

PERSONAL HISTORIES

A comedy of menace

by

Jerry Slaff

14303 Briarwood Terrace
Rockville, Maryland 20853
202.389.2825
jerry.slaff@gmail.com

Literary Representative
Susan F. Schulman Literary Agency
454 West 44th Street
New York, New York 10036
212.713.1633
susan@schulmanagency.com

CHARACTERS

THOM Vincent, 40s-50s, former journalist, disgraced. Aloof but inquisitive.

SID Yates, 50s-60s, a scientist. Guarded, with much to be guarded about.

SETTING

A dingy hotel room in suburban Maryland, outside Washington, D.C., but way out of the Washington mindset.

TIME

The present.

NOTES

The play is performed without an intermission.

The author is represented by the Susan F. Schulman Literary Agency, New York, and is a member of the Dramatists Guild.

This script is also available for download at the New Play Exchange of the National New Play Network, <https://newplayexchange.org>.

SYNOPSIS

In the 90-minute play, a scientist on the lam meets a disgraced journalist to ghost write his memoirs in a claustrophobic motel room outside Washington. And a priceless statue. The play examines greed, and what people are owed from their circumstances.

(A second or third floor hotel room in suburban Maryland, outside Washington, D.C., but way out of the Washington mindset.

(It's a brutally hot summer day in Washington, about 1 pm.

(The room has the usual chain hotel furniture – a queen bed, a nightstand and clock-radio, a small desk and chair, a TV and refrigerator in a stand, and doors to a closet and bathroom. There are also a number of desk and floor lamps, some controlled by wall switches, some not.

(The room is relatively dark – shades are shut, and one lamp and a ceiling light are on.

(The room's door opens to an outdoor hallway.

(As lights come up, SID, a relatively heavy man in his mid-60s, is sitting on the side of the bed, checking his watch, waiting nervously. Some very incongruous pop music, like Sixpence None the Richer's *Kiss Me*, is playing from the clock-radio. Since the hotel is near a busy roadway, we can hear traffic noise – tires screeching, the occasional fire engine or police car, etc.

(At some point, after nervously puttering around, he goes to the closet, bends down, and checks something on the floor of the closet. HE pulls out a medium-sized duffel, takes it to the bed and opens it on his lap. HE takes out what seems to be a few bricks of paper, and puts them into a large envelope, which he seals.

(HE removes a small bag from the duffel, the size of a paper lunch bag, and puts it in the refrigerator.

(HE closes the duffel and puts it and the envelope back in the closet.

(The music continues, and SID continues to wait nervously, until there's a knock at the door, which startles him. HE runs to turn off the radio, goes to answer the door, and looks through the door's peephole.)

SID

(through the door)

Mister Vincent?

THOM

(through the door)

Yes – Mister Yates?

(SID opens the door.)

SID

Please come in.

(THOM enters the hotel room, and looks around, a bit confused to be in such low rent surroundings. HE's carrying a sample case.)

THOM

You're Sidney Yates?

SID

Yes.

THOM

You're sure.

SID

Excuse me?

THOM

I'm sorry to ask, but...can I see some identification?

SID

Why?

THOM

The circumstances are highly unusual.

SID

They are? How?

(THOM waves his arm around the room.)

THOM

This.

SID

You know, I could say the same thing about you. There could be anything in that case. How do I know you are who you say you are?

THOM

I'm not here to discuss metaphysics, Mister Yates. A driver's license would suffice.

SID

Oh, all right.

(SID goes to the closet, reaches in, and gets a wallet. HE pulls out a card and shows it to THOM who looks it over and returns it to SID.)

THOM

Virginia?

SID

I moved.

THOM

When?

SID

Recently.

THOM

And you live here?

SID

No. I rented this for our meeting.

THOM

Oh.

SID

I stay in a lot of hotels. Different hotels.

(THOM wipes sweat from his brow.)

THOM

I see. Do any of them have air conditioning?

SID

I prefer it warm. Keeps the mind centered. A cold room means a cold brain.

THOM

I don't mind the heat, Mister Yates. Just not so much of it.

SID

I'd rather keep it this way. If you don't mind.

THOM

Can we try, say, 78?

SID

Eighty-four.

THOM

You do realize it's August. And you're not paying for the electricity here. Eighty?

SID

Eighty-two.

THOM

Sold American. A little tobacco auctioneer humor.

(SID readjusts the air conditioning.)

SID

I got the room with points, you know. No reason to leave money on the table. If they're going to give you a free night, take it. Not that I don't have the money.

THOM

I didn't think you didn't. You did engage our services, after all. Although I don't think I've met any of our clients in...

SID

A hotel?

THOM

I meet clients in hotels all the time. I met one in the Algonquin in New York. Do you know the Algonquin? Famous writers haunt. Great lobby. Very civilized. I met one at the Willard, downtown. Excellent bar. Lincoln slept there. But this...this is a first.

SID

I have the money. Don't think I don't have the money.

THOM
Of course you do. You're just...

SID
Careful.

THOM
Yes. And it makes for a better story. Because what we're after is the story. Your story.

SID
My story.

THOM
That's why I'm here.

SID
Did you park outside?

THOM
I did. Is that OK?

SID
I assume so.

THOM
Where do you actually live?

SID
I've got a place.

THOM
Not Virginia.

SID
No.

THOM
Near here?

SID

Sort of. Not walking distance. Relatively near here.

THOM

Then why are we here?

SID

Well, you know.

THOM

No, Mister Yates, I don't. This is all...rather odd to me. When Sally told me about this project, I was enthusiastic. Did she explain the process?

SID

I've got the letter of agreement.

THOM

Well, just to make sure we're all on the same page – a little publishing humor – let me lay it out for you.

(THOM goes through this as if HE's done this a thousand times before, like a policeman reading a suspect his Miranda rights.)

My first job is to listen, to keep you on track. We call it “compassionate listening.” I want you to share your stories, your observations, your reflections. And at the same time, I will respect your feelings, your privacy, and your secrets. I'm not a policeman, I'm not a priest, I'm not your therapist, and I'm not your confessor. I'm not here to give you absolution. But the more open you are with me, the more you trust me, the better the project will turn out. Do you understand?

SID

Yes.

THOM

Good. Now. How healthy are you, Mister Yates?

SID

How healthy am I?

THOM

It's something I ask all my clients.

SID

I don't smoke.

THOM

That's very admirable. I ask out of routine. Many of our clients are elderly. I want to make sure they'll be around to see the final product. May I, er, take your blood pressure?

SID

My blood pressure?

THOM

Yes. Your blood pressure.

SID

Certainly not.

THOM

Well, that's fine. It's your funeral. *As it were.*

(THOM takes a small notepad from his pocket and writes.)

Refuses blood pressure. Do you drink?

SID

Occasionally.

THOM

Good. I'll bring a bottle of scotch for our next meeting tomorrow.

(THOM makes a note of that.)

SID

Tomorrow?

THOM

Yes. Usually we do a few two-day sessions, three hours a day, eighteen hours total.

SID

I don't know about that. I don't think I can do that.

THOM

Why?

SID

Can't I just tell you my story today, and you can write it up, and that's that?

THOM

Mister Yates, I'm sure a man like you can talk for more than a few hours about himself.

SID

Well...

THOM

You're a scientist. You wouldn't just spend a few hours on an experiment, leave before it was done, and write that up for a journal, would you? I need to listen to you, and you need to trust me. I can lead you to places you haven't thought about for years, for decades. Respecting your feelings, of course.

SID

But eighteen hours?

THOM

Leave that to me. By the time we're done today, you'll see what I mean. Trust me to do my job. You know, I've never written the memoir of a scientist before.

SID

A chemist. And a physicist.

THOM

I've worked with doctors and lawyers, mostly. They're the ones with the money to engage us. I didn't think science paid that well.

SID

(defensively)

It can.

THOM

But you also need a healthy ego. Doctors and lawyers have healthy egos. They want books written about them, their memoirs published for eternity. Business executives. But never a scientist.

