The Brutal Art

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Extract

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True art is always found where we least expect it, where nobody is thinking about it or saying its name.

Art hates to be recognized and greeted by name.

It flees instantly.

–Jean Dubuffet

. . . a mirror of smoke, cracked and dim
in which to judge himself . . .

–The Book of Odd Thoughts 13:15

ONE

In the beginning, I behaved badly. I'm not going to lie to you, so allow me to get that on the table right away: while I would like to believe that I redeemed myself later, there's no question that – in the beginning at least – I lacked a certain purity of purpose. That's putting it mildly. If we're being honest, let's be honest: I was motivated by greed and, more important, by narcissism: a sense of entitlement that runs deep in my genes and that I can't seem to shake, no matter how ugly it makes me feel, some of the time. Part of the job description, I suppose, and part of the reason I've moved on. Know thyself.

Christ. I promised myself that I'd make an effort to avoid sounding like a pretentious prick. I ought to be more hard-boiled; I'd like to be. I don't think I have it in me. To write in clipped sentences. To employ gritty metaphor in the introduction of sultry blondes. (My heroine's a brunette, and not the especially sultry kind; her hair isn't jet-black and dripping; it's medium chestnut and, more often than not, pragmatically tied back, workmanlike ponytails or flyaway buns or stashed behind her ears.) I can't do it, so why bother trying?

We each get one story to tell, and we have to tell it the way that comes naturally. I don't carry a gun; I don't get into car chases or fistfights. All I can do is write down the truth, and

truthfully, I might be kind of a pretentious prick. That's all right. I can live with that.

As Sam is fond of saying *It is what it is.*

Generally, I don't agree. A more appropriate rule of thumb – for my life, my line of work, and this story – might be *It is what it is, except when it isn't, which is most of the time.* I still don't know the whole truth, and I doubt I ever will.

But I'm getting ahead of myself.

All I mean is that, having lived a long time in a world of illusions, a costume-party world, wink-wink and knowingness and quote marks around everything everybody says, it's a relief to speak honestly. If my honesty doesn't sound like Philip Marlowe's, so be it. It is what it is. This might be a detective novel, but I'm no detective. My name is Ethan Muller. I am thirty-three years old, and I used to be in art.

OF COURSE, I LIVE IN NEW YORK. My gallery was in Chelsea, on Twenty-fifth Street, between Tenth and Eleventh avenues, one gallery of many in a building whose identity, like that of the city around it, has been in flux more or less since birth. A row of stables; a garage for hansom cabs; then a corset factory, whose downfall coincided with the rise of the brassiere. The building lived on, though, subdivided, reunited, resubdivided, condemned, uncondemned, and – finally – rezoned as residential lofts for young artists, some of whom had taken to wearing corsets as a protofeminist throwback. But before the first struggling MFA filmmaker could sign her lease and get her boxes out of storage, the entire art world decided to drag its sagging ass uptown, creating a neighborhood mini-boom.

This took place in the early 1990s. Keith Haring was dead; the East Village was dead; SoHo was dead; everyone had AIDS or AIDS ribbons. Everyone needed a change. Chelsea fit. The DIA Foundation had been there since the late 80s, and people

hoped that the move would redeem art from the rabid commercialization that had metastasized the downtown scene.

The developers, nosing out an ideal opportunity for rabid commercialization, took their newly prime piece of real estate and had it rezoned yet again, and in May of '95, 567 West Twenty-fifth reopened for business, accepting into its white-walled bosom a few dozen smallish galleries and several large ones, including the airy, double-high, fourth-floor space that would eventually become mine.

I used to wonder what the corset-maker or the stablehands would make of what transacts on their former plot. Where horseshit used to turn the air sulfurous and rank, millions and millions and millions of dollars now change hands. So goes the Big City.

Because of the number of tenants engaged in the same activity – i.e., the sale of contemporary art – and because of the nature of that activity – i.e., frantic, jealous, shot through with schadenfreude – 567 frequently feels like a beehive, but a hip and ironic one. Artists, gallerists, assistants, collectors, consultants and assorted flunkies buzz up and down its smooth concrete halls, nectar-heavy with gossip. It's a schmoozer's paradise. There are openings to attend, a sale to scoff at, a resale that makes the first sale look like a bargain – plus all of New York's standard social touchstones: adulteries, divorces and lawsuits. Marilyn refers to the building as the High School, for her a term of endearment. Marilyn was homecoming queen, after all.

