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The Nowhere Man

GREGG HURWITZ

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For Keith Kahla
an old-fashioned editor in all the best ways
and a new-fashioned editor in all the essential ones

How deep do you need to bury the past
before it will stay dead?

—Alan Moore, *Swamp Thing*

The truth will set you free. But not until
it is finished with you.

—David Foster Wallace, *Infinite Jest*

The Nowhere Man

1

What He Needs to Know

A naked selfie.

It starts with that.

Hector Contrell sends a seventeen-year-old kid to troll middle schools in East L.A. The kid, improbably named Addison, makes for fine bait. Seedily handsome, starter mustache, pop-star cheekbones, dirty blond hair flipped just so. He wears a hoodie and rides a skateboard, the better to look like he's fifteen. He says he's a pro skater with a contract. He says he's a rapper with a deal at a major label. He's really a pot-smoking dropout who lives in a rented garage with his older brother and his friends, spends his nights playing Call of Duty and hitting a green glass water bong named Fat Boy.

He hangs out near campuses at lunch, after classes, his skateboard rat-a-tat-tatting across sidewalk cracks just barely past schoolground limits. The girls cluster and giggle, and he chooses one to peel off the herd. He tells her to snap pictures. He tells her to get a secret Facebook account, one her parents don't know about, and

upload them there. He tells her that everyone does this in high school, and he's mostly right, but not everyone is hooked into a scheme like this. He targets Title I schools, broke girls, easily impressed, looking for a dream, a romance, a way out. Girls whose parents lack the resources to do much if they disappear.

The secret Facebook page links go to Hector Contrell.

The genius of it is, the girls create the sales catalog themselves.

From Contrell the links go to all sorts of men with unorthodox tastes. Austrian industrialists. Sheikhs. Three brothers in Detroit with a padlocked metal shed. Online they can peruse the merchandise discreetly and, if need be, ask for more product information—different photographic angles, specific poses. They make their selections.

Given immigration confusion, gang influence, and splintered family trees, disappearances aren't rare when you're dealing with broke ethnic girls. They're a renewable resource.

Hector Contrell comes in the black of night, and another girl vanishes off the streets and wakes up in a stupor in Islamabad or Birmingham or São Paulo. Some of the girls are kept. Some are designated for onetime use.

Anna Rezian is the next prospect. Her father is a plumber, works hard, comes home late and tired. Her mother, a cocktail waitress, comes home later and more tired. Only fifteen, Anna takes care of her younger brothers and sisters, tries to remember to look at her textbooks after she gets the kids down. It's a hard routine for a girl her age.

One day after school, Addison's blue eyes peer out from beneath his scraggly bangs and pick her and only her. That night she touches up her eyeliner, sheds the flat-front Dickies with the worn knees, checks the lighting. This choice, this moment is going to be a portal to a Whole New Her.

But after she uploads the selfie, nothing magical happens. Staring at the image she has released into the world, she feels an unease begin to gnaw at her.

She decides to stop after the one photo. But Addison needs more; they've been requested from a buyer in Serbia. In a ganja haze, he catches her in the alley outside her family's one-bedroom apart-

ment. When his low-rent hipster charms fail him, he tells her what she'd better do. Big-shotting in the Crenshaw night, he lets fly that he works for someone who will hurt her and her family if she turns off the tap.

She stays up all night, trembling in the glow of her ancient laptop, clicking her way through the infinity of Facebook and chasing threads. Friends of friends have heard of friends who have disappeared. Over the top of her laptop, she looks at her sleeping siblings and contemplates what it will feel like if harm befalls them because of her stupidity. She looks at her sleeping parents, exhausted after their long work days. The chasm of guilt inside her widens by the second, pushing her further and further away until she is on an island of her own making, until her family members seem like specks on the horizon. Something awful is coming, either for them or for her. She makes the choice.

She sends new photos.