SID

I've made discoveries and travelled the world in very difficult environments.

THOM

I'm sure you have, Mister Yates. I'm sure you have. Except I didn't expect to meet a man of your stature in a motel off New York Avenue in Landover, Maryland, sandwiched between a Golden Corral all-you-can-eat and a funeral parlor.

SID

I thought it would be best.

THOM

Why is that?

SID

It's inconspicuous. Neutral ground.

THOM

Well, this is as neutral as you're going to get. Should we get down to work? I noticed from your order you hadn't specified any of the usual details. For instance, what font would you like to use?

SID

Font?

THOM

Yes. We have some lovely ones to choose from, very readable.

(THOM pulls a binder out of his sample bag.)

For a scientist like you, I'd recommend a heavier, more authoritative font. Fitting a man to a font is like fitting him to a well-tailored suit of clothes. Garamond. Or Baskerville. Yes. Baskerville demi. Eleven point.

(THOM shows SID a sample, but he's not interested.)

SID

Whatever you think is best.

(THOM takes out an order form and starts filling it in.)

THOM

Fine. Baskerville demi 11. Binding?

SID

Yes.

THOM

What type of binding?

SID

Binding?

THOM

Binding. How your book is bound.

SID

The usual. I don't know. *Book* binding. You choose.

THOM

Are you sure? We can go from paper all the way up to leather, depending on how many copies you want. Of course leather's the most...

SID

(interrupting him)

Just one.

THOM

(taken aback)

One? Just one copy?

SID

Yes.

THOM

Of your memoirs? Just one copy?

SID

Yes. Just one.

THOM

Mister Yates, I've been doing this...

SID

(with some mild annoyance)

Doctor. Doctor Yates.

THOM

I've been doing this for five years now. I've never had a client ask for just one copy.

SID

Then I'm your first. It's all I need.

THOM

But then why go through the work, the expense? Six days of interviews, the up and back, revisions, galleys, not to mention the forty thousand dollars.

SID

Forty-one, including state tax.

THOM

But why?

SID

That's all part of the story. My story. Which must be told. And you must be the one to tell it.

THOM

Why?

SID

Why?

THOM

Why must your story be told? And why me? That's rather dramatic. I wouldn't necessarily want my story to be told.

SID

But if I don't tell you my story, others will. And they may not be kind. Or accurate.

(guardedly)

And I'm sure you're a great writer.

(THOM looks at him warily, walks around the shabby room regarding it.)

THOM

You know, Doctor Yates, if I don't feel right about this, I can turn you down. Cancel the contract. Rip it up.

SID

I hope you don't. And there are others.

THOM

There are.

SID

In the back of *The Atlantic*.

THOM

Yes. Next to the ads for pheromones, river cruises and Panama hats.

SID

But I don't want the others. You came recommended.

THOM

By who?

SID

A colleague.

THOM

Who?

SID

A doctor. An academic. *Getting Ahead of Myself: Fifty Years of Phrenology at the University of Wyoming*.

THOM

Not one of mine. My last project was *Nurtured in a Petri Dish: My Years at Corning Glass*. The chief financial officer. Beautiful home. Lawns for acres and acres. We met in a gazebo. Hard to get a handle on him though. He kept bringing the conversation back to an old 1958 Mercedes he had remodeled. Nothing about his career, his family. Just the Mercedes.

(Pause.)

Do you know what a Rosebud is, Doctor Yates?

SID

No.

THOM

It's from *Citizen Kane*. The story of a newspaper magnate who wanted to control everyone around him. A thinly veiled biography of William Randolph Hearst. Spoiler alert – Kane dies at the beginning of the movie, and his last words on earth are “Rosebud.” And we find after two hours that Rosebud was the sled he was playing with on the day he was sent away from his home when he was eight. He spent his whole life in pursuit of that childlike time, that innocence, when he could play with Rosebud. It was an insight into the man, Doctor Yates, an insight not unlike that man's 1958 Mercedes.

(Pause.)

So what's your Rosebud, Doctor Yates? What motivates you? What pushes you forward? You probably don't even know it, or if you even have one. Rosebud is what Hearst called his mistress's vagina, by the way. But that's my job. Finding your Rosebud. *As it were*.

SID

(trying to change the subject)

Can I offer you anything?

THOM

I'm fine. Are you?

(Pause. SID stirs, but doesn't speak.)

Hmmm. Perhaps we could do some trust exercises to help you talk. Loosen you up a bit.

SID

Trust exercises? You don't want me to fall backwards so you can catch me, do you? Because I'm not doing that.

THOM

This isn't the Stella Adler School for Actors, Mister Yates. A verbal exercise. Let me ask you a general question.

SID

Okay.

THOM

Mister Yates, what are you afraid of?

(Pause.)

SID

Poverty.

THOM

Very good.

SID

You.

THOM

Excellent. Anything else? Spiders, divorce lawyers, roving bands of Uzi-touting physicists harassing old ladies on the street?

SID

I guess my story starts with water.

THOM

This isn't working. *Water.*

SID

Water is my specialty. What do you know about water, Mister Vincent?

THOM

It makes scotch taste better.

SID

You know, that's been proven at a molecular level. It releases the scents and the flavors locked within the molecules. It's a marvelous thing, so simple, and yet infinitely fascinating. The physics of water. How it flows, where it flows. The chemistry of water. How it interacts with other things – it dilutes liquids, it turns iron to rust. If you freeze it, it becomes solid. If you heat it, it turns into a gas. It falls from the sky as rain, as snow, as sleet. It hangs in the air as clouds. It sustains life, yet you can drown in it or die from drinking too much of it.

THOM

Water.

SID

People don't realize such a simple thing can be so complex. I was the president of the International Society of Water Chemists for five years.

THOM

That's quite an accomplishment.

SID

My life is built on water.

THOM

Doctor Yates, when I interview someone for their memoirs, I like to record them on my phone. Is that all right with you?

(SID is very hesitant to being recorded.)

SID

You can't just take notes?

THOM

A recording keeps your voice intact. It makes it easier to capture you when I sit down and write.

SID

I don't know. I didn't think you'd be recording me.

THOM

I recorded the CFO of Corning Glass. For transparency.

(HE chuckles. Pause.)

A little interviewing humor. To break the ice. *As it were.*

(SID is still troubled.)

SID

What will you do with the recordings?

THOM

I'll listen to them.

SID

After. After you're done.

THOM

You can have them.

SID

Will you keep copies?

THOM

(warily)

I might.

SID

I can't allow that.

THOM

Why?

SID

I need my privacy.

THOM

Privacy? You're paying us forty thousand dollars to write and print your memoirs!

SID

Forty-one thousand. And just one copy.

(Pause.)

THOM

I'll destroy the recordings for five thousand dollars.

SID

I'd need your phone too.

THOM

My phone?

SID

To be sure.

THOM

Doctor Yates, you can trust...

SID

I don't trust anyone.

THOM

Make that six thousand. For a new phone.

(And HE adds, thinking it would be so ludicrous as to
dissuade SID...)

In cash.

SID

Fine.

(SID goes to the closet, bends down to open the
suitcase with his back to THOM, fiddles around,
stands back up and closes the closet door. HE has a
stack of hundred dollar bills in his hand, and hands
them to THOM.)

Six thousand dollars. In hundreds.

(THOM is dumbfounded, and momentarily unaware of what to do.)

Aren't you going to count it? Or do you *trust* me?

(THOM thrusts the money into his pocket without counting.)

THOM

I trust you.

SID

Good. Then, let's get back down to work on my Rosebud.

(mocking THOM's catchphrase)

As it were.

THOM

Uh, yes.

(HE takes out his phone, and starts recording. SID looks down at the phone. THOM is a bit nervous and unsettled now.)

You were talking about water.

SID

It's the essence of life.

THOM

That might be a good title.

SID

(a little disappointed)

You think so?

THOM

(getting back in control)

Oh yes. *The Essence of a Life.*

SID

I was hoping more for *Making Water All My Days*.

THOM

Well, the title comes in the later stages, anyway. So.

