



A short story in four parts
by Christopher Bollen

Part One

It would be an ordinary day, Kit decided, a sticky, late-spring New York day so unextraordinary and similar to all the others that it might as well be dragged into the spam folder of time.

She'd make a few calls, check in with her gallery to see which of her paintings had sold, meet up with Bruce for a late breakfast at Black Run to hear how his sobriety was affecting his sex life, return the ridiculous neoprene dress that didn't fit and she'd already been photographed in, and get to her studio by mid-afternoon. If she managed not to be pushed in front of an oncoming subway—an achievement, given the recent rash of public-transportation homicides—today would pass into oblivion and she would rise again, single and productive and hungrier, tomorrow.

Kit yanked up the aluminum blinds on her bedroom window and watched the yellow light agitate the tip of the Chrysler Building. Across the street, the pretty hooligans of the Catholic high school congregated like rival gangs in a prison yard. For once, instead of wishing them dead for their loud morning hip-hop serenades, Kit tried to appreciate the way they modified their school uniforms with so many chains and rips and cinched folds to their skirts and pumpkin-sized sneakers that they utterly negated the whole purpose of a uniform. Maybe she'd paint their portraits and do a series called Youth at Risk that she could use for her show in Zurich next December. "Kit Carrodine traces the mutability of cultural consumerism by focusing on the appropriations of its youngest demogra—." She had to resist the urge to pen her own press releases before she even began a project; it strangled the creative act from the start. Still, *this was good*, she told herself, *bury your head in the future. Forget today*. She walked into the kitchen to brew coffee.

Technically, the coffeemaker belonged to Kai, and she was thankful that he had overlooked it when he moved his belongings out of the apartment yesterday. They had been together for eighteen months. Kit treated her personal life the way others treated seasonal homes in the country. She disappeared so thoroughly into her paintings, months and months in her studio, that finishing a show was a chance to reconnect with her life and make the necessary improvements that had fallen into disrepair while she was away. Kai had been the first problem in need of fixing. While Kit had cast their breakup as an opportunity for them both to grow, she knew, and Kai knew, that she was dumping deadweight. She was successful, and Kai—all those awful, unsellable junk piles that he persisted in connecting to his Appalachian upbringing—was not. If she were to dwell on it, she would admit it was the cloying, singsong alliteration of their names, "Kit and Kai," always uttered by a friend in a single breath, that proved the first blow to their happiness. Kit had not worked for years in this city to establish herself as an important painter to be referred to as a twosome that sounded like a demented Japanese toy. Still, the memory of naïve, vulpine Kai holding his box of clothes and books at the front door last night momentarily stung her. "You're not even crying," he had wailed with enough tears in his eyes for both of them. He was right. She hadn't cried. And she wouldn't today. She would get through this first day without regret. Plus, she missed dating women. Kai had always been a bit of a heterosexual experiment for her, like a home chemistry set that failed to turn salt into snowflakes.

Kit opened the front door and snatched up the Friday *Times*—surely there would be a review of her latest show. She let the advertisement inserts scatter in the hallway as she flipped to the art section. There was no review, and she felt small flares of jealousy over the triumphs of rivals. Why hadn't Haskell, her gallerist, pushed harder for a review? He knew this was the show, the big one, the culmination of two years of work, and it had already been open for two weeks. Kit had painted a series of mug shots of New York death-

row inmates among veils of fluorescent digital glitches and random free-floating emojis and consumer products. Perhaps Haskell was angling for a meatier story in the *Times*. In a small act of compassion for Kai, she considered it only fair that the first day of his misery wasn't compounded by another validation of her accomplishments. Kit raked in about \$2 million a year after expenses. She wondered what Kai would do now for money. He had better not sell the drawings she had given him.

Forty minutes later, Kit was on the street, dressed in too-dense tweed for the soft April air pouring through the avenues. She carried the rumpled neoprene dress in its original shopping bag (in lieu of the receipt). The trees were breaking into pink, and the last-remaining magazine shops proclaimed the local headlines: woman pushed in front of D train, assailant not apprehended. Horrible. Horrible that these tiny, doomed magazine shops would morph into nail salons by summer. Even the banks were shuttering their storefronts, but somehow nail salons magically proliferated. The future was manicures. Kit tried to reach Haskell on her phone but got a busy signal. She wasn't aware that the busy signal still existed. She tried again. Busy. Some idiot assistant had probably left the front-desk phone off the hook. The Haskell Vex Gallery might be too small an operation for her. She had stayed out of loyalty and expected devotion in return. *Dammit, Haskell, pick up!* She called his cell, but it went straight to voicemail.

Kit hurried down 10th Street, late as usual to meet Bruce. She wished she could text him *calm down, a block away*. But Bruce, a paranoid unemployed writer who lived off the chrome, manganese, and iron mines of his wrathful South African family, was religious about not using technology. It was noble only in theory. Though approaching fifty, Bruce had the healthy lust of a twenty-five-year-old just off the bus from Omaha, he had a fabulous wit and could always make Kit laugh before noon (not an easy feat, her sense of humor tended to kick in around sundown), and he had a house in San Sebastián where she was hoping to spend most of August. He would be thrilled to hear of her split with Kai ("He's perfectly adorable, doll, in the one-night-stand, please-no-talking sense"). Kit scurried around the morning's post-rush hour foot traffic. Everyone on the sidewalk seemed to have a disfigurement—a limp or a misshapen back or some invisible spinal condition that rendered them half-immobile. These were her people, New Yorkers on the street, drifting around the overtended brownstones like dirty pollen particles. She loved living here, though maybe not as emphatically as she had in her twenties; *New York, you saved me* was no longer a dissident shout but a quiet, grateful whisper like the kind exchanged between an older couple who had long stopped having sex and found their celibacy only confirmed their closeness. When Kit first moved to Manhattan, she had been a bar-back and a waitress. No matter how successful she became, a part of her always expected to end up back in the poverty of her youth. Artists understood starving even when they ordered endless lunch trays of sashimi for their studio staff.

Kit's phone vibrated with an incoming call marked unidentified. It could be Bruce hounding her from a pay phone. Or Haskell calling from some provisional line if the phones were down at the gallery. She clicked "accept."

"Hello?" she said. A muffled silence. "Bruce? Calm down. I'm a block away."

She heard thundery pulses of static like panting breath.

"Hello? Who is this? Haskell? Hello?" A more depressing possibility occurred to her: Kai might have simply wanted to hear her voice. She had never been safe from his old-fashioned conception of romance. "Kai? Jesus, I said no communication. Why are you making this harder on yourself? This is for your benef—"

"Fucking bitch," came the sexless, leathery voice. "You will die."

At first she still thought it was Kai. But the primary-school, prank-call pathology didn't fit the eighteen months she knew of him.

"You will die for what you did."

"Thanks for the warning. I'll have my assistant look into it." She hung up. Unfortunately this was not Kit's first death threat. Seven months ago, a leading fashion magazine had run a profile on the daughter of a maniacal, bloodthirsty dictator of a former Soviet state. In every photograph the handsome young woman had posed in her home in front of a prominent Kit Carrrodine canvas. Kit had no clue how the painting wound up in the hands of the evil dictator's daughter, and she went on a warpath straight to Haskell about it. "Secondary market!" Haskell had pleaded, arms raised in mystification, as if the secondary market were a divine force beyond control. "We'll never again sell to the collector who flipped it." The magazine suffered weeks of social-media persecution about their glorification of the offspring of a major human-rights violator, and it was Kit's painting that appeared over and over alongside this blonde posed holding her infant baby while attempting to slip on a high heel. (It was the pose that infuriated Kit as much as the inclusion of her painting: why did a woman putting on an expensive shoe suggest the possession of a complex inner life?) The demons of social media briefly turned on Kit, as if she too were guilty of torture and kleptocracy by mere association. She had received dozens of frightening emails, a Twitter campaign to boycott her show at a Los Angeles museum, and thirteen hate-spewing anonymous phone calls. Her regular morning joke upon entering her studio had been, "Any calls for my execution today?"

If there's one thing in this world you can count on, it's a short attention span. The bluster didn't slowly fade; within a week it vanished altogether and no one could recall the fashion story or the country of the dictator's daughter or the beautiful painting hanging behind her. But Kit was sure there must be one holdout who had finally tracked down her number to burden her with a reminder. She circled through the revolving door of Black Run, theatrically swept the shopping bag over her shoulder, and located Bruce, clearly having failed in sobriety, slumped in a corner booth behind two glasses of white wine.

"You didn't," she roared from the doorway, ignoring the petite hostess's attempts to corral her.

Bruce's face lit up. "Of course I did. And I'm bringing you down with me." He flicked the brim of the fuller glass.

On her way to Bruce, Kit passed a table where a couple she recognized sat. The woman was a prominent attorney and the man was on the board of MoMA when he wasn't off on one of his spiritual quests in the desert. She idled at their table for a minute, swapping supple, meaningless banter. Kit wouldn't exactly call them friends, although they were more than mere acquaintances. There should be a word for the people you genuinely care for, and enjoy talking to in snatches at a party, but who would not be expected to attend your funeral. Kit said goodbye, glided toward Bruce, and bent down to kiss him on each cheek. When she squeezed his shoulders, he winced.

"What's wrong? Did you get beaten up by a new boyfriend?"

