

Octothorpe

By

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Prologue – YouTube Livestream

“Goodbye, cruel world.”

The image – handheld, obviously an older cellphone without image stabilization – shows a man in his late 60s, rectangular face, short dyed-blond and now windblown hair, crinkling about the eyes, forehead still undecided between smile or frown lines. The raw sodium vapor lighting does nothing to soften a face recognized by thousands, though not millions.

“Trite, right? Well, let me add a big fuh— screw-you to John Rockwell, who called my first album trite. Or maybe it was Jon Pareles. Some John at the New York Times.”

The image tilts down. Band T-shirt over a thin waist, worn jeans, ankle weights, laced-up hiking boots.

Back up, quickly.

“Weights and boots, so when I go down, I stay down. ‘Cause I know people change their mind.”

The camera pans: from the face to the bright deck of the ferry to black, where after a couple of seconds a few dim points of light reveal themselves, moving slightly.

“Puget Sound’s fuh— sorry, damn cold even in the summer, so I hope it’ll be over quick. And hey, if you’ve enjoyed my music at all over the years, thanks for listening. Really. And do check out my last song. Up on my YouTube channel.”

Again the image pans, to the chain barrier at the back of the ferry, not much of an obstacle at all, easily ducked. And then black, not enough time for the distant lights to register before the picture rotates back to the man.

“So, um, yeah. I should yell Geronimo or something, but that’s probably a slur. Oh, shit, they see me. Peace out, friends.”

The image bobs wildly, a couple of steps.

The rapidly growing phosphorescence of the wake is briefly visible before the image freezes, then disappears.

Chapter 1 – The Name of the Game

Mario

Mario Mendez lives by the vulture capital mantra, as spawned in Silicon Valley: Invest in ten companies, expecting eight to be flops, one to limp along, and one that returns your investment a hundredfold.

Only he had missed out on Netscape, on Google, on Facebook, on the whole electronic – and real-world – traffic jam spreading out from El Camino Real. Because his own jam wasn't tech. He could barely use a computer, and maintained to all who would listen his pride in that fact. Rather, he lived for a different jam, the interplay among musicians striving for a hit record.

So he'd signed ten acts to management contracts. Eight flops. One that disbanded – and wasn't *that* a perfect word – before their first gig. And one limping along.

He texts and tweets and grams everyone he knows, within the industry and without, linking limping Taurus Temple's farewell video, livestreamed this past hour. Views. Gotta make it go viral.

Because if it goes viral – and Mario has by now learned what that means, if not how to make it happen – then Taurus Temple records will start selling again,

and his Spotify and Apple Music streams will spike, and Mario will get his percentage of the royalties. He'll book memorial concerts with the rest of the Distemples around the country. Europe, too. Taurus actually had a couple of hits in the UK. One in France. Get Cal to lose a few pounds, take Taurus's place in the band. The money, such as it is, lies in live gigs.

Mario had promised Taurus this afternoon, when the musician clued him into the near future, that he'd get views, both the livestream and the suitably black-bordered video for "Dozen."

Unfulfilled promises. Which is, he'd learned early, the name of the game for a manager / agent.

Still, this is one he needs to make happen.

Drea

Settling in for bed, Andrea Templosky tries to ignore the ringing phone. No electronics after 10:30, she'd read, translating the advice to a more reasonable 11:00.

At this hour, has to be her son, or maybe her lawyer. Her ex, whining about something, and she swears next time he calls she's going to block his number. Could be a scammer, too. Well, let 'em try. Blood from a stone and all that.

Five rings, then silence, then the chirp indicating voicemail has kicked in.

She fluffs her pillow, which doesn't plump, having exhausted its chakras in producing a few thousand nights of bedhead.

The phone rings again.

Drea sighs, picks up the instrument, checks the caller ID.

She swipes up on the Accept button. Twice, since she misses her first try.

“What’s up, Rohan?”

She runs through a mental list of matters her son might be calling about.

Money, though she can’t help there. If he needs bail again, she’s gonna kick him to Tommy, swear to God. How to get the stains out of something, including his bedsheets from jerking off. How long to microwave something with the instructions written right on the fucking box.

