

## MADISON'S BIG NIGHT OUT

Madison was a big man. When he walked through the streets of New York, he would habitually wear a bright tan leather coat, which flowed behind him, emphasising his height. This sense of size was reinforced by his coterie. He was followed by a line of small blonde wives; each separated from the next by about two years. After his fortieth birthday, he had abandoned even the pretence of separation and was now habitually followed by a harem of three young women who—only close observers could tell—changed on an irregular basis.

He was always immaculately dressed: the sharpest suits and the best shirts. His shoes were always clean, and if he wore a hat, it would be tipped just so. But his true affectation was that he never wore matching socks. It was as if he wished to make the point that, despite the care he had taken, it wasn't the clothes that made the man—it was he who made the clothes.

It wasn't clear to anyone, Madison included, how he made his living, but that he was successful was obvious to all. If asked, those who didn't know would describe him as a fixer. He would describe himself as someone who made sure things didn't break.

Each day he made a round of various coffee shops, restaurants, and bars, where he would be availed of a world of opportunities.

See him now.

His arrival at each reef of opportunity is unconsciously choreographed to the character of the establishment. In some, he glides in under a sea-surge of other customers, part of the bubbling surf of humanity. At another, it appears as if the waves have washed away the covering sand to reveal that he was always there. In still others, his appearance is as unsurprising as a high spring tide, though it would be much remarked upon in its absence.

Watch him.

His gold-ringed fingers grasp the hand of a job-seeking supplicant. A smooth, much-practised smile extends even to his eyes. He wears his second-skin camouflage of sincerity with such ease that even he can't see the join.

He nods now, his teeth flashing in synchrony with those of the small man in front of him. Though they are mirrored in stance, something in Madison casts a shadow blight. The other bleeds into darkened-corner weakness.

But let us be fair: Madison has delivered as promised. A devil-child job with just enough salary to be worth staying, yet not enough to be able to leave. This immigrant finds the new land less solid and more grasping than he had thought. His back will pay a debt Madison owed for a favour received.

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But who is at fault here? No gun-barrel impression can we see upon Ishmael, and the work is honest, the pay set by market malleability.

Move on with him.

The wave carries Madison—tan coat, ice-breaker strong—through the throngs to a dark walnut-walled bar. A lender of money waits. Chameleon-like, he blends by dress and stance with the lunching crowd. Each individual is a mosaic piece, making a picture whose whole is less attractive than its parts. The banker emerges from the crowd: little greeting nods and handshakes. These are just empty niceties that fill the space where hard, unyielding business lies. His creased eyes demand payment, but his stance expects rejection. Madison smiles, and with magic-trick panache waves a brown paper envelope from the air, bent with green treasury notes. Payment artfully collected, spotlights the failure of others.

The gargyle guardian of bank profits shifts gears with barely a finger click. His bull charge of condemnation is turned aside by the whirl of currency. Madison has delivered where two months of door-beating and legal letters have seen no return. It is his mystery.

The true genius of Madison is that he understands everything is money, and his role is merely to affect a change from one form to another. To achieve repayment of the debt, he has turned a daughter's love for her father into cash through the exchange booth window of adult entertainment.

In an anonymous, sex-filled room, a lifetime away from the bar, the debtor's daughter is paid just half her worth and blanks out each filmed thrust. Delivering herself, she generates two paydays for Madison. The girl is a find, for whom the director paid Madison. Her first five films, paid in advance, clear her father's debt. A share, of course, goes to Madison.

It is, after all, Madison who has pieced this jigsaw puzzle, cajoled and corrupted. Even here, he has played in a way he thinks fair. The father knows only that his daughter is an actress and is happy to know no more. The daughter believes she has saved her father from men of fiction who would break bones and blind. And Madison, the conductor of this small tragedy, is paid at each point.

Yet, though it seems for a moment to break the earthly bounds, where is the gravity? A young beauty is launched on a career, not slave-forced. A father is freed from the banker's bonds. Madison has solved, not caused, a problem here. Yet as the lights go off at the end of filming and the actress hurries to the shower, there seems already a scar-tissue separation forming between her and the rest of the world.

And so his day progresses.

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His time is filled with others' challenges, and with his solutions. Their problems are dissolved, each scene a vignette, complete on its own.