"No, by my trainer. Every muscle is sore. And you're late. Again."

"I'm sorry," she said, sliding into the seat across from him.

"That's all right. I ordered company." He grabbed his wine and took a sip. She gave him a disapproving glance, but she wouldn't guilt-trip him about it. She loved Bruce enough to tolerate his vices. She might not even recognize him without them.

"I got another death threat." She enjoyed saying that. It made her feel strangely important. Bruce's eyes widened with fascination.

"You might be the only artist in the world worth killing. At least your work means something to strangers. You should take it as a compliment."

"I'll try to see it that way."

"I had such a marvelous time at your opening. What a crowd. I could barely see the paintings." He leaned into the table to signal intimacy. "Doll, I promise I'll go back to the gallery when I have a free hour to really take them in." Bruce had all the free hours of

every day to do just that. It was as if he, too, were waiting for a positive review to make sure a second trip was worth his while.

"The show's up for two more weeks. No word from the *Times* yet." She huffed and reached for his hand. "Honestly, I need that review. I want the work to get some notice. Otherwise it will just be sold to private collections and no one will ever see it again. What's the point?"

He rubbed her knuckle tenderly. "Everything eventually moves through the intestines of private ownership and ends up in public institutions one day. Meanwhile, think of the collectors as guardians. Or as benevolent digesters."

"You make museums sound like toilets. Anyway, that'll be in, like, forty years. I want them seen now. They're supposed to be about the Internet. In forty years they'll be as relevant as the statues at Luxor."

Bruce retracted his hand. "That's a sensitive subject. I had a friend—now who was it?—a distant uncle, I believe, who survived the shooting massacre at Luxor. He hid behind a rock for hours, and—"

"Bruce," she howled. "That was my story. It was my friend's sister, or was it—oh, I can't remember. But I told you that story."

Bruce stared down at his lap in genuine hurt. He loved to tell stories and hated when he was called out on pilfering them from others. Kit sighed and feigned confusion. "Maybe I'm wrong. Tell me again. What was it?" She was absolutely sure she had told him that very story a few years ago over dinner. Bruce immediately snapped to attention, describing the scene of the massacre at the archaeological site with a wealth of gruesome adjectives. Kit pretended to be astonished and actually found herself shocked the moment he mentioned the bullets piercing the tourists as his distant uncle—who was really Kit's friend's sister—crouched behind a stone pillar. "Awful," she whimpered as if hearing of their deaths for the first time. He nodded solemnly.

"The worst," he agreed. Although now she recalled that Bruce's reaction was an apathetic shrug when she had described the same piercing bullets to him. It only mattered to him when he told it.

"Well, you'll love my news," she said. "Kai and I . . ." But her phone began to vibrate on the table. When she flipped it over she saw it was her studio manager, Grace. She lifted the device to her ear. "What?"

"I'm sorry to bother you," Grace said too meekly. Grace was past the point of doing anything right—everything the girl did was *too*. She was another problem on Kit's list of life repairs. "It's just that I'm getting all these weird calls from journalists. They want to talk to you. I didn't know what to say."

"Say yes," Kit shouted. "That's good news, Grace, not bad news. *We want that.*"

"But the questions were really weird. I mean, I didn't understand them." Grace would never understand. So much for the practical application of an art-history degree. "It was the *Post*, the *Daily News*, *Jezebel*, and *Huffington*—"

"I'll talk to them."

Grace hesitated. "But . . . I think there's something wrong, something odd. You should call Haskell."

"Why?" But Kit decided that, for once, Grace was correct. She hung up and dialed Haskell on his cell. *I'm sorry*, she mouthed to Bruce and placed her wine glass in front of him to keep him occupied.

Haskell answered after four rings.

"What's going on?" Kit barked. "I've been trying you all morning."

"Oh, um," Haskell mumbled. "Oh, Kit. It's been so crazy here at the gallery." He sounded nervous and tense, a middle-aged man who had lost his cool. Haskell never lost his cool. She had never seen him so much as sweat. That was one of the reasons

she had stayed with him. "I was going to call. You see, it started two days ago. I honestly thought it had something to do with the humidity in the gallery. Or condensation from the air conditioning. So I wasn't going to bother you. But it's . . . it's not that." He shouted something indecipherable at an assistant and then whispered into the receiver. "I think we should close for a few days, until an expert can come in."

"What are you talking about?" Now she sounded nervous and tense. "Close the gallery? No way. You're not doing that. What the hell is the matter?"

"I . . . I can't explain it. Something's wrong with one of your paintings. I think you should come down and see for yourself."

Kit double-kissed Bruce goodbye and collected her shopping bag, apologizing to him while frantically ordering an Uber. Black Prius. Driver's name Mamoun. The one problem with Uber was that you couldn't bribe the driver to speed faster to Chelsea. Kit climbed out of the car on 21st Street and ran down the bleached sidewalk. As she approached Haskell Vex she was struck by a bewildering sight: a line of some thirty people waiting outside the frosted-glass doors to see her show. A rush of ecstasy flooded through her, but these loiterers weren't the usual, well-heeled, semijaded gallery-goers of strictly Northern European ancestry. They were of all ethnicities and mostly very old or very young, with patchy clothing, and some held rosaries and others white roses. As she sprinted past them she heard one of them whisper, "She's the one."

Kit wrenched open the heavy door. Inside the cold white space was a crowd of more unlikely visitors. Some clutched hats reverently over their hearts. One older Hispanic woman was on her knees in the midst of some sort of Bellevue-worthy emotional breakdown. A tall black man was passing out leaflets printed with a calligraphic verse. Two gallery assistants stood at the front desk looking horror-struck. She spotted Haskell stampeding toward her. He grabbed her by the arm before she could ask what was happening. His face was ashen and, yes, sweaty.

"Kit, let me show you. It started two days ago and it hasn't stopped. I have to say, I do not want this."

As they entered the main exhibition room the swarm of visitors fell into a hush. Kit gazed at her nine paintings lining the walls. All of them were perfectly normal except for the one on the far wall. There were clumps of white roses underneath it and three more women swaying on their knees. The painting was *Untitled, #7* in her *Killers* series. Kit had covered the canvas in a golden wash. Amid the floating emojis of a bag of cash, a priapic eggplant, and a beach umbrella loomed the mug shot she had lifted from public record of a young black prisoner convicted of murder, whose name she never knew because his particular identity had been of no interest to her. But as she stepped closer, she saw exactly what had brought all of these visitors to Haskell Vex in droves. Her lips went numb, and the shopping bag fell from her grip. *No, fuck no, it's not possible.* A seepage of water clung to the young man's eye, and a tiny amount trickled down the canvas, bleeding the gold. The man in the painting was definitely—unmistakably—crying.

Haskell turned and looked at her angrily as if expecting her to offer an explanation. But Kit Carrodine was not in the business of explaining her artwork, let alone miracles. She stood in the cold room full of people she didn't recognize, a little Lourdes right here in Chelsea, and all she could think was how happy she'd been this morning, before God came to the art world.

[To be continued]



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by Christopher Bollen

Part Two

Know this: Kit was not a believer.

Sure, at thirty-four, she had witnessed her share of miracles. The summer after college, she and her German girlfriend Gudrun had spent an entire night climbing Mount Sinai to reach the peak at sunrise—the apocalyptic purples and dusty apricots pouring across the dawn-bleached desert still haunted her. Six years ago Kit had overslept and missed a train in Madrid that was subsequently bombed by radical separatists; she still had the train ticket pinned to her bulletin board. Her Korean mother in Baltimore had been diagnosed with stage IV lung cancer (the five-year survival rate was less than 10 percent), but wondrously, after only two operations, she was in remission and running mini-marathons. Last winter, while visiting a wealthy collector in Hawaii, Kit had gone for a swim alone and had actually touched a wild dolphin.

These, according to Kit, were extraordinary events; they were implausible and suspicious-sounding but genuinely authentic moments of real-life enchantment. Kit often leaned on these experiences to remind herself that the world still held a cache of magic and mystery, and she occasionally brought out one of these anecdotes at snoozy cocktail parties to entertain listeners. But these were *terrestrial* miracles, requiring no outside tampering by the Divine. Like anyone in New York who made serious money by exploiting their own talents, Kit felt that she was a chosen person—she might even go as far as to call herself blessed. But God? A maker of supernatural miracles? A mystical visitation by a holy being who, amid the extreme turmoil befalling this planet, chose a Kit Carrodine artwork to spiritually vandalize? Uh uh. No frigging way.

The problem was that one of her paintings—*Untitled, #7* of her *Killers* series, now hanging at Haskell Vex Gallery—was crying, as in leaking water from the eye region. And in the days that followed, no matter how many times Kit swore up, down, and sideways that it was just a case of condensation buildup—a freak accumulation of vapor thanks to the Antarctic temperature at which Haskell set his gallery thermostat—the blogs and newspapers went berserk covering the miracle painting of West 21st Street. There had been articles in the *New York Post* (surprisingly unbiased), *The Cut* (a mocking one), *Jezebel* (even more mocking), and *The Daily Beast* (a think piece on the mingling of true belief and predatory capitalism). In an attempt to turn a quotidian environmental disturbance into abject sensationalism, the reporters refused to heed Kit's appeals to sanity—*Condensation, it's only condensation!!!* The gullible faithful came in droves to the gallery while the rational skeptics accused both Kit and Haskell of attention-seeking charlatanism. The final irony had not been lost on her: she had prayed for the blizzard of press she was currently receiving—the story had even drowned out news on the search for the New York serial subway pusher—and it was this very exposure that was threatening to destroy every last shred of her credibility in the art world. Last week she had been a serious artist and a rising star; this week she was a local carnival act and a falling meteor.