She believes she has the options pretty well covered. Lots of practice, since parenting was no more Tommy’s thing than adulting has been Rohan’s. As far as she knows, Rohan’s barely talked with Tommy since the split two years ago.

She’s believes the possibilities are limited, but she’s wrong.

“He’s dead.” Rohan is sniffing, trying to stifle tears, distraught. “Dad’s dead.”

Livia

Livia Barrow swears she isn’t going to miss the asshole.

She does so aloud, a full complement of f-bombs directed at her iPhone as she watches the video for the sixth time. Maybe the seventh. Not counting the one where she dropped the phone fifteen seconds in, remaining in openmouthed shock and disbelief long after it had played through.

“Fucking asshole.” That’s one of the simpler epithets, but her spring has wound down, leaving her only with the basics, the tried-and-trues, the staples requiring no conscious thought. The weak tea she mumbles at the Niners while

watching the Seahawks on TV, or at the cop outlined in his bubble-gum lights as he strides toward her wreck of a car, or at a dead boyfriend with whom she was about to break up anyway.

She checks the fridge again. The beer genie hasn't made an appearance. But genies are fickle, and so she peers behind the decomposing lettuce and the three-day-old *pad prik king* leftovers, even opens the freezer in case she'd put one in earlier to cool and had forgotten it after seeing the video, but she has no more luck than the last two times she tried.

"Fucking ass...." No point to finishing. No one hears her, and she's done. He's gone, without giving her the pleasure of shoving his sorry butt out the door.

No, not really a sorry butt. Tight for a seventy-year-old. The F.A. did have his charms, and while the overall balance sheet wasn't in his favor, he was in the red less than her previous half-dozen boyfriends.

She sighs, opens her desk drawer in search of a forgotten cigarette, pats down her one winter coat, stops. If she finds one she'll smoke it – igniting a sheet of paper on the stove if she can't locate matches – but she doesn't want to. She has quit five times, relapsed four, yet she's been okay ever since covid and has no real desire to go back, either to ciggies or to covid itself. Just... something to do with her hands.

With herself.

She really needs a drink. The mini-mart's only a few blocks. She grabs a lightweight jacket from the closet, both to shield her braless boobs and provide some

protection against the chill beginning to glaze the Seattle August midnight. Gathers her kidney-length gray hair in a scrunchie. Flips the sleek mass over her shoulder.

Forces her cellphone into her jeans pocket. Makes sure she's got her ID pack, not that anyone's going to card a sixty-two year old woman who's got the face of seventy – though the tits of fifty, she reminds herself. The slim ballistic nylon case also holds her debit card and a few bills.

She sighs again. Takes a deep breath.

Opens the door to her singlewide.

And comes face to face with Taurus Temple, nee Tommy Templosky.

Chapter 2 – What Does That Mean for Me?

Taurus

“I’m not really dead.”

Taurus isn’t sure what to say, despite having rehearsed the moment ever since sneaking off the ferry in the trunk of Kilgore’s beater, curled amid worn drumheads, broken sticks, and other percussion detritus. The muffler and springs make noise, the crap in the trunk makes noise, and Kilgore makes noise everywhere he goes, Charlie Brown’s Pigpen with sound rather than dirt. But Aaron Kilgore also keeps solid time. Including his return on schedule from the casino in Suquamish.

Or not quite on schedule, because the ferry had to stop and search for a damned inconsiderate jumper.

Taurus doesn’t get stage fright anymore, and not much shuts him up. Even when he buries his head in Livia’s unshaven bush he’s talking, often singing. His own songs, Beatles covers, nonsense syllables, extemporaneous paeans to Livia’s unfettered sexuality. But he’s frozen now, because the way he’d visualized it, Livia – after a moment of openmouthed surprise – wraps her arms around him, sobs in

relief, and then leads him into frantic lovemaking on the floor, the worn reddish sixties shag fulfilling its singular purpose.

“You. Asshole.” Her ice-blue eyes narrow. Her forehead wrinkles.

“I thought you’d be glad to—”

He’s unprepared for the slap, not full force, because he’s standing in the doorway, on the narrow wrought-iron stoop, and she has no room to wind up, put some leverage into the swing, but it hurts nonetheless. Livia is strong, befitting her background as a Venice, California beach bunny in her twenties, pumping iron, surfing, and fucking. And if she lost definition in the ensuing forty years, she hasn’t lost her tone, and the slap rocks him hard enough to make him stumble.

