

Whistleblower

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I had six months in at the agency when I observed my first rendering.

That was the word my boss used—“rendering.”

“There’s a rendering tonight I want you to attend,” she said, dropping by my cubicle one afternoon around quitting time. “At midnight. I’ll meet you back here at nine.” And then she walked off, without waiting for my response, leaving me to ponder just what a *rendering* might entail. It was an interesting word, I thought, both before and after I saw what it meant in context. It has the same root as *rend*, meaning to rip or tear, for instance as a veil, or a curtain, or a piece of meat. The process, *rendering*, is that which is used to reduce a worthless carcass to useful products such as lard and bone meal. In common usage it has a connotation of reciprocation or retribution, as in *payment for services rendered*. The King James Bible reminds us, lastly, that *rendering* is that act whereby we give unto Caesar what is Caesar’s, and to God what is God’s.

The rendering I saw that night was all of those things, and more.

I met my supervisor at the appointed time. She was a serious person, generally, but that evening her mood seemed especially grim. She led me to a federal limousine—of the kind used to shuttle foreign dignitaries around Washington—which was parked in the loading dock, and ushered me inside. Soon we were westbound out of Arlington and into the granite mountains of West Virginia. The backseat windows were darker than any car windows I’d ever seen, and as the last light of dusk failed, I realized they had been designed not only to prevent observation of the occupants from outside, but to prevent observation *by* the occupants *of* the outside. They were still taking precautions with me.

For upwards of two hours we cruised in silent darkness, the only light in our little cocoon given off by the screen of my boss’s laptop, on which she tapped and clicked intermittently. I had the sense that she was pretending to be busier than she really was in order to avoid conversation. At the end of the journey, as we slowed down and began to turn, she looked up at me and said:

“I know you must be wondering what this is all about. I haven’t told you because a rendering’s one of those things that must be *seen* to be fully understood. I will warn you that many people are troubled—deeply troubled—when they first observe one, and I will provide you with the caveat that you are free to leave the observation room at any time, on the understanding that if you walk out, your association with Group 9 comes to an end and you will be returned to your originating agency.”

She gave that a moment to soak in, and asked, “Do you understand?”

I nodded, then, and at that moment I knew, to some extent, what I would see that night.

I was led down into a bunker cut deep into the side of a mountain. There were massive, bomb-proof doors, and what seemed like miles of tunnels lit by cold fluorescent tubes. Armed guards were scattered generously about the surface, near the entrance, but down below the catacombs seemed vast and empty. Eventually, we approached an open doorway and the welcome sound of voices burbling within. I passed into a close, dark room full of technicians and instruments, with a long oval conference table in the center. On the near wall was what appeared to be a one-way mirror, looking into a padded cell in

which a restless, long-haired man paced back and forth. He was Latino, wearing the high-visibility yellow-green jumpsuit of a federal prisoner, and in place of his nametag there was merely a number—19. Closer examination of the mirror revealed that it was, in fact, not a window at all, but a large and doubtless very expensive high-resolution flat-panel display, carefully constructed to give the impression of direct observation through a pane of glass.

A bright-eyed bespectacled fellow in his early forties seemed to be running the show; he welcomed us warmly, bade us find chairs around the conference table, and expressed satisfaction, glancing at his watch, that everything was proceeding according to schedule.

Looking around, I noticed that the attention of my peers was focused casually and very carefully *elsewhere*, i.e. at anything other than the person of the doomed man on the screen. I, myself, found it difficult to take my eyes off him. He was in his late thirties, probably, and quite handsome if one ignored the cruelty in his eyes and the scars—the long, knife-born scars—that split his face. He moved incessantly, pacing from one wall to another, bouncing back and forth like a pinball in an arcade machine. Occasionally he *slapped* the vinyl covering of the padded wall as he rebounded, and the noise resounded in our darkened chamber as if it really had happened right next door. Although clearly well-fed and -groomed, Number 19 had a hungry look about him, as if he had lately been deprived of diversion or sustenance or both. How long, I wondered, had he been kept in that featureless cell? Who was he, and what had he done to land himself in this miserable situation? Were there people on the outside who were looking for him, who wondered about him, who would fight and kick and scream and yell if they ever found out his terrible fate? Did he have any family?

It was then that I noticed my supervisor watching me. Her eyes managed to communicate both authority and sympathy. She motioned to one of the supervising technicians, who nodded slightly and, with the flick of a switch, dismissed the image on the monitor. The scene in the padded cell was replaced with a cable news feed—two armchair pundits arguing about the price of gas. Everyone else in the room pretended not to notice.