She stops sleeping. She starts plucking out her hair in patches. She cuts herself at school, hoping the pain will wake her from this nightmare. Maybe it's a cry for help instead, each crimson line across her forearm a smoke signal released in hopes that someone will ride to her rescue.

Someone does see the signal. One of her classmates' father, an older man with a cane and a fresh limp, finds her sobbing in the bathroom of a 7-Eleven when she's supposed to be in homeroom. He gives her a phone number: 1-855-2-NOWHERE. A magical fix-it line.

She dials.

Evan Smoak picks up.

"Do you need my help?" he asks.

That's how it works.

Fourteen hours later Evan is standing outside Addison's rented garage. The air tastes of car exhaust. The streetlights are broken, the stars smeared by smog, the night dark as tar. Evan is a wraith.

Addison's brother, Carl, and his crew of friends are out scoring black tar at a park in Boyle Heights. Evan knows this. Addison is alone. Evan knows this, too.

He has done his research.

The First Commandment—*Assume nothing*—demands it.

The wraith raises a single knuckle, taps the garage door.

A moment later it creaks upward.

Stooped, Addison emerges from an effluvium of day-old bong water. He rocks on his heels, gauging Evan.

By design, Evan is hard to gauge. Thirty-something. Fit but not muscly. Somewhere around six feet. An average guy, not too handsome.

Addison underestimates him.

This happens a lot, by design.

The kid's lips twitch to the side. He jerks his head, flips his hair out of the blue eyes that have landed many a young woman on a container ship heading for uncharted waters.

"The fuck you want?" he says.

"Hector Contrell's address," Evan says.

The pretty-boy lashes flare, but Addison covers quickly. "No idea who that is. And no fucking way I'd tell you if I did."

Evan looks through him. This tends to make people uneasy.

Uncertainty washes across Addison's face, but he blinks it away. "I know people, you tool," he says. "People who can make you disappear like that." The snap of his fingers, sharp in the crisp air. "Who the fuck you think you are anyways?"

"The Nowhere Man," Evan says.

The kid's Adam's apple jerks once. Up. Down.

The moniker is not widely known. But dark rumors have spread through certain streets like trash blown down graffitied alleys.

Addison takes a quick step to the side to stabilize himself. His voice comes out husky, pushed through a constricting throat. "That's just a bullshit story."

"Then you don't have to be scared, do you?"

Addison didn't say anything.

"You do know what happens to the girls," Evan tells him.

It takes a moment for Addison to relocate his voice. "They disappear."

"To where?'

"I don't know. Guys."

"Who use them for . . . ?"

The kid shrugs. Actually muffles a snicker. "Whatever guys do."

"The address."

"I can't tell you. Hector will kill me. *Literally* kill me."

Evan's gaze is steady.

Addison falters. "No," he says, a new realization dawning. "Oh, no. Look—I'm just a kid, man. I'm seventeen. You're not gonna kill me, are you?"

There is a punch Evan was taught in his early teens by a gruff marine close-quarter- combat instructor.

It is called the palate breaker.

A nonlethal blow that fractures the bridge of the nose, the sinus bones, and both orbital sockets, splitting the skull horizontally temple to temple. It leaves the upper jaw floating, unattached.

Evan's gaze narrows. He picks his spot.

You wouldn't have thought the kid could keep his feet, but there he is, upright on the curb. Something like drool leaks from his lips, the holes of his nose.

"No," Evan says. "I won't kill you."

Addison makes a wheezing noise. With his new face, it will be hard for him to troll for girls anymore.

"The address," Evan says again.

What is left of the mouth tells him what he needs to know.

2

The Social Contract

Evan slipped through the plastic tarp into a new-construction McMansion, the spoils of Hector Contrell's war on the broke families of East L.A. The house, distanced from its neighbors, topped an inclined driveway at the edge of Chatsworth.