If Kit ever did meet God, she would punch Her/Him in the stomach (after thanking Him/Her for sparing her mother).

Kit ascended from the tomb that was the Greenpoint Avenue subway stop. One sleeve of her nubby beige cardigan was bunched at her elbow while the other engulfed her blood-speckled fingers: she had chewed three hangnails on the ride to her studio while refusing to look at any of the newspapers folded in the laps of her fellow riders. Before reaching her studio in a former soap factory on the waterfront, she predicted that the steel grate would still be shuttered over her door. That would indicate that the last of her assistants had fled the sinking ship—two had quit by e-mail yesterday and one had concocted a weeklong family emergency in Minnesota that was so deranged it almost sounded credible. To her genuine surprise, though, the grate was lifted. She entered the cavernous concrete rectangle. Its floor was stained in spray-painted outlines of long-removed canvases, not unlike, Kit always thought, police tape around homicide victims.

Usually Kit's first sight of her studio manager, Grace, was the emotional equivalent of rubbing alcohol on a cut. But today Kit was touched by Grace's loyalty in showing up. Kit smiled in gratitude even as the young woman was sweeping up slides she'd obviously toppled onto the floor. From here out, Kit promised herself, she would no longer take her staff for granted. She vetoed the plan to fire Grace; instead she might offer her a raise.

A mug of tea sat steaming on Kit's drafting-table desk, clearly placed there by Grace (who really was a wonderful, brilliant studio manager). Kit noticed the mug was bleeding a water ring onto page four of the *Daily News*. "Heaven help us! Prominent New York artist's miracle painting cries crocodile tears, says gallerist." *Says gallerist?* Kit quickly scanned the article, rummaging her eyes over the five paragraphs for Haskell's name. And there it was, two paragraphs in: "Mr. Vex assured reporters that the painting is a clever hoax, perhaps intended by Ms. Carrodine as a sly reference to medieval church statuary. He refused further explanation as to the source of the strange tears."

Kit felt as if a bullet the size of a taxi had just plowed through her body: Haskell was supposed to defend her, not throw her under the nearest bus. She dialed the gallery on her cell phone. As she waited for someone to pick up, she stared at the two images accompanying the article. One was a photograph of her from a year ago at an opening at the Whitney Museum—not an unflattering shot, in which Kit posed with an annoyed-but-humored crumple to her lips. The paper had cropped in on her, cutting the face of the man next to her in half. It was her ex-boyfriend, Kai. He was grinning open-mouthed and his one visible eye was roller-coastered wide; he looked like a fool, but a fool she missed. She wondered how he was handling their breakup. She could have used Kai by her side and in her bed the past few days, someone gentle to steady her erratic brainwaves. Kit took a compact mirror from her purse and placed it perpendicular to the cropped photograph, doubling the half-moon face, briefly returning Kai to the illusion of a complete person.

"Haskell Vex Gallery, please hold."

Kit was thrown into the purgatory of badly dated indie rock. The second image that the *Daily News* ran was a reproduction of *Untitled, #7*, pretears. Kit examined her own painting, gazing past the forest of emojis—cash bag, eggplant, beach umbrella—and down to the barely visible face of the young black murderer. She had studied his mug shot for weeks while painting it, duplicating every wrinkle and bend of his mouth and nostrils. Kit probably knew this man's face better than anyone else on the planet, maybe even better than he did. Were inmates allowed mirrors on death row? It was a tough face, menacing but resilient, with a wide jaw and forehead and the disbelieving eyes of someone who realized he was caught whether or not he was guilty. She didn't know his name or the particulars of his crime—when conceiving the *Killers* series she had found it meaningful not to know his name or background, to treat him as the state did, another statistic to be processed and incarcerated.

"Haskell Vex, thank you for holding," a voice chirruped through the receiver.

"This is Kit Carrodine. Get me Haskell immediately."

"Oh," moaned the assistant. Oh, as in, the problem is calling. "Umm." Kit was losing her patience. "He's gonna have to call you back. He's in a meeting."

Patience. Breathe. "Listen. What's your name?"

"Marcella."

"Hi Marcella." Kit was preparing her standard pecking-order retort: *Just so you know, Marcella, it's my art on the walls that allows Haskell to pay you to sit up front and look pretty while pretending to read Deleuze and put me on hold. So do me a favor. Tell Haskell he has two minutes to find the door to his meeting room and call me back.* But Kit found that for once she didn't have the nastiness in her. She just said limply, "Could you please ask him to call me as soon as humanly possible."

She looked out the window at the skyline of Manhattan shining in the spring sun, the slender skyscrapers with steeples and spires, like gilded granite churches. Deep in the cracks of that metropolis, the trees were budding pink and yellow. It had only been a few horrific days, she told herself, don't let a week be a life sentence. The miraculous tears will stop and

life will go on. Kit considered buying a plane ticket to some faraway destination until the scandal blew over—Palermo or Baia do Sancho or San Sebastián, or hadn't she discovered via Facebook that her old girlfriend Gudrun had opened a bed-and-breakfast in Munich? But she rejected the fantasy of escape. Kit, like all successful New Yorkers, was at heart a survivalist and she knew she'd stand her ground.

"Excuse me," a frail voice whispered behind her. Kit spun around to find Grace standing a foot away, shoulders hunched and purple-white hands held like a frozen clap at her waist. "Could I talk to you for a moment?"

"Of course," Kit wheezed, in a tone she hoped sounded like affection. "I'm always here for you. What's on your mind?"

Grace nodded toward page four of the *Daily News*. "I feel terrible about what's happening and all the negative attention you're receiving." Grace was putting it mildly—four art magazines had canceled features and there had been all of zero reviews of the show. The art world had unanimously shunned any mention of Kit Carrodine for fear of contamination. To them, Kit had committed the mortal sin of stirring the passions of the masses. "It's just that"—Grace put her hand on her forehead as if gauging her own temperature—"I've been having to handle all of these crazy calls from religious people this past week."

"I told you to tell them, *condensation!*"

"I have," Grace swore. "But people on the phone are praying at me. Asking me to pray with them. And those are the nice ones." Grace blushed. "There have been angry ones too. Accusations."

"Like what?"

"Just—" Grace stumbled, afraid to broadcast those insults to their intended target. "It doesn't matter. Look, I really admire you, and I know none of this is your fault. But I think I need to tender my resignation." Kit reached for Grace's tiny hands but the young woman recoiled. "I never told you this," Grace continued, "but my family back in Colorado Springs was really Christian." Grace's eyes glistened. "It was hard for me to get away from that. Really hard. And now all this talk about miracles is making me feel super uncomforta—"

"Please don't leave me." Kit was taken aback by the spontaneity of her own pleading. She tried for control as she repeated, "Please don't." A call came in on her cell and she instantly picked it up, hoping to hear Haskell on the other end. It was not Haskell.

"You disgusting, evil cunt," growled the sexless leathery voice. Her death-threat caller was back. "Shame on what you did. You will die for this." Kit hung up without uttering a word. Announcing that someone wanted to kill you for your wickedness was not the secret to wooing disgruntled employees. It took ten minutes of begging and nodding and sharing horror stories from youth—and also the promise of a raise—for Grace to agree to stay. After they shook hands, Kit lifted the *Daily News* article and pointed to *Untitled, #7*.

"This painting," she said. "Do we still have the original mug shot in our files?"

Grace bit her lip. "I think so. I can look. Toby was in charge of—"

"Can you dig up the identity of this convict? Find out his name and where he's in prison. And any information on the crime."

Grace nodded. "I forgot to mention," she whispered sheepishly. Kit worried she'd ask for more vacation days. "Kai keeps phoning too. He says he needs to talk to you. He's—"

"No," Kit replied definitively. She resigned herself to getting through this crisis on her own.

When Haskell finally called, Kit barked his newspaper quote at him. "A clever hoax?"

"What was I supposed to say?" he snapped. "Should I have admitted that it might be a sign from God for all I know?"

"You were supposed to say condensation! Because that's what it is."

"But it isn't!" he roared. "I've had four of the city's top heating and cooling experts into the gallery to check the equipment. Everything's normal. Each expert guarantees that isn't what's causing the tears! 100 percent no! It has nothing to do with the conditions of the gallery. Don't you dare try to pin it on me!"

So this was how her eight-year partnership with Haskell would end: wrestling over who would take the blame.

“What are you saying, Haskell? If it isn’t condensation, then are you trying to tell me it is a miracle?” Haskell laughed. It was the dry, mechanical laugh of an empiricist, a realist, a man who did not for a split second believe that the world was run by much more than chaos and the gravitational tug of the sun. “Whether or not we have proof of the gallery’s humidity levels, you could have just said it was condensation and the whole circus would have vanished.”