That was all it took. I settled down and began fiddling with the contents of my briefcase, extracting pad and pen for note-taking. There was also a list of citations I needed to proofread, and I busied myself with that, giving it as much attention as I could muster. In some part of my mind, I think, I was telling myself that I would go to the press *later*, after I'd been around long enough to be trusted with really damning evidence that would make my allegations, when they came to light, impossible to deny. That, I like to think now, was my plan all along, and was what I intended when I made the decision to remain. What I was to see that night would change everything, but *before*...well, I don't think I had completely lost my sanity.

After a few minutes the TV was muted and the bespectacled man stood at the head of the table, clearing his throat for attention.

“Evening, everybody,” he began good-naturedly. “Most of you are familiar with our protocol here, but I see at least one new face tonight”—here he indicated me—“and so I'm going to take a moment to review. Cell view, please.”

The television image was replaced by Number 19, pacing.

“This subject,” spectacles continued, “like all our subjects, was delivered into our possession by the U.S. Marshall’s service. He is a convicted multiple murderer and, according to official records, was executed by lethal injection in the federal death house at Marion, Indiana six weeks ago, and subsequently cremated. The cell in which he is contained is located in an automated, unmanned bunker several miles from this facility. Since coming into our possession, subject has been fed on a consistent schedule—twice daily, once in the morning and once in the evening. The morning meal provides about 500 calories and is supplied regardless of his behavior; the evening meal is more substantial. It contains 1000 calories and is supplied upon subject’s completion of a task.”

Spectacles operated a series of controls. As we watched, a panel slid open in the wall of Number 19’s cell, exposing a recess, the contents of which were as yet invisible from our vantage point. Number 19 stopped his pacing and turned, warily, to observe the contents of the cavity. Cautiously he began to move towards it.

“These tasks are of varying complexity, but are always of the nature of games. Sometimes it’s a crossword puzzle, for instance, and sometimes a mechanical puzzle like the Towers of Hanoi. The tasks are chosen to be self-explanatory; no instruction is provided, so the subject must intuit the conditions of solution in order to achieve them and be fed. Sometimes we deliberately frustrate him by introducing an unclear, arduous, or highly complex task, and generally we find that this increases his performance on subsequent tasks for several days. Typically we frustrate him no more than once a week, but have now done so for two days in a row. He did not eat last night, nor the night before.”

Number 19 had by this time extracted the contents of the recess, and was standing by the open panel, fiddling with it. It was a puzzle box, of ornate and intricate design, something like a Victorian Rubick’s cube. Even at my relatively great distance, I could tell that it was a product of exquisite craftsmanship and that it was very old and probably very valuable. By the look on Number 19’s face, I could tell, also, that I was not the only one who experienced a strong and rather unnatural fascination with it.

After a minute or so of fiddling the man moved back a few steps and sat down on the floor, Indian-style, the puzzle cradled gently in his lap

“Ah, that’s better,” spectacles crooned. “Can we get a close view of the box, please?”

In a moment the screen obliged; a close shot of the man’s hands filled our view, moving over and around the box, which from this near distance was very beautiful. We watched, then, the dozen or so of us gathered in the darkness, as his fingers probed the puzzle’s corners and edges and surfaces for any defect, or imperfection, or subtle movement that might hint at the opening of the way to its interior. I don’t know how long we sat there, rapt, watching the drama unfolding in Number 19’s hands, as the prisoner’s mind struggled against the devilish complexity of the puzzle and the puzzle-maker, whomever he may have been. I do know that there was an audible sigh from myself and from others in the audience at the first *click* of motion, as one intricate piece moved slightly apart from the others, and a sigh redoubled again as the part folded back to reveal interior surfaces polished mirror-perfect, a tiny metallic microcosm opening like a mercury flower. Some kind of clockwork lay within; as the first catch was tripped, a hidden music-box began to play a short tinkling melody reminiscent of a nursery-school

rhyme, one I'd learned long ago but couldn't quite remember the words to. The parts gave way more quickly, then, with one revelation coming fast upon the heels of another, and the shiny unfolded bits of the box scattering light about the room like a shattered mirror, their arrangement hinting at some kind of underlying, radial symmetry that was suggestive of a mandala. And each step added a musical counterpoint, a new voice weaving in and around the original melody, the warp and the weave in an unfolding tapestry of sound.