(THEY stare at each other.)

SID

Yes?

THOM

This is the part where I compassionately listen, and you talk.

(THOM leans forward ostentatiously, trying to show interest and compassion, or at least give a good facsimile of it.)

SID

That's kind of open ended. Aren't you supposed to ask me a question? Direct me. After all, I'm paying forty thousand dollars. Ask me, I don't know, where I was born.

(Pause. THOM just stares ahead.)

THOM

(in a flat monotone)

Where were you born?

(SID gets up and begins to pace around the room as he talks. HE's not very enthusiastic about this.)

SID

I was born in a small town in Pennsylvania. Lewistown. It was actually a medium-sized city when I was a child. Lots of factories, coal mines and stores. My father had a men's clothing store, and we lived above it.

THOM

Do you remember the address?

SID

134 Electric Avenue.

THOM

Electricity and water don't mix.

SID

What do you mean?

THOM

You grew up on Electric Avenue, and you went on to study water. It's a dichotomy.

SID

I never considered that. More a coincidence than a dichotomy.

THOM

Okay. A coincidence. A telling coincidence.

SID

You think?

THOM

It's my job. Your father had a clothing store.

SID

An old-time haberdashers. Suits, hats, coats. Even the miners needed a suit for Sunday. But the mines closed, the factories moved, and the stores went out of business. He hung on for a while. At least he owned the building so we kept our house.

THOM

Sounds rough.

SID

It must have been.

THOM

(evenly)

But you were happy.

SID

Yes.

THOM

They always are. Everyone I interview, I hear the same thing. We had no food. I wore hand-me-downs. My sister cut my hair. Father held three jobs and drove a taxi and mother took in washing. We boiled our used bathwater for soup. *But we were happy.*

SID

I didn't know any better.

THOM

You don't really care about your childhood, do you? It didn't make you who you are.

SID

Why do you say that?

THOM

I feel some...reluctance here, Doctor Yates.

SID

Sid. Call me Sid.

THOM

You're not being open with me.

SID

You asked me about my childhood.

THOM

Because you told me to. But you don't really want to talk about your childhood, do you?

SID

It's not all that interesting to me.

THOM

Then what is, Doct...*Sid.* What is interesting to you? And don't say water.

(Pause.)

SID
Can I trust you?

THOM
We've been through this.

SID
Say it.

(THOM sighs.)

THOM
You can trust me.

(Pause.)

SID
I was held hostage by the Russian government for three days seven years ago.

(Pause.)

You don't believe me.

(THOM switches off the recording and puts his phone in his pocket.)

THOM
I asked if you were healthy.

SID
I am.

THOM
Really.

SID
Yes.

THOM
Physically, emotionally and mentally happy?

SID

As much as anyone else.

THOM

Doctor Yates, I don't have the time for this. I don't care how much you've spent.

SID

I'm telling you the truth.

THOM

I turned down a lovely 93-year old Holocaust survivor for you, Doctor Yates. A wealthy woman who overcame incredible tragedy to live in a big comfortable house in Potomac, whose son owns a string of Toyota dealerships and offered me a very sweet deal on a lightly used Lexus.

SID

You don't believe me.

THOM

I'm here to listen to you, Doctor Yates, but I'm not a fantasist. If you wanted John le Carre to write your memoirs, you're out of luck.

SID

How can I prove I'm telling you the truth?

THOM

Did you bring along any, I don't know, evidence? Documents, photos?

SID

Oh yes. A whole box full.

(SID goes to the closet and gets an accordion file filled with papers and photos.)

But there's nothing there about that.

(THOM looks through the file.)

THOM

No documents. No news clippings?

SID

None.

THOM

If you had been held hostage by the Russians, it would have been major news. Reported in all the papers. All the networks would have covered it.

SID

No news clippings. It was kept hush-hush. In the American press.

THOM

No proof.

SID

None I can show you. None I'd want to show you. Right now.

THOM

Right now?

SID

Perhaps later. When it's appropriate.

THOM

So there *is* something.

SID

Do you read Russian?

THOM

I have friends who do.

SID

There was one article in the Russian press. In *Kommersant*. I never saw it.

THOM

And you were never curious enough to find it and have it translated?

(Pause.)

SID

Please stay.

(Pause, as THOM looks SID over warily. Eventually, HE takes the phone out of his pocket and starts recording again.)

THOM

Where were we?

SID

I was held hostage by the Russian government for three days seven years ago.

THOM

Yes. Do you have anything to drink here?

SID

There's some Cokes in the refrigerator. Let me get you one.

(SID rises to go to the small refrigerator, which is near the closet.)

THOM

No trouble. I can get it.

SID

(panicking)

No!

(HE recovers himself.)

Let me. I wouldn't be a good host if I let you get yourself a drink.

THOM

I'm right here. It's no trouble.

SID

I insist.

(SID takes a Coke out of the refrigerator, opens it for THOM, and hands it to him.)

I drink at least six of them a day.

THOM

Isn't that horrible for your teeth?

SID

It settles me. I've got a nervous stomach.

(THOM touches the can to his sweaty head to cool off and takes a drink, then glances at the closet. HE reaches for the closet door. SID explodes.)

SID

What are you doing?

THOM

Just checking around.

SID

There's nothing in the closet for you.

THOM

My old journalist days. And can't we get some more light in here?

(THOM goes to the window to open the shades.)

SID

No!

(THOM backs off warily.)

THOM

(calming SID down)

Okay, okay...

(THOM goes to a wall switch, and flips it. Nothing happens. He flips it a few more times. Nothing. HE goes to a lamp and turns its switch on. Nothing. HE goes back to the wall switch, flips it, and a different light turns on.)

I've never seen a room like this. Now, Mister Yates...

SID

(with some annoyance)

Doctor.

THOM

Doctor Yates. Where were we?

SID

I was held hostage by the Russian government for three days seven years ago.

THOM

Yes.

SID

At the airport in Murmansk. In the Arctic.

(Pause.)

THOM

Can I ask why?

SID

They thought I was a government spy.

THOM

They thought *you* were a government spy?

SID

Yes.

THOM

Who did?

SID

The Russian government.

(THOM gets up and walks around the room.)

THOM

If you'll excuse me, *Doctor* Yates, you don't seem much like the spy type.

(Pause.)

Which, now that I think of it, would make you a perfect spy.

(THOM looks at SID, now with a different attitude.)

Tell me your story.

SID

Don't you want this first?

(SID hands THOM the large envelope he took out earlier.)

THOM

What's this?

(THOM opens it, incredulous and intrigued.)

SID

In cash.

THOM

There must be...

SID

Forty thousand dollars. Forty-one, with state tax.

THOM

Doctor Yates, there's no need...

SID

I don't use checks or credit cards anymore. Or banks. Or invest. Strictly cash. And there's more where that came from.

THOM

(even more intrigued)

How much?

(SID clams up, thinking HE's already said more than he's wanted to.)

SID

Enough.

THOM

What were you doing in Murmansk, Doctor Yates? And does it have anything to do with this forty-one thousand dollars in hundred dollar bills?

(SID reaches into his pocket and takes out his own phone. HE turns it on to record and places it down.)

SID

You don't mind if I record this too?

THOM

Feel free. Remember, you're paying me to tell your story. I'm not a prosecutor. I'm not going to report anything to the police.

SID

But you could.

THOM

(exasperated)

Then why did you start this whole project?

SID

I needed to tell someone. To tell my story.

THOM

Then I suggest you start talking, Doctor Yates. Tell me something. What were you doing in Russia?

SID

I was attending an international conference on water. In Saint Petersburg.

THOM

There are such things?

SID

Don't be so skeptical. I'm sure there's a conference for memoir writers.

THOM

The Association of Oral Historians. Oh, the parties we have.

SID

I was presenting a paper on a new process to make saltwater drinkable. A small series of inexpensive portable filters. They could be made from cheap household materials anywhere in the world. It could save millions of lives, giving people access to safe drinkable water anywhere, cheaply and quickly.

THOM

And make you a lot of money?

