

Fiction
The Unbinding
By Walter Kirn
Installment 14

[MyStory.Com]

Daylight-saving time saves no one. It's spring, when people uncoil and make mistakes. At AidSat, we pump up the lumbers in our desk chairs as our overstimulated callers plunge over muddy embankments in new sports cars, weep uncontrollably in motel bathrooms while drunken lovers pound the doors, and vomit into restaurant urinals after gorging on stuffed-crust pizzas that they pledged at New Year's not to eat again. It's been a siege at work these last few days—no lunch breaks, no chats over coffee, no fantasy baseball games, just the relentless application of empathy to hundreds of seasonal breakdowns that we saw coming the moment more sunlight was added to the evenings. One man from Columbus whom I counseled on Wednesday overdosed on allergy capsules and then spotted the Savior, dressed in a black trench coat, gathering daffodils in his backyard. I read to him from a script on my computer screen devised to calm outbursts of religious mania.

“Sit down with a cold glass of water and your scriptures, picture the face of your mother or your best friend, and say to yourself: ‘At my next meal I will eat something from all three major food groups.’ ”

“Is this Gospel of Judas authentic?” the fellow asked me. “Where did they find the thing? And when, exactly? My girlfriend says it's been lying around for ages.”

“Fruits and vegetables, proteins and carbohydrates. You need them all, sir.”

“In equal portions?”

“Roughly. Are you sipping that clean, refreshing water yet?”

My cell phone filled up with messages as I worked. Three or four were from Jesse, who'd left Las Vegas with Rob after he'd won tens of thousands in a poker tournament. He'd impulsively leased a Cadillac convertible and driven them through the night to a resort in Laguna Beach. They were eating raw foods, she said, and getting massages meant to sweep the toxins from their muscles. He'd confessed to her that he'd been reading my online journals (Hi, Rob! Come back to the gym for a long sauna!) as part of a “hush-hush effort” at Vectonal to perfect a new telecom product known as MeNet that would compete with AidSat in the market for “Seamless life-assistance interfaces.” I didn't call Jesse back, of course, maintaining my wall-ish impenetrability, but it was hard to contain my curiosity after she informed me in another call that Rob had drowned off one afternoon during an in-room couple's hot-stones massage and muttered the name “Aguirre.” Jesse knew of the film from the printouts of my diaries, so she confronted Rob when he woke up and was warned—with a vehemence that she said alarmed her—that

any more questions relating to me, my writings, AidSat, MeNet, or Rob's Vectonal job would land her in "grievous bureaucratic peril," beginning with registered letters from the authorities about her chronic underreporting of tips during her career at Outback Steakhouse.

(Note to Rob: For someone I've only hung out with a couple of times, your fixation on me is pronounced, and your explanations for it laughable. I dealt with a few of you haunted AC/DCs during my two years at military school, and let me advise you that roaring around the West playing Texas hold-em with fellow degenerates, champagning and Saks-ing my cash-strapped former lover, and ordering room-service rubdowns from hotel healers won't bring your restless soul the peace it seeks. Accept yourself, Rob, and try to find a group. Or call me at work—we maintain extensive directories.)

The next cluster of urgent voice mails came from my paintball squad's captain, Colin Frisch, instructing me to initiate Phase 3 of our plan to liberate the imprisoned show dog, "Twist," whose case I've been reluctant to discuss here out of fear of jinxing our plot. But my shyness, I now realize, has served no one. And especially not you, Rob, my unbalanced but only identifiable reader. You deserve to know more fully the humane yet lively adult male who, for whatever shameful reasons, you furtively adore.

Phase 3 in our plan to set free poor Twist—the runaway, dumpster-diving Shiba Inu that brought our squad such luck and joy last winter after we found her and nursed her back to plumpness and before she was torn from our embrace by Stan and Tammy Kurtz of Canine Endeavors, her greedy AKC-backed breeders—began last Thursday night, when I summoned two teammates through their AidSat earjacks to meet me at Fuddruckers in the North Gate mall. "Aaron" and "Storm" dined lightly, on chicken sandwiches, as we mapped on a napkin the parallel dirt roads that form the northern and southern borders of the rural CE kennel complex. We'd been scouting the operation for months, observing the feeding and exercise routines there, noting the bedtimes of its owners, and recording the comings and goings of various service personnel.

Our task that night was to engineer a meeting with a pair of male and female cleaners who were the last folks to leave the place most evenings. They appeared to be Mexican, middle-aged, and married. They drove a retired Ford Galaxy police car with a stretched and duct-taped garbage bag for a rear driver's-side window. The man dipped snuff. The woman dragged her left leg and seemed religious, compulsively crossing herself as she raked cedar chips across the filth and stench of the locked run where Twist paced listlessly behind the chain-link.