And then, of a sudden, there came a noise, a noise like nothing I had ever heard before on this earth. It was the sound that a great, cracked church-bell might be expected to make if one's skull were pressed into service as clapper. It was *painful*, that sound, and something deep in my guts twisted up in response to it and to this day has not unwound. At the same time, the screen filled up with static, which mercifully obliterated both sight and sound at the peak of the bell's turmoil.

"Full view," spectacles said calmly, as the snow cleared, and once again the screen was as a window onto that padded room which, strangely, seemed to have become somehow darker since last I saw it. If Number 19 himself were aware of this impinging darkness, or of the terrible sound of the bell, he gave no indication, continuing rather to exhort the puzzle with his hands. His face, cruel before, had now become terrible—a rictus of feverish, mad, ecstatic glee. The lights grew brighter and I shuddered as the sound of the bell came again—a terrible juggernaut of a sound relieved only by the haze of electronic noise it seemed to precipitate.

Spectacles was unruffled. "Can we do something about that static, please?" he shot, annoyed.

As the snow cleared this time I realized the lights of the room were dimming again, that they were brightest when the bell tolled and dimmed in between. Only the darkness of this trough was deeper than the one before, and I saw for the first time the *things* that were moving inside of it. They would not take final form, those things, but rather whirled, and swooped, and staggered, and frittered, and when the light came up again dissolved. I saw now that the man had stopped manipulating the puzzle, and that the puzzle—at this point totally unrecognizable as a thing that might once have been a simple embellished cube—was moving of its own will. An assembly like a rotor, at the center of the mandala, was turning with mounting speed, and as it did the entire puzzle *began to rise slowly up into the air*, lifting itself out of the man's hands like a tiny helicopter. But the rotor was much too small, and was moving much, much too slowly to be providing lift, and I realized with a start that, for the first time in my life, I was looking at a supernatural phenomenon—something I could not explain by invoking science. I would've suspected a trick, then—some kind of staged performance or digitally manipulated video—had not the drama and *gravitas* of the scene been so thoroughly convincing. I was not suspicious of the electronic system intervening between my eyes and the evidence of our experiment; rather, I was grateful for it, and for the great distance I had been assured lay between that tiny darkened room and our own.

And then, one final time, the bell thundered, and the lights blazed, and in that instant I saw the rear wall of the cell washed away like an earthen dam before a flood, and in the swirling gray cloudiness beyond the *things* again, the whirling-swooping-staggering *things*, rising in a cyclone like buzzards above a wildfire. Then the darkness plunged over us once more, and this time it was absolute. There was no question of

reprieve. The light was gone and would never return as long as the earth endured. The silence was as deep.

The sound that shattered it began as a scream, but rose quickly through the octaves to become something inhuman—a kind of squeal and squeak and whimper all combined, the sound of an animal caught in a relentless grinding machine, its gears slick with blood and gristle. It keened on, breathily, for a few seconds, and then dissolved into a series of gurgling sobs and a babble of incoherent pleas.

It was hard to imagine what had been done to Number 19, during those few seconds of darkness, that could have elicited such a sound, but harder still to realize, as an eerie dim phosphorescence began to suffuse the chamber (which was now more of an *antechamber*, really), that I would soon be forced to *look* on it. The light, which seemed to come from everywhere and nowhere, was a dim bluish-green suggestive of chemiluminescence, but it rose and fell fitfully, like the light of a campfire, albeit without any apparent source. In it, I saw the flickering silhouette of a man crucified, roman-style, his trembling limbs splayed to their limits of motion by the tension of chains bearing hay-hooks driven through wrists and ankles. The flesh along the underside of his outstretched arms had been lined with smaller hooks, like fishhooks, connected by taut steel wires to more hooks along his upper thighs and outer shins—a cruel parody of harp-strings stretching between his arms and legs. Naked otherwise, his loins were obscured by coils of rusted barbed wire wrapped tightly through the crotch. The skin of his torso had been partially flayed, with a cut like a zipper slowly opening above his sternum. The skin had been wired, I realized with horrific fascination, to a kind of ratcheting mechanism behind his back that tightened with the motion of his breathing. He was struggling, accordingly, to survive on few and shallow gasps of air, but every now and again he was too greedy and the mechanism *clicked* tighter and the pain mounted and the struggle against breathing became more arduous still.

And then there was a figure standing in the mist beside him, and with razor blades embedded in its fingertips it strummed his wires and he screamed—dear God, how he screamed. The creature—man or beast or angel or devil or whatever it was—looked at us then, looked right through the video-window at us sitting in the darkness of the observation room, with tears streaming down the pale skin of its mutilated face and said:

“Beautiful, isn’t it?”

Thus began my true initiation into the innermost secrets of Group 9.