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J20 Postscript: How I Spent January 20, 2017

A True Story from Trump's Inauguration

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That was the morning we overslept—Friday, the twentieth of January, 2017. It was every activist's greatest fear: our cell phone alarms blaring in unison, our friends running around us scrambling to get ready, while we just lay there, arms thrown haphazardly across our faces, dead to the world.

How could we sleep with Marius Mason in prison, the polar ice caps gushing into the ocean, and Donald Trump entering office?

For months, reality had hung on us like a bad dream; riding into DC was like entering its epicenter. Every Nazi troll on the internet was promising to gun us down in cold blood. Newspapers were reporting that two million bikers had promised to form a *wall of meat* between us and the motorcade of the President-elect. We were all going to prison—if we made it out of surgery. If you want a picture of the future, imagine Pepe the Frog stamping on a human face, forever.

All night, we'd discussed the situation, speaking one by one, weighing our options, going around the living room in circles

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the way one passes one's tongue over a broken tooth again and again. If Trump entered office with the mandate of an acquiescent population, deporting ten million people would be the new normal. But if we tried to interrupt the spectacle, they would mass-arrest us, put all our names on a list, and our parents and partners would never be allowed to fly again. Would they surround us as soon as we assembled? Would the Nazis shoot us? It was a nightmare from which slumber offered no respite.

And there we were, asleep at our moment of truth. Downtown was filling up with Secret Service agents and crimson-hatted know-nothings as our friends shook us by the shoulders and called out our names. Protesters were already lining up to blockade the checkpoints to the parade route when they resorted to flinging cups of cold water in our faces. It was no use: we were a thousand floors below, wandering the foggy land of Nod.

They wheeled the bed out through the broad double doors of the bedroom, down the narrow hallway, across the living room strewn with backpacks and sleeping bags. They carried it down the steep front steps, bracing themselves against the iron railing. Shoulders to the headboard, they rolled us up the hill past the row houses, through alleyways and intersections and shopping districts into the very heart of the nation's capital.

The streets were ominously tranquil: a jogger here, a couple pushing a stroller there. There was no indication of the forces massing downtown. The branches of the trees sailed past us overhead, their shadows briefly fingering the bedclothes crumpled across our chests.

Then the buildings opened around us and we were in Logan Circle—the convergence point for the anti-capitalist march, a vortex drawing in all the rage and courage within a thousand miles. Hundreds of our friends had gathered already, their faces concealed beneath bandannas and balaclavas, a swirling maelstrom of anarchists and rebels. More were pouring in

sleepwalkers in someone else's dream, captives in never-never land.

This scene, not the White House, is truly the center of the nightmare, whence come all the other horrors. The police are not needed here—not in such numbers, anyway. The absence of an alternative does their work.

The dreamlessness itself is the police. It is what imposes the nightmare.

For the first time, we look at each other, you and I. What is *our* dream? What will transport us unscathed through the lines of riot police? Where do we want our burning limousine to take us? Where do we want to go?

Dream alone, it's just a dream. Dream together, it can be reality.

from the side streets every minute, pulling on masks and gloves, zipping up their sweatshirts, cinching their windbreakers tight around their wrists, unfurling the great black banners proclaiming NO PEACEFUL TRANSITION—FIGHT BACK NOW—JOIN THE RESISTANCE.

Our friends pushed us to the front of the throng and we set out, a dozen black-gloved hands on the headboard, our cheeks resting on silk pillowslips, our bodies cradled in gauzy silk sheets, the brocaded bedspread folded back beneath our splayed arms as the bed rumbled across the black asphalt. Behind us, the others poured into the street, linking arms, roaring out a full-throated call and response. *Are you ready? Yes, we're ready.*

This was the notorious black bloc—bristling, if Trump's Special Assistant to the Secretary of Defense is to be believed, with “banners, shields, bull horns, noise making devices, gas masks, medical supplies, police scanners, spray paint, ladders, bolt cutters, handcuff keys, and code manuals for covert communications,” dressed in “steal toe boots [sic], body armor, face masks, helmets, military gear, sports equipment, and other such attire,” wielding “Molotov cocktails, mace/chemical spray, flares, bats, sign polls [sic], bricks, rocks, glass, nails, padlocks, slingshots, brass knuckles, martial arts weapons, and bottles of waste.” A medieval monster in a modern fairy tale.