There's no lobby, as such. Three concrete steps lead to a steel gate, opened by a numerical keypad, which has about as much thief-stopping power as a twist tie, or perhaps a banana peel on the floor. Everyone relevant knows the code. On the off chance that you'd recently arrived from Mars or Kansas and, never having seen an art gallery before, that you took the first taxi you could find to 567, you would have little trouble gaining admittance.

You could wait for an intern to come toddling in, balancing four cups of coffee, all prepared with extreme precision, one for herself and three for her employer. Or you could wait for an artist to show up lugging a hangover and the new canvases he promised eighteen months ago. Or for a gallerist himself, someone like me, getting out of a cab on a cold and windless January Monday, phone pinned between head and shoulder, negotiating with a private party in London, fingers going numb as I count off the fare, filled with a sourceless and dreadful certainty that today was going to be one hell of a day.

FINISHING THE CALL OUTSIDE, I let myself into the building, hit the button for the freight elevator, and savored my solitude. I tended to show up at about eight thirty, earlier than most of my colleagues and a full hour before my assistants. Once work began, I was never alone. Talking to people is my strong suit, and the reason I've been successful. For the same reason, I treasured those few minutes to myself.

The elevator arrived and Vidal pulled open the screeching accordion gate. As we exchanged greetings, my phone went off again. The caller ID read KRISTJANA HALLBJÖRNSDOTTIR, confirming my hell-of-a-day premonition.

Kristjana is an installation and performance artist, a behemoth of a woman: six feet tall, thick-limbed, with a drill sergeant's crew cut. She manages to be somehow dainty and enormously heavy-footed, like a bull in a china shop, except that the bull is wearing a tutu. Born in Iceland, raised all over the place: that's her provenance as well as her art's; and although I admire the work deeply, it's barely good enough to justify the headache of representing her. When I took her on I knew her reputation. I knew, too, that other people were rolling their eyes at me. It had become a point of pride that I'd kept her in line, putting up her most successful show in years: reviewed well and sold out for well above asking, a feat that

left her literally weeping on my shoulder with gratitude. Kristjana is nothing if not demonstrative.

But that was last May, and since then she had gone into hibernation. I'd gone by her apartment, left messages, sent e-mails and texts. If she was angling for attention, she failed, because I stopped trying. Her call that morning was our first contact in months.

Cell phone reception in the elevator is spotty, and I couldn't make her out until Vidal hauled open the gate and that huge, panicked voice came bursting across the airwaves at full bore, already deep into an explanation of her Idea and the material support she required. I told her to slow down and start again. She drew in a wet, heavy breath, the first sign that she's about to go haywire. Then, seeming to reconsider, she asked about the summer. I told her I could not show her until August.

'Impossible,' she said. 'You are not listening.'

'I am. It can't be done.'

'Bullshit. You are not *listening*.'

'I'm looking at the calendar as we speak.' (Not true; I was looking for my keys.) 'What are we talking about, anyway? What am I committing myself to, before I say yes?'

'I need the whole space.'

'I—'

'It's not negotiable. I need the full space. I am referring to *landscape*, Ethan.' She launched into a highly technical and theoretically dense discourse on the disappearing Arctic ice pack. She had to show in June, at the absolute peak of summer, opening on the night of the solstice, and she wanted the air-conditioning off – the *heat on* – because that underscored the notion of dissolution. *Dissolfing* she kept saying. *Everything is dissolfing.* By the time she got to post-post-post-critical theory, I had ceased listening, absorbed by the problem of my keys, which had migrated to the bottom of my attaché. I found them and unlocked the gallery doors as she outlined a plan for destroying my floors.

'You can't bring a live walrus in here.'

Wet, heavy breathing.

'It's probably not legal. Is it? Kristjana? Have you even looked into that?'