It’s been a long night, even if he didn’t actually go for a swim. The ankle weights under his pants, coupled with the Vibram-soled boots, conspire to rob him of his balance, and he begins to flail.

Livia reaches for him, and no doubt would have stabilized him had his thrashing arm not knocked hers away. He teeters for a moment, knowing he’s going over.

He begins to laugh, because it’s better than screaming, and because of the great cosmic irony in having told the world he was falling, only to have his lies true up a few hours later. The universe will not be mocked, not by losers like him.

The impact with the water from thirty feet, the height of the ferry deck, would have been survivable, at least until he went under. The blacktop path to

Livia's trailer, a mere five percent of the distance, is going to be a hell of a lot harder.

Drea

"Yes, I know what time it is." She spits the answer at their divorce lawyer even as she realizes she doesn't actually know what time it is. But then no one tells the truth to lawyers, even their own. And lawyers themselves are professional prevaricators.

"I don't keep musician's hours." The man's voice, rich with resonance in daylight, tonight is sleep-ravaged. Perhaps he musters the honeyed tones only for clients.

And, she hopes, for the judge.

"Neither do I. Anymore." Better get to the point. The lawyer is, after all, named Bill. Bill By-the-Minute Porter. "My husband's dead."

An intake of breath. "I'm sorry to hear that."

But he says that to all his clients. "Not to be crass, but what does that mean for me?" And she does mean to be crass. Nearly thirty years of marriage to a rockstar manqué has taught her that if she's not pushy, nothing good happens. Mostly nothing good happens anyway, but directness is the only key that even occasionally fits the shackles life wraps about her.

"We were going to file the agreement tomorrow. He came into the office and signed it just before we closed."

The arrangement was technically amicable. They'd used a single attorney for the paperwork, since they'd had little to divide other than distaste for each other's presence.

She'd looked up the word. Amicable: Adjective. 1) Friendly. 2) Without rancor.

If she'd could have edited the dictionary, she'd have added, 3) Too broke and/or too cheap to give more than a shit-and-a-half about screwing over the other party.

"So right now, the late Tommy Templosky is still my husband."

Porter mumbles a "hang on." A few seconds of shuffling, the thunk of a gently closing door, and he's back. "Technically, if he's dead, you're not married."

"So his will is still valid?"

"If he didn't change it. But let me tell you, that's one of the first things that happens in a divorce. Spouses do a revenge will." His voice goes up half an octave, with nasal overtones. "I leave one dollar to my ex so she can stick it where the sun don't shine."

"Like I'm either a widow or a divorcee, right? Depending on whether you file the agreement?"

"I suppose. Is there some reason we need to hash through this at..." He is silent for a couple of heartbeats. "At 1:37 in the morning?"

"I need to figure out if I'm better off as a widow or a divorcee."

Despite the hour, he's quick on the uptake. "It's possible my office might not actually have the signed papers. Let me know – during business hours, please – if you want me to try and locate them."

The phone goes dead.

Taurus had made some money in the seventies and eighties. Not a lot, but enough to buy the house she now lived in. And which she'd keep living in, whether as connubial premises or as the one thing she'd gotten out of the maybe-file-maybe-not divorce agreement.

Then had come lean years. They scraped by between music and her job as a high school history teacher, the music paying less and less as streaming replaced CDs and as his live audience (literally) died out, the teaching gig in trouble because history has become meaningless in an era of alternative facts and *quid est veritas*.

The *veritas* is that Tommy is dead. And that there will be memorial concerts and minor tributes and a decent uptick in steams, sales, and royalties. None of which could be of any use to the late Taurus Temple.

But maybe can benefit the still-kicking Andrea Templosky.

She contemplates her options for a while before adding: And Rohan Temple too.

And later appends one more thought regarding Rohan: Maybe.

Livia

Livia lurches toward the falling man in hope of keeping her ex-boyfriend alive.