“No, Kit, I’m not taking the blame,” Haskell hissed. “I’m not ruining my reputation to save your ass. If I take the rap for this shit storm, every artist I represent will be walking out the door or demanding an entirely new gallery due to my negligence. I can’t afford it! I’ve already taken a loss, and I don’t simply mean in terms of respectability. None of your paintings has sold. No collector in their right mind wants to get ten feet near a series that’s become a laughing stock. My only chance of a profit is selling *Untitled, #7* to a southern mega-church! No, it’s your painting, your fault.” Haskell took a long, well-deserved inhale, having fatigued on a rant that Kit wished had been a few degrees less accurate. The Haskell who spoke next was more considerate, and Kit tried to forget the ugliness of five seconds ago. “Look, it isn’t good. But I am on your side. I’ve found a conservator in Los Angeles who is flying in tonight to examine the painting.”

“Why not a conservator based in New York?”

Now Haskell was frugal about his insults. “No one decent here was willing. This woman is a pro and she’ll do it discreetly. And when we find the cause, we’ll notify the press. *Basta!* This lunacy will stop once and for all. Now, do I have your permission for the conservator to run tests tonight on *Untitled, #7*? Legally I need your permission.”

“Yes,” she relented. Yes, he had her permission. The conservator could chip the whole eye off the canvas as long as she uncovered the source of the water. “How are the crowds?” she asked. “Is it still a Catholic mass at the gallery?”

“I hired guards to keep them out,” Haskell said. “I couldn’t allow it any longer. These people on their hands and knees, singing hymns and weeping, when I’m trying to run an art space. As of this morning, none of them is allowed inside. They weren’t pleased. Your parishioners are congregating at 7 PM in the basement of St. August’s over on Seventh Avenue. Kit, I don’t know if you’re up for it—” He paused.

“Up for what?”

“It might not hurt for you to go there and make an announcement. Tell them it isn’t a miracle. Tell them you used special paint. Hell, tell them one of your assistants was sneaking in and throwing water on the painting. It could really help in terms of disbanding the pilgrims. And who knows? Maybe it isn’t too late to patch this hole in your career.”

The subway had only gotten as far as Third Avenue before an announcement came over the speaker that “due to a criminal incident,” service was temporarily suspended. As Kit was climbing the steps to the street, a heavyset woman in a macramé coat nodded to her and said, “Someone was pushed in front of the subway at Union Square!” Kit asked if the perpetrator had been apprehended, but the woman just shrugged—“Same ol’ dangerous city of psychos,” she said, and shuffled off. Was it evil that Kit hoped the latest attack by the subway pusher might steal the attention away from her ridiculous crying painting? Maybe her salvation was this serial murderer—maybe killers did provide some essential benefit to humankind?

Kit walked the fifteen blocks to St. August’s. Because of the stalled train, she was half an hour late meeting Bruce, who was leaning against the church’s wrought-iron gate with his hands in his jean pockets and his black-leather jacket zippered to his chin. Bruce had been the only friend Kit could think of who’d be willing to attend the meeting with her. He tapped his watch and she waved her hands in apology.

“I know,” she called. “I’ll pay for the wine after.” She kissed his cheeks.

“The real miracle would be your punctuality,” he complained.

“Ha ha,” she said. “I don’t know why I’m doing this. I don’t want to face a room full of lunatics who should be permanently committed for believing that a gob of oil paint applied to Belgian linen is capable of showing emotion.” She shook her head and looked at Bruce, expecting him to reply with an even more cutting remark. Instead, he squinted at her sadly.

“I think it’s beautiful what you’ve given them,” he said simply, “and what they’ve given back to you in return. Just because it isn’t the people you expected to react to your work—”

“Don’t do that,” she warned him. “Don’t play devil’s advocate just to be provocative. This idiocy over a trickle of water is destroying everything I’ve worked for. It’s not funny.”

“It’s not funny,” he agreed. “But Kit, artists don’t get to choose their audiences, nor do they own the rights on what their work comes to mean. You should respect—” Bruce cut off. He must have caught the anger brewing on Kit’s face and decided she wasn’t up for an evening seminar on art and ethics.

“Let’s get this over with.” Kit stormed toward the doors of the church with Bruce racing behind her. They located the staircase in the vestibule and descended together in the dark. Kit heard the singing first, hymns about the Lord and mountains falling to dust. Bobbing candles painted tiger stripes on the walls. When they reached the bottom and turned a corner, they entered a cafeteria filled with sixty or seventy candle-lit bodies. There were all races, all ages, and, Kit assessed, mostly the lowest fourth of the city’s income spectrum. Some held posters of *Untitled, #7* amateurishly photographed or blown up from the *Daily News* article. A few had glued blue yarn running down from the convict’s right eye. Kit turned, considering escape over the planned announcement that the tears had been a prank, but she was already spotted. A cute Chinese girl came up to her first, grabbed her hand, and kissed the knuckles. Kit almost pulled her hand away but didn’t. An ancient woman in a wheelchair was zooming toward her, the tears on the woman’s face rerouted by the deep wrinkles of a smile. Within a minute, Kit was swallowed by her fans, thanked and hugged tenderly and palmed on the back. People were crying all around her, and a lean white man was so overwhelmed he could barely tell her that she had restored his faith in a better life after this one.

“I really didn’t do anything,” she tried to explain. “You see, I’m an atheist. It’s all been—”

“God performed the miracle, yes, but you created the stage.”

An attractive, elderly black woman in a lavender suit was marching toward Kit. The woman’s arms opened and, before Kit could protect herself, she was consumed in a tight embrace. Kit felt the heaving breasts and the sticky smell of perfume. The woman touched her cheeks, staring up with love.

“Thank you,” the elderly woman sobbed. “I can never repay you for what you’ve done. Neither can Ronell.” Kit was on the verge of asking who the heck Ronell was, as well as clarifying that this had all been an embarrassing mistake. But Kit didn’t ask or clarify. And because she didn’t, her entire life changed: “How did you know to paint him?” the woman went on amid sobs. “How did you know he is innocent? My boy never murdered anyone, but the police didn’t listen. The police didn’t listen because they needed someone to be guilty.” Moans of agreement trafficked around them. “Only now, because of *your* painting, *your* miracle, the world has started to pay attention to his case. You have given Ronell what no one else ever dared. A chance. Oh, bless you. You have been sent as a savior of truth by the Lord.”

Kit stepped out of the church into the blue-black evening where her phone found reception. She dialed the number and waited for an answer. Haskell said hello.

“Call off the conservator. You no longer have my permission.”

“Kit.” He sounded startled. “She’s just arrived. Don’t be silly.”

“I will sue the fuck out of you if she touches that painting.”

“Are you on drugs? Have you been drinking? Kit, are you stoned?”

“It’s a miracle, Haskell. It’s a miracle as long as it can’t be explained. Call her off. The painting is crying.”

[To be continued]



A short story in four parts
by Christopher Bollen

Part Three

The pinewood box that contained *Untitled, #7* leaned against the wall of Kit's studio, the only painting in a series of nine that had been returned by her gallerist Haskell Vex after the immediate closing of her show. Haskell's decision to pull the plug hadn't been much of a surprise; after all, Kit had refused to allow him to run tests on *Untitled, #7* to uncover the source of its mystical tears. Yet even Kit hadn't predicted his final valedictory punch until she read his full statement on the *Artnews* website: "Due to the recent controversy and understandable outcry, we also regret that we are no longer able to represent Kit Carrodine and her special needs. We wish her all the best in her future endeavors."

Kit had laughed out loud at that last bit: Haskell had thrown her to the lions to salvage his tarnished reputation. But if Kit had special needs she also had special skills—and one was making friends with lions. Fearing correctly that Haskell would shut her *Killers* show down, she had decided to get ahead of him on the story by calling a few reporters of her own. Kit's news had beaten Haskell's to the papers and blogs by five hours. "I have made a crying painting," she told the press simply and solemnly. "I deliberately chose to paint the mug shot of an incarcerated black man. I did not choose for this image to sprout water from one eye and appear to weep as it streamed down the canvas. I won't explain or justify what is, to my knowledge, inexplicable and unjustifiable. But I won't renounce it either. Art isn't a toy you send back to the factory if its edges are too sharp or its stuffing catches fire. All I will say is that I have since met the mother of the man I depicted. I have listened to her and others who claim that Ronell Stephens was convicted of a murder he did not commit. I don't know where I stand on miracles. But I do believe in justice." Kit had hung up before the reporters could quiz her on the specifics of Ronell's case.

Was Ronell Stephens innocent? Kit had no idea. How could she? She had listened to Ronell's mother talk passionately of planted evidence and forced confessions, and she had dispatched her studio assistant, Grace, to dig up the few articles on the murder and trial. Ronell had earned an impressive rap sheet of drug-dealing arrests in the Bronx before being accused of shooting an undercover narcotics officer to death in the middle of a hot September night five years back. The jury had found him guilty in less than forty minutes—and that had included a lengthy bathroom break. In her more vulnerable moments Kit worried that she had simply used Ronell as a convenient moral cause to deflect attention from the ludicrous circus that had formed around her after *Untitled, #7* had begun to weep. But she recalled the devotion of the believers, the prayerful worshippers with eyes closed so tightly they looked like shotgun holes and hands balled at their chests like second hearts; they had come together because of her painting and had found strength and hope in it. From her own talent and hands she had produced something that made people sob in piles on the floor. That's when Kit caught herself thinking things she had never anticipated. Things like, *Maybe this happened for a reason, or, If I'm truly honest, I've always felt chosen to be an instrument of greater good, or even, Who am I to say that this painting isn't a miracle that could exonerate an innocent man?* Ronell's mother, Alice, had been calling Kit's studio night and day, begging her to speak at a rally next weekend at City Hall to demand the reopening of his case. Two local morning-TV shows had invited Kit on to discuss Ronell and her "magic artistry" (their words). So far she had declined all invitations, but she was beginning to warm to the idea.