She told me to go fuck myself sideways and hung up.

Knowing that it was a matter of time before she called back, I left the phone on the front desk and began my morning routine. First voicemail. There were six from Kristjana, all between four and five thirty in the morning; God only knew who she had expected to reach. A few collectors wanted to know when they could expect their art. I was currently running two shows: a series of lovely, shimmery paintings by Egao Oshima, and some of Jocko Steinberger's papier-mâché genitalia. All of the Oshimas had presold, and several of the Steinbergers had gone to the Whitney. A good month.

After phone came e-mail: clients to touch base with, social machinery in need of grease, arrangements for art fairs, arrangements to look at new work. Much of dealing art consists of keeping one's plates spinning. A friend of mine in the business wrote to ask if I could get ahold of a Dale Schnelle he lusted for. I replied that I might. Marilyn sent me a macabre cartoon one of her artists had drawn of her, depicting her as Saturn eating his children, à la Goya. She found the image delightful.

At nine thirty, Ruby showed up, coffees in hand. I took mine and gave her instructions. At nine thirty-nine Nat arrived and resumed typesetting the catalogue for our upcoming show. At ten twenty-three my cell phone rang again, a blocked number. As you'd imagine, most of the people I liked selling to had blocked numbers.

'Ethan.' A voice like flannel; I recognized it immediately.

I'd known Tony Wexler all my life, and I considered him the closest thing I have to a father that I didn't despise. That he worked for my father, had worked for him for more than forty years – I'll leave the psychoanalysis up to you. Suffice it to say that whenever my father wanted something from me, he sent Tony to go fetch.

Which had happened with increasing frequency over the last

two years, when my father had a heart attack and I didn't visit him in the hospital. Since then I'd been getting calls from him, through Tony, every eight or ten weeks. That might not sound like much, but given how little communication we'd had prior to that, I had lately come to feel a tad assaulted. I had no interest in bridge-building. When my father builds a bridge, you can bet there's going to be a toll on it.

So while I was pleased to hear Tony's voice, I didn't especially want to know what he had to say.

'We read about the shows. Your father was very interested.'

By *we* he meant himself. When I started at the gallery nine years ago, Tony got himself subscribed to several of the trades; and unlike most art-mag subscribers, he reads them. He's an authentic intellectual in an age when that term has come to mean nothing, and he knows a shocking amount about the market.

He also meant himself when he said *your father.* Tony tends to pin his own sentiments on his boss, a habit designed, I believe, to conceal the absurd fact that I have a closer relationship with the payroll than with the man who sired me. Nobody's fooled.

We talked art for a little bit. He asked me how I felt about the Steinbergers in the context of his return to figuration; what else Oshima had planned; how the two shows communicated. I kept waiting for the request, the sentence that began *Your father would like.*

He said, 'Something has come to my attention that I think you should know about. Some new work.'

It's always open season on art dealers. Quickly one develops strict submission policies. In my case, impenetrable: if you were good, I would find you; otherwise I didn't want to hear from you. It might sound elitist or draconian but I had no choice. It was either that or face the endless pleading of acquaintances convinced that if you would take the time to come to their sister-in-law's best friend's husband's half-brother's debut show at the Brooklyn Jewish Community Center you'd be bowled over,

converted, dying to showcase their genius on your obviously bare walls. *Et tu*, Tony?

'Is that a fact,' I said.

'Works on paper,' Tony said. 'Ink and felt-tip. You need to see them.'

Warily, I asked who the artist was.

'He's from the Courts,' Tony said.

The Courts being Muller Courts, the largest housing development in the Great State of New York. Built as a postwar middle-class utopia, drained of its founding intent by white flight, it holds the ignominious title of most crime-ridden area in Queens; a blight on an already blighted borough; a monument to wealth, ego and slumlordship; two dozen towers, fifty-six acres and twenty-six thousand people. Bearing my surname.

Knowing that the artist hailed from that hellpit awakened a sense of obligation in me, one that I had no right to feel. I didn't build the damn thing; my grandfather did. I wasn't responsible for its poor upkeep; my father and brothers were. Nevertheless I began to rationalize. There wasn't any harm in having a look at this so-called art by this so-called artist. Provided word didn't get around that the Muller Gallery had flung open its doors, all I stood to lose was a few minutes of my time, a sacrifice I would make for Tony. And he had a decent eye. If he said a piece had merit, it probably did.

