

## Encounter with Paul

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The dark, grainy photos seemed to show a burial mound growing out of the carpet in the corner of a room, an unruly pyramid of thrift-store worthy books. Regardless, there were a lot of them and the price was right, so sitting in the dark, illuminated in the monitor's glow, I replied to the listing. I offered thirty dollars, sight unseen. It didn't matter that it was after midnight on a Friday and the seller lived over twenty miles away, I was on autopilot. Surfing Craigslist and scouting for books to buy cheaply to flip online is how I make my living. Likely the poster wouldn't respond anyway, given the hour and my offer, which was twenty bucks less than the fifty he was asking. But what the hell, there were over 200 books, and while 170 of them would probably make great fuel for a bonfire, it only takes one good one. Also labor is free, and time something I was drowning in.

I responded in part because the listing revealed the seller was moving in the morning. He needed to sell the books. I wasn't psyched about the books, but thought the seller might bite at my offer and I could easily double, probably quadruple my money. Either way I was good, but I also didn't mind the idea of leaving the apartment, tired of being stuck in my head and smelling my own desperate farts.

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I didn't really know where I was going, the location too far north for my withered, provincial hippocampus to register it as part of the city. I drove north in after-midnight darkness, my Cherokee rattling and shaking on the pockmarked blacktop of the highway. Google Map directions, printed out old school, sat on the passenger seat. In the margins of the printout I'd scrawled human-scale directions the seller gave me to make sense of

the street construction. The directions might have provided some assurance, if the overhead light in the Jeep hadn't burned out years ago.

I'd lived here all my life but I didn't know the name of the exit off the I-17 North I was driving toward.

I felt like a flat-earther brushing up against the edge of the known world, my little mind map scrambling to attach some enormous stucco and chicken-wire tumor growing onto the north flank of my city. In reality it wasn't so far from where I lived; in what passes for a downtown in Phoenix, the freeway exit contained within the ever-swelling borders of what's considered the "metro area."

The exit should have been within my conceptual borders, not mentally banished like the un-territory of the mushrooming planned communities that ring the valley. Places with silly names like Surprise and Anthem and Awatukee. Curiously, I knew the names of the exits before and after the one I was looking for, as if an entire section of fabricated city had been cut and pasted to accommodate Google maps. I searched for the exit for Utopia.

The construction started a few miles from my exit, he'd warned me about this, but he didn't tell me the freeway would go down to one lane, eventually forcing me to get off the interstate and freestyle street-side, winding around unknown, empty streets trying to find his house.

The streets were dark, like the streetlights were on strike protesting the overflow from the freeway closures. I finally found the main artery after weaving around in the clot of construction. I headed west on Deer Valley as the directions instructed. Four lanes each way, looking vast in late-night desolation. The road remained mostly empty, though occasionally red sparks from taillights blurred past as wolf packs hurtled toward unknown territory.

I'd been trying to get my bearings, preparing for a left turn just west of 27<sup>th</sup> Avenue, when suddenly vehicles shot out from my right, erupting out of a dark parking lot north of me like heavy-metal fireworks, rushing out in every direction. In front and behind me cars, trucks and motorcycles pulled out in front, beside and behind my jeep. Cars arched in front of me speeding east, others rumbled into the right lane and exploded

forward into oblivion. This volatile, midnight rush hour made my shoulders constrict, my chest got tight. I clenched my jaw.

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Following the directions, I turned left from Deer Valley on to 36<sup>th</sup> Avenue, and it was as if I'd suddenly come to the end of the road; the end of the city, instantly dark and foreign. I turned left into the complex. As the seller had said, once off the main road the entrance split into two main drives, left and right like tines on a tuning fork. I could only go left because the right entrance was blocked off, behind it I noticed that half of the complex of about thirty town houses were not completed. They didn't look in-progress, more long ago abandoned mid-construction. The sight was disorienting. The drum in my stomach tightened and anxiety began to ache through my bones.

The empty street lined with incomplete townhouses looked like a scrapped, dilapidated movie set. I turned left and tried to purge the image. The left road was a mirror image of the right but complete, a hemisphere of realized development that faired better than the abandoned section. The units were habitable but utterly interchangeable, pre-fab, dry wall and stucco. Human habitats.