SID

Not a dime. Maybe a bonus from my company. But they would hold the patents.

THOM

That's not very fair, is it?

SID

Maybe not. Do you know what happened to the man who discovered the water process for decaffeinating coffee?

THOM

No.

SID

Before that you had to use chemicals, and it was a dirty, foul and expensive job. With the water process, it was cheap and simple. And the coffee tasted much better.

THOM

So what happened to him?

SID

He went to a water conference and was held by the Russians for three days in the airport.

(Pause.)

THOM

I'm sorry. You must have made the company millions.

SID

I did. Many times over, and on many projects. But I'm not sorry. I'm a scientist. I live for the hunt, for the next discovery.

THOM

Did you want to do something about it? I would.

SID

That's because you're not a scientist. Of course I was envious. I was living with my wife and kids in a small house in Falls Church, and I...

THOM

You never mentioned your family before.

(SID stops.)

SID

They're not part of my story.

THOM

Oh, but it sounds like they are. It sounds like they're very much a part of it.

SID

I'll tell you if they're important. But I'd rather talk about Murmansk.

THOM

You know, I think that's the first time anyone's ever said that sentence.

SID

I was coming back from a conference in St. Petersburg. The third International Water Association Conference on Odors and Air Emissions.

(THOM shoots him a look of incredulity, mixed with
"I can't believe I have to listen to this.")

At the conference, I met a Russian colleague. He said he was studying Arctic oceanography. That part of the world has always fascinated me.

He lived in Murmansk with his family, and he asked me if I wanted to accompany him back to see his laboratory and work on some projects. It was the chance of a lifetime.

THOM

I can imagine.

SID

I don't think you can. Most times scientists are cooped up in labs or offices, doing paperwork or writing journal pieces. It's rare you get to do actual work in the field, and rarer still when it's in such an exotic place as the Arctic.

THOM

I've dealt with the Russians. I'll bet you were in over your head.

SID

I was. What did you do with the Russians?

(Pause.)

THOM

This is about you, Doctor Yates, not me.

SID

(growing concerned)

You had dealings with the Russians?

THOM

Many years ago.

SID

Is that why you're writing other people's memoirs?

THOM

Excuse me?

SID

Nothing. Forget I said anything.

THOM

I'll try. So we left you in a Arctic field.

SID

Yes. We were working on the salinity of the water in the Lomonosov ridge, a mountain range under the Arctic Ocean. A Russian submarine had brought back samples.

THOM

Is the water any different than what comes out of the faucet?

SID

Of course. First of all, it's saltwater. But it's so pristine, even though the oceans all circulate. And the glaciers leech into the Arctic, and they're fresh water. You've got very clean saltwater mixing with even cleaner fresh water from the glaciers. It's all so exciting.

THOM

If you're a scientist.

SID

If you care about your fellow human being! People are dying because they don't have fresh clean water. And up there, there's almost an endless supply of it.

THOM

So it becomes a question of transportation rather than science.

SID

It could be, but the transportation problems are huge. You can't just tow an iceberg to Africa.

THOM

Why?

SID

Why what?

THOM

Why can't you tow an iceberg to Africa?

(SID is dumbfounded.)

SID

I thought you were an intelligent man, Mister Vincent, but I see I was mistaken.

THOM

Indulge me. They're not anchored anywhere, are they?

SID

Do you know how much an average iceberg weighs?

THOM

I'm not a scientist.

SID

Twenty million tons.

THOM

That's a lot.

SID

That's about six million cars. So the problem is getting the clean fresh water at the top of the world to places where it would do the most good. That's what my colleague Yuri was working on in Murmansk, and he asked me to help.

THOM

So instead of heading back to the U.S. from a dreary water conference in Saint Petersburg, you changed plans and went north, to the Russian Arctic.

SID

I didn't think much of it.

THOM

Obviously. Russia's a very controlled place. It must have raised a few eyebrows at the KGB.

SID

I didn't know that the Russians had sent a submarine to the the Lomonosov ridge a few days before and put a Russian flag on the seafloor, to claim it for themselves.

THOM

Isn't that international waters?

SID

Yes. But with the warming waters there, the glaciers are slowly melting, and some of the ocean is ice free for the first time in centuries. The Arctic is becoming a vital sea passage.

THOM

So you unknowingly stepped into a huge geopolitical mess.

SID

Looking back, I may have been a little naive.

THOM

A little? Let me tell you, the Russians don't fool around.

SID

How much experience do you have with them?

THOM

(guardedly)

Some.

SID

I've got to be able to trust you, Mister Vincent. My story is very...delicate. Now, what did you do with the Russians?

THOM

I visited there a few times. When I was a reporter.

SID

A financial reporter for Marketstand.

THOM

Yes. How did you know?

(Pause.)

SID

Your name was familiar. I donate to NPR.

THOM

I visited a copper mine in Norlisk. One of the largest in the world.

SID

That's also in the Arctic.

THOM

Yes. Froze my ass off. Lots of security.

SID

Yuri was exploring the use of copper ion exchange in water desalination. It's easy to find – copper pipes are everywhere, even in small villages.

THOM

And the Russians, holding the majority of the world's copper, were intrigued by your interest. As an American scientist.

SID

I was travelling on a grant from the State Department as well.

THOM

Well, this does seem more interesting than I thought.

SID

I was innocent. Totally innocent.

THOM

You can say that again.

SID

I know how it looks.

THOM

Like you were the American spy they thought you were.

SID

Yes.

THOM

Were you?

SID

A spy?

THOM

Yes.

SID

Of course not. And if I were, would I tell you?

THOM

I had a client who actually claimed he was a spy. All the derring-do James Bond stuff. Except he was five foot four, pudgy, a chain smoker, and he had a wonky eye. One looked straight ahead, the other off to the side. I told him he didn't look like a spy. You know what he said? "*Exactly.*"

SID

I wasn't a spy then, and I'm certainly not one now.

THOM

Explain the cash.

SID

The cash?

THOM

The forty-one thousand in cash. The six thousand for my phone. Where did it come from?

SID

I don't believe in banks.

THOM

They obviously believe in you.

SID

It's all mine.

THOM

All this cash. It wouldn't happen to have anything to do with your time in Murmansk, would it?

SID

We had completed our experiments, and Yuri was driving me to the airport. He came to see me off, and get a cup of coffee. We must have only gone a few steps, and four big security agents in long leather overcoats grabbed us.

THOM

Leather overcoats? Those were the FSB, descendants of the KGB and the Cheka, the old Soviet secret police. The coats, by the way, were designed by Felix Dzerzhinsky, their founder. He was a ruthless murderer, but quite the snappy dresser.

SID

They accused Yuri and me of being American spies, for our work in the Arctic. They said I was smuggling computer disks back to the States that Yuri had given me.

THOM

Did he?

SID

They were topographical scans of the Lomonosov ridge, so we could plot the temperature of the water depending on the depths. Some tables of the degrees of salinity. And a few pictures of his family. We had had dinner the night before. All very innocent.

THOM

To you.

(Pause.)

Was Yuri a spy? Was he using you knowing you had a State department grant?

(Pause.)

SID

Maybe.

THOM

Maybe?

SID

He didn't seem like a spy.

THOM

Did he have a wonky eye?

SID

Come to think of it, he had a large house...

THOM

The real estate market in Murmansk must be thriving.

SID

...filled with beautiful furniture. He drove a Mercedes.

THOM

Sounds like science paid off for old Yuri. Unless it wasn't science that paid the bills.

SID

They took us to the local police department and put us in a small room together. I figured it was bugged. They obviously wanted to see if we talked.

THOM

Tell me about the room.

SID

It wasn't a jail cell. It was more of an interrogation room. We sat on hard metal chairs and they gave us some water.

THOM

Oh my! Hard metal chairs? Their standards of torture certainly have slipped.

SID

I know, but I'm an older guy, some health problems, medication, you know, all the stuff that goes on when you hit 50.

THOM

I'll bet you were scared.

