

FRANCINE PROSE

Nolan pulls into the parking garage, braced for the Rican attendant with the cojones big enough to make a point of wondering what this rusted hunk of Chevy pick-up junk is doing in Jaguar City. But the ticket-spitting machine doesn't much care what Nolan's driving. It lifts its arm, like a benediction, like the hand of God dividing the Red Sea. Nolan passes a dozen empty spots and drives up to the top level, where he turns in beside a dusty van that hasn't been anywhere lately. He grabs his duffel bag, jumps out, inhales, filling his lungs with damp cementy air. So far, so good, he likes the garage. He wishes he could stay here. He finds the stairwell where he would hide were he planning a mugging, corkscrews down five flights of stairs and plunges into the honking inferno of mid-afternoon Times Square.

He's never seen it this bad. A giant mosh pit with cars. Just walking demands concentration, like driving in heavy traffic. He remembers the old Time Square on those righteous long-ago weekends when he and his high school friends took the bus into the city to get hammered and eyeball the hookers.

He's read about the new Disneyfied theme-park Times Squareland, but that's way more complicated than what he needs to deal with right now, which is navigating without plowing into some little old lady. A fuzball of pure pressure expands inside his chest, stoked by patches of soggy shirt, clinging to his rib cage.

It's eighty, maybe eighty-five, and he's the only guy in New York wearing a long-sleeved jersey. All the white men seem to be running personal air-conditioners inside their fancy Italian suits, unlike the blacks and Latinos, who have already soaked through their T-shirts. What does that make Nolan? The only white guy sweating. The only human of any kind gagging from exhaust fumes. While Nolan's been off in the boondocks with his friends and their Aryan Homeland wet dream, an alien life form has evolved in the nation's

cities, a hybrid species bred to survive on dog piss and carbon monoxide. Nolan needs to stop thinking that way. Attitude is crucial.

Last night, at his cousin Raymond's, he'd watched the TV weather chipmunk chirping about the heat wave, so unseasonable for April, reassuring local viewers with his records and statistics lest anyone think: Look out, global warming, the world is ending right now. Why is everyone so surprised that the planet's cutting them loose? Ecological Armageddon was just what the doctor ordered to take Nolan's mind off his own problems as he'd faced the dark hours ahead until it was time to get up and borrow Cousin Raymond's truck, his money and pills, and vanish into the ozone. Nolan's hardly slept for two weeks, ever since he decided to turn. Two Xanax did nothing to stop his lab-rat brain from racing from one micro-detail to another.

Like, for example, sleeve length. Should he hide the tattoos? Or just wear a T-shirt and let them do the talking. If one picture's worth a thousand words, that's the first two thousand right there, two thousand minus the hi howareya nicetameetcha. Which was one reason to get the tats: cut through a load of hot air. On the other hand, strolling into the office of World Brotherhood Watch with SS waffen bolts on one bicep and a death's head on the other might make it harder for Nolan to get his point across--let's say, if the people he's talking to are hiding under their desks. Nolan wouldn't blame them. It hasn't been all that long since that lone-wolf lunatic in L.A. shot up the Jewish temple preschool.

In any case, it's going to be tough, explaining what he's doing at Brotherhood Watch, especially since Nolan himself isn't exactly sure. There are some...practical issues involved with stealing Raymond's truck plus the fifteen hundred bucks that, if you want to be literal, belong to the Aryan Resistance Movement. But there's more to it than that. If it were just a question of disappearing and starting over, Nolan could have some fun.

Sell SUVs in Palm Springs, deal blackjack in Las Vegas. Go to Disneyworld, put on a Goofy suit, let toddlers fuck with his head. What he'd really like to do is give every man, woman and child in the world the exact same hit of Ecstasy, the same tiny candy, pink as a kitten's tongue, that managed to turn his head around, or more precisely, to give his head a little--well, a fairly big--push in the direction it was already headed. But that's not going to happen, free Ex for the human race, so maybe the next best thing is to help other people find a more gradual route to the place where the Ex took Nolan. Meanwhile, he knows that thinking like this will only get in his way. He'll stay cooler if he convinces himself that he's just interviewing for a job. A long shot.

Has it only been two weeks since Nolan finally made up his mind? A long two weeks of trying to figure it out, even--especially--after he knew how he was going to do it.