It was midnight on a Friday, but most of the dwellings appeared empty, or never lived in. The complex sat silent and still, except for the soft crunch of my tires. A few cars dotted the asphalt. Every few houses an upstairs window gleamed like an open eye. No street lights illuminated the narrow lane; the entire block bathed in blackness only found outside of a city's polluted skyglow. Not rural, really, but to my eyes it might as well have been. It felt like behind the scenes of "Phoenix: The Making of Suburbia."

The seller had been affable on the phone when I called and said I was near, saying he would open the garage and be waiting for me. In the distance on the right side I saw an open garage glowing artificially like a beacon in the inky night. The drum in my stomach tensed, my skin felt tighter. I tried to move through the discomfort, chalked my anxiety up to body chemistry, a daylong hangover and the dislocation of having voluntarily

placed myself on this little island of no-where. Despite my effort, pulsing disorientation dislodged an idea that had been percolating in the back of my mind: *This would be a perfect place to kill someone.*

I found myself literally at a dead-end outside of town, with no one around, no occupied residences within shouting distance, and it was the middle of most people's night. And I'd blindly driven there because I was a big tough thirty-eight year old man who no one would mess with. Right.

The garage door stood open and a wide column of light beamed out into the blackness. A truck sat in the driveway and a nice SUV in the garage. In front of the garage, outlined by this fluorescent aura, was the silhouette of a huge man. I couldn't yet make out his features but he was well muscled, with a buzz cut and a black beard that hung down about 4 inches in a wild bush. The drum tightened to bursting, my bones began to howl. I visualized myself putting the hammer down, driving past him, flipping a bitch and the bird and gunning it out of there.

But I didn't. I undid my seat belt, grabbed my phone and book scanner and hurried out of the Jeep door. "John?" he said. "Yeah." I said. "Hi. Paul?" He looked sinister and dark with big, deep-set eyes ringed by black, like some medieval fresco of a man driven mad by his beliefs. I'd found myself in a desolate place facing some menacing man in a location I'd told no one about and no one would think to look. This is not common, but I became instantly intimidated.

"Kind of remote location" I said with a sideways smile. "Yeah, I like it," he said, not sinister but in a friendly way. Once my eyes had some time to adjust to the light I saw tattooed sleeves peeking out from under the cover of his long sleeve t-shirt. More tattoos sprouted around his shirt collar. It was still ninety degrees out after midnight, so why long-sleeves?

I heard myself say: "So can I check out books?"

As he turned to lead me into the garage I saw a Celtic cross and some kind of rune symbol in black ink on the back of his neck. Many tattoos erupted from beneath his collar, some primitive, blurry and blue hued. I could partly make out words and symbols in some of the designs. They told me he'd done time, and I was fairly confident some of the symbols represented Aryan ideology.

He held the door inside the garage open for me to go in front of him. Nearing the entrance to the house, I had to step around a long, rectangular wooden box lying in the garage. It took a moment to resolve, but then I understood: it was homemade pulpit. A diagonal, crudely carved cross rested on its top. I moved past the pulpit toward the entryway of the townhouse. Leaning against a wall inside was a fifty-pound bag of dog food punctured with bite marks, dog food pooled around it. *So this is how it ends*, I thought.

On autopilot I entered the condo. He shut the door hard behind me in a deliberate way. I held steady, but in fear. What I could see of the downstairs appeared empty. To be expected as he said he was moving, but I also realize this would be a great set-up for an anonymous crime scene. Simple. Just needed to find an out of the way vacant house with the power still on and set traps online, luring people with mundane offers of items at a good price. The benign listings wouldn't raise an eyebrow but would get replies and eventually yield a live body, the desired catch.

It was a typical new economy condo: two-story, carpeted, anonymous. The walls and carpet harmonized in a perfect lack of color. Our conversation had been pleasant enough, though I can't recall it now. As much as I tried to play it off, the chemical tide of panic and body betrayal coursed through me, fight or flight instinct in the red.

Standing in front of the closed door, he pointed to the stairs and told me the books were upstairs. I made a false step like trying to juke a defender and he started toward the stairs, not breaking his stride, and passed me. A four-foot long, shiny black-metal Iron Cross with sharp corners hung above the entry to the stairway. Framed, faded parchment maps in diminished greens and browns hung on the walls. They did not portray any continent known to me.

I don't know why, maybe civility or monkey-see monkey-do passivity, but I found myself following this stranger further inside an empty place, staring at the symbols and words carved into the back of his ropy neck. The carpeted tan stairs were grimy. Filthy tracks ran their length.