Imagine, though, for an instant that each episode were captured as a single photograph. Think now of those thousand pictures laid out side by side, and in many rows. This technique is used to create a new image, seen only from above.

What picture do we see emerge when laid this way?

A dark, thick oil-painted canvas. A skeletal figure, large and central, with huge, hard-feathered wings blooming from its back, fills the scene. On its shoulders rests a dark grinning skull, and in its claw is grasped the rod-thick handle of a scythe.

We know Death, but there is worse to come. The blade is cutting into a nursing mother. The child tumbles, neglected, as the mother dies. It is a scene of dark Victorian majesty that takes shape before us.

And still, even in this stark picture, we are uncertain.

Death comes calling to all in its own time. Madison is surely not Death. But look again: in the furthest corner of the painting, business-bound and blind, townspeople hurry by as the nursing mother dies. And if we look closely, do we not see in each indifferent figure a small stigmata sign? One wears a tan coat. Another has gold-ringed fingers. Another a hat tipped just so.

The coup with the banker completes Madison's day. These are not things that simply happen. Madison travels the streets of New York scenting blood—or its possibility. He is a carnivore, but the blood he seeks is not always to feed himself directly. He seeks out blood because the wound is a weakness, and it is the weakness of others that gives Madison power.

His view of the city is a mental map of blood, fear, and unformed connections. He was born of this strange mix, a creature shaped by it. Across the city, he has his future: many small mosaic pieces, each a life he has touched and left vulnerable. Each a life lived in uncertainty and fear—lives he can return to feed on at a later date. He doesn't know when, doesn't care. It is enough that he has left the balance tipped just slightly in his favour. Those lives will fall to him in time. They always do.

And yet, his day is not over.

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In the last bar he enters, strangely and unlooked for, a figure approaches him. This man, Taylor, is not one of the damaged and the fearful. He is, in fact, a tool. A bureaucrat, keeper of visas and authorities. He has the power to make police reports sink to the bottom of a pile—or rush to the top. Madison has used him in the past, paid him in money, women, and small favours. He is a good tool; he is honest in his larceny. He stays bought and relishes his position.

Madison knows him, but does not know him here.

He is out of place. They meet in car parks, vacant lots, and (once) a small, dark bar off Fifth Avenue. Whilst Taylor is cut from the same cloth as the suits around him, Madison knows this is not his place. Even were he calm, this noise, these lights, this exhibition of self—this is not Taylor. Each person here, even, or especially those with only bit parts, holds the light when it shines on them, edging toward the brightness.

No, Taylor carries a dark aura, ignores the light, and seems to diminish it. He doesn't fight the light, reject it, or hide from it; but by being oblivious—contemptuous, even—he sets himself apart.

Madison understands. In his own mind, Taylor is not anywhere aside from where Madison is. But no—not where Madison is, but where the solution might be.

Even that is not quite correct. Madison is a door, or a key, or a route. Madison is a solution.

At the sight of Taylor, Madison is overwhelmed by the stench of blood. He is suddenly swimming in a crimson sea of opportunity. This man, this tool—this is his peak. Madison will need to leave a poison in him, and make him require Madison for the antidote. That will be the control: the ability to give, then take away, whatever it is Taylor needs.

Taylor—Taylor, whom Madison has seen own the toughest of negotiations—seems oblivious. He has his hand clasped around the glowing talisman of his phone-god, constantly checking. Before he begins, he has already sold himself. He is in mortal fear. That much Madison understands in an instant. This man, steeped in the stance of government, passkey to a nightmare of corrupted responsibilities, waits—anxious to surrender to him.

Now, Madison understands, is not the time for subtlety. He needs only to know what is required. The price will be whatever Madison demands. Tonight Taylor doesn't understand price.

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"What can I do for you?" he asks. Madison loves that phrase. It is not an offer of help. It means: Bare your chest so I can plunge my hooks deep into you. It means the supplicant will forever be horse-dragged across the plains by deep-set bear-claw hooks. It means: Give your future to my will.

But then—for a second—Madison is terrified. Taylor has smiled. Taylor, who understands exactly what he is doing, who knows not just the risk but the implications, has smiled. It is as if it is Madison who has been pinned by a boulder and will need to hack off his own arm.