No one promised it would be easy. But Nolan has prepared. He's read up, starting with two books by Meyer Maslow, the founder and current head of the World Brotherhood Watch Foundation. He actually went out and ordered them through the bookstore in the mall. The first book, *The Kindness of Strangers*--Maslow's tribute to the people who saved his life when he was on the run from the Nazis--was what made Nolan begin to think that maybe his plan could work. For balance, Nolan has also been reading *The Way of the Warrior*, a paperback he took from the tire shop, borrowed from the back seat of a Ford Expedition some yuppie brought in for the Firestone recall. Nolan knows the book's a fortune cookie for bond traders with Samurai delusions, but still, it's filled with ancient principles of diplomacy and war that help Nolan untangle the knots into which his thoughts can get snarled. For example, *The Way of the Warrior* says: Planning is key. Planning and total freedom to change the Warrior's plan. The book suggested that Nolan wait till afternoon. The Warrior knows that the enemy is best approached after lunch. So Nolan has spent hours cruising the suburbs, killing time.

Driving into the city, Nolan went over the plan. Park truck. Find Fifty-first Street. Find building. Enter lobby. Locate elevator. Push button. Board elevator. Hold breath. Assume that every passenger carries a different contagious disease.

The plan is working better than planned. The elevator is empty. He finds 19, pushes the button, leans against the wall. Just before the doors close, a dwarf hops into the car. Young, tan, streaky surfer hair, oddly handsome for a guy with a mashed-in pumpkin head. A blindingly bright white T-shirt shows off his gym-buffed chest. Great, thinks Nolan. My luck. Our man is being tested. The old Nolan would have been pissed, forced to ride up nineteen floors with a mutant. The newly reconstructed Nolan wills himself to imagine what the short dude went through on his first day of kindergarten. Or asking a girl to the prom. Nolan had a hard enough time, and he's on the tall side.

The trouble with changing your attitude is that the old one doesn't disappear. It hides in the creases of your brain, sending out faint signals. He can hear what Raymond would have said about the elevator dwarf. The hungriest chromosome is the broken one. The weak and the damaged will multiply and conquer the earth like a virus. Nolan remembers one of those boozy, late-night "discussions" with Raymond and his friends. One guy said that people used to think dwarfs had magical powers, which, they all agreed, just went to show how stupid people are. Nolan never bought it. He never believed that freaks were having lots of sex and millions of freaky children.

The elevator seems to have stopped. Is this Nolan's floor?

"Nineteen," says the mind-reading dwarf. He got on after Nolan. He couldn't have seen him hit the button. What if Work-Out Dwarf is a magical being? And what's with the knowing smile? Maybe he works in the building and sees a thousand guys like Nolan, every week some Nazi punk turns and heads for Brotherhood Watch. That worm-colored geek with the shiny head? Send the guy up to nineteen. Nolan has to remind himself that he's dressed in such a way

that there's nothing to distinguish him from your normal, fashionably bald dude in jeans and a long-sleeved shirt.

The elevator releases Nolan into a carpeted hall paneled in gleaming wood. Behind the reception desk sits a beautiful Asian chick in stylish black ninja pajamas. How classy, how predictable for a famous human rights outfit to hire PC Dragon Lady to guard the front door. Nolan recalls a Hong Kong film where the secretary rockets up from her desk and does triple flips, hurling namchuks around the office. He wishes he'd brought six other guys. He wishes his tattoos showed.

In the end, what he can't hide is enough to give Suzie Wong the willies. The duffel bag is a problem, as he knew it would be. Of course, it would have been smoother if he could have left it somewhere. As Namchuk Girl eyes the bag, Nolan watches a little fight-or-flight thing take place in her face, until her receptionist training wins out over her basic human instinct not to be anywhere near him. Nolan has the feeling she's got one finger on the panic button. Just in case.

"May I help you?"

"I'd like to see Mr. Maslow. Uh, Dr. Maslow. Whatever."

"Do you have an appointment?"

He doesn't know what the gentleman's called. Does it sound like he has an appointment?

"No," says Nolan. "I need to talk to him." So do millionaires. Politicians. Nolan can expect about five more seconds of Miss Yin Yang's attention. He says, "I've got some information I think he might want to have. I guess you know what ARM is, right? The American Rights Movement?"