As we crested the hallway a door to my immediate right sat closed. There were beasts behind it. Deep barks and whines accompanied frenzied scratching as we entered the hall. I could make out at least three distinct barks. I imagined the animals to be rabid

and Shetland pony-sized. Occasionally, through barking, I heard a woman's voice, struggling to quietly yell and contain the animals. On the phone he'd mentioned that my twenty-mile drive would give him time to put away the dogs. At the time I'd paid it little mind, like everything else. Which must be how these things happen, potential terror hidden behind the mundane, banking on our inattention, our expectation of normalcy. The signal, the clue is lost in the noise of the ordinary and suddenly you find yourself in a vacant home with a murderer and his hellhounds.

The next door on the right sat across the hall from the one holding the dogs at bay. It was closed. I gauged it as a bathroom. We passed a partly open door on the left. It looked to be a kind of office or den, with books, a big desk and a number of chairs. The chair's arrangement hinted at rows. I didn't understand why the room's contents weren't packed.

He opened the next door on the right. The room was full of blackness, save for dim light provided by a naked window. In the far corner I saw the stacks of books from the Craigslist post. I followed him in but somehow he got between the door and me. "There is no light in here," he said plainly. I guess I should have trusted my instinct. "No lights," he said, "So I brought a flashlight." He produced a small flashlight and flicked it on. The projected light momentarily illuminated primitive blue tattoos on his hands. Two stacks of books sat on opposite corners of the room, furthest from the door.

Seeing the books made me think I wasn't going to die just that moment, that the purpose of my visit was actually to scout books and not jump out of a two story window to escape being murdered. It was still in a potentially volatile situation, but I was somehow comforted by the books. I took the flashlight and powered up my book barcode scanner. "I would have brought some light," I said, "If I'd known." At this point I enacted standard behavior so as not to appear as out of body as I felt. A way to trick myself and prevent him from understanding just how fearful I felt.

He waved his hands at the stacks. "I added more since I took the pictures."

"Do you mind if I check 'em out?" I said, not using the barcode scanner yet as sellers are often put off by the device. "Yeah, no problem I'll be in the room right next door."

As soon as he left the room I shuddered, took a big breath and tried to gain some control over the lens of fear that had been distorting this picture. I looked at the messy piles, according to the Craigslist post about 200 for fifty dollars, plus the books he'd added.

I quickly riffled through them, scanned some, and eyeballed others, unconsciously separating them, gently tossed them into piles. I started to relax in familiar, repetitive movements. I found books that were stuck together, bonded by some oily substance I didn't want to know about. Some of them had teeth marks, most of the hardcovers were missing jackets. There were a bunch of crappy "how to" craft books about macramé. Some of the books smelled like pee.

Soon the discard pile was three times larger than the keepers, and none of them were anything special.

I never would have driven this far for that number of common books for the price, so on the phone we'd already done some pre-negotiations. I told him I wasn't going to be able to pay fifty, regardless, and for me to drive that far he'd need to agree to thirty dollars for sure, forty if the books were good.

These books were okay titles for someone, but not for a serious seller, and the condition of most was sub-par. I realize that not only did I drive all this way and get the shit scared out of me, but I was going to leave empty-handed. Bunk all the way around. I looked at the books for a few more minutes, looking for something worth the hassle, but confirmed they weren't worth much.

"Uh, Paul," I said, as I stepped into the hall, directing my voice to the den, my voice sounding almost meek. I inadvertently saw more of the room opposite. The motif of large crosses and maps carried on, and there were definitely three small rows of chairs crowned by a very tall desk. A small chapel of some kind. A DIY home church. Having calmed down in the everydayness of scouting books so I no longer feared for my life and was able to momentarily marvel at the little world I'd dropped into.

Paul appeared and we went back into the dark room, this time he leaves the door open to provide weak slanted light. "I hate to say this, but I don't think I can use them," I said. He was stone-faced but a little disappointment registered, even in the near dark. "Oh, okay," he said. There was a pause. "Yeah, I mean they're fine titles, but I just don't

know if they'll work for my purposes.” “I understand, no problem,” he said. “Unless you wanted to sell them really cheap.”

There is a short negotiation. On the phone he'd said he wasn't going to give them away, but I knew a moving truck was coming in the morning and he didn't have room. I didn't want to insult him, but offered him twenty dollars, the most I would pay for what I saw in the stacks in the dark. We finally settled on twenty-five, and I handed him the money.