Picture the scene as it appeared to the helicopters thundering overhead: the amorphous black mass driving before it the white quadrilateral of the bed—like a Malevich painting, *White Square on a Black Block*. Ascending higher, the pilots could make out what awaited us a few blocks away: a lattice of metal fences and concrete barriers defended by 28,000 security personnel. It wasn't the red-hatted fools we had to fear, but the full might of the state. Squads of National Guardsmen clustered around military vehicles at every intersection; fleets of mobile riot police circling on bicycles and motorcycles; vans packed full of armored officers fidgeting impatiently with pep-

per spray dispensers and bundles of zip ties. All the mercenaries within a thousand miles become a part of the hostile physical architecture of the capitol, become hostility itself.

Freeze the frame, here, as the march arrives at Franklin Square and the police move into action, rushing to flank us on their bicycles, to chase us with their zip ties, to shoot their less-lethal munitions at us. At the front of the march, the two of us lie in the bed, sunk in unconsciousness, limbs and hair intertwined, jolted by the motion of the wheels over the uneven pavement, our limp bodies without the dubious armor of sweatshirts or bandannas, beneath a hovering hailstorm of projectiles—percussion grenades and rubber bullets and tear gas canisters and frozen arcs of pepper spray. Our frail flesh on the chopping block of the state.

A hush falls. The police, the black bloc, the Trump supporters in their stupid red hats, the screwballs at Franklin Square demanding the legalization of marijuana, the photographers and spectators and passersby—all of them remain motionless. Only our friends continue forward, picking up speed, sneakers flying across the pavement as they charge the fortified lines of police, driving the bed like a battering ram before them. Finally, shoving the headboard in unison, they launch us into the void, remaining frozen in place behind us.

The police lines open before us like the Red Sea and we sail right through. Not on account of Molotov cocktails, pepper spray, flares, bats, bricks, rocks, glass, nails, padlocks, slingshots, or brass knuckles, mind you, not because of the polls or stolen toes—it's very important that you understand this—but because of the dreaming.

On the other side of the columns of Kevlar and polycarbonate, we continue hurtling down the street, zigzagging between the roadblocks, through metal-fenced checkpoints, past detachments of callow Guardsmen and handfuls of stupefied bikers and gauntlets of snappily dressed pundits crowing in victory or wringing their hands. Our bed coasts by regiments of porta-

potties standing at attention, marshaled to hold the excrement of a hundred thousand patriots—through the half-filled stands where bootlickers fresh from Rust Belt exurbs crowd together, mouths agape in a monosyllable—and we roll to a halt in the center of the parade route, blocking the way to the motorcade and the future.

The sudden stop shocks us awake. Starting from unconsciousness, we find ourselves in a petrified city.

Blinking, we take it all in: the bleachers dotted with imbeciles—the armored cars—the secret service agents caught midstride, their faces fixed as glowering masks. Behind them, a brass band blows soundlessly, cheeks bulging, sustaining a single inaudible note.

We rub our eyes in unison. But when we open them again, nothing has changed. Pushing back the bedclothes, we swing our legs over the sides of the bed and step from our brocaded barricade onto Pennsylvania Avenue. The air is absolutely still.

Moving in slow motion through this frozen phantasmagoria as if passing through a photograph, a flaming limousine appears trailing a column of smoke like a bridal train. The smoke extends a hundred feet in the air, blotting out the flags, darkening the asphalt, casting its shadow over the uniformed soldiers on parade. The windows of the limousine are smashed out so we can see that there is no one at the wheel. It pulls to a halt before us.

Should we get in? But what address would we give? *Where would we like to go?*

A mile north of the parade route, life continues as normal. Drivers enter their credit cards into parking meters; cashiers at kiosks dispense cigarettes and chocolate-covered monoglycerides beside panhandlers; waitresses and system administrators toil to placate creditors and absentee landlords. Carpenters refurbish drab box houses in someone else's suburbs as amateur pundits tweet about someone else's political party. All