SID

Scared? I had never even gotten a traffic ticket before! And now I'm being held in Russia and I don't know why. Yuri's English wasn't very good. Good enough for science, but not for small talk.

THOM

What did you do?

SID

You know what the two seminal events in my life are, Mister Vincent?

THOM

Aside from getting married, the birth of your children, and being kidnapped by the Russians?

SID

The 1969 Mets and the 1977 Yankees. Both won the World Series. I was 10 in 1969 and in college in 1977 at Columbia. Those were my baseball teams. So first, in my head, I named my favorite lineups. Seaver, Grote, Kranepool; Boswell, Harrelson, Garrett; Jones, Agee, Swoboda. That was the Mets. And Guidry, Munson, Chambliss; Randolph, Dent, Nettles; White, Rivers and Jackson for the Yankees. Then I played them against each other. Anything to keep my mind off where I was and what I was going through. Baseball saved my sanity.

THOM

What did Yuri do?

SID

Not much. He kept his cool. Barely said a word. But he told me to call my friends in America, that they would get us out.

THOM

And did you have any?

SID

Not like he meant. I worked with a low-level grant administrator at State, and while my company was a large multinational chemical firm, it couldn't deal with something as big as this. I kept telling Yuri I had no American connections, and he said he was sure the State department would step in.

THOM

I have to tell you, this is all very cloak and dagger stuff. Meeting in a hotel room like this, cash deal, Russian spies. And no evidence.

SID

I do have evidence.

THOM

I thought you said you didn't.

SID

I didn't want to bring it up before.

THOM

What's changed?

SID

I've told you this much. I was questioning whether I would go ahead with this.

THOM

What do you mean?

SID

I liked your radio show, Mister Vincent. And your articles. I subscribed to your newsletter when you left Marketstand.

THOM

My investment newsletter? That was three thousand dollars a year.

SID

And it paid off handsomely. Or at least I made enough in the markets to afford it. In the early years.

THOM

I only had 250 subscribers.

SID

But at three thousand a year, that's a nice profit.

THOM

I had overhead. Travel.

SID

To the Arctic. Still, you must have cleared a pretty good amount.

THOM

I did.

SID

And then one day, it stopped. May 25. Five years ago. Middle of the year. You sent me a refund of eighteen hundred dollars.

(Pause.)

Why did the newsletter stop, Mister Vincent?

THOM

Who's being interviewed here?

SID

Right now, you are. And you want to know why?

THOM

Why?

SID

Because I'm going to give you the best investment tip of your life.

THOM

I thought you didn't invest.

SID

Except on a sure thing.

THOM

A water desalination plant in Krasnoyarsk? A coffee decaffeination process in the Amazon? A copper pipe factory in Youngstown, Ohio?

SID

I know why the newsletter stopped.

THOM

I wanted to make some money on my own.

SID

No.

THOM

Do you have any more of those Cokes?

SID

Let me get you one.

(SID gets two Cokes out of the refrigerator, opens them, gives one to THOM and keeps the other for himself.)

(SID toasts him, having the upper hand for once.)

Nostrovia.

(THEY drink.)

You know I specifically asked for you.

(THOM stops mid-drink.)

THOM

You asked Sally for me?

SID

She had offered me others. Rita, a 25-year old English major working on her second novel with some minor publications in the *New Yorker*. Janet, a historian with an interest in genealogy. But I saw you were working there, and I wanted you.

THOM

Because you heard me on the radio?

SID

Because you owe me.

THOM

I owe you?

SID

One hundred eighteen thousand dollars. And fees. To be exact.

THOM

I don't understand.

SID

Mister Yates, have you ever heard of the Libby Creek Gold Mining Company in Whitehall, Montana?

THOM

Oh yes. Whitehall, Montana. Nice place. Lots of skiing and snowmobiling. Big game hunting.

SID

But you know one thing the Libby Creek Gold Mining Company didn't have much of?

THOM

What's that?

SID

Gold.

THOM

So I heard. Did you invest?

SID

Does this look like the Waldorf?

THOM

Investments are inherently risky ventures. Especially gold mines.

SID

And six months later, the newsletter stopped coming.

THOM

I was taking a break.

SID

More like a forced retirement from the financial business, correct?

(Pause, as THOM approaches SID.)

THOM

I think you know too much about me for me to continue here.

SID

I know what “pump and dump” means, Mister Vincent.

THOM

That’s it. I don’t need to...

SID

Sit down, Mister Vincent. I’ve been following you online.

(THOM is dumbfounded.)

THOM

How did you know?

SID

Sealed records from the Security and Exchange Commission quickly become public if you pay off the right people. As is your record of writing about stocks you own – *pump* – and selling them after your newsletter went out and the prices went up, leaving the poor saps who invested in them based on your newsletter high and dry – *dump*. Pump and dump. As well as your seven million dollar fine and prohibition from working in the financial business or even individual investing in anything more than a passbook savings account. If there is such a thing anymore.

THOM

You looked me up?

SID

I prefer “investigated.” That’s why I personally requested you.

THOM

Why?

SID

You owe me.

THOM

I owe you nothing.

SID

And I knew you were the type of person I needed.

THOM

For what?

SID

For everything to work out. I knew you'd want in.

THOM

I think I need an explanation.

SID

All in good time.

THOM

Does it have anything to do with all this cash?

SID

It might. And much more.

THOM

How much.

SID

Can I continue my story? Now that you're interested?

THOM

Go right ahead.

SID

I was in a holding cell at the Murmansk airport with Yuri, waiting for something to happen.

THOM

Like what?

SID

I wasn't sure. But I thought, government to government, something was going to happen. Even though I wasn't working for the government, I was still an American citizen.

THOM

And on a State Department grant.

SID

They couldn't just leave me.

THOM

You're a very trusting soul, Doctor Yates.

SID

Call me Sid.

THOM

So, you're at the airport with this Yuri fellow, and the Russians think you're a spy.

SID

Yes.

THOM

When actually it was Yuri who was the spy. The American spy.

SID

I guess he was.

THOM

Of course he was. I'm not as trusting as you. And the Russians saw your sudden visit to him as a confirmation.

SID

And the Americans wanted him back.

THOM

And you were the way they were getting him back.

SID

I finally saw that.

THOM

Let me get this straight. One day, you're, as they say, a mild mannered scientist studying the physics of water, and the next you're an international man of mystery with a license to kill. I don't buy it, Sid. I don't buy it at all.

SID

On the third day, they released me, at four in the morning. Woke me up. Not Yuri, just me. They told me they trusted me. I was to go to Yuri's lab, and there would be a brown satchel for me. I was to bring it back to the airport and if they were satisfied, they'd let us both go. And I was told not to open it.

THOM

Ransom money?

SID

I was thinking that. They called a taxi for me and I got to the lab.

THOM

They were testing you.

SID

What?

THOM

They weren't sure about you yet. They wanted to see if you'd follow through. Or else they would have just picked it up themselves. After all, this is Murmansk, not the middle of Red Square.

SID

I got to the lab, and told the taxi driver to wait. It was still dark out. At the door to Yuri's lab was a medium sized brown bag, a grip we used to call them. But it felt heavier than I thought it would, like there was something in it besides paper. I got back in the taxi and we started back to the airport.

THOM

At which point, you opened the bag.

SID

Curiosity.

THOM

You wanted to see what spies went for on the open market these days.

SID

I sat in the back and counted it. Two hundred thousand dollars.

THOM

That's all? For two Arctic undercover scientists? Was there a glut on the market?

SID

I was very disappointed.

THOM

You'd have every right to be.

SID

And seeing as how Yuri was the real spy and I was just an afterthought, I was worth probably twenty thousand of that, at most.

THOM

How very rude.

SID

But then, I saw it. And my life changed. In that instant, my life changed, and led me right to this moment, sitting here with you, telling you my story.

THOM

Saw what?

SID

It was at the bottom of the bag, wrapped in brown butcher paper, tied with twine.

THOM

What?

SID

Mister Vincent, have you ever heard of the Bronze Horseman?

THOM

The Bronze Horseman?