Wordlessly we started boxing the books. As we did the atmosphere changed. The mood was distinct from both those first fearful, ominous minutes and the business mode of looking at the books in near darkness. We settled into an affable, mutual relief and benefit once the money changed hands, though I think for different reasons for each of us.

We worked on how to best box and move the books. I had boxes, he had a dolly and we quickly started boxing them. I bent to the task as I'd done solo so many times before, buying and selling books online is oddly labor-intensive. Having someone else doing the same thing beside me was novel and fun.

As we boxed books he found a title he wanted to keep. “No problem” I said. He was obviously a book lover, but if the stacks were any indication, a general reader, though I felt this was likely a cobbled together lot of cast-offs. When examining someone's collection for sale there is often a pattern of interest, an exploration of a discipline or indulgence in a genre or aesthetic. That kind of pattern wasn't visible in these selections. “We spend most of our free time reading books,” he said, I believed him. He expertly lowered the dolly down the stairs.

Sometime during the work he said his friend had claimed the digital age signaled the death of the bound book. I disagreed, held out a hardcover in the darkness and said: “This is one of the oldest technologies since the written word and one of the most enduring. It's one of the most pleasing information delivery systems and humans love having something in their hands,” or something not really or nearly as eloquent. I was still coming down off of glandular fright. I cited Amazon as a testament to the endurance and popularity of the book, and he said that was where his wife worked. This was just before the debut of the Kindle.

“At the warehouse?” I said, referring to the unfathomable behemoth located not too far north of where we were. I’d discovered the steroidal Amazon warehouse by mistake and still thought of in the abstract, not unlike the outlying master-planned communities that remained off my mental map.

I’d found out about the Amazon warehouse when I’d ordered a book on the site and it had been delivered the next day. I noticed the package had a Phoenix return address. After a little Google-Fu, I found images of the mammoth structure on Google Earth. I stared aghast at the warehouse’s size: over 600,000 square feet. Afterward I purged the thought of such an automated super-structure hidden in plain sight, and the others just like it in hub cities across America. Maybe I’d done this because at the time I made my living through Amazon. Later I would also learn of the poor working conditions in these facilities.

“Yeah, she was working out there until we had to move.” How random and cool, I thought, and asked how she’d gotten the job. I explained that I’d considered applying there because I sell on Amazon and wondered if that would be a plus or a minus. I guess I was job networking in a weird way, on some level already understanding my book business was failing. “She got it through temp agencies,” he said. “I would have worked there too, but with all the background stuff they do they wouldn’t hire me.” I said nothing. There was a silence.

Unprompted he said:

“I don’t have a felony, okay. I’ve never been convicted of a felony. I know what I might look like, all tattooed and stuff, and I did some time, but I don’t have a felony on my record. But still these background checks, they turn up this old charge, this battery I have, and they don’t even consider hiring me. It’s a really old charge but it doesn’t matter.” We were standing up facing each other in the dark room, after both rising up from boxing books.

In this moment there was an odd bonding. My response to this was weak in comparison, saying I couldn’t believe the things they checked for now, like doing credit checks on job applications. I told him I found it incredibly intrusive and counter-intuitive, “I mean, you would think someone with money problems would *want* to work and work even harder.”

A few minutes later we'd loaded up the dolly for the third time and had almost finished boxing. In the dark corner sat a discard pile of books I knew I couldn't use. I chucked them into a ragged box and left them in the room.

"I mean, to them it doesn't matter," said Paul, "about what you're doing now, or how you have changed. They only care about the black mark. I'm a minister, an ordained minister at a church here, but those background checks could care."

He lowered the dolly down the dirty stairs. Once outside we loaded boxes into the Cherokee, only the sound of boxes scraping the bed against stillness. I hadn't planned to ask about the home ministry or the unusual objects in his home like the crude pulpit, the chairs in rows or the crosses. Though my curiosity was piqued, I was there to not get murdered, get some books, make some small talk and go home. Now that he'd opened the door I simply said: "I noticed the home chapel and the pulpit in the garage, but I didn't want to pry."