A definite yes from Ice Princess. Now she's really eyeing the duffel bag, obviously wondering if this is her time, if her bullet-riddled body will be all over tomorrow's front page. And is that a tiny twitch pulling her hand beneath the desk? Call security! Red alert! Hitler's in the building looking for Meyer

Maslow! Nolan can't decide if he wants to pop her in the nose or fall on his knees and promise he won't hurt her. He follows her glance towards the duffel bag.

"I'm in a kind of... transitional state," he says. "And if you're thinking what I think you're thinking..." He turns his palms outward and tries to smile. "I'm harmless. I promise. Unarmed. There's nothing in the bag but some books and clothes and dirty laundry."

The receptionist's lip curls. She doesn't want to think about Nolan's dirty laundry.

"I was in ARM for five years." Lie number one, and Nolan's only been here two minutes. So what. It's a detail. They can hash out the fine points later.

"Congratulations." She gives him the freeze-out look she learned in Bitch Receptionist 101. She hesitates, thinks, thinks some more. Then she pick up the phone and keeps pushing the same button. Security isn't answering. So she's pretty much on her own. Is that fear on her face? Just a trace, and it's gone, either because she's a professional, a professional receptionist, or because she doesn't want to give Nolan the satisfaction. Or because he's charmed her. That's always a possibility. She listens, pushes another button, listens, then another. So the person about to deal with the fact of Nolan's existence is several rungs down the food chain here at World Brotherhood Watch.

"Bonnie?" she says. "There's someone here you might want to talk to."

Bonnie? Maslow's secretary, probably. Did Nolan think Madame Butterfly was going to ring the boss's direct line? She looks at Nolan. "Ms. Kalen will be out shortly."

Nolan strolls across the foyer and check out the art on the wall, a mammoth canvas gunked with gobs of that shit-brown color kids mix up just to piss off the art teacher. A finger-painting of train tracks. Some genius got a fortune.

"Excuse me?"

Nolan wheels around to find himself standing way too close to what's got to be Bonnie. Putty-colored business suit, thin blondish hair tied back into the same limp pigtail she probably wore in college, fortyish, a couple of kids, bossy psychiatrist husband. Nolan worked for a hundred women like her, that summer he spent around Woodstock humping chlorine and skimming bugs for Skip's Pool and Spa.

Bonnie's eyes, two magnified blue jellyfish swimming toward him from behind her glasses, look slightly psycho. Another female nut case. One of those women, like his mom, always trying to be a good person. Except that they're clueless as to what good is, so they're always checking in with dozen inner opinions on what they should do and say. If only chicks like Bonnie and his mom would stop trying so hard to be good, the world might be a better place. Certainly their world would be. With Mom, it was a problem. But this Bonnie's functioning up to speed--and beyond. She's working overtime, just standing still, revving her engine. She's an orgasm waiting to happen. Or a nervous breakdown. Whichever gets there first. Nolan doesn't want to be around to see which way it goes down.

She says, "I'm Bonnie Kalen? From the development department?" Develop my ass, thinks Nolan. But what's his problem, exactly? She's really trying, smiling for so long it must hurt. She's a little slower than her receptionist friend at I.D-ing Nolan. Which is fine. Back to Plan A. Hide the tattoos and get his good intentions across before she figures out who he is. But what will the tattoos tell her about who Nolan is, and what he's been through? Except for the fact that one drunken, stoned night at the Homeland Encampment, it felt great to be so out of it that the tattoo needle felt good. He could talk himself blue in the face and never make her understand the sweetness of feeling that the buzzing and pain was happening in a parallel universe, happening to some other guy, some fool who bought the entire Aryan Homeland program. Maybe he thought

that getting the tats was a way of thanking Raymond for his hospitality. More likely, Nolan was letting the codeine and beer think for him. And now he's thanked Raymond, all right, by stealing all his stuff.

"Nice to meet you. I'm Vincent Nolan. What do you develop?"

Loser. Nolan knows what she means. He got thrown off by the silence. Bonnie's trapped in another smile. "Actually, we do fund-raising."

How brilliant. Psychic blackmail. Rich people writing out checks to keep this Bonnie from exploding like those blobs of hot dough Nolan had to scrape off the walls when he worked in the doughnut shop.

No need to feel sorry for Bonnie. She's got a fat scene going. She—or someone--must be a whiz. Somebody's bankrolled the woodwork, the painting, the carpets. The gold letters above the receptionist desk. World Brotherhood Watch. Peace Through Change. Somebody paid the bills for that. And it's not like they're selling a product.