SID

A statue, Mister Vincent, an equestrian statue of the Russian tsar, Peter the Great, in the center of Saint Petersburg, on the banks of the Neva, next to the Winter Palace. It stands on a pedestal, the Thunder Stone, the largest stone ever moved by man, more than three million pounds. It was commissioned by Catherine the Great in 1766 and finished in 1782. Pushkin wrote a poem about it in 1883, and it's been called the Bronze Horseman ever since. You can't overstate its importance to Russia, to Russian society, and more over to the legitimacy of the Russian state.

After Pushkin's poem made the statue a symbol of the Russian spirit, three solid gold replicas were struck, each no more than a foot high, from the bottom of the Thunder Stone to the tip of Peter's head. Two and a half pounds of pure gold. Melted down it's not worth much, perhaps forty or fifty thousand dollars.

But symbolically, ah, *symbolically*, Mister Vincent, it is as priceless as the Venus de Milo, as Michelangelo's David, as the Last Supper. And much easier to transport.

One replica is in the Rijksmuseum in Amsterdam. Another is at the Louvre in Paris. But the third, ah, Mister Vincent – the third was lost. And the Russians have been searching for it ever since. Legend has it that Russia will regain its rightful place among the nations once the Bronze Horseman is returned to the Hermitage.

There were rumors the Nazis had found it, and had taken it to Berlin. An archivist thought he saw it at a small gift shop on the Jaffa Road in Jerusalem. But the consensus was that the third solid gold replica of the Bronze Horseman was lost, gone forever.

(Pause.)

Except I had it.

THOM

I have to say I'm impressed.

SID

I've spent a lot of time in Saint Petersburg. I minored in European Art History. Science wasn't my only passion. And I always admired that statue. I spent a lot of time studying it, up close. It combines art and science. The beauty and strength of Peter and his horse, and just imagine what it took to move a three-million pound

stone all the way from the Gulf of Finland to Senate Square in the middle of the city. The Soviets protected it from Nazi bombs and artillery with sandbags and a wooden casing. It all defies imagination.

THOM

Are you sure?

SID

As much as anyone would be with a priceless piece of art in a duffle bag. It was precisely one foot tall, and it didn't feel very heavy. It felt like it weighed two and a half pounds.

THOM

You've got me, Sid. You've finally got me. So the Americans had it?

SID

There are rumors about what the Smithsonian has and doesn't display.

THOM

John Dillinger's penis.

SID

Yes. They deny that. But ask them about the third Bronze Horseman, and they'll say they never heard of it.

THOM

The Smithsonian's very own wonky eye.

SID

Exactly.

THOM

So the Americans offered very little cash for you and Yuri, but something priceless they knew the Russians had wanted for centuries.

SID

And I'm standing on a dirt road in the Arctic with a duffel bag containing two hundred thousand American dollars – and one of the most priceless works of art in the world. With a taxi waiting a few yards away.

What would you have done, Mister Vincent? What would you have done?

THOM

Did they...

SID

I never found out. I didn't want to know. All those years of working, toiling for someone else, working so someone else could get rich – *on my works, my genius!* – I was done with it. Done with it all. And I finally had what I wanted. I was compensated. Life and me, we were finally square.

THOM

At Yuri's expense.

SID

He was a spy! He wanted me to smuggle the computer disks back to America.

THOM

You didn't know that.

SID

(deflated)

I suspected.

THOM

Barely. You're a scientist. You search for truth. Scientists want a definitive yes or no. Where would we be if Isaac Newton said I think gravity keeps me from flying off into space, but I'm not really sure?

SID

I...

THOM

Suspicious aren't enough, Doctor Yates. Cold hard facts. Cold. Hard. *Facts*. I'm sure Yuri's dead.

SID

You suspect.

THOM

Maybe he's alive, maybe he's dead. Maybe he's Schrödinger's scientist. Anyway, I'm just a journalist.

SID

Were a journalist.

THOM

Once a journalist...

SID

I suppose he is.

THOM

You betrayed him. For three years salary and a statue. And did it make your life better?

SID

I offered the taxi driver five thousand dollars to take me to the train station, and not back to the police. He asked for twenty. I gave it to him. I had no choice. I bought a ticket to Saint Petersburg, and then at the airport to Los Angeles, by way of Tokyo. I wanted to avoid Washington and New York if I could. I spread the bribes around, a few hundred here, a thousand there, and after all that, I took a train across the country to my home. Amtrak doesn't ask for ID.

I took a taxi from the station, but...I couldn't get out. I couldn't face them. I knew I had done something horrible, traded a man's freedom and maybe his life for my own. I just couldn't.

I left my wife and daughter twenty thousand dollars and a note saying Don't look for me. There was plenty in the bank for them, and eventually they'd declare me dead and she could get the life insurance.

(Pause.)

THOM

And that's when you began living in hotels.

SID

I stayed at really nice places in the beginning. Hiltons, Four Seasons, Intercontinentals. Ate room service. Then the money began to run a little low. So I switched to Marriotts, Sheratons. Still ate at nice places. Then Holiday Inns, Choices. And now...

THOM

How much do you have left?

SID

Twenty-seven thousand.

THOM

You need this forty thousand more than I do.

SID

You forget.

THOM

Forget what?

(SID goes to the closet and removes the duffle bag. HE takes it to the bed, and takes out a package wrapped in brown paper and twine. HE carefully removes the paper to reveal a golden statue, and shows it to THOM.)

The horseman. The Bronze Horseman.

(THOM looks straight at him.)

So I finally have your attention.

(THOM reaches out to touch it, but SID pulls back.)

SID

No touching.

THOM

And what can I do?

SID

You owe me. And you can help me. A man like you. You're just like me. Except your wife and kids left *you*.

THOM

Do *not* bring my family into this.

SID

Your wife paid your fine, and walked out. I saw it in the SEC records.

THOM

You'll regret this.

SID

She left you with nothing. *Nothing*. I traced your address. You're living in a shitty one bedroom rental in Beltsville. Above a Chinese restaurant.

(Pause.)

And now is your chance. An investor with a past. *You owe me*. And you know people. People I don't.

THOM

How do you know I could help you? Or would?

SID

We could be millionaires, Thom. Fifty-fifty. Down the middle. At least a hundred million each.

THOM

Minus a hundred eighteen thousand for me, I suppose.

SID

I'd call it even.

THOM

How generous.

SID

We could both look back at life and say, *We beat you!*

(THOM looks at SID.)

THOM

Can I get another Coke?

(SID gets him one from the refrigerator and opens it.
THOM takes a long drink.)

Let me touch it.

SID

I can't allow that.

THOM

Why?

SID

It hasn't been out of my hands since Russia. I take it with me wherever I go.

THOM

You take it with you to bathroom?

SID

Even to McDonalds.

THOM

Isn't that dangerous?

SID

Not as much as if it were out of my sight.

THOM

You're going to have to trust me. *Sid*. Do you trust me?

(SID very reluctantly hands the statue to THOM. HE looks it over thoroughly, feels it in his hands, first in one, then the other.

(HE offers it back to SID, but when SID approaches, THOM hits SID on the side of the head with the statue and knocks him onto the bed.)

You dumb schmuck. You dumb motherfucking schmuck.

SID

(regains himself a bit)

Don't.

THOM

(sneers)

Don't what?

SID

Don't leave me.

THOM

Don't leave you and take the horseman you mean.

SID

Once is espionage, twice is theft.

THOM

You investigate me, you insult me, and then you ask for my help? Well fuck you.

SID

I trusted you. After you swindled me!

THOM

Like your pal Yuri trusted you?

SID

Fifty-fifty.

THOM

You don't understand. I'm not like you. I'm worse.

SID

I'll call the police.

THOM

And say what? Someone's taken my stolen priceless work of art that I got by betraying a colleague? No, Doctor Yates, it doesn't work that way. Either you take what I give you, now that I know who you are and what you've done, or you don't.

SID

It's getting hot here. I need a Coke.

