

SMASH AND GRAB

Kirk Wilson

I came here as an honest tradesman. “Here” is a curbside opposite ten thousand square feet of faux palazzo on a hilltop, overlooking a vast lake, distant sails filling in the warm air of morning, with a toy skyline made of temples of commerce at the last edge of the vista. The façade is stucco painted Greek fishing village white, the roof is terra cotta, with a loggia peaking the roofline like an unfortunate hat. In the foreground, a nymphless fountain tosses a fat plume of water skyward. Side arches lead down rock work paths to a series of courtyards and to the zero edge pool in the rear with its spa of native limestone and its bubbling urns.

No doubt all of this adds value on the property tax rolls, but for me the house’s only real attractions are its contents and its perfect isolation. The contents are yet to be revealed, but if my intelligence is right they include an exquisite if small collection of ancient Hindu artifacts. The isolation is

apparent. The hilltop lot, acres big, is separated from the nearest structure by a sharply spiraling road. No neighbor can see the house without hopping in the Lamborghini or committing to a strenuous hike. In the course of observation, via binoculars, from a nearby hillside, I have established that the occupants—an Indian whose company develops software, his willowy trophy of a wife, and their two small children—are out well before 8am on weekdays, that the cleaning crew comes Tuesdays and Thursdays, the landscapers every other Wednesday, and the pool man on Friday. I note now that there are no vehicles parked outside the house and no obvious activity.

I take the parabolic listening device from its place in my equipment bag, cover my ears with the headphones and switch on the power. I point the microphone and its black dish toward the front wall of the house. The brand name of this tool delights me. The Bionic Ear. I bought it on the internet. A fancy toy, but listening technology is nothing new.

You may recall that in Polybius' account of the Roman siege of Ambracia, for example, the defenses of the city's inhabitants were so effective that the legions under the command of the consul Marcus Fulvius Nobilior had to resort to digging a mine under the walls. After a time, the people inside noticed a suspicious pile of dirt and debris outside their

battlements growing ever larger. They did some digging of their own, fashioning a deep trench parallel to the wall, and along the wall-side of this trench they placed a row of very thin implements made of brass. Sound vibrating through the brass soon gave them the location of the Roman tunnel and they dug a countermine to surprise the invaders. Fulvius eventually made it through anyway, despoiling the city of everything of value, including the cult images from its temples. Livy tells us the Ambracians later complained to the Roman Senate that they were reduced to the worship of bare walls and doorposts. But that is another story. My point is that The Bionic Ear is my brass implement.

What my implement mostly detects is the loud *churr* of the fountain. I avoid it as best I can, scanning walls methodically, then go back for a random sampling at specific points. But even the Ambracians could hear nothing worthwhile from this position. I am forced to abandon my van with a bulky microphone in my hands and earphones on my head. My new angle from the side of the house, under the cover of a tall juniper, greatly improves my reception. I hear the purr of an air conditioning system, its breath untroubled. No doubt the filters are changed out monthly by a service, so the inhabitants never suffer from soiled hands. But I am listening for what I do

not hear. No television. No music. No quarrels or love making or gossip on a phone. No vacuum cleaner piloted by the hand of a maid. I risk a complete circuit of the house, eavesdropping from the back and the opposite side. Nothing. I return to the car and replace the Ear in its bag, extract and snap on a pair of latex gloves, ready to operate. Strangely empowered by my rubber hands, I pick up more equipment. My Stinger all-steel battering ram, likewise purchased on the internet, is almost three feet long but weighs only thirty-five pounds. Like the SWAT units and firefighters who employ it, I enjoy this device because a couple of good swings with it will splinter most doors. My bee keeper's hat and veil is gear I consider an innovation. The hat is a pith helmet. The veil, a coated black steel screen, hangs on a frame of plastic bars. It affords an ideal combination of visibility and invisibility: I see out, the security cameras do not see in. The effect is comical, I admit, but I am dressed for work, not for a cocktail party.

With the hat on my head, the Stinger in one hand and two empty duffel bags in the other, I check the empty road, step down from the vehicle and move toward the front walk as though I belong there. I pass a placard on a stick, advising that the house is protected by ADT Security. I have my own brand name to announce. A magnetic sign attached to the door of my

nondescript white minivan says *Swift Chimney Sweeps*, and provides a URL for a web site that is so virtual it does not exist. I never use the same sign twice. I am CEO of an empire of imaginary businesses. Today I wear a khaki-colored poplin short-sleeve coverall of the generic variety favored by workmen everywhere. A name tag sewn onto the breast pocket says *Felix*.

That may as well serve as my name. One lifetime ago I wore another name, that of Pliny Jarrings. Pliny's bona fides were these: Doctor of Philosophy, Churchill College, Cambridge; PhD Classics, UC Berkeley; MA Art History, Columbia; employment at demise as Eliza F. Philburn Distinguished Professor of Philosophy and Classics at a tax-supported university more noted for its football team than its philosophers. Pliny was the author of eight books including an authoritative guide to Wittgenstein (complimented by its most perceptive critic as *notoriously difficult*) and two slender volumes of poetry. Pleased to offer you his acquaintance, and may he rest in peace.