Kit had already received one unexpected boon from speaking publicly about the painting: as soon as she openly refused to renounce the work, the art world that had abandoned her came rushing back in her defense. Haskell, now officially her ex-gallerist, fielded endless requests about *Untitled, #7* from collectors—basically speculators following the divining rod of scandal and press—who sensed that a Kit Carrodine *Killer* might be worth quite a bit even after the initial notoriety died down. Poor Haskell had phoned her, mumbling in meekness and apology, as he mentioned numerous six- and even seven-figure bids for her miracle painting. Kit knew he needed to recoup his losses—he was a man dancing on the strangling wire of the market—and, in an attitude of what she saw as utter magnanimity, she had said, "Hey, no hard feelings, okay? I tell you what. *Untitled, #7* isn't for sale. You send that painting back to me. But you can sell the other eight in the show that you're currently dismantling and take your usual cut." Haskell had

sent *Untitled, #7* to the studio the following day, along with an enormous bouquet of peonies. He had always had the safest taste in flowers.

An artwork returning to Kit's studio was usually unboxed, checked for damage, rephotographed, and archived in cloth and Bubble Wrap. But she kept *Untitled, #7* nailed shut in its pine crate and told Grace not to let anyone open it. Right now, Kit eyed the box leaning against the wall. Sliding from her chair, she grabbed the hammer on her desk and walked toward the box, brandishing the tool with its claw raised as if threatening to put it out of its misery. But as Kit reached the giant rectangle of raw pine, she couldn't get herself to yank the nails free. Inside was her canvas of Ronell Stephens, her miracle masterpiece. Was it still crying? If she set it loose in her studio, would she find moisture around the eye? Or would it be as dry as old paint, no miracle at all, just the result of condensation in Haskell's air-conditioned gallery? It frightened her to learn the answer—and she wasn't sure which would upset her more, a painting still weeping or an inert accumulation of oil strokes. Suspecting that either case would rip her life apart, she set the hammer down. Her life was safe as long as the box wasn't opened. Still, she tried to peer between the seams of the wood for any sign of activity. "What are you doing in there?" she whispered into the splintery crack. Kit got on her knees and pressed her fingertips along the cement floor, searching for any trace of water. She laughed—she was confusing the mechanics of a miracle with that of a leaky kitchen pipe—but her fingertips continued to explore the corners of the box for dampness. "What are you?" Kit said quietly to the box. "Are you alive? A message? A mistake? Are you here?"

"Kit?" Grace boomed. She had returned from her lunch break to find her boss on her hands and knees muttering madly at thin air. "What the hell are you doing?"

"Nothing," Kit groused as she climbed to her feet, her face turned toward the windows so as to hide the blush scorching her cheeks.

"Were you praying to the box?" Grace asked. Kit scowled at her assistant. Nevertheless, in recent weeks their hostile relationship had transformed into something close to friendship. Kit couldn't afford to lose her. Grace was one of the few constants she had in her life.

"No, of course not," Kit replied. "I told you, I—" She was about to swear yet again to her unyielding faithlessness when Grace waved her hands to ward off the familiar speech.

"I booked your rental car for tomorrow," Grace interrupted. "I got one with GPS so it will take you right to the prison gates. It should be a two-hour drive."

"Was there any trouble clearing my visit with the warden? Tell him Alice Stephens made a special request that I be admitted."

Grace nodded. "They know you're coming. Even Ronell knows." Grace snapped her fingers to remember the last part of her instructions. "Oh yeah. Don't bring him any gifts. He can't accept them. Apparently they have to throw them in the garbage and it upsets everyone to see things go to waste."

It wasn't the set of white metal bars shutting behind Kit that disturbed her. Those she expected. It was the twelve-plated steel door that she heard being bolted behind her that brought tremors of panic to her chest as she and her escorting officer entered the innards of the prison. *Locked up. Locked in. No way out. Inside for life.* Kit had thought she understood what those terms meant, but now, physically sealed inside the deadening walls of this deadening institution, she realized that she had never known. A horrific fact was beating from her chest to her brain: she was trapped in here—even though her allotted stint in prison would only be sixty minutes.

Feigning a casual swagger as she walked with the officer down the polished-linoleum hall, Kit was actually fighting the urge to run screaming toward the steel-plated door and beg the guards to unlock it. From there she'd sprint out into the parking lot and hug the air and gravel and budding summer trees, and from thereon she'd live eternally in wide open spaces.

"You okay?" the officer asked as they turned a corner.

"Yeah, fine," Kit said with a smile. "Why wouldn't I be?" She was experiencing claustrophobia so extreme that she felt as if she were being suffocated in a thick wool blanket, or that time itself had hardened and was crushing her ribs. But she wanted this officer to like and respect her because he controlled the keys to the outside world. It occurred to Kit that she couldn't even call the police if something happened: they had confiscated her purse and phone at the entrance desk.

On the drive up to this remote maximum-security prison in the bucolic, slightly methy-looking Catskills, Kit had actually been excited for the adventure of prison. Now she felt ashamed for painting mug shots of inmates, as if their daily torture inside these human warehouses had given her a tough street cred that she hadn't in any way earned. She had behaved like some thirteen-year-old suburban kid who dreamt of being a gangster because she liked listening to rap music. Her art was a con, a lie, and the only genuine element of *Untitled, #7* was the strange tear rolling down from the prisoner's painted eye. *Human beings shouldn't be locked up for life in these inhuman places*, she thought. And yet many were—many, many, many.

The officer led her into a small white-cinder-block room with a laminated faux-wood table in its center and plastic chairs on either side. There were two windows in the room, with beige blinds covering them. She couldn't have pulled the blinds up had she wanted to because they were encased in locked grates.

"Is this the waiting room before you take me in to see him?" she asked. The officer was tall, plump, and white, with a doughy, dimply face that didn't seem sufficiently intimidating.

"No," he said. "We bring Stephens in here to meet with you."

Kit quickly glanced at the arrangement of table and chairs as if expecting a sheet of safety glass to materialize and separate the visitor from the inmate.

"You mean, we talk over a table?" she asked. "With no barrier between us?" The officer smiled. More dimples emerged on his cheeks.

"Yeah. It isn't like TV, ma'am. You sit across from him like in a normal meeting. I stand outside."

"Outside? So we're alone together?" Kit had come to visit Ronell because she might very well champion his release. But he was still a man convicted of first-degree murder, and she had thin bones and zero fighting skills and could imagine herself the perfect sacrificial hostage in a botched prison escape.

"I'll be right outside the door," he assured her.

Kit took the chair by the windows. Who was she kidding in undertaking this ridiculous mission? Did she really think she could determine guilt or innocence simply by showing up and talking to a stranger for an hour? She was dangerously out of her depth, and even the dimply officer knew it. The rare murders that intruded on Kit's New York universe were hopelessly white collar, the motives being passion or money—anything but necessity, which she supposed was the reason most of the inmates had ended up in here.

She heard a jingle of keys in the hallway and a young black man in a drab green jumpsuit strode into the room with his wrists cuffed behind his back. An elderly Latino officer reached to unlock the handcuffs. These were careers that involved locking and unlocking all day long. Kit kept her eyes trained on the prison jumpsuit. She identified its precise shade of green from the tubes of oil paint that cluttered her mind: oxide of chromium #459. She could paint every wrinkle of that jumpsuit. It was the rest of Ronell she had gotten wrong. In real life, he was smaller and thinner than his mug shot had suggested; he was also less handsome and pompous looking. As Ronell shook his wrists theatrically at their freedom, smiled at the two officers who stepped outside (leaving the door half open), and sat down across the table, Kit found his expression hard to discern. There was a softness in his eyes and lips that regular doses of mistrust and disappointment were slowly turning brittle.

They stared at each other for a solid minute—two random people who were never meant to meet in a secure cinder-block room in upstate New York. Ronell rotated his wrists again. Then he spoke.

"I didn't think you'd be Asian."

Kit didn't mean to grin, but once a grin spread across her face she let it remain there. It seemed to relax him. He slumped a bit.

"What did you think I'd be?"

"White."

"I'm half white and half Asian. My mom's Korean."

"Know what I am?"

"What?"

“Property.” Ronell pinched his green shirt, where PROPERTY OF was emblazoned across his chest. Below it spread a litter of worn-away letters that must have once spelled out the name of the prison. “I’ve always been property — of the state, or the police, or white people — even before I landed here.”

Kit nodded. In some way she agreed with his assessment.

“Shit,” he hissed and shoved himself back in his chair, folding his arms over his stomach. He was eyeing her paint-stained fingers on the table. “My mom says you’re a painter. A real artist.”

“I am.”

