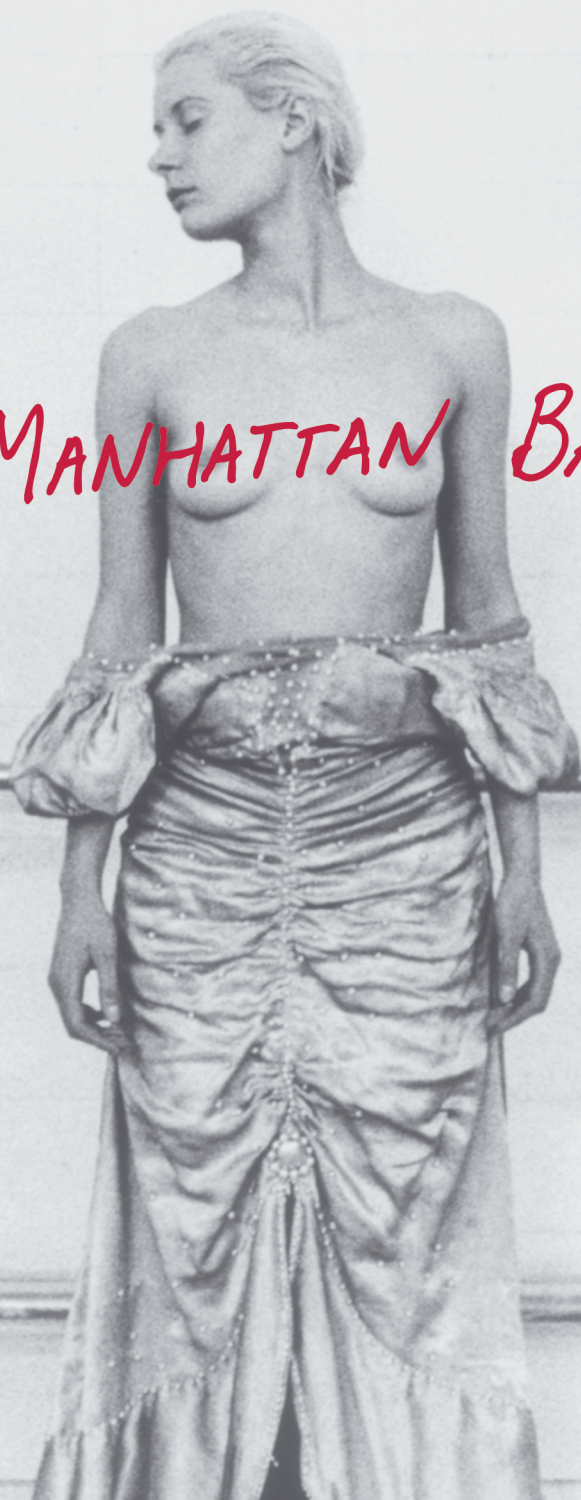


LECH MAJEWSKI

MANHATTAN BABILON



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One

Thursday, July 31, 2003

"Single, thirty-three, seeks passionate woman. Age unimportant. Marriage possible." Cordelius whispers to himself. A dark windowpane frames his spectral reflection, the lights of Manhattan shimmering behind it. "Ah, forgot to put in: non-smoker."

The shades in the windows across the street glow with a half-light, obscuring the mysteries within. Some are pulled up, revealing a slice of life, part of a human figure; people watching TV, impassionate and absent, having their brains ritually sucked out. Those at their computers look more lively, tapping furiously at the keyboard then going still, only to start the tapping once again. Here and there a figure glides from one window to the next on route to the kitchen or bedroom and, as the light goes on, the shades get closed. Further observation becomes pointless.

A red light reflected in Cordelius' window indicates that his Digital Video camera is on.

The lens aims at a man grooming a dog in his near-empty apartment. Olive streaks of sweat darken his green shirt. The fox terrier leaps onto a moulting

armchair, then jumps off wagging its tail, staring at the commanding hand of its master. The dog jumps around faster and faster, the grooming becomes more and more a sadistic drill, but the dog does not protest, it just barks with joy.

The lens moves down the wall of the building and stops on a frozen figure dressed as a Viking. His helmet horned, cloak to the ground, he leans on a spear, guarding the building's entrance. He doesn't move when suddenly, in front of him, an accident happens — a screeching of cab brakes, the howl of a run-over dog — the event caught on Cordelius' camera.

The whimpering Alsatian bares its teeth, pants, coughs and vomits blood.