Taylor leans forward. Sweat beads glisten and reflect the bar lights. In strange synchronicity, the pulsing music pauses. Madison is aware that the world is turning on Taylor's axis.

He whispers his request. At first, Madison cannot process what he hears. He understands the words, can parse the meaning. But there is a world of implication in the request: a shattered, destroyed world, fire-scarred and blackened.

Taylor—a man high enough in government to know things, but not quite high enough—has asked for something he needs, must have, within the next twelve hours. In the sudden sink-well of silence, silhouetted by the bar lights, with a voice like mud, he makes his demand:

"I need a place in a nuclear fallout shelter... before midday... tomorrow."

Korea. Madison knows instantly that this is the twisted root cause. North Korean threats, and now similar from China and Russia, have been rolling news for so many weeks that the meaning has been lost. They had all become so used to the black-bordered headlines, the breaking-news clarion alarms, the high ad-revenue moments, that the announcements and endless analysis from experts had almost ceased to mean anything.

Taylor knows, though. Knows that the time is coming—the time of fire and destruction. Taylor is high enough to know that something has been set in motion. Even now, U.S. bomber crews are opening target briefing notes, and missile crews are working through launch countdown steps. As always, the soundtrack of mass annihilation is the click of bureaucratic checks.

Madison looks into Taylor's eyes. Sees, as he always does, the truth glowing there. Taylor has carried within himself the eroding acid of this knowledge for as long as he could. His decision to tell Madison signals that he can no longer contain its corrosion. It is probably already seeping into the city from a thousand similar sources.

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Though in truth there is more: he has given himself up to some darkly prehistoric urge to spread the disease of what he knows. In the moment of asking, of revealing the tumour of terror and despair that is choking him, a new realisation erupts. In a searing flash of understanding, Taylor knows he doesn't have the strength to be one of the survivors. He has no desire to hear the short, dark notes at the end of the human symphony. His request to Madison was no more than a way to spread the Ebola-virus of what he knows.

And already Madison feels his own flesh begin to corrupt.

Abruptly, without warning, Taylor turns and vanishes into the flashing light, the pulsing sound, the body mass of the damned. He runs into the night of the city—perhaps to fight, perhaps to drink, perhaps to have sex one last time. But most of all, to forget—until the brightest flash of morning burns him, and the world, to ashes.

Madison stands. He wants to call Taylor back—not to question him, but to demand that he take back the knowledge, and to kill him. He wants to grip Taylor's throat in his own thick hands, to see the red heat of choked life burn in the other man's face. But most of all, he wants something he cannot have, something that none of his carefully placed bear-bile victims can give him: the ability to unknow.

Still Madison stands. All but a small part of him remains pinioned to the floor. His body no longer exists. His legs have shadow-shifted to nothing. He hangs suspended at the bar. He is assailed by the pulsing music beat, but no longer hears it. He knows that he is lost. A strong, separate part of him watches the rest being crushed in the grip of his knowledge. The disinterested other part of him watches and analyses. Another part of him knows he should be active, be doing, be solving. But the rest of him wants to scream to the world—and to hide.

How long does he stand like that? He cannot tell. Time is measured in subtle ticks of movement, and he does not move. To move is to bring change, to react, perhaps to resist. And he is not ready, nor capable—perhaps.

Then he does move. How can he not? A man who stands in the centre of a thousand bloodied chains of obligation can hardly breathe without pulling on one. If his life has been about one thing, it has been about setting himself ready to handle this ultimate of disasters. He is no Taylor. He will not give himself to oblivion. He will rise above it.

Phone to ear, he calls to those whose lives have set themselves above others but are still bound to him. Yet, here is a strangeness. Before—just a moment in time before he had knowledge, his calls would be answered with swift alacrity. Business discussion would be cut short and social climbing halted with an apologetic shrug and an acknowledgement that Madison's summons carried

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precedence. But after the world changed, after the snake-bite venom of knowledge began to course through his veins, all is different. His calls go unanswered.

He has been cast from his safe-haven into the desert.

He puts the phone aside. Those he needs do not see a need for him at this moment, and probably will not until—until after, when phones will no longer matter. But he is not empty of ideas. He knows a place where dragons live. He will go to these beasts and see what he can wrest.

