the view. The trail of smoke described an almost perfect parabola, and the ball of fire, which up until a few moments ago was an entirely ordinary and unglamorous component of an office block, fell with dignity somewhere in the south of the city, beside a lit-up billboard – "Phillips: The Real Experience". A passenger plane circled above, like a bird wondering if that was a relative who had fallen, or perhaps its eternal, mythological enemy, the fire eagle, the steel hawk, if that was the thing lying there burning, never to return to haunt the bird's dreams...

#

We changed clothes and went to a party.

Some genius of a designer decided to build a light-organ of fire and smoke, to shoot out coloured flames in tune with the music. For the safety of all present, a giant wire cage was built around the contraption. Fire can't pass through a wire mesh, but our Louie worked in advance to replace the cage with a soft plastic replica and improve the mechanism – anything for a party.

'Excellent!' the party-goers were impressed when the DJ's stand began to smoke. 'They really put money into their parties!' said a reporter to a television camera filming the event, and immediately a tongue of green fire emerged and took hold of him. Multicoloured flames grabbed now and then at a dancer or other, at the furniture, the barman and the sponsorship signs ("McDonald's – If You're Not There, You're Nowhere"), and everything went peacefully enough until Louie lost his patience. The flamethrower made an awful farting sound, and suddenly the whole place became a giant whirlpool of painted fire. When the cameras we laid inside burned out, we gathered the equipment and went home to my place.

#

In the middle of the night I disappeared. One moment I was leaning, between Huey and Louie, over a topographic map of the Trade Fair Gardens, and the next I wasn't.

'Pass me his plate,' said Huey, 'I think he's finished eating.'

'Listen, both of you,' said someone.

'Say,' said Louie, 'doesn't it strike you as odd...'

'What?'

'That he, like, disappeared?'

'Who?'

'What do you mean who? Where's your brain?'

'Listen,' said Huey, 'Let's not play games.'

Louie knows Huey and knows there is no point arguing.

'Dewey. Disappeared. Don't you think something here doesn't add up?'

'Of course it doesn't,' said a voice. 'If you would only listen to me for a moment...'

Huey thought about it. 'No,' he said. 'He probably went for a break. He'll be back soon.'

'Look,' said Louie, 'I wouldn't be surprised if he disappeared at any other time, but in the middle of topography?'

'Topography?' said the voice in suspicion. 'What are you going to do now?'

'There is something to your twisted logic,' said Huey, 'but there you go.'

'He's not right,' said Louie.

'Don't exaggerate,' said Huey. 'He did a very nice job on the elevator today. Doing is everything.'

'That's right, don't exaggerate,' said the voice. 'We have eighty-five dead and almost a hundred wounded. Very nice. Can't you bloody listen for a moment?'

'No – yes – I mean, sure. That's not what I meant.'

'Don't be a pain,' said Huey. 'Let me finish here.'

Louie went.

#

The next day clouds covered the sun, but the Ferris wheel in the Luna Park shone a strong sunflower-yellow, it and the scores of soft, shining children in its lap. Phosphorus. Huey took pastoral pictures, Dewey recorded a symphony of screams and cries. The image of a child floating cheerfully through the air, as glowing as an angel, on the background of "To Be Or Not To Be – Mitsubishi", was followed immediately by the recording of the soft sound of impact as he hit the ground. After a few such happy minutes, when all eyes in the park were turned upwards, the two activated the acid spray. Then the volume of sound rose by a magnitude of decibels, but after several minutes of vocal joy the mics were burned through and it was over.

#

'Ha ha,' said the dark-haired demon and pushed his sunglasses slightly aside. 'I'm sure the families would be happy to hear.'

'Hear about what?'

'The eighty-six people you didn't kill.'

'Eighty-six? What are you talking about?'

'Two in that flat in Tel Aviv, eight on the highway, five in the elevator, forty-three in the club...'

'What about them?'

'Didn't you kill them?'

'Nu, so?'

'Don't you think,' said the demon and wiped his brow, 'that something isn't right here? Ever heard of "Thou Shalt Not Kill"?''

'Dear God!' I said. 'You think we killed human beings?'

#

A wall made of recently-annealed glass, and inside it darkening lumps. A strong smell of grilling and burning infuses the air. The lumps have stopped convulsing long before the glass solidified, of course. And now we stand there, and the recording films run again, and Huey approaches the wall, a giant hammer in his hands.