I sat with Storm in my Ranger and watched them clean as Aaron, who'd ditched his Jetta on a side road, belly-crawled up behind their Galaxy and pricked a slow leak in one of the rear tires. The plan was to follow them when they drove home, pull alongside them when the tire gave out, offer aid, and get to talking. We assumed that the pair was disgruntled and corruptible.

"I think I hear sad little Twist," said Storm. "She's lonesome."

I listened. Whichever dog was howling, its cries conveyed the pain of the whole pack. Above the kennels and the surrounding dairy farms, whose cooped-up miseries gave off no sounds but fouled the truck's air vents with sickly greenish odors, hung a waning, pollution-rouged half moon. Twist would be free before the orb was full again—that was my vow, which I made out loud to Storm. He held up two fingers and crossed them. He knocked wood. Storm is a serious amateur astrologer who hosts a late-night call-in show, "Ethereon," on the state university's public radio station. He cast Twist's natal chart using Kennel Club records and warned us that all the Neptune in her essence might hamper our mission.

Storm's pessimism irked me. From what I've learned at AidSat about attitude, people who expect the worst face as many difficulties as most folks, but they face them less defiantly.

The cleaners drove off in their Ford at 9:15. Their deflating back tire stirred up extra dust that clouded my headlight beams. They didn't stop, though. I pulled up closer and flashed them. They didn't slow down. The paved highway was only two miles ahead, but our goal was to corner them away from traffic. Then Aaron gunned past me in his Jetta, waving a hand as though to say, "I'll handle this." I braked to give him time. A minute later there we were, offering jacks and flashlights to the cleaners.

And there was Twist, up on his hind legs in their back seat, startlingly, inexplicably accessible and nearer to freedom than we'd dared hope. Spooky Neptune had shed an unexpected influence.

"Your dog?" Storm asked the woman in Spanish. I couldn't translate her answer, but it was long and included the English words "vaccination booster." The man and Aaron had raised the car a foot or two, but the jack was sinking and tilting in the damp ground. The morons kept on cranking. The car slipped sideways, shuddered, and settled, trapping the jack beneath a rusty brake drum. Twist's frightened scratching had ripped the garbage-bag and put him in a position to leap and flee, his front paws perched on the glassless window frame. I tried to push past the woman to grab hold of him, but an error in footwork tripped me, I bumped Storm, he reached out and touched the car to keep from falling, Twist squirted out, the chassis shifted, groaned, and when it rocked down off the fulcrum of the jack, the tortured yelping drove ice picks through my chest.

The cleaning woman let loose a Third-World scream that could have shaken the cross from a cathedral, and Storm, the doomsayer, fled—in Aaron's Jetta. Permanently disgraced and off the squad.

Aaron knelt in the dirt consoling Twist, whom he'd pulled out from underneath the car and who was sitting up now, very straight, all purebred and obedient, holding out his mangled right front leg as though inviting somebody to shake it.

Leaving me to call AidSat.

I identified myself using my employee code to the randomly selected operator, whose code I asked for in return. The woman's prefix indicated that she was stationed in Nebraska, at the new North Platte Special Routing Facility, which specializes in mental-health emergencies among a selected group of high-risk clients who aren't aware of having been so identified. Because of the late hour, North Platte must have been experiencing a lull and taking on nonspecific system demands.

"We've got about three separate challenges here," I said. "No law enforcement, though. You got me?"

"Yes, dear." That's how all those special North Platte ops talk. Soothing. As though you've reached them in their rocking chairs. All older, all female, and all intensively trained. Former military nurses, most of them.

"We'll need a wrecker, a fluent Spanish speaker, a veterinarian, and three hundred dollars in cash."

"All on their way."

"Been busy this week?"

"Flooded."

"Especially Michigan residents, I've been noticing."

"I blame the new round of layoffs at the Big Three."

"They certainly don't help much."

And in no time, half an hour, it was done. Twist had been disinfected, bandaged, and splinted. The ruined tire had been replaced. The cleaners' immigrant silence had been bought. When I dropped off Aaron at his condo, we argued over possession of the dog, but I prevailed by pointing out my lack of a roommate and my higher salary. Twist rode in my lap back to my complex and slept on a throw pillow beside my futon with one of my arms stretched protectively across her. I didn't sleep. I listened to her breathe. She must have been dreaming, because she jerked a lot. Some time during the night I woke up crying. I phoned Sabrina and left a message admitting that I'd been abrupt and cruel to her after our night of pricey sushi, lofty conversation, and awkward sodomy. I begged her for another chance. Caring for a crippled pet, I told her, had softened me inside.

"Come out, come out wherever you are," I said.

And because there was a small dog involved, she did.