“I live in a painting.” At first Kit thought he meant *Untitled, #7*, and she maneuvered her dry tongue to begin explaining why she had painted his mug shot. But Ronell hadn’t meant that. “I live nineteen hours a day, every day, inside four painted walls and one painted ceiling. No window.” He laughed humorlessly. His hair was shaved so close to his scalp that she could see each fine black hair the shape of a curlie against his brown-pink flesh. “I hate paint. I didn’t want to meet you.” His eyes fled to a corner of the room. “My mom made me promise I would. She thinks you can help me. You can’t.”

Kit wanted to reach her hand out and press it against his fists. But she presumed — even though the officers weren’t in the room — that physical contact was against the rules.

“I’d like to help you, or at least try,” she said. “Ronell?” She waited for him to gaze up at her. This awkward next question required eye contact. “Can I ask, are you really innocent?”

His eyes constricted, almost closing entirely, as if to shut her out. “What do you think?” he answered coolly. “It doesn’t matter what I think, does it? All that matters is what *you* think.” It struck Kit that Ronell’s response to the question of his guilt was the same as the one she gave when people asked what her paintings meant. But murder wasn’t the same as art: there was a definite answer as to whether he had killed someone or not. Wasn’t there?

“I don’t know enough about your case,” she replied. “I know what your mom says, and what the papers say, and —”

— And what twelve straight folks in a jury box said so they could be done before lunch.” He lifted his eyes to the ceiling. She thought she saw tears in them, although the harsh institutional lighting glistened any shiny surface. “I’ll tell you the truth. I fucked up. I fucked up my life real bad. I was young. And you can’t blame my mom for it. She tried. But I was bent, man. I was bent on it.” He went quiet for a while, watching his thumbs dance on the table. The face that finally emerged was both softer and older than it had been minutes before. Ronell looked directly at her. “I didn’t kill anyone. I did a lot of other stuff. I sold drugs. I was not good. But I didn’t kill that undercover cop. No matter. The police needed to nail someone for the loss of one of their own, and they saw me as a gold opportunity, take down this punk and look like heroes. They got one of my friends to rat me out in exchange for charges dropped on another crime. So he swore in court that I bragged about shooting that cop. But I didn’t. He lied. It’s the usual story. Here I am.” He rotated his head to flex every muscle of his neck. “It’s the same story you’ll hear from every other guy in this pen. *I ain’t guilty, I ain’t guilty*. So why should you believe me? I wouldn’t.”

Kit had made a career of capturing faces. She’d drawn them, sketched them, painted them, studied them like subway maps. You don’t walk away from years of that specialty without learning how to read them. Ronell had irises the color of worn leather. He had a mole in the corner of his left nostril. The bottom of his chin was rounded like a buckeye seed. And according to Kit, he was telling the truth.

“I believe you,” she said. “I’m going to do whatever I can to have your case reopened. I can’t promise it will be, but I can promise I’ll try.”

The faint tug of an appreciative smile appeared at the side of Ronell’s mouth, which he immediately covered with his hand. He slumped back in the chair.

“By the way, since we’re being honest with each other, I don’t buy your bullshit.”

“What bullshit?” Kit asked.

Perhaps Ronell could read faces too because he was staring intently at hers as if he saw something revealing on it. “About you being some sort of saint who performs miracles like my mom thinks. About you making a painting of me that cries tears. I didn’t cry once during my trial.

Not once. So no god is going to come out of the clouds and choose a picture of me to strike with any stupid miracle. I don’t buy your whole religion act. It’s bullshit. Just so we’re clear.”

A part of Kit had expected Ronell to thank her. Even locked up in this remote corner of New York State, he must know that it was her painting that had spurred all the renewed interest in his case. Strangely, though, Kit preferred his honesty to gratitude. She broke her self-imposed rule against physical contact and reached her hand across the table. She pressed her fingers against his knuckles.

“You know what? I’m not sure I buy my bullshit either. We’ll both have to wait and see.”

Kit forgot to hug the sunlight as she walked through the prison parking lot. As she clicked the power button on her phone, she was already planning her speeches on the two morning-TV shows and at the rally at City Hall next weekend. Her phone displayed a flurry of missed calls from Grace. Kit called Grace back, cradling the phone between her neck and shoulder as she unlocked the rental car and tossed her purse across the seat.

“Kit!” Grace wheezed. “Where are you?” There was a pathological urgency in her assistant’s voice.

“I’m just leaving the prison,” she answered flatly.

“And you’re safe?”

“Of course I’m safe! I’ve been in jail for the past hour.” Kit sensed that something wasn’t right. “What’s going on? Are *you* okay?”

Grace’s breathing turned rickety. “I’m shaken up but otherwise okay. There was an intruder at the studio this morning. An attacker really. I was in the back room when I heard a voice. Oh my god, Kit, it was such a scary voice! It was so scary I thought it was a joke! It yelled in a whisper, ‘You evil cunt!’” Kit’s entire body turned to ice. It was the same message whispered to her by her relentless anonymous prank caller. The voice had finally grown legs and come looking for her at her own studio.

“Jesus,” Kit moaned.

“Right?” Grace rasped. “When I heard this stranger say ‘evil cunt,’ I knew he was looking for you.” Kit chose to ignore the unintended insult. “I raced out into the main room because I still thought it was someone joking, and a young man in a ski mask was standing there about to swing a baseball bat right at my head! He nearly killed me, Kit! Thank god you and I look nothing alike. When he saw I wasn’t you, he bolted. The police are fanning the neighborhood looking for him. I was worried he might have tracked you down up at the prison.”

Kit scanned the backseat of her car just to ensure that a young man in a ski mask wasn’t crouched below the seats. She locked the doors and started the engine.

“Look, I think I have an idea who the guy might be,” Kit said. “I know from mutual friends that Kai has been devastated by our breakup. He’s clearly heartbroken to the point that he’s lost his mind. I think it’s best if —”

“No,” Grace broke in. “The attacker isn’t Kai. The police know who the kid is, they just can’t find him.”

“They know who my prank caller is? How?”

“His mother was afraid he might try to hurt you so she called the police to warn them. I guess they’ve decided to take her warning seriously now that I was almost clubbed to death in your place.”

“But who would want to try to hurt me?” Kit whined. “Me, who made a painting that cries tears?”

“Easy,” Grace replied. “Ronell Stephens killed an undercover cop named Anthony Esposito. Esposito has a teenage son named Mateo. That’s our attacker. Don’t you see? Ronell was safely behind bars forever until you came along and made that painting. He blames you. You might be the reason his father’s killer goes free.”

Kit stared straight ahead, gliding her rental car onto the interstate that would lead her back to the scenes of past and future crimes — her lethal, beloved New York.

[To be continued]

SWIM OVER ORLY

A short story in four parts
by Christopher Bollen

Part Four

“Oh, it’s beautiful,” Kit said unconvincingly.

She sat on the arm of a leather sofa, her bare legs goose-bumped from the blast of an entirely-too-low air-conditioning unit, her face and neck beaded with sweat from the record-high temperature of late spring in Manhattan. Standing before her in the spacious hotel room was Ronell Stephens’s mother, Alice. The attractive older woman wore the same lavender suit she’d sported the night Kit first met her, at the basement prayer meeting celebrating Kit’s miracle painting. The lavender suit must be Alice’s best outfit—or her *only* outfit, as far as Kit knew; she’d only laid eyes on the woman these two times. All Kit really knew about her was that her son had been convicted of homicide.

“Absolutely stunning,” Kit exclaimed more loudly, as if volume could be confused for sincerity. “All the sparkles! How creative!”

The madness of the moment overwhelmed Kit as she faked a smile and adjusted her perch on the sofa arm. It was as if she had been suddenly asked to identify herself in a police lineup. She couldn’t recognize her own life—not to point to it with certainty and proclaim, *Yes, that’s the one*. How did she get here? What had she become? A month ago she’d been minding her own precious business, painting portraits of unknown murderers and enjoying the success of a rising-star artist. Since her painting of Ronell had magically sprouted tears, she’d been dropped from her gallery, turned into tabloid fodder, visited a maximum-security prison, appeared on two morning talk shows to lecture a blinking camera about the inherent racism of the US judicial system, and, *oh, yeah*, had her life threatened by the revenge-seeking son of the cop Ronell had allegedly shot to death. It was that last item that had brought on bouts of queasiness about the plan for today. Mateo Esposito, who had already tried to bash her head in with a baseball bat, was out there somewhere on the loose. The police had been unable to find him. He was out there with god knows what arsenal of weapons, and in one hour Kit was scheduled to speak alongside Alice at a rally at City Hall, demanding the reopening of Ronell’s case. In other words, she’d be a squawking sitting duck (or standing, really), ripe for Mateo’s aim. Kit had rented this hotel room for Alice as a gift. It was two blocks from the rally, so Alice didn’t have to worry about traveling from the outer boroughs on top of everything else. Nearly a thousand protesters were expected to besiege the courthouse steps this afternoon, many of them from Alice and Ronell’s Queens neighborhood, many others from the Manhattan art world, where Kit had suddenly become a symbol of resistance.

Kit assumed that the robe Alice was currently presenting to her in the middle of the hotel room was her idea of a thank you. The robe was hand stitched, covered in shiny black sequins, and lined with fake black mink fur. Alice held it out and shook it as if tempting a bull to charge her. It was the ugliest piece of clothing Kit had ever had the misfortune of beholding.

“I made it for you myself,” Alice said, with pride and raised eyebrows. Her lavender eye shadow matched her suit. “For you to wear today at the rally for Ronell.”