"Yeah, I'm a minister now, I turned my life around and I'm trying to do some good," he said. "Hey, I don't know what you got going on, but I want to show you something." I agree without even thinking and I followed Paul up the stairs, leaving the full dolly behind. Suddenly I found myself in the humble church, this real and at the same time strip-mall flavored, tiny room-o-worship. Huge crosses dwarfed the other furnishings; framed maps defined lands in Cyrillic script. He stood in front of what he really wanted to show me, his passion, his books. They were well-organized and plentiful on two nice real wood bookshelves, in no way dismantled, despite him saying a truck from his church would be coming in the morning to move him back to the south.

I looked at them admiringly but superficially, barely glanced over the titles and textures as if merely staring at objects d'art, which of course they were, as are all books on some level. I'd assumed I would instantly dive in if given the chance, as I have wished for so many people to do when looking at my collection, as I assumed anyone would given the chance.

Maybe I was underwhelmed by the quantity. The number of books I'd handled in the past few years had spoiling my sense of what a goodly number of books should look like. I did at least stand reverently for a while and commented on a few Christian

scholarly works I recognized, *The Screwtape Letters*, *Life and Epistles of St. Paul* and *Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* among them.

Despite my layer of remove, I enjoyed being in this man's study/improvised chapel. Enjoyed looking at what was important enough to carry on his back across country, all these heavy things full of ideas. Maybe I didn't look too closely so as not to break the spell of this unusual encounter. It's reasonable to think I wouldn't have agreed with the latent argument in many of his books.

"Sometimes I wish I collected stamps," he said and again the moment changed like a beat in a play. We moved back to the dark room, now almost empty of books. I grabbed the box of discards.

We loaded the last boxes into the back of the jeep. "I used to have such hate," he said as he slid a box across the back of the Cherokee. "Just consumed by it, ruled by it." "I have a lot of anger too," I said, surprised to hear myself say this to a stranger.

"I plan to contribute something positive to the universe." I said, and slid a box all the way back, cringing inside at the flakiness of this statement.

"I am, I do, at least I'm trying to," he said. "You CAN change it, you can change, it can happen," he said, a slight, knowing softness in his voice.

"I can't believe anger is such a part of me now, has intertwined itself with some of the good, in some cases dominating it," I said, the books loaded and ready to go. I closed the tailgate and hatch of my old jeep and its window reflected the florescent light of the garage. Without thinking I put one hand on the roof and the other hand on my hip. On the other side of the truck he assumed the exact body position, mirroring me, modeling in an unconscious gesture of friendship.

"There's no way I'm going to have everything ready," he said, eyeing my tidy small load. There was a pause that contained the noise of no-city and the smell of creosote.

"I've been meditating," I say, giving in to conversational horror vacui, finding the need to fill the silence with confession. I needed to take advantage of this reformed minister, counselor and confidant. "To get away from all the distractions that are keeping me from doing what I should. Been doing it for a few months now."

“That’s a *good* thing to do,” he said, “a good practice, just to take that thirty minutes and get away from the distraction.”

“I think it’s cool you do what you do, I admire it.” I said, relieved to air frustrations to another human not already over-burdened with my difficulties. At the same time I didn’t want to get too specific about his ministry. I didn’t want to know.

There was another, not uncomfortable brief pause, where the conversation might have continued. Instead I slapped the roof of the Jeep and said: “Good luck in your endeavors.” “Same to you,” he said, and stepped away from the truck. “I’m working on it,” I say. We earnestly shook hands.

“You have my number, use it.” He said. I got in the jeep and closed the door. Started the engine, turned the jeep around and drove away.

Despite this miniature unburdening, my body was still in revolt. I needed fuel for truck and self. I can get ravenous when hypoglycemia interacts with a hangover and anxiety. I buy peanuts and gas and gobble handfuls of nuts while pumping gas, trying to jump-start a balanced glucose level. Though better, I feel other than myself, a contradictorily familiar sensation.

The freeway entrance is even more broken from this direction and I end up snaking through a confusing detour through more suburbs. On one of these streets I see a little gathering in a front yard. On a manicured lawn, a few couples sit in a semi-circle on white plastic chairs, variously swaying and singing along with a boom box resting on the grass. The windows of a nearby home frame flashing blue shadows from a TV. I picture some late night soul like myself lounging on the couch, laughing at a talk show.

Once on the freeway my breathing eases, my belly breaths and internal talk-down finally taking root. Or maybe it’s being that much closer to something I think I understand.

Saul to Paul is my mantra as I count breathes and exits.