Evan drifted through doorless frames, making silent progress toward the heart of the house. Studs framing the wide halls and exposed ceiling beams gave him the impression that he was walking into a massive rib cage, into Hector Contrell himself. Sawdust chalked the back of Evan's throat. Nails protruded from the floor, poking the soles of his Original S.W.A.T. boots. The aggressively checkered gunner grips of a custom Wilson Combat 1911 pistol bit the flesh of his palm.

He found Contrell in the living room-to-be, ensconced like a pilot within a cockpit of computer monitors and servers from which he ran his flesh empire with impunity. A burly, bearded man wholly unhooked from the social contract, who took what he wanted because he wanted it. The high-tech station with its bluish

glow and snaking cables seemed anomalous, sprouting up like a mushroom from the exposed subfloor.

Hector noticed movement in the shadows and stood, revolver quickly in hand. For a time, it seemed, he kept rising.

Standing just past the semicircle of pushed-together desks, Evan looked up at him. A FUCK YOU tattoo on the front of Hector's neck indicated that nuance was not the man's strong suit.

Hector said, "I don't know who you are or why you're here, but I'm gonna give you five seconds to leave before I aerate your torso." For emphasis he kicked one of the monitors off the desk, which went to pieces at Evan's feet, sparking impressively.

Both men kept their guns down at their sides.

Evan watched the monitor give off a dying spark. Then he lifted his eyes.

"One of the functions of anger is to convince people of the seriousness of your intentions," he said. "To signal that you're out of control. Unpredictable. Willing to do damage. To evoke fear."

Hector drew himself even taller. No minor feat. Backlit by the monitors, his meaty left earlobe showed a missing slot where an earring had been ripped free.

Evan took a step closer. "So look at me. Look at me closely. And ask yourself: Do I look scared?"

The big man leaned in, the glow of the computers turning his face into a shadow-ravaged landscape—empty eye sockets, pronounced jowls, the curve of one cheek. His thick lips pulsed, the first show of hesitation.

Evan's gun remained at his side, just like Hector's. They faced each other across the desk.

When Evan was fourteen, Jack had trained him how to fast-draw. It wasn't with *High Noon* theatrics—unholster, lift, and aim. It was a two-millimeter tilt and 3.5 pounds of index-finger pressure.

The shadows shifted across Hector's face. His beefy hand twitched above his gun. He moved first.

The plywood walls gave off a good echo.

Later that night Evan eased into the alley that ran behind the dilapidated apartment that accommodated Anna Rezian's family. A sheen of blood had hardened on his left forearm, cracking like dried mud when he moved. He'd washed his hands and his face but could feel the leftover flecks on the side of his neck.

There'd been backspray.

He lifted his black phone from his pocket. It was a RoamZone model, encased in fiberglass and tough black rubber, the screen protected by Gorilla Glass. He kept it on him.

Always.

It was a lifeline. Not to him, but to those who called it.

He sent a text to Anna: OUTSIDE.

As he waited, a concern niggled at the base of his skull. He had seen something in Hector's house—he didn't know what it was, but it was wrong. Was his client in danger? No. He'd been thorough. Not a threat to her. Not a threat to him. Something else. Something important but not immediate.

Anna's backlit silhouette appeared at the mouth of the alley about ten yards away. She wore a nightie, her spine hunched, her dry hair sticking out. The alley formed a wind tunnel, the October air whipping at her brunette tufts, making them wag stiffly.

"You're safe now," he told her.

Her feet were bare. He could see the tremble in her knees.

"I thought you were one of them coming to get me," she said. "I thought walking down here would be the last thing I ever did. But then . . . but then it was you."

"I'm sorry I scared you," he said.

"What does it mean? That I'm safe?"

"You don't have to worry anymore," he said.

"About what?"

"Any of it."

"Addison?"

"Has other concerns now."

"And his boss? The guy behind it all?"

"He died."

Anna trudged forward, her scalp shiny in the spots where she'd

plucked out her hair. Her face held the same look he'd seen in his other clients, a worn-through, hollowed-out expression that came from falling out of the slipstream of life.

"Albert is safe?" Her voice cracked. "And Eduard?"