A young mulatta in a leopard-skin bodysuit runs onto the road screaming at the cab driver. The big-bellied cabbie checks his fender, shoves the girl aside, gets back in the cab, and slams the door, cutting off her tirade. He honks his horn for her to get out of the way, but she won't budge. Finally, she takes a scarf from her hips, wraps the dying Alsatian in it, and carries it off, trailing blood. She disappears round the corner, past the unmoved Viking.

The red light on the DV camera illumines Cordelius' face. There is something not exactly human in his gaze. He surveys the world with a surprised expression of someone who has just arrived from Mars.



Manhattan Babilon

His face glued to the monitor, he watches the cabbie drive off. The rubberneckers turn their attention to the Viking, who has not even twitched during the incident. This is probably why the doormen and police call him Stoneman.

Two

Tall and mighty, Stoneman measures well over seven feet from the ground to the tip of his horned headpiece. His thick beard, tangled and wiry, devours his Mount Rushmore face. His eyes are closed and shrunk, perhaps blind. His rough-skinned hands clutch the metal spear made from a rod of scrap iron. Clad in a hooded robe with metal plates covering his knees, he stands beneath the granite cornice of the apartment building, equally archaic and at odds with its bustling Manhattan surroundings.

Even native New Yorkers slow down; some actually stop to take in the alien stillness. Not seeing any cup for coins, they ask what he is advertising. Or maybe he plays in a movie or TV show? They look around suspiciously: will some hidden camera embarrass them in front of their neighbors?

Others, mainly Asian tourists, position themselves for souvenir photos like the one they took last week in London, posing beside the uniformed guardman with fluffy headgear shielding his eyes from onlookers.

Someone says Stoneman guards the entrance to a tunnel leading to the underworld. Another laughs and says that the Viking looks dead himself.



Manhattan Babilon

Three

Wisps of smoke wrap Yerba Cili's grim face. She lifts incense in her cracked hands and holds it up to the Virgin Mary's image protected by a greasy pane of glass smudged with lipstick — an oil-print hanging among rosary beads, toys, business cards, and dollar bills.

Yerba raises and lowers the incense seven times, spits over her shoulder, then wades through the clutter of the living room to the overstuffed kitchen. With almost every step she bumps into some furniture. Her hips strike the chair, table and cabinet, while her hands are policemen, who keep restoring order.

The fridge, a relic too old for an antique shop, warms rather than cools the bottle of Gorbatschov Vodka. She pours a generous measure of it into a sticky glass, mixes in some cherry jam and knocks it back with the fervor of an Olympic athlete going for gold.

The doorbell rings.

Yerba swipes the abrasive edge of her hand across her mouth: "I ain't home!" She shouts. "I on vaiquaic-hon en Mallamibish."

"Open up, Yerba!" A woman yells back. "Don't shit with me."

"Yerba's out!"

"Open up, or I'll spill blood all over the stairway."

"So spill away!" Yerba clearly enjoys herself. "Yerba's at church!"

"Let me in, or the blood won't dry off your shoes in time for church."

The swearing and kicking finally convince Yerba. She makes for the door, swaying her hips and bumping into the cupboard with its collection of crystal ornaments that ring with her every step.

She opens the door to let in the mulatta carrying the dead dog wrapped in the scarf, which has changed from black to brown with the blood it has soaked up. Her tight outfit, also covered in blood, now looks like a leopard's fur after feeding on its game.

"Found this on the street. Where you want it?"

"Same place as always, Shygirl."

Shygirl puts the dog in the sink, while Yerba switches on the icy fluorescent light. Visible now, Yerba's eyes are barely open, swollen lids showing her retina and pupils to be the same tobacco-leaf color.

"Fuck," moans Shygirl. "My new outfit."

"Blood washes out, sweetie." Yerba takes a butcher's knife from a drawer and expertly slits open the dog's underbelly.

Blood bursts out.

Yerba plunges her hands into the warm innards.

A moment later Yerba sits in the room over a steaming liver, shouting some obscure words, while Shygirl patiently observes her every move. Yerba hoarsely sings a few bars of *Somewhere over the Rainbow*, and then falls silent. She spits straight onto the liver; her twisted fingers touch its glistening lobes.

"Dios mio, nada...." Yerba mumbles to herself. "Darkness. Just darkness. You gotta be careful, Chiquita. I'm afraid for you."

Four

Friday, August 1, 2003

The scorching afternoon attracts a crowd to Bethesda Fountain in Central Park. People sit on the granite rim of its pool and dip their hands in the warm water, ignoring cans and cigarette butts swirling on the surface. From the zoo come the bray of a donkey and chuckle of a hyena, soon muffled by the rising moans of an ambulance.