Not that I intended to represent anyone new. My roster was full. But people like to have their good taste confirmed, and I supposed that even Tony, who I considered the picture of self-composure, was not immune to the need for validation.

'You can give him my e-mail address.'

'Ethan—'

'Or he can come by, if he'd like. Tell him to call first and use your name.'

'Ethan. I can't do that.'

'Why not?'

'Because I don't know where he is.'

'Who.'

'The artist.'

'You don't know where the artist is?'

'That's what I'm telling you. He's gone.'

'Gone where?'

'*Gone* gone. Three months he misses rent. Nobody's seen him. They start thinking he might have died, so the super opens the place up, but instead of finding the tenant, finds the drawings. He had the good sense to call me before tossing them.'

'He called you directly?'

'He called the management company. They called up the tree. Believe me, there's a reason it got this far. The work is out of this world.'

I was skeptical. 'Drawings.'

'Yes. But they're as good as paintings. Better.'

'What are they like?'

'I can't describe them.' An unfamiliar note of urgency came into his voice. 'You have to see for yourself. The room itself is essential to the experience.'

I told him he sounded like catalogue copy.

'Don't be snarky.'

'Come on, Tony. Do you really think—'

'Trust me. When can you come?'

'Well. It's a busy couple of weeks. I'm going to Miami—'

'N-n-n. To*day*. When can you come today.'

'I can't. Are you kidding? Today? I'm in the middle of work.'

'Take a break.'

'I haven't even gotten started.'

'Then you're not interrupting anything.'

'I can come up – next Tuesday. How about then?'

'I'll send a car for you.'

'Tony,' I said. 'It can wait. It'll have to.'

He said nothing, the most effective rebuke of all. I held the

phone aside to ask Ruby for a slot in my schedule, but Tony's voice came squawking from the receiver.

'Don't ask her. Don't ask the girl.'

'I'm—'

'Get in a cab. I'll meet you there in an hour.'

As I gathered my coat and bag and walked to the corner to pick up a cab, my cell phone rang again. It was Kristjana. She'd done some thinking. August could work.

TWO

All twenty-four Muller Courts towers are named for gemstones, a stab at elegance that misses its mark by some distance. I had the driver circle the block until I spotted Tony waiting for me in front of the Garnet unit, his tan camel-hair coat vivid against the brick, sniffing distance from a heap of trash bags bleeding into the gutter. Above a concrete awning fluttered the three flags of country, state and city, and a fourth, for the Muller Corporation.

We entered the lobby, overheated and fumy with institutional floor cleaner. Everybody in uniform – the security guard inside his bulletproof kiosk, the handyman prying off baseboards near the management office – seemed to know Tony, acknowledging him out of either cordiality or fear.

A reinforced glass door led into a dark courtyard, hemmed in by Garnet behind us, and on three sides by the Tourmaline, Lapis Lazuli and Platinum units.

I remember once asking my father how they could have named a building Platinum, which even I, at age seven, knew was not a stone. He didn't answer me, and so I repeated myself, louder. He kept reading, looking supremely annoyed.

Don't ask stupid questions.

All I wanted to do from then on was to ask as many stupid

questions as possible. My father soon declined to look up at me when I approached, finger crooked, mouth full of imponderables. *Who decides what goes in the dictionary. Why don't men have breasts.* I would have asked my mother but she was already dead by then, which might help explain why my questions so irritated my father. Everything that I did or said served the same purpose: to remind him that I existed, and that she did not.

At some point I figured out why they chose Platinum. They ran out of stones.

Seen from high above, the courtyards from which Muller Courts draws its name look like dumbbells. Each consists of a pair of hexagons, four sides of which are residential towers and two of which taper into a rectangular stretch of community property – the bar of the dumbbell – that features a playground, a small parking lot and a grassy patch for sitting when weather permits. Between them, the various courtyards also contain six basketball hoops, a volleyball net, an asphalt soccer field, a swimming pool (drained in winter), a handful of unkempt gardens, three small houses of worship (mosque, church, synagogue), a dry cleaner and two bodegas. If your needs were simple enough, you could get by without ever leaving the complex.