Even as he folds toward the walk, she too is aware of the irony. As his body thumps the ground, as she dashes down the two latticed steps, she tries to recall whether the tarp is still in her gold Honda Element. Wrap him up. Slide him through the suicide doors – she’s still proud of her strength, even if her workouts these days are largely confined to swinging kettlebells gifted by a previous lover. Dump him off the beach at Golden Gardens, and who’s not to know he didn’t wash up there from the ferry.

But the thought vanishes almost before it begins – almost, but not quite. She had after all determined to get rid of this current iteration of boyfriend, albeit in a less physical manner.

She kneels at his side, calling “Taurus, honey.” She starts to cradle his head. Stops. Bad idea, if his neck is broken. Though for a millisecond or two, maybe a good idea. The Element still calls.

Again, she dismisses the thought.

She puts her ear against his mouth.

Breathing.

And moaning, a low grumble. And then, “Fuh-h-h-h-ck,” deep in his throat, more subvocalized than spoken.

But all things considered, the perfect word for the situation, in her view. He has fucked up. Her night is fucked. Her fucking plans are fucked.

Well, it’s not like she has another boyfriend waiting. They’re getting harder to catch, good ones, anyway. She’s trolling in fished-out waters, she knows that,

scooping up bottom-feeder after bottom-feeder. She'd thought big-fish Taurus had miraculously turned up in her small pond only to find him as needy as the rest of her conquests.

She looks down at his prone form. Has to admit he's well worth looking at, still trim at seventy, friendly blue eyes, even white teeth, strong chin, minimal neck wattles. Older by a decade than her preferred demographic, but no low-T bullshit, and he keeps himself in shape, a devotee of the Mick Jagger workout routine. Just... doesn't see her.

He rolls partly onto his left side, pushes with an elbow to a half-sit, groans, lies back as she slips an arm behind his shoulders for support.

He yelps, reaches across his body with his left hand, fingers the area between the bump atop his right shoulder and the hollow at the base of his neck. "Fuck."

"Are you okay?" As soon as the words hit the cooling night air, she feels their stupidity.

"Fuck no." His sneer overrides her fumbling attempt to claw back her question.

"Sorry." Simultaneous apologies.

He looks up at her, and laughs. Then winces.

Her arm keeps his shoulders off the ground. "Should I... help you up?"

"Yeah. No, wait." He takes a deep breath, gasps, squeezes shut his eyes.

Livia broke her arm falling out of an orange tree when she was eight. She refused to cry. But she understands the pain, as much as anyone can remember

pain. Not as bad as childbirth, about the same as when the dentist didn't get the Novocain right.

Much less than the morning a major and a chaplain made the slow walk to her door.

He's not whining, not crying. Maybe shock. Maybe fortitude. Either way, good. Maybe he's not an utter lost cause after all.

She has a thing for wounded birds and stray kittens.

Sort of a thing. Take them in, then kick them out because they shit on the floor and tear stuffing out of the sofa.

A light has come on in a doublewide across the way. He tucks his head toward his chest. "Help me inside." And then, "Please."

She adjusts her arm, feels him shivering in his T-shirt. "One sec." Withdraws her arm, easing him to the gravel, removes her jacket, drapes it across him.

He slides it up, using only his left hand, to cover his head.

She helps him to his feet, guides him up the stairs, leads him to her sixties sofa. Almost as old as she is. She doesn't sag – she hopes – as much as the piece of furniture that also serves as a pull-out.

He shivers and leans forward.

She adjusts the lightweight jacket over his shoulders. She lowers herself next to him on the sofa, takes his hand – his left hand – and sits in silence for three or four minutes.

"Thank you." The first words he's spoken since they came inside.

Only fair, since her slap sent him careening to the ground.

The slap occasioned by his sudden and unexpected appearance at her door. The slap that started the whole Two-Stooges episode. Now she remembers, and her confusion is building. “Um, why are you here?”

“Well, because you’re my woman. My main squeeze.” He grips her hand harder, leans into her.

Main squeeze. Bullshit like that is reason enough to kick him loose. And now she considers how she’s going to deal with her boss the following day, No, it’s already the following day. He knows she’s dating Taurus, claims to admire the guy’s music, will be all sympathy and consoling while he updates his plan to get into her pants. Or at least talk her into an advance on the annual blowjob. It will be an awkward morning. “No, why are you not dead?”