The idea calms him. Controlled anger and planned revenge rise to his surface. Those who know him rarely see the thick crocodile carapace, which most times lies below his crystal-water calm. Now it rises into view. The crowded bar patrons scatter from his path. He pulls a taxi out of the yellow stream. He has to fight for a moment with a wild-eyed couple who challenge his right, and he sees in them the toxin of knowledge. His feral look turns them aside. Their purpose is defeated for just a few moments, and they stumble into an alley, clawing at each other's clothes and bodies.

He orders the driver to that dragon lair, a certain bar, private and for members only.

Membership there is by acclimation. He recalls a hyena howling of back-slapping and handshakes. Dues are paid in secrets shared and trusts betrayed.

The driver recognises the address, gives a second and a third glance at his fare. He sees a man he does not know, but understands. In Madison, there might just be an answer to the question that has condensed from the wild stream of rumours boiling up that evening.

Waiting for his moment to speak, the driver pulls into the traffic flood. He knows this river, has navigated it for many years. He has lived its rocks and reefs; its capricious character has shaped his own like a sculptor's chisel. But this night he does not know it. It is as if some mountain storm has sent a flash-flood torrent twisting down dark canyons to warp his world. The cars pulse and pause, rush then dead-stop in ways that defy his experience. He sweats and swears, profanity and invective—unbidden and unconscious—chorusing his passage. He guesses now that this wild tumult is linked to the dark knowledge bubbling from every corner of the city.

In time, his Homeric passage reaching its far shore, adrenaline- and fear-fuelled, he asks Madison his question.

"Is it true?"

His dark eyes, red-rimmed, silver-paned, and deep as sorrow, ask much more. Ask, "After everything, is this how it will end?" Ask, "Am I never to be born to life?" Ask, "Why?"

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Madison knows. He understands the questions. He has always heard them. They have been his currency. Yet there is some dawning thought here, some glimpse of the soul of man revealed to him, and a chasm opens in his understanding. Madison replies:

"It's as true as any shit ever is, my man."

The man thinks of truths he knows: "Hard work never killed anyone," "Virtue is its own reward," "Land of the free, home of the brave"—and sees not one that isn't a pit of twisting vipers.

The cab pulls up at the address. It should be lit in a way that invites without allure, but it is as dark and silent as some abandoned church.

Not quite abandoned. A tall, thin figure beats at the door, intermittently stopping to look at his phone.

"You bastards," the figure cries, but Madison cannot see if this is to someone in the building, someone on the phone, or to the world in general.

The man turns, as if his attention has been attracted by the taxi. The light catches his face, and Madison knows him. A wolf. If this man has been cut from the pack, then salvation is indeed far away.

Madison feels a black tide surge within him. He is on the brink of allowing himself to be dragged into it. The man at the door stumbles off, still shouting at the world and studying his phone. Madison decides he must try. Against all credibility, he must confirm what he already knows.

"Wait for me, man," he orders the taxi driver as he alights and goes to check the doors. He knows already that this Pandora's box of a place has scattered its seeds across the city and now lies empty. He pushes the bell near the door. There is a distant ring, like the cry of a bird of prey. But nothing else—no hurrying steps, no heads looking around doors. The bar is empty and closed. There is no salvation here.

It had never been a place of hope. He had turned to it as a man for whom all questions have a single answer: destroy. Hope drains from him. Has it all been an illusion? His power, his place, his right to be—was it all just an illusion?

"Is it true?" the cab driver had asked. That question had entered him like some loathsome crawling thing. It was perhaps the first true thing in his life. Now he sits in the cab. The driver watches him as though he has an answer. But he does not. His life, tangling and twisting the lives of others, has left a Gordian knot which nothing can cut.

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A car flashes past. Its lights flare the taxi driver into brightness. He is burned into Madison's retinas. In that light, Madison sees the taxi driver, notes for the first time his city licence badge and his name: Errol Fuller. He had not thought of the driver as a person before, had not truly seen him. In his mind, a thought whispers.

"He might be the last person I talk to."

The emptiness of the thought nearly crushes him. Something opens inside him. He looks at Errol, at his eyes reflected in the driver's mirror. Sees Errol, sees his hopes and fears, looking back at him. Madison takes a deep breath, ready to speak—to speak truth. To cast aside, if just for a few hours, the thing he has become.