A purple-faced man rolls up his pant legs, slips off his sandals and striped socks, then plunges his swollen feet into the water. He looks like an Irishman who could knock out a cow. His hairdo ends in dark, twisted tufts where droplets of sweat form; the fluorescent green shirt stuck to his back is part of his work uniform, as confirmed by the brown pin above the right breast pocket, reading WALLY MART and, in smaller letters underneath, WALLY HERZ. His face and bloodshot eyes show a choleric nature or love of bars, or both.

A plump blonde in a cream dress slips off her shoe and bashfully sinks her foot into the water.

Wally Herz stares at her white calf, tattooed with a snake twined around a tree. "Good for thee, lass," he congratulates her quietly. "Thy feet need to breathe."

The blonde gives him a dirty look and turns away.

Wally shrugs, wipes his feet with his socks, and puts his sandals back on. He nods her farewell, and picks up a stick with a board attached, reading:

THE END OF THE WORLD IS NIGH

Five

Illuminated by the totalitarian glare of neon bulbs that tolerate no shadow, Cordelius wanders along the supermarket aisle. With the concentration of an archaeologist deciphering newly uncovered tablets, he pores over labels, compares prices and checks whether this can and that jar correspond to the cans and jars in the special offers cut from newspapers — he has a whole bunch of them, clutched in his hand, which he studies with unhurried care. He saves a nickel here, a quarter there, thinking and deciding, savoring the experience. Nervously correcting his horn-rimmed glasses and Brilcreme'd hair, Cordelius might be an overgrown child — an impression intensified by the naive look in his blue eyes, the purity of his complexion and his PeeWee Herman cast-off clothing.

Cordelius reaches the aisle that hawks badly sewn clothing. He pushes his wagon, until he accidentally brushes against a summer dress hanging on a peg stuck in a corner.

White, with red polka dots, the dress seems out of place, as if someone has picked it up, looked at it, and hung it back just wherever.

As he stares at the dress, Cordelius absent-mindedly crushes the newspaper cuttings, and thrusts them into his pocket. His forehead beads with sweat.

Glancing round nervously, he shyly touches the dress. Its smooth nylon fabric catches on his rough fingertips.

Six

In the cluttered office at the back of the supermarket, Cassandra Moss makes corrections to a computer printout. Her pale skin contrasts with her locks of black hair. She is twenty-three and dresses all in black, apart from the rainbow laces of her military boots.

As she reads, she smiles to herself with satisfaction.

"Hi, Mr. Herz," she says to the purple-faced redhead who enters, back from soaking his feet in the Central Park fountain.

"How ya doin`, Cass." Wally Herz puts down his sign heralding the end of the world, takes a pile of paper towels from the metal box above the sink and gives his forehead and hands a thorough wipe to remove the sweat. "Man, heat wave or what? Did you write it?"

"Yeah."

"Let's hear it!"

Cassandra leans over the printout and reads:

“We, the Congregation of the Final Day, appeal unto ye, presidents and leaders of the world, ye: George Walker Bush, Vladimir Putin, Kofi Annan, Ariel Sharon, and Osama bin Laden. Hereby and herewith we do beseech ye to declare a worldwide cease-fire, for our days are numbered, and we shall soon come forth before the Good Lord.

‘Thus we pray that ye shall answer our call by means of secret gestures performed during your public appearances, showing your willingness to join the Alliance of the Final Day proclaimed by our Congregation....’”

“No, no, no.” Wally sits down beside Cassandra and tears the paper from her hand. “We can’t write that. They won’t agree to join something they haven’t thought up on their own. Cross out ‘proclaimed by our Congregation’.”

“Excuse me, Mr. Herz.” A huge black man in a tight Wally Mart uniform stands in the doorway. The vice of his left hand grips Cordelius’ arm, his right holds the polka-dotted dress. “Bagged a live one for ya. He was sneakin’ this out under his shirt.” He waves the dress and places it on the desk.

“Thanks, Benny. Thou shalt let go of him.” Mr. Herz’ bloodshot gaze measures Cordelius, who blushes and cringes, trying to curl up into a ball and roll under the desk.

"Thou art a shoplifter, huh?"

"Oh, no, never, sir. I always pay exactly what I should. I only buy what's on sale. I don't have a lot of money...."

"Say, what's in thy pack?"

Benny rips the backpack from Cordelius' hand and places it on the desk in front of his boss.

"Open it!" orders Wally Herz.

Cordelius submissively snaps open the latch. His hands shake even more now, and he bursts into tears and flops onto the floor.

"What the?" growls Mr. Herz. "Cut the circus. Benny, pick him up."