“Oh,” Kit moaned. “I couldn’t. I couldn’t possibly.” She struggled for a reason other than vanity (which had always been reason enough, as far as Kit was concerned). “It’s so eye-catching, it will steal the attention away from Ronell, from *our message!*” Kit thought this excuse rather coherent considering she had had all of five seconds to invent it. Alice’s face deflated, her eyebrows dropping and the lavender eye shadow shrinking into squinted folds. Kit glanced at her friend Bruce, who leaned against the hotel door right next to the emergency escape-route map. Kit had brought him to serve as her support

system—she could always trust her friend’s sarcastic pragmatism to keep her feet glued to the ground. Surely he wouldn’t want her draped in black sequins in 100-degree heat delivering a speech about police brutality? Kit imagined explaining the outfit to her great-grandchildren while watching some future version of YouTube.

Bruce’s only reaction was a fond nod. She grunted at his unhelpfulness and rotated her eyes back onto Alice.

“Does it look too much like a judge’s robe?” Kit asked. “I don’t know if we should encourage references to authority figures.” Kit had purposefully chosen to wear a simple green shirt and skirt—pale cadmium #084 in her box of oil paints—because of the color’s vaguely militant, Viet Cong, camo-uniform associations. The tucked-in blouse and tight-at-the-waist skirt also flattered her thin frame.

“I thought of it more like a choir robe,” Alice replied, delicately bunching the synthetic fabric. “The rest of us will be wearing our choir robes. Yours is the only one with sequins. Because you’re the one who made all of this possible for Ronell. The beads will catch the sunlight just like you’re a saint.” Tears streamed down Alice’s cheeks and disappeared into the creases of her broad smile. Crying while smiling always reminded Kit of those times growing up in the suburbs of Baltimore when it rained while the sun shone. She rose from the sofa and grabbed the robe.

“Let me try it on.” She nodded at Bruce to follow her into the adjoining bedroom. Alice’s two older sisters sat on the bed, also dressed in pantsuits of Easter egg pastels. Between them were a number of open photo albums starring Ronell as an infant and a toddler. There were even a few loose shots of him in junior high school—right up to the point of puberty and, presumably, the moment he started to involve himself in more criminal after-school interests. Ronell had admitted being a drug dealer when she visited him in prison.

The sisters turned from their knee-to-knee huddle and stared up at Kit with adoration. The bedroom offered no privacy for a candid talk with Bruce, so she opened the bathroom door and waved him in. Before she closed the door, she caught Alice’s face in the outer room, watching her with apprehension. Alice Stephens’s son had dealt drugs and may or may not have shot an undercover narcotics officer. But she disapproved of a young woman entering a bathroom with an older man—even if Kit happened to be paying for the hotel room, even if Bruce happened to be a fifty-year-old gay man who bragged about not knowing the names for most parts of the female genitalia. Kit slammed the door shut.

Alice’s makeup tubes were spread across the counter. Bruce pressed his knuckles on the marble countertop and stared at her in the mirror. She searched for his sarcastic smile but couldn’t locate it. To induce that smile, she waved the robe in her fist.

“Maybe if it were bullet-proof I’d consider it,” she whispered. “But, my god, look at it! Sequins! What was she thinking? I’ve finally found my breaking point. It wasn’t the death threats. It’s this robe.”

Bruce wasn’t smirking, only watching her soberly in the mirror. Kit turned and grabbed him by the shoulder.

“What’s wrong with you?” she asked. “Let me guess. You think it’s perversely chic!”

He didn’t laugh but kept his eyes trained on hers.

“What difference does it make?” he asked.

“Easy for you to say when you don’t have to be caught—”

“Kit, you’re talking like this is still about you.” Bruce’s cement-fixed gaze on her face was starting to spook her, as if she should have heeded Alice’s warning about locking herself in a small, confined space with him. “Why not wear it if the poor woman wants you to? After all she’s given you. . . .”

“Given me?” She took a step back. “Don’t you mean, all I’ve given her? All I’ve done, all I’ve thrown away—”

“She’s given you the opportunity to change,” he said, as his hands mimed a cable breaking between them. “Who gets that chance? Are you completely blind? You have the chance to make a real impact, to give people a belief in something more than they’ve ever been offered anywhere else. Kit, don’t waste it. Please don’t.”

Only when Bruce pinched his eyelids did she realize he’d been crying. What was it about this hotel room that caused everyone who set foot in it to break down? Kit also only realized when he wiped his tears away that her friend was not the same hilarious, hedonistic socializer she’d known for a New York eternity.

“Do you think I want to continue on like I have?” he asked. “To be that man for the rest of my life? To sleep with any young person who’s willing to say yes to me? To consider it an achievement if I don’t start drinking until noon? To be writing articles about twenty-year-old painters who think they’re the next de Kooning even though they only learned who de Kooning was a year ago? To be the walking, talking, sighing joke in every room?” He shook his head as if to answer the questions for her. “I’m not alive to be someone’s amusing lunch partner. This situation with your painting has woken something inside of me, and I don’t want it to go back to sleep again. Kit, I’m asking you to take what you’re doing seriously. I need to believe that it’s possible to change, that a hand can reach out in life and shake you. This miracle is bigger than you are. Don’t ruin it. Let people have their hope.”

Right up until that moment in the bathroom, Kit had mistaken the crying painting for *her* story. In the back of her mind, she had assumed that once this weird season was over, she’d return to her art career and its cocktail parties, and an August vacation at Bruce’s house in San Sebastián, and a future of pretty women and men as lovers, and the hope that one day this entire bizarre interlude might inspire a clever series of canvases. At most, Kit thought the incident was a test of her character—never a test of her herself. But as she stared at the reflection of her friend sobbing into his hands in the mirror, she finally understood that it mattered very little what Kit Carrodine felt about anything that had happened. This wasn’t her story; she was merely its instrument.

“Oh god,” she wheezed, staring into the sink.

Bruce put a hand on her back. “What’s wrong?”

She wanted to tell him, *Oh god, she’s gone. The old Kit I was is gone*. Instead she said, “Nothing,” and slid her arms into the robe.

Downtown Manhattan boiled in the heat. That Saturday noon, most of its gummy sidewalks were deserted—the residents who hadn’t escaped the island for cooler shores were taking refuge from the hot snap in their air-conditioned apartments. But the park and streets at City Hall were crammed with the angry and the faithful. They were of all ages and skin colors. The estimated 1,000 attendees had swelled to 2,000, and many brandished signs or posters or T-shirts of Kit’s now iconic *Untitled, #7* showing Ronell Stephens. Others carried water pistols that had initially been intended to symbolize police violence but were used instead to relieve the crowds with cascades of water.

On a different day, Kit might have recalled that these courthouse steps were the same ones where not long ago her ex-boyfriend Kai had garbled a mention of their getting married. “Uh, you know, we should do it one day, it’d be so quick,” he’d said, as if quickness were the chief selling point. “We could do it right here at City Hall and bring one friend as a witness. You know, because I want to be with you. Think about it. Seriously. Are you hungry? Tacos?”

Kai’s squeamish nonproposal had been the actual deathblow to their relationship. Kit couldn’t continue to date a man who even unrealistically fantasized about making her a wife. She’d broken up with him a few weeks later, right before her painting started weeping

at Haskell Vex's gallery. That seemed so long ago now—almost another planet ago, another universe. As Kit mounted the steps alongside Alice Stephens, she wasn't thinking of Kai. A young poetess activist with dyed-white dreadlocks introduced Kit, "the painter of miracles," and handed her a bullhorn. She spoke into it to the thousands of faces in front of her, some weeping, some nodding devoutly, some chanting her name. Kit was here to give people the hope they'd been longing to taste their whole lives. Manhattan had once been a city of transformation, and she'd prove that it was possible for this soulless shopping complex to transform again. All could be reborn here, shaking off one existence for the fresh skin of another. A photojournalist knelt before her to snap pictures as she spoke, her arms moving through the sequined folds as if she were swimming in black, moonlit water. Hundreds of phones recorded her every movement and word. On the screens she appeared as a shining column of light.

"I cannot say if my painting is a divine or an earthly act, but I will say with absolute assurance that we can change ourselves into agents of good. We can perform a human miracle. We can think collectively instead of individually and make amends for the sins we've caused. Who among us feels they can take another step in this same, dead direction?" *Noooooo*, went the crowd's roar in response. "We start over as one right now! We start by releasing Ronell Stephens from prison today!" Cheers erupted across the park. The frail metal gates that separated Kit from the multitudes were beginning to buckle with the press of bodies. Kit fed the crowd that was feeding her. She demanded an official response from the mayor and the resignation of the district attorney. Then she grabbed Alice's hand and hoisted their arms high in the air. "This is what solidarity looks like," she promised. Why had no one told her this fundamental secret: the answer to pain wasn't all those years alone in her studio trying to create meaning from art; the answer was this tight clench of hands, this soft embrace of people, this gathering together under the open sky. Nothing had ever made her feel so alive. She offered Alice the bullhorn.

"They want to hear from you," Kit said. She ceded the steps to Ronell's mother.