As we crossed the hexagon, its towers seemed to loom inward, weighed down by air conditioners painted in pigeon shit. Balconies served as overflow storage for decrepit furniture, moldy carpet remnants, three-legged walkers, charcoal grills abandoned in mid-assembly. Two kids in oversized NBA jerseys played a rough game of one-on-one, driving toward a basket whose broken rim drooped at a thirty-degree angle.

I pointed this out to Tony.

'I'll write a memo,' he said. I couldn't tell if he was being sarcastic.

The so-called artist lived in the Carnelian, on the eleventh floor, and on the way up I asked Tony what efforts he'd made to get in touch with the man.

'He's gone, I told you.'

I felt uneasy waltzing into a stranger's apartment, and told Tony as much. He assured me, though, that the tenant had forfeited all rights when he stopped paying his rent. Tony had never misled me in the past, and I didn't think him capable of doing so. Why would the thought have crossed my mind? I trusted him.

Looking back, I might have been a tad more careful.

Outside the door to C-1156, Tony asked me to wait while he went in and cleared the way. The entry-hall fixture didn't work, and the rest of the place was very crowded; he didn't want me to trip. I heard him moving around inside, heard a soft thud and a muttered oath. Then he emerged from the gloom and pinned an arm across the door.

'All right.' He stood back to allow me in. 'Go nuts.'

BEGIN WITH THE MUNDANE, the squalid. A narrow entrance opens onto a single room, no more than a hundred and twenty square feet. Floorboards worn down to the bare wood, dried out and shrunken and splitting. The walls waterstained and pricked with thumbtack holes. A dusty lightbulb, burning. A mattress. A makeshift desk: inkstained particleboard balanced on stacks of cinderblock. A low bookcase. In the corner, a white enamel sink, archipelagoed with black chips; underneath, a single-burner electric hotplate. The windowshade permanently down, unable or unwilling to retract. A gray short-sleeved sport shirt on a hanger hooked around the bolt of a heat pipe. A gray sweater draped across a folding chair. A pair of cracked brown leather shoes, soles pulling away from uppers, making duckbills. A doorless bathroom; a toilet; a sloped tile floor with a drain underneath a ceiling-mount showerhead.

All of this I saw later.

At first I saw only boxes.

Motor oil boxes, packing tape boxes, boxes for computers

and printers. Fruit crates. Milk crates. 100% REAL ITALIAN TOMATOES. Boxes lining the walls, tightening the entryway by two-thirds. Smothering the bed. Tottering in stacks like elaborately vertical desserts; on the sink; in the shower, crammed in up to the ceiling; boxes, bowing the bookcase and bricking up the windows. The desk, the chair; the shoes crushed flat. Only the crapper remained exposed.

And in the air: paper. That rich smell somewhere between human skin and bark. Paper, decaying and shedding, wood pulp creating a dry haze that eddied around my body, flowed into my lungs, and burned. I began to cough.

'Where's the art?' I asked.

Tony squeezed in beside me. 'Here,' he said, resting his hand on the nearest box. Then he began pointing to all the other boxes. 'And there, there, there, and there.'

Incredulous, I opened one of the boxes. Inside was a neat stack of what appeared to be blank paper, sour yellow and crumbling at the corners. For a moment I thought Tony was playing a joke on me. Then I picked up the first page and turned it over and everything else disappeared.

I lack the vocabulary to make you see what I saw. Regardless: a dazzling menagerie of figures and faces; angels, rabbits, chickens, elves, butterflies, amorphous beasts, fantastic ten-headed beings of myth, Rube Goldberg machinery with organic parts, all drawn with an exacting hand, tiny and swarming across the page, afire with movement, dancing, running, soaring, eating, eating one another, exacting horrific and bloody tortures, a carnival of lusts and emotions, all the savagery and beauty that life has to offer – but exaggerated, delirious, dense, juvenile, perverse – and cartoonish and buoyant and hysterical – and I felt set upon, mobbed, overcome with the desire to look away as well as the desire to dive into the page.