(SID goes to the refrigerator, but instead of getting a Coke, HE takes out the small paper bag he put in it at the beginning of the play. HE opens it and it's a gun – the smallest, shiniest, least dangerous looking gun ever made. It's tiny, and laughable, and SID isn't in control of it or himself.)

Don't make me use this.

THOM

That? The Lady Remington?

SID

It's a gun.

THOM

Barely. A cheap theatrical ploy. Do you still have the cereal box it came in?

SID

I got it for protection.

THOM

Against what? Bedbugs?

SID

I have a work of art worth probably two hundred million dollars. I need protection. Now please hand it over.

THOM

When you pull the trigger, does a little flag come out that says "Bang!"?

SID

Just give me the horseman. Please.

(THOM laughs, and hands the statue back to SID.)

Thank you. Now sit down on that chair.

THOM

On this chair?

SID

Yes. And don't move.

THOM

Of course not. I wouldn't want to be on the business end of that salad shooter you're holding.

SID

Just sit still.

(THOM sits. SID pats him down, and feels around in his pockets.)

THOM

If you find anything, let me know.

SID

I'm checking.

THOM

For what? An even smaller pistol?

SID

I have to watch out for myself.

(SID looks at THOM, and looks at the bed. HE rips off the covers, gets the undersheet, and begins to tie THOM to the chair. HE gets a pillowcase and ties THOM's hands together behind him.)

THOM

(evenly)

And what is this?

(SID doesn't respond. THOM laughs.)

You've had your fun, Doctor Yates. You know, Modern Memories doesn't take kindly to its staff being tied up. Except at our annual Christmas shindig.

SID

(still tying THOM up)

I'm done with you. With your games. I've paid you a lot of money to listen to me. Now you'll have to.

(finishing)

There. All done.

(But now THOM, all tied up and unable to move, is facing away from SID.)

This isn't right. Could you, um, turn around, perhaps?

(THOM hops around a little, but it's very hard and tiring.)

A little more.

(THOM hops around some more, and is eventually looking at SID.)

Very good. We can finally begin.

(Pause.)

Well?

THOM

Well *what*?

SID

Aren't you going to ask me a question?

THOM

None of this was in the contract, Doctor Yates.

SID

Ask me something.

THOM

All right. How are we going to sell that thing with me tied up?

SID

Now it's we?

THOM

Yes. We.

SID

What about you sell it, for a fee?

THOM

I don't think...

SID

Ten percent. That's still twenty million.

THOM

But it's not a hundred.

SID

Not it's not. It's not a hundred eighteen thousand either.

THOM

Are you renegeing on our deal?

SID

We had no deal.

THOM

You stood right there and implored me to use my nefarious connections to sell it, and we'd split it fifty-fifty.

SID

That was before.

THOM

Before what?

SID

Before you hit me.

THOM

Feelings hurt? And stop pointing that stupid toy at me. You have no idea how to use it and it might go off.

SID

No one's ever hit me before.

THOM

No one's ever tied me up and threatened me with a gun before. So we're even. Except you're probably okay and I'm still tied up.

SID

I need you to hear me out.

THOM

Doctor Yates...

SID

Sid.

THOM

It's very hard to practice compassionate listening like this. I don't feel very compassionate.

SID

I need you to listen to me.

THOM

What choice do I have? Fine. Talk away.

SID

Ask me something. To get me started.

THOM

Ask you something? I'm tied up in a fucking chair!

SID

Yes. Ask me something.

THOM

(calmer)

All right. Chocolate or vanilla? Coffee or tea? Beatles or Stones?

SID

About me.

THOM

Like what?

SID

If I knew, I'd be the one writing the memoir.

THOM

Fine. You've told me about your childhood, your work with water, your discoveries and inventions. Your time with the Russians and that stupid statue.

SID

That's worth two hundred million dollars.

THOM

Tell me about your family.

SID

You tell me about yours first.

THOM

That's not how it works.

SID

That's how it works when you're tied up.

THOM

(reluctantly)

My wife was very wealthy.

SID

Was that why you married her?

THOM

No.

(SID looks at him skeptically.)

Well, partially.

SID

It didn't detract from her beauty.

THOM

No it didn't.

SID

How wealthy?

THOM

Her father owned a string of almond farms in central California. And there's lots of money in almonds.

SID

Did you know that ten percent of California's water goes to almond farming?

THOM

Really?

SID

Don't doubt me about water, Mister Vincent.

THOM

You're the expert.

SID

Continue.

After creating Marketstand and selling it for lots of money, and then investing that – legally – I had more money than her family did. And then I got stupid. You know all about that. And I didn't have enough to cover the SEC fine. She did. She sold her share of the farms' inheritance to her brother, who bought it for ten cents on the dollar. Cheap bastard. But it was enough. And she sold the house, walked out with our daughter and a few million bucks, and I never heard from her again.

SID

Which lead you to this precise moment.

THOM

I suppose so.

SID

So you *are* just like me. A failure. A loser. A dumb schmuck, as you might say.

THOM

Can I, uh, have another look at the statue?

SID

Why?

THOM

It has such a power over you. And if it's what you say it is, I've never seen anything like it before.

SID

How can I trust you?

THOM

You'll have to. Just show it to me. Let me see it.

SID

(reluctantly)

Okay.

(SID approaches THOM, statue in one hand, gun hanging down in the other. HE holds the statue about three feet in from of THOM.)

Don't you love how it shines, how it reflects light. Even the cheap lights here.

THOM

I need to touch it.

SID

Why?

THOM

I need to feel its weight.

SID

It's two and half pounds. Just as it should be.

THOM

You say.

SID

On a scale. At a gas station.

THOM

A gas station scale? Did it tell your fortune too?

SID

Why do you need to hold it?

THOM

I have some ideas about what I...what we could do with it. Being tied up with a gun pointed at you leads a man to thinking. People I could contact.

SID

People.

THOM

People who know people.

(half-sings)

They're the luckiest people in the world.

SID

Hmmm?

THOM

A bit of musical humor, to break the tension.

SID

I see.

THOM

And these people...they don't like to be fooled around with.

SID

Who does?

THOM

Not when they're risking two hundred million dollars.

SID

Of course.

THOM

They need to be sure. Sure of what they're getting.

SID

And you think they'd do it? You think they'd buy it?

THOM

I have my suspicions.

SID

For two hundred million dollars?

THOM

You must realize, Doctor Yates, these things are negotiable. They have to be.

SID

They do?

THOM

And they drive a hard bargain. They drive the hardest of bargains. They're taking a substantial risk even looking at something like this, much less paying one hundred fifty million dollars for it.

SID

I thought we agreed on two hundred million.

THOM

What we agree to and what they're willing to pay are two different things. Two very different things.

SID

I was hoping for two hundred million.

THOM

And I was hoping to be untied at some point in the near future.

SID

All in good time. When you've regained my trust. So no two hundred million?

THOM

There's a very limited market for priceless works of art stolen from the U.S. government. We can't very well put an ad on Craigslist. *Bronze Horseman for sale, museum quality, two hundred million or best offer.* Now untie me and let me hold the statue.

SID

Just your hands.

(SID gives THOM a good long, wary look, and reluctantly unties his hands. HE lets him hold the statue but keeps a hold of it himself.

(SID runs his fingers along the statue.)

Look. See the ridges on it. How finely the sculptor matched the original statue.

THOM

I need to hold it. Hold it in my two hands.

SID

Why?

THOM

I'm not going anywhere with it. I'm still tied to the chair.

(SID hands it to THOM, who looks it over, feels its weight, and looks at it much more deeply than before.)

So this is worth two hundred million dollars.

SID

Yes.

THOM

I'm holding two hundred million dollars in my hands.

SID

More than that. You're holding the fate of nations. You're holding my fate. And yours.

(Pause, as THOM looks it over much more closely.)

What are you looking for?

THOM

Most sculptors put their initials on the work. Who's EMF?

SID

Etienne Maurice Falconet. He created the original statue in Russia. His initials are just under the horse's left flank.

THOM

So they are. That's detailed work.