#

On the way from here to there, all three of us disappeared. One moment we were busy on the exact tuning of the recorder, and in the next we weren't.

For one moment, everything stopped.

'Pass me his plate,' someone said to somebody else. 'I think he finished eating.'  
'Say,' said someone. 'Doesn't it strike you as odd...'  
'What?' said someone.  
'That he, like, disappeared?'  
'No,' said the demon and blinked. He looked as if he needed glasses.  
'Excuse me?' said someone.  
'Not someone, sir,' said the demon. 'You.'  
'Me?' said someone.  
'You. You know perfectly well who you are,' said the demon.  
'That's possible,' said Dewey, 'but what is it to you?'  
'Thinking in the third person isn't going to help you.'  
'Get off it,' I said.  
'No,' said the demon. 'You've gone way too far. You're going to stop this moronic killing spree. Right now.'  
'I think you have a small problem with your perception of reality.'  
'I only have one problem,' said the demon, 'and it's you.'  
'Leave me alone!'  
'I can't,' said the demon. 'I'm a part of you.'  
'Now I know you have a problem with your perception of reality.'  
'I really don't,' said the demon. 'And not just that: you, along with me, are stuck in the loop.'  
'There's something in your twisted logic,' I said. 'But there you go.'  
'You're not right,' said the demon.  
'Don't exaggerate,' I said. 'I did a very nice job with the wall today. Doing is everything.'  
'Wait!' said the demon. 'There you go again! That's not what I meant!'  
'Don't be a pain,' I said. 'Let me finish off here.'  
And I went.

#

A skyscraper in napalm. Billboards burning in the wind. 'What You See Is What You Get. Nokia.'

#

And was brought back.

'You're not going anywhere,' said the demon. 'You're staying here with me to the end.'

'The end?'

'Yes. Until you realise you're one, not three, and stop getting out of control.'

'Of course I'm one,' I said. 'I never thought otherwise. And I'm not out of control.'

'A hundred and two victims would testify otherwise.'

'Will you stop it with that?' I said. 'There are no victims. Dewey and Louie are practicing art, and I'm helping them. That's all.'

'Yeah?' said the demon. 'What sort of art, exactly? Mass murder?'

'The aesthetics of burning,' I said.

'Murder,' said the demon.

'There's no connection,' I said.

'Murder. Don't have any illusions.'

'Say,' I said, 'who are you anyway?'

'I,' said the demon, 'am the only element in this story who isn't you yourself.'

'Nu, seriously,' I said. 'Why are you banging on about murder?'

'Because you, apparently, don't perceive those you kill as human beings.'

'I don't understand why you keep insisting I killed anyone.'

'Mr. Kalmanson, for example,' said the demon. 'What happened to him?'

'I have had enough,' I said, 'of this conversation.'

And I went. And was brought back.

'As I said, you're not going anywhere. We were talking about Mr. Kalmanson, for instance.'

'He wasn't a human being,' I said. 'He was an asshole bourgeoisie, that's what he was.'

'And the children in the park?'

'A symbol of the moral decrepitude taking hold of the young.'

'A symbol?'

'Of course,' I said. 'Remind me, who are you?'

'I am your artificial consciousness,' said the demon. 'It looks like you can't be stopped any other way.'

'The establishment never looked favourably on alternative art,' I said.

'The establishment never looked favourably on genocide,' the demon said.

'Now you tell me – who are you?'

'I'm Huey,' I said.

'You made up Huey, Louie and Dewey. You are the three of them together, or, to be exact, each one of them at any given moment.'

'That is complete nonsense,' I said. 'It's even stupider than your banging on about murder, murder, murder.'

'Really? Do you remember how long you've been Huey?'

'Louie,' I said.

The demon sighed. 'This way we won't get far. Tell me – can you call Huey and Dewey? Ask them to come here?'

'Sure,' I said, and they came.

'Say,' said Huey through a mouthful, 'doesn't it seem odd to you...'

'What?' said Dewey.

'That he, like, disappeared?'

'Who?'

'Enough of that!' said the demon and turned to me. 'You're only helping them, right?'

'Yes,' I said. 'I'm the technical guy.'