Cordelius appears to have fainted. Benny attempts to revive him with a series of slaps, but even the final hard one fails to bring him round; his pupils are hidden under his eyelids, leaving only the tear-glazed whites visible.

"Stop it!" Cassandra needs all her strength to grab Benny's shovel-sized hand. "You'll knock his teeth out."

Wally Herz pours the contents of the backpack onto the desk.

Among the piles of paper clippings announcing bargains, sales, and special offers there are five mini DV cassettes and the camera.

Herz examines the camera from every angle. It comes to life and films Cassandra as she delicately shakes Cordelius' head.

"Where am I?" asks Cordelius.

"Thou hast stolen this, too?" Wally asks.

"Oh, my camera." Cordelius looks worriedly at his favorite toy. "Please don't break it, it's a gift."

Herz and Benny exchange glances. The black man's brief smile flashes the white of his teeth across his face.

"Well then," says Herz, "we shall call forth the cops."

"No, I beg you! Don't do this to me!" Cordelius falls to his knees in front of Wally Herz. "Mother'll be so ashamed of me."

"Thou shouldst have thought of the shame before thou didst steal the dress." Herz is toying with the terrified Cordelius, urged on by the unfeigned dread in his eyes.

"Let him alone, Father." Cassandra returns to her chair and switches the computer off. "He'll faint again. I couldn't stand that."

Herz nods. "And waste the chance to bring forth this lost sheep back onto the path of righteousness?" He looks at Cordelius with concern. "Art thou a man of faith, young man?"



"Why — I'm a Methodist."

"Uh-Oh.... Doth thou want to deepen thy faith, stop thy sinning?"

"Yes, sir." Cordelius would agree to anything that will stop all this. "I most sincerely do."

"Right." Wally Herz reaches for the metal box again to wipe the sweat from his head and hands. "Therefore join our Congregation, young man.... Give him an application form, Cass — I'll be right back."

He walks out into the store, followed by Benny.

"What Congregation?" Cordelius nervously asks Cassandra.

"It's all here." She thrusts a one-page in the face of the still kneeling Cordelius. "Have a seat. Read it."

Cordelius obeys. A silence falls, punctured by the dripping of the broken air-conditioner.

"Say, who's the dress for?" Cassandra fingers the material. "Your woman?"

"No." Cordelius blushes. "I don't have one."

"You don't?" Cassandra eyes him suspiciously. Cordelius bows his head so Cassandra cannot see his burning red cheeks.

"So, what's the story?"

Cordelius shrugs. "I wanted to prove that I'm not a coward."

"Prove to who?"

He looks at her blankly.

“To myself.”

Wally Herz’ return makes Cordelius quickly sign the declaration.

“Right.” Wally takes the signed form and puts it away in a desk drawer. “The brethren meet every Friday at five and thou shalt come and join our family... And one more thing: Keep the dress to remember this happy day — but thou must still atone for thy thievery.”

Cordelius looks worriedly at Wally Herz. “How?”

Seven

A sign announcing that THE END OF THE WORLD IS NIGH swings above the heads of the crowd. No one pays attention to either the warning or the leaflets Cordelius vainly offers. Anyone who does take one of the yellow papers crumples it up and tosses it aside after a summary. Prophecies of doom are nothing new to New Yorkers such as the girl who passes Cordelius wearing a T-shirt emblazoned FUCK YOU YOU FUCKING FUCK.

On the corner of Forty-Seventh and Third Avenue, a young businessman in full Wall Street battle gear — navy blue Brooks Brothers suit, salmon tie, penny loafers — screams at a stooped black man with gray-ing dreadlocks, who is nearly blown away by the tempestuous tirade of filth.

“You motherfucker! Dirty pig-ass bitch! I’m gonna shove this report right up your dumb stinking ass and put a blowtorch to it!”

Intrigued, Cordelius gives up his meek flyer distribution, puts away the cardboard sign and gets the DV camera from his backpack.

The businessman unloads his anger without attracting any attention. This is not due to any Mount Eve-rest of callousness on their part, rather to the sign on the disheveled man's cart reading:

TELL ME OFF – ONE DOLLAR.

"Thank you." The businessman suddenly adopts a polite tone and hands the man a five-dollar bill. "Keep the change."

Cordelius approaches, filming everything that comes the way of his lens. He stops transfixed by the viewing panel.

"This ain't Showtime, cowboy." The black man turns his attention to Cordelius. "You wanna have a go?"

Embarrassed, Cordelius switches the camera off and shoves it in his backpack. Leaving the end-of-the-world sign on the sidewalk, he fades away into the crowd.