"Yes."

Anna came closer yet, her cheeks glinting. "How about Maria? They won't hurt Maria?"

"There's no one left to hurt Maria."

Openly sobbing now. *"Mayrig? Hayrig?"*

"Your mother and father will be fine."

He thought of her family in their beds and wondered at the serenity they might offer her. At her age he hadn't had much, which meant he'd had nothing to leave behind. As a twelve-year-old, he'd stepped off a truck-stop curb into a dark sedan and blipped off the radar. Back then any gamble was worth the taking. This one had gotten him out of East Baltimore. He'd been to Marrakech and St. Petersburg and Cape Town, and he'd left his mark in blood at every stop. But he'd never had what Anna had waiting for her upstairs. The chill breeze brought with it the realization that he'd devoted his life to preserving for others what he couldn't have himself.

"The pictures of me," she said. "They'll be so ashamed."

Before leaving Hector's place, Evan had safed the house, finding little more than construction materials, empty beer bottles, a few hefty dumbbells in the garage. Fast-food wrappers layered a mattress thrown on the floor in one of the bare-bones rooms upstairs where Hector was living during the construction. Evan had gone back down to the comms center and dragged the considerable body out of the way. Once the cockpit was clear, he spent a few stomach-churning minutes navigating the databases, clicking through the files of past "eligibles" to locate the matching buyers. Client information was sparse and coded, but he forwarded it on to the local FBI field office. But not before wiping all information about Anna Rezian off the servers.

"The pictures are gone," Evan said. "No one will have to know anything."

Anna took an unsteady step to the side and lifted a hand to the cracked stucco wall. "Eduard. He's safe now. He's safe." Still working it through, thawing out of denial.

"You're all safe."

Anna's face wobbled, and for a moment it seemed she might come apart entirely. "I don't know how I can face them. Knowing what I almost did to us all. I'll never forgive myself."

"That's up to you."

She looked stung by his response. Tears clung to her lashes. She bit her lips. Her chest rose, her nostrils flaring. Deep breath. Exhale. The tears did not fall.

"You're not to call me again," Evan said. "Do you understand? This is what I do. But it's all that I do."

"Albert and Maria are okay now." Her lips barely moved. Her voice, little more than a whisper. "*Mayrig* and *Hayrig*. And Eduard. Eduard."

"Anna, I need you to focus. Look at me. Look at me. I have one thing to ask of you before I leave."

Her eyes found a sudden clarity. "Anything."

"Find someone who needs me. Like you did. It doesn't matter if it takes a week or a month or a year. You find someone who is desperate and has no way out. Give them my number."

"Yes,1-855-2-NOWHERE."

Every call was digitized and sent over the Internet through a series of encrypted virtual private network tunnels. After pinging through fifteen software virtual telephone switch destinations around the globe, it came through his RoamZone.

"Yes. You tell them about me."

"Like Nicole Helfrich's dad when he found me in the 7-Eleven?"

"Like that. You find someone. Tell them I'll be there on the other end of the phone."

That was the final step for his clients. A task, a purpose, an act of empowerment that transitioned them from victim to rescuer. Evan knew all too well that some wounds never healed, not fully. But there were ways to contain the pain, to take ownership over the scars, and this was one of them.

Anna lunged at him and wrapped him in a hug. For a moment

his arms floated a few inches above her thin back. He was unaccustomed to this kind of contact. In the moonlight he could see the wine-colored streak on his forearm, the dark half-moons beneath his nails. He didn't want Hector Contrell's blood on her clothes, in her hair. And yet Anna's embrace tightened, her face pressed into his chest.

He lowered his arms. She was warm. He felt the wetness of her cheek through his T-shirt. She clung to him.

Her voice came muffled. "How do I thank you?"

Evan said, "Be with your family."

He'd meant it as the next instruction, but it struck him that it was also the answer to her question.

She stepped back to wipe her eyes, and he took the opportunity to slip away.