'Very well,' said the demon, pulled out a gun, and shot Louie and Dewey to death.

#

Smoke, without fire. Silence. Cinders.

#

'What have you done?'

'Now you don't have anyone to help.'

'But we have a lot more things... many more items for... our exhibition. There is still so much to do. Doing is every...'

'There is no exhibition!' shouted the demon. 'Forget it! It's finished! Gone! Enough!'

'Remind me – who are you?'

'I am your viral, artificial consciousness,' said the demon. 'You can't get rid of me. I'm a piece of software running on your brain's wetware, and based on your personality, just like Huey and Louie and Dewey, RIP. But them you made up, and me you haven't.'

'I didn't make anyone up.'

'Of course you did,' said the demon. 'the two – or three – of them are just aspects of your personality. I don't know what drug or technology you used to create them, but they are definitely you. The loop you're stuck in is probably some kind of side-effect. Maybe you're afraid of something and don't want to move on.'

'I don't know what you're talking about and I'm not afraid of anything,' I said. 'And besides, you said you're also based on my personality.'

'But I come from outside,' said the demon.

'Outside?'

'Several of those who tried to stop you, extraneously, in the real world outside of your sick brain, are now in intensive care. The rest have already been buried. Not that there was much left to bury. And that's why they created me.'

'Who are you?'

'I... In one way I am you. They scattered viral spores, encoded and tuned to your brain. You breathed in one of them, and it caused... created... me.'

'You came to kill me?'

'No,' said the demon. 'To rehabilitate you. To cause you to heal.'

'I'm not sick.'

'Not really,' said the demon. 'You're split. That is – you were split, until I killed Huey and Dewey. Now I hope you could stop. Return to reality. Exit the loop. Stop the burning.'

'Burn.'

'Yes.'

'Burn.'

#

Sparks and cinders. Smoke.

#

'Burn!' I said. 'Oh, God! What have they done!'

'You did.'

'I... did. I! Me!'

'Huey and Louie are fiction. They never were. You are the artist who was afraid to be an artist. Maybe that's why there's a loop.'

The exhibition that would never come. Just more and more...

'I am... I am the artist.'

'Who was afraid to be an artist.'

'I am... the artist.'

For doing is everything...

'Forget that. Welcome to reality.'

'Reality,' I said. 'What have you got to do with reality?'

'I could ask you the same question,' said the demon. 'But it would lead us nowhere. Tell me – what do you see? Where are we?'

#

Spark and cinder, cinder and spark. Smoke. Darkness.

#

Light. A white room.

'A white room,' I said.

'Tabula Rasa,' said the demon. 'A blank slate. A good place to start in. now, all that remains for us to do is help you find the way back out.'

'I am the artist,' I said.

'You were,' said the demon. 'Were.'

'Still am,' I said. 'Always have been and always will be.'

Because doing is everything.

'Not any more,' said the demon. 'I am curing you. You are not an artist and have never been an artist. You were possessed of an artificial split-personality with a growing superiority complex, but now everything should be all right. The white walls are a good sign. Now you need to create an opening in them.'

'There's something in your twisted logic,' I said, 'but I don't think we're going to do anything about it.'

'What?'

'He's not right,' said Dewey, and pointed at him.

'Don't exaggerate,' said Huey. 'He did a very nice job with you here. Doing is everything.'

The rest is nothing.

'No – yes – I mean, sure,' said Dewey. 'That's not what I meant.'

'But I killed them!' said the demon.

'You must understand,' I said, 'a man cannot die, but in fire. Fire is the life and the death.'

'That doesn't make sense!' said the demon. 'But you said you didn't kill anyone! No human being!'

'And you are, by your own admission, no human being.'

'But...'

'Don't be a pain,' I said. 'Instead, finish here.'

And the white walls calcinated.

Beautiful. Terribly beautiful. No longer cinders, the heat growing, sparks whisper, surfaces burn...

'Hey!' shouted the demon. 'You can't do this!'

He blazed and burned and melted and reduced and disappeared.

I went.

#

They say you should always start small. Burn a tree, perhaps; a parked car, road signs, a traffic light. Not us. We, for starters, burned Mr. Liberson's flat – including two fine

leather chairs, forks and knives (one dozen pairs), a lifesize (ugly) china horse, and Mr Liberson himself.

Of course.

THE END.