It was only once on the sidelines, listening to Alice describe the state's murky evidence against her son, that Kit processed the full intensity of the crowd. Like running her fingers across smooth wire only to hit upon a sharp barb, she stared out at the faces and envisioned Mateo, her assassin, somewhere in the crush. She was so vulnerable on these steps, within mere arm's reach of anyone, and she noticed very few police officers in sight. In any case Kit doubted the cops would do much to protect her, since she was, in effect, asking for the release of a man convicted of killing one of their own. Fear began to burrow into her brain. She imagined a bullet striking her chest, or a hammer blow to the back of her skull. Kit had too much to live for, too much to do—she felt she'd only just woken up to the world.

A teenager in a wheelchair was pushed toward the metal gates, a Japanese boy with twisted legs and a twisted spine. Kit bent over the gate to touch her palm to his chin. The boy seemed to appreciate the attention, and his father thanked her behind his thick glasses.

"I'm so glad you two could make it," she said as she stood up. That's when she caught a flurry of movement shooting toward her from deep in the crowd. Bodies were shifting around some advancing force, the way stalks are swept aside when an animal charges through a field of corn. An instinct told Kit that she was in danger. She stumbled back from the gate and gathered the hem of her robe to hop up the courthouse steps. Aware that she was now standing too close to Alice in the middle of her speech, accidentally hogging someone else's spotlight, Kit hurried across the steps. She spotted a figure darting through the congested front section to intercept her on the other side. It must be Mateo, she thought. Here, finally, was the son of Anthony Esposito to take her life in exchange for his. It was too good a life to lose.

Kit climbed over the security gate and entered the squeeze of bodies. Hands reached out like branches in a forest to shield or scratch her. "Excuse me," she said politely, "please let me through." But Mateo Esposito was not far behind, she could feel it, so she dug through the people—*her* people—shouting less politely, "Excuse me! Out of the way! I need to get through!" The sequined robe was too obvious of a target, for Mateo and for every single protester hoping to soak up her spirit by skin-to-skin contact. Kit yanked the dense fabric from her body, and as she slipped between two sweaty, heavysset men as stationary as sequoias, the robe came loose from her grip. At least she looked like a civilian again, anonymous and free.

She made it out of the park and into the far street, where there was room to maneuver. In the corner of her eye, though, she still saw the figure chasing behind her. She dodged a pretzel vendor and two black children hugging a Great Dane, and nearly lost her balance as she stumbled over a sidewalk curb. The young man in pursuit was temporarily corralled by the Great Dane's leash. Kit found herself at the entrance to the uptown subway, and without thinking she dove down its steps to disappear deep inside the earth. Knocking against riders exiting the station, she raced to the turnstile, jumped it, and sprinted for the car doors.

She was too late. The steel doors shut in her face. She chased after the retreating train until it was swallowed by the tunnel. Kit's run sputtered out as she reached the end of the waiting platform. Down here, in the balmy winds of the underground, where the horrors of the city scavenged for food in the trash cans and scurried with long pink tails on the tracks, she had hit a dead end. How could she be so stupid after so many years in Manhattan surviving on her wits? As she turned around, she nearly accepted her fate. The man who had been chasing her passed through the turnstile and started his approach down the deserted station. Kit stood her ground. At least Mateo would have to walk the forty feet to kill her. She wouldn't meet him halfway.

"Kit," the man hissed. "Why the hell were you running?"

The monotone voice was so familiar—so specific to eighteen months of her previous life—that her fear turned into an admixture of happiness and rage. The man wearing ratty gray sweat shorts and a paint-flecked tank top, now the length of a public bench away from her, wasn't Mateo Esposito. It was her ex-boyfriend. Kai's face was hollow in the cheeks and swollen in the eyes. A recent haircut hadn't eased the sharp desperation of his features. In other words, Kai looked exactly like the man who had spent the past month phoning Kit at her studio, begging for a chance to win her back. Thanks to her assistant, Grace, she'd avoided all of his calls. She had so many other hearts to fill now that his seemed claustrophobic by comparison. How had she fit inside it for even a day, let alone eighteen months?

"I've tried to talk to you so many times," Kai said.

"I know. But it wouldn't have done any good. We're never going to get back together. I'm not even the same person you shared an apartment with. I'm sorry."

"It's not that," he scoffed. It might not have been that, but clearly a second dose of rejection stung. Kai rolled his eyes and, in hurt, studied the grimy wall tiles. "I felt guilty. I felt like I owed you an explanation or an apology. But look at you now. Celebrity miracle worker. I caught your interview on TV. Christ, Kit, are you aware of what a fool you've become? The Kit I knew would have preferred a razor blade to the wrist."

Kit took a patient breath. "I accept that you're hurting," she said, "but you don't owe me any apologies or explanations. You weren't a bad boyfriend. What you need to know is that I've changed." Now she wished she hadn't removed the robe. Kai always did learn best by visual evidence. "I've taken a new path. For whatever reason, I've been chosen to help heal the wounds of the world."

For a moment, Kai nodded respectfully. But his respect was a show, and he followed it up with mocking, sniggering laughter. He strapped his arm over his stomach and bent into it. “You’re hilarious. You were *chosen*?”

“I don’t expect you to believe me. It doesn’t matter if you do.”

“Because of the tears on that painting?” Kai stepped forward, his chin raised and his jaw clenched. “I did that! I put those tears there! That was me!”

Kit couldn’t absorb this information. She tried to picture Kai summoning the telekinetic power of automatic tears on inanimate objects. He must have caught the look of confusion on her face. “It’s a chemical compound one of my science friends whipped up. It’s a gel that secretes water over time. I went into Haskell’s gallery right after you dumped me, chose one of your prisoners at random, and smeared it on the eyes. It was revenge!”

“Revenge?” Kit repeated almost soundlessly. In her shock, she was still trying to comprehend the *chemical compound* part. She was still trying to comprehend the *That was me* part—which meant, *That wasn’t her*, which meant, *That wasn’t some divine spirit who chose Kit Carrodine specifically to be a guiding force*.

“You didn’t cry,” Kai shouted. “You didn’t cry once when we broke up. I think I even saw you smile when you turned away. You were so thrilled to be rid of me. You couldn’t even bother with tears. I don’t know why that surprised me. All you ever cared about was your work. So I decided to make one of your paintings cry!”

There had been no miracle. The entire last month had been a joke. There had been nothing special about her, or Ronell Stephens, or any of the thousands of faithful sending their prayers skyward. A joke. The destruction of her whole career had been a joke.

“I figured when Haskell ran some tests, they’d discover the gel right away,” Kai said. “I was angry, okay? I wanted you hurt. Embarrassed. Why didn’t Haskell test the damn painting the first week?”

“I didn’t let him,” she mumbled.

“You’re the last person I expected to fall for a crying painting. It was supposed to piss you off, not turn you into a believer. I’m sorry, okay?”

“Sorry,” she repeated. She thought of Bruce. She thought of Alice Stephens. She thought of Ronell in his prison cell upstate. She thought of the 2,000 protesters above them right now in City Hall Park.

“Well,” Kai muttered, “the show’s over. Now you know. If you’d just picked up my call I could have told you the truth weeks ago.”

“Kai,” she wheezed. She was finally thinking clearly. Her brain had caught up to her heartbreak. “You can’t say anything. You can’t tell anyone what you’ve done.”

He scowled at her. “Oh, I get it. You don’t want the curtain pulled on your act. You want to keep being beloved St. Kit of the Chelsea art world. No way. I’m coming clean.”

“You can’t.”

“Yes, I can. And I will. Fuck you, Kit. It’s not fair manipulating everyone just so you can have your name in the papers. Jesus, this really is the perfect city for you because clearly you’ll do anything to be famous.”

But it was no longer Kit Carrodine that Kit was worried about. She couldn’t let the trust and faith that so many had built around her painting be destroyed. It couldn’t be revealed as a fabrication—worse, a prank—when so many had staked their past selves on the promise of their future ones.

Kit heard the echoes of an uptown train whistling along the tracks.

“I forgive you,” she heard herself tell him. “I forgive you for all of it.”

Kai cocked his head distrustfully. “You do?”

“Yes. And I’m tired of all of this beating each other up. Can you forgive me?” The whistling grew louder in the mouth of the tunnel. She didn’t have much time.

Kai poked his tongue around his gums. “I guess so, yeah. I forgive you. You really hurt me.”

“I know.”

“I’m still going public with the truth,” he warned her. “If you’re trying to—”

“I’m not talking about the stupid painting, alright. I’m talking about us. Did you mean what you asked me a few months ago on the courthouse steps?” She worried she was rushing too quickly toward her goal. Kai wasn’t an idiot. “Oh, never mind,” she demurred. “Forget it.”

Kai gave a last suspicious glance at her before staggering over in the typically lazy manner that she used to find adorable. He blushed with smug satisfaction at their inseparability. The old Kit could not have sacrificed him, but the new Kit had the wounds of the world to consider. There was a serial subway pusher on the loose, and who could say if Kai’s life was more valuable than any of the pusher’s other victims? Which story would lead on the front page of the newspaper tomorrow—her munificent call for unity or another tragedy on the tracks? She hoped it would be the former. The city needed more stories of goodness and hope.

“I love you and will always remember what you’ve given,” Kit said as she reached her arms toward him. For a second, had anyone been watching, they might have looked like any young couple staking their future on each other right below City Hall. The uptown train rounded its last bend before whipping into the station. From here on, Kit would have to arrange the miracles herself.

THE END