SID

Now you see why I only wanted one copy of my book.

THOM

Not really.

SID

I plan to burn it. Burn it outside my new beachfront villa in Costa Rica. I just needed a reason to get you here.

THOM

You've got it all planned.

SID

I haven't had much to do these past years except think of the future. And plan for your visit. What good is having a priceless work of art if you can't tell anyone?

THOM

Yes, but that applies to the buyer as well.

SID

I never considered that.

THOM

Let's say you break into the Louvre and steal the Mona Lisa. It's rather small, you know that? You could hide it under your coat. You evade all security, all police. It's all over the news – *Mona Lisa stolen*. You get it home, and hang it on the wall next to a few holiday photos and a picture of your maiden aunt. You've pulled off one of the biggest art heists in modern history. Who are you going to call to have a look at it?

SID

But no one in America knows about the Bronze Horseman.

THOM

Then why is it worth two hundred million?

SID

Well, art aficionados do.

THOM

True. You're lucky it looks like something you could pick up at a museum gift shop.

SID

But the Americans wouldn't have given it back unless it was so important.

THOM

Unless it was Yuri who was so important.

SID

Yes. Poor Yuri.

THOM

You were just the courier. The willing sap.

SID

Don't. Don't say that.

THOM

Why? Because it's the truth? The State Department didn't give two shits about you. It was Yuri they wanted back. But here's one thing I don't get. Why was Yuri

worth two hundred million dollars, *Sid*? That's a lot of money. I'm not worth two hundred million dollars. You're certainly not – we know that for a fact. We know what your market value is.

SID

Stop.

THOM

It doesn't really matter. You said you used to take long walks around Saint Petersburg. By the statue?

SID

Yes, with my wife. I showed Yuri a picture of her. Here.

(SID goes into the closet and gets a framed photo.)

THOM

A beautiful woman.

SID

Thank you.

THOM

Do you miss her?

SID

What do you think? Of course!

THOM

And that's the statue behind you two.

(THOM looks at the photo, then the statue, and compares the two.)

So he knew you liked it.

SID

A lot of people take pictures in front of it.

THOM

A lot of people aren't as gullible as you.

(Pause.)

Could you come a little closer. I want to show you something very interesting.

(Very slowly and reluctantly, SID comes closer to THOM, so they're almost at eye level, THOM sitting and SID standing. THOM points to something on the statue.)

Look at this, at the horse's face.

SID

Yes...

THOM

He's smiling. You see that? He's smiling.

SID

Yes!

THOM

He's laughing.

SID

Yes!

THOM

And you know what he's laughing at?

(At which point THOM slams the statue into SID's head, like before but harder, and SID goes flying onto the bed.)

You! He's laughing at you! You pathetic imbecile!

(THOM struggles and manages with his free hands to wriggle out of the bed sheets around him. SID is still groggy on the bed.)

I despise people who use other people, who betray them. You betrayed Yuri, you betrayed your science, your own ethics, all for what? Two and a half pounds of gold. You say I owe you? I owe *you*? Who owes me? Huh, Sid? *Who fucking owes me?*

(SID staggers to the light switches at the other end of the room. HE flips a switch to turn the lights off – but instead, another light turns on. HE flips another switch, and a different light goes off. After playing with the switches, the effect is the same – it’s still light in the room.)

What the fuck are you doing?

SID

I wanted to turn the lights off so you couldn’t leave with the statue.

THOM

I’m not going anywhere. I’m not a thief.

(SID raises the gun.)

SID

And I am?

THOM

Uh, yes. We’ve established that. And not a very good one.

SID

Give me one reason why I shouldn’t use this thing.

THOM

I’ll give you three. One, you’re a thief but not a murderer. Two, if I’m gone, who’s going to help you sell the statue? And three, anyone who calls a gun “this thing” doesn’t know how to use it.

(SID realizes what THOM is saying is true, and lowers the gun.)

I just have one question.

SID

About what?

THOM

This statue. Why were your friends at the State Department so willing to give it away?

SID

They wanted Yuri back.

THOM

Did they.

SID

Of course.

THOM

And?

SID

What do you mean "and"?

THOM

A priceless work of art that only art historians, collectors and the Russians care about.

SID

Because they couldn't do anything with it.

THOM

If the Smithsonian put it on public display, the Russians would immediately ask for it back and create an international incident. It would be as if George Washington's wooden teeth were under glass at Lenin's Tomb.

SID

So they were like your buyers.

THOM

Couldn't display it, couldn't tell anyone they had it. But by giving it in exchange for you and Yuri, they also let them know how valuable Yuri was. Making it less likely they'd want to release him.

(under his breath, to himself, thinking out loud)

Unless...

SID

But it was ransom.

THOM

As if the Russians are merely true lovers of art, and play on the up and up.

SID

But they got their money, their statue.

THOM

No, *you* got their money and their statue. A pathetic middle level scientist...

(SID raises the gun.)

SID

Stop it.

THOM

Put that down. And did you ever consider why they haven't come looking for you?

SID

I've been very careful.

THOM

No one's that careful. Yes. Yes. I know what's going on. I know. *I know*. That must be it! No wonder you had such an easy time getting out of the country!

SID

What?

(THOM looks at SID and starts laughing. Soon HE's laughing uncontrollably, and HE's tossing the statue back and forth in his hands, cavalierly, perhaps doing tricks with it.)

What are you doing? You idiot! What are you doing?

(THOM extends his arm with the statue in it toward SID, and as SID goes for it, HE retracts it, laughing all the time.)

You're crazy! Give me my statue! Give me my statue!

(And SID pushes THOM to the bed, as they struggle for the statue.

(For a few short tantalizing seconds, SID and THOM come face to face on the bed.

(THEY stop, hold, and take a good long stare at each other. Then they return to struggling on the bed.

(Eventually, SID overpowers THOM, and grabs the statue. HE holds it close.)

Get out. Get out or I'll kill you.

(THOM sits up.)

THOM
(still laughing a bit)

All right. You've had your fun.

SID
This was all a mistake. A huge mistake. The book. You. A mistake.

THOM
I wouldn't say that. We made a few memories. Evened the books. Had a few laughs. At your expense.

(THOM gathers his belongings. HE reaches into his sample case, tears up the contract and hands it to SID.)

SID
Where are you going?

THOM
Back to Washington. There must be a ball game on in some bar.

(HE reaches into the large envelope and pulls out a few bills.)

C'mon. I'm buying. Tell me tales of desalination.

(SID doesn't move. HE just clutches the statue to his chest.)

Well, your loss.

SID

Don't go.

(THOM opens the door.)

THOM

Oh. By the way. That statue. It's gold, right?

SID

Yes.

THOM

Gold through and through.

SID

Yes.

THOM

From from the bottom of the Thunder Stone to the tip of Peter's head.

SID

Pure gold.

(Pause, as THOM glowers at SID.)

THOM

(as HE leaves)

Scratch it.

SID

Scratch it?

THOM

Scratch it. With your fingernail. Or a letter opener. Something metal. Scratch it. Scratch it hard.

(THOM begins to laugh.)

I'll have some decaffeinated coffee in your honor. And don't worry. We'll always have Murmansk.

(And HE leaves, shutting the front door.

(SID is befuddled. He looks around the room, opening and shutting drawers. Finally, HE finds something metal, and begins to scratch the statue, first tentatively, then harder and faster, hacking at it.

(The area HE's scratching begins to turn black. HE's been scratching off thin gold plating, and revealing the lead material underneath.

(It's a fake.

(SID lets out an hellacious, inhuman scream.)

SID

Nooooooooooooo!

(HE runs to the front door, opens it, and throws the statue as far as he can. We can hear it hit the ground or a parked car in the parking lot outside the hotel.

(HE returns to the edge of the bed, crying and hyperventilating. HE sees the framed photo of his wife and him, and holds it close to his chest, sobbing.

(Suddenly, the clock radio in the room starts playing Sixpence None the Richer's *There She Goes*, as the lights fade.)

(BLACKOUT. END OF PLAY.)