As he does, his phone lights, glowing with small promise. He looks at the screen and clicks the message icon. "Rendezvous: Trump Tower, corner of 3rd and 5th." He knows the building: a tall, dark edifice. It stands high in a city where such buildings have been cast like cacti in a desert. Triumph, power, satisfaction — almost carnal, flows through Madison. Eight words mark him as a man of substance and import. It is not just that this message offers salvation but that he has wrested it from the city. Madison's eyes flick up to the mirror in the cab again. He sees Errol watching him.

He recalls the thought he had had before his phone reached out to him—reminded him who he is. But.

But "Is it true?" Errol had asked. And the words had burrowed into him, feeding on the pus and poison in his body. He wants to ignore these thoughts, become himself again. He calculates the time to get just beyond the promised shelter, leaving Errol to his fate.

But here is another feeling—not relief at the promise of survival, but mourning at a loss. Not the loss of the city, but that for a moment he could see the soul of a man in mirrored eyes.

That fleeting smoke-wisp thought wavers in the gap between the two of them. It shivers, a tendril bridge built on pending death and lost hope. Yet it holds. Bolstered by the glowing message on Madison's phone, it stands.

"Errol, my man—3rd and 5th, the Tower. You're invited too."

He means it, means to save this man. If he is to be reborn in fire the next day, he wants to start on the right path. Perhaps the star-bright blaze set to raze the city will burn out his history. Perhaps, too, a small part—an old part—feels in the offer an incentive to the driver, a new life lodged in his bank of gratitude. Maybe. But if so, Madison does not see.

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Errol sees the change in Madison. Doesn't understand it, but understands enough. Again, into the strange, storm-confused city. Now again he shows what a ferryman he is: down side streets and alleys, onto sidewalks, and once into a garage, emerging through a service entrance and beyond a gridlocked block. Madison congratulates himself on having chosen so well.

Madison expects the tower building to be guarded by large men in dark suits, corkscrew wires trailing from their ears, and eyes looking to all corners of the city. But no. The tower's glass doors slide open, and there is no throng of desperate, unnamed supplicants begging for sanctuary. Errol trails him as he searches for his route to the bunker below the tower.

His phone lights the way like a candle in the dark. "Elevator. Roof."

Roof. Visions of a Saigon evacuation. A helicopter's dragonfly flight to carry them to sanctuary. As if by fate or magic, an elevator door opens before them, and they enter. There is a service panel, opened with a key jammed and broken in it. Only two lights shine on the tessellated floor indicator: Ground and Roof. Madison pushes the Roof button, the doors close, and they lurch as the lift rises.

Movement where there is no movement—that sense of going somewhere and going nowhere.

As the lift rises, he wonders about his rescuer. What will he owe? When will all bets be off? Why let him race at all? To his own surprise, he wonders too how he will secure a place for Errol. But he knows he must. If the city is to burn and he is to live, then he must start anew now. Somewhere in his mind, he wonders if it takes such a conflagration to clear the dark forest he was lost in.

"Errol, my man, I'll not leave you. We go together or not at all." He means it, not only says it with conviction but means it. It is true. The will to live rekindles in him.

The door rings its arrival. They wait, anticipating the crush of bodies awaiting rescue, guards with guns, fear, and barely hidden terror. The doors slide open—metal curtains on a theatre of the absurd.

Nobody.

A flat roof, air-con machinery shrapnel patterned around. Roof lighting of mysterious purpose splashes harlequin shadows across the scene. Not totally empty. A single silhouetted figure stands beneath a light.

It is Taylor, who had demanded his help, who had set him on the path to this dead end. Why has Taylor brought him here? He does not have the look of a man bent on revenge or ridicule. For the

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first time since he knew him, Madison sees a man near peace. At peace with himself even—the hardest war to win.

Taylor walks forward, arms extended, then calls out in greeting:

"Welcome, Madison," noticing the driver, "Oh, and friend. Welcome to the best seat in the house, one night only, ringside view to the end of the world."

The words are chilling, but the greeting is not. There is gravel in his voice. Depths and layers pattern its history. At its deeper levels, there is pain and disappointment. Then, hope and aspiration draw patterns in the sand of his life. Next, a deeper red vein grows—avarice and greed with fine lines of guilt and betrayal. Thus is the rock he has formed of his life. But in his voice now is sediment carried with the most recent torrent of events. This lays a patina over him. In this grain-thin layer, there is a sheen that attracts rather than repels.