The real attention to detail, though, was concentrated not in these characters but in the landscape they populated. A living

earth, of wobbling dimensions: here flat, there exquisitely deep, inflated geographical features, undulating roads labeled with names twenty letters long. Mountains were buttocks and breasts and chins; rivers became veins spilling purplish liquid nourishing flowers with devil's heads; trees sprouting from a mulch of words and nonsense words; straightrazor grass. In some places the line was whisper-fine, elsewhere so thick and black that it was a miracle the pen had not torn straight through the page.

The drawing pushed at its edges, leaching into the murky air.

Electrified, unnerved, I stared for six or seven minutes, a long time to look at a sheet of of $8^1/_2$-by-11 paper; and before I could censor myself, I decided that whoever had drawn this was sick. Because the composition had a psychotic quality, the fever of action taken to warm oneself from the chill of solitude.

I tried to place what I was seeing in the context of other artists. The best references I could muster at the time were Robert Crumb and Jeff Koons; but the drawing had none of their kitsch, none of their irony; it was raw and honest and naïve and violent. For all my efforts to keep the piece orderly – to tame it with rationality, experience and knowledge – I still felt like it was going to jump out of my hands, to skitter up the walls and spin itself into smoke, ash, oblivion. It lived.

Tony said, 'What do you think?'

I set the drawing aside and picked up the next one. It was just as baroque, just as mesmerizing, and I gave it the same amount of attention. Then, realizing that if I did that for every drawing in there, I'd never leave, I picked up a handful of pages and riffled them, causing a sliver near their edges to disintegrate. They were all dazzling, all of them. My chest knotted up. As early as then, I was having trouble coming to grips with the sheer monomania of the project.

I put the stack down and returned to the first two drawings, which I set side-by-side for comparison. My eyes went back and forth between them, like those games you do as a child. There are

nine thousand differences, can you find them all? I began to feel light-headed. It might have been the dust.

Tony said, 'You see how it works.'

I didn't, and so he turned one of the pages upside down. The drawings aligned like puzzle pieces: streams flowed on and roads rolled out. Faces half-complete found their counterparts. Then he pointed out that the backs of the drawings were not, in fact, blank. At each edge and in the center, lightly penciled in a tiny, uniform script, were numbers, like so:

2016
4377 4378 4379
6740

The next page was numbered 4379 in the center, and then, clockwise from the top: 2017, 4380, 6741, 4378. The pages connected where the edge of one indicated the center of the other.

'They're all like this?'

'As far as I can tell.' He looked around. 'I haven't made much of a dent.'

'How many are we talking about?'

'Go on in. See for yourself.'

I squeezed into the room, covering my mouth with my sleeve. I've inhaled plenty of unnatural substances in my day, but the sensation of paper in my lungs was entirely new and unpleasant. I had to shove boxes out of the way; dust leopard-printed my slacks. The light from the hallway dwindled, and my own breaths seemed to have no echo. The eight feet between me and the door had effectively erased New York. Living here would be like living ten miles below the earth, like living in a cave. I don't know how else to describe it. It was supremely disorienting.

From far away, I heard Tony say my name.

I sat on the edge of the bed – six exposed inches of mattress; where did he *sleep*? – and took in a stomachful of dirty, woody air. How many drawings were there? What did the piece look like when assembled? I envisioned an endless patchwork quilt. Surely they could not all fit together. Surely nobody had that much mental power or patience. If Tony turned out to be correct, I was looking at one of the larger works of art ever created by a single person. Certainly it was the largest drawing in the world.

The throb of genius, the stink of madness; gorgeous and mind-boggling and it took my breath away.

Tony shimmied between two boxes and stood next to me, both of us wheezing.

I said, 'How many people know about this?'

'You. Me. The super. Maybe some of the other people at the company, but they were just passing on the message. Only a few people have seen it firsthand.'

'Let's keep it that way.'

He nodded. Then he said, 'You didn't answer my question.'

'What was the question.'

'What do you think?'