Madison spins, sees his world change again. He is back when he stood before the bar, when hope had been extinguished, then reborn. Feels himself stumble on the edge of a cliff, understands that his world is truly to be destroyed. He totters on a cliff edge, expects to fall, to crash into despair.

But he does not.

He hangs on a precipice between anger and denial. Feels his fingers clawing at the fragile façade of hope he had created. Then it crumbles, comes away as dust, dry and powdery under his nails. Beneath, he finds something else. Like bare plaster laid over fine mosaic. It is clear and remarkable. In those scrabbling moments of terror and loss, he has found some bedrock, some ancient reality, some freedom. Some peace with the world as it is, not as he tried to shape it.

He laughs. What else can he do? Cry, rage, fight, and scream? All are as valid as laughter, but only one will bring a short respite.

Through tears, he turns to Errol.

"Errol, my man, I had hoped to save you, and maybe even myself. But today, today I have no more answers, no cards to play. I'm sorry, man." And he means it—sorrow for the pain of another. How can it be that this brings both pain and some strange relief?

Errol listens, understands. His is a life where promises are rarely made and even more rarely kept. He thinks of what he will lose and feels it almost a gain. He draws a phone from his pocket.

"What we need now is a party."

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They come. The word is out—the city gridlocked and coming apart before the fire falls. But first here, then on many high building roofs, the parties start. People drawn together to face death in a way they rarely did to face life.

They come in ones and twos, and then in groups. They bring their drugs and prayers and music and food. They bring comfort. In corners, in areas of light and shade, some make love. Those who do not know each other claw and fight in desperation, trying to drag something from the other's body. Those who know each other, quieter and more well-hidden, make slow, renewed explorations, looking to give, not take; looking to show their love, not hide their fear.

The night passes.

It passes slowly and with speed; it has its moods and phases. And it draws to dawn. Some follow the scant news, track the countdown such as it is. But all is chaos, and those on the roof—and Madison—know they have accepted that they have no power and no place, and can do no more than await their fate. A few think, was it ever thus? But most think that this time they have been overwhelmed.

Madison stands at the edge of the building. Two wives are with him. He has shared love with them, and more. They have seen him as he has never been to them before.

Now they all watch over the city. Here and there are fires. A few places have flashing lights of police and ambulance, but all know that rescue is pointless. Across the city, on many tall buildings, there are more parties and watchers.

Madison looks to the sky for portents and for messages. Looks to the stars. There have been planes—most outward bound, most military, he believes. Occasional helicopters too, but never a hint of rescue.

He stares at the stars, sees some move, blurring from high above the city. From below, or from nowhere it seems, lights rush to these falling stars—missile defence systems to strike down the wave of death. Bright flashes signal some success. He imagines shattered missiles raining waste across the land.

Then, behind him, on another roof, an electronic wail erupts. For just a second, he thinks it is a siren. Then it sounds like a choir, or an electronic voice wailing in the dark. At last he knows.

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A long-dead musician is dragging raw emotion from six guitar strings. It is a scream of pain and anger, a mocking twisted melody. Each note is there, instantly recognised. The rising cadence and sudden drop. No words from a song that is always sung, but they all hear the words in their minds.

The sacred is profaned, but sounds better for it.

It is Jimi Hendrix's Star-Spangled Banner that eats into the mind of all upon the roofs . They stand—not to pledge allegiance, but to witness. They are raised and joined by it. The tune, the tune as reimagined, demands they join as one. They are together at the end, bound by the wild music that holds them as they have never been held before.

Far to the west, a star falls. Two bright white lines rush to cut it off. Two explosions on the horizon, and the star falls beneath them.

They watch. Dawn. Dawn on the horizon, bright and magnificent. But this is not dawn. They see the building mushroom cloud erupt into the sky. Within seconds, two more, distant but closer, scar their sight. The air pulses, and for a crazy instant, Madison wonders if it is safe on the edge.

He laughs again. Pulls the two women to him. Each shelter against him. He glances up. A star is falling above the city. Nothing lances out to cut it down. He watches...

End.