I mount the steps, cross the broad stained concrete porch and admire the heavy brass knocker in the center of the door, a woman's hand grasping a globe. The detail is remarkable. It is the hand of a Devi, alive, delicate, and strong. She wears two rings. I take the hand in mine and let it drop. A dense

sheet of sound travels through the house. The sound is impressive. I make it again. I waste a minute wondering how long it might take to remove the knocker and put in my bag. I push a lighted button beside the door, generating a conventional, lazy ding-dong from inside. Ding-dong again. No one to welcome me. I put down the duffels and take the Stinger in both hands, eyeing a point near the lock. But before I swing—why not?—I let go with one hand and try the knob, an oversized affair that fits in my latex palm like a softball. The door opens with an eerie, silent glide.

I face a hallway with portals on three sides, a staircase to the upper reaches, a feeling of unlimited space. I hear not a sound. The floor is creamy, polished stone, the walls a mossy green. Directly ahead of me, the guardian of the entrance, is a four foot tall linga with a face of Shiva on its business end, looking to be over a thousand years old at the least, on a molded concrete stand. A small, chrome-finished spotlight graces the countenance of the god. Cult images, indeed. I wonder briefly about the mind of the homeowner who greets guests just in the door with an ancient super-sized dildo. And then I wonder how I will ever cart it off. I have a dolly in the van, but I am not eager to pay for the object with a hernia. I set that

consideration aside for the moment, put the Stinger down on the porch and take up the duffels.

The unlocked door has spooked me, I admit. Still the house beckons. It is an undiscovered territory, a frontier of potential. But as Wittgenstein said of language, it may be just as well *an immense network of easily accessible wrong turnings*. I spot motion detectors but no alarm has sounded. No doubt there are cameras but they are well concealed. I step to the security console and learn from its display that the system is switched off. Why would that be? Fulvius would go forward, but then he had Rome behind him. Pliny would retreat. I will not. I march across the opening into a vast living area, confected to inspire humility in the plebian mortal, with seating pods floating in a sea of open space and a glass wall overlooking the pool and the domain of hills. A trapezoid of filtered sunlight paints the cold floor. The furniture mingles antique Asian and toneless modern, the present mashed up with the past. But the art is stunning.

The space cannot decide if it is a home or a museum. It does know it is not a temple. I whiff no incense. See no evidence of red kumkum powder, no yellow nuggets of turmeric, garlands of flowers or bits of broken coconut. The self-conscious, spot lit displays make it clear these are not murti, not

images to channel gods. They are possessions, here to signify the peacock demigod who owns them. Through the fine mesh of the veil, I admire each piece briefly in its turn, ever conscious that I must make my choices quickly. An excellent seated Ganesha, of ivory, about eight inches high. Fifteenth century or so. A stone head of Krishna, perhaps the oldest work in the collection.

And now a spellbinding representation of the goddess Durga slaying the demon Mahisha, 12th century, carved in yellow-beige stone and standing about six inches tall. This object is familiar because it was featured in an article I found about the house and its owner. Durga is missing one of her hands, reportedly one that held a spear, but she is well provided with weaponry. Various of the rest of her sixteen hands hold an arrow, sword, chisel, hammer, thunderbolt, elephant goad, war discus, shield, bow, bell, mirror, and a noose. For the battle, Mahisha has taken the form of a buffalo. Inadequate cover, as it turns out, for Durga has whacked off the buffalo's head. The demon emerges from the decapitated body in the form of a small fat man with a necklace of snakes. He looks up at his killer admiringly, even as her pet lion nibbles his toes.

Touring this gallery, I sense as I so often do in my work the adhesive, mocking quality of the objects. They watch me as intensely as I view them. They crave and despise my attention. To fully exist, we require each other, but neither of us is happy with the arrangement. All in all, there is a vanload of booty in the downstairs alone. I will be selective.

The stairs ascend in a graceful curve, carpeted in a red floral patterned runner of Rajasthani silk that muffles the sound of my footsteps. In fact, as I climb, the silence of the house grows deeper, thicker. I stop cold at the last bend, for on the edge of the landing I can just now see, dangling from the top step with a weightless gravity, is a human hand.

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A shape shifter is one who can inhabit the body of a new kind of being. Witches do it, we are told, but no supernatural training is required. With effort and commitment, one can stride out of one life into another. But just as the witch remains the witch in the shuck of the crow or the coyote, indelible traces of the old life remain. And in fact the central problem of the new life is that every second living it creates its own gummy complications. There is no zero moment to which one may return or in which one may take shelter.

Would I make the leap again? No doubt. Or better, no choice. In that past life, Pliny woke exhausted by the prospect of having to honor his commitments, the foremost being to live through an entire day as Pliny himself. He knew the need to change with the desperation of a passenger on a ship with its bow sucking ocean. It was not an impulse. Not a stab at self-improvement. It was a mandate from the living core that is unburdened by a name, a non-negotiable directive to transmogrify.

He gathered the will to rise from his bed, sewn into his ways as surely as if he faced the world in a woolen overcoat lined with scrap iron. He descended an accustomed flight of stairs, clutching at the banister with cold, damp palms, into an accustomed kitchen, where he kindled the same burner on the same stove and set the same kettle with its spout always pointing east.

He had lived in the same apartment for thirty years, walked the same sidewalks and eaten the same meals in the same restaurants. Dozed through the same conferences and fought the same oh-so-academic skirmishes. It is true that he once loved teaching—the living discourse with minds not yet fixed in cement—had all the awards and top ratings on the campus web sites, but even that went stale in time. He looked out across his lecture hall onto pod-like, social media-infested batches of young twerps. (Unfair, untrue, says

the ghost of Pliny from the cellarage. There were still those faces in the mass upturned toward him full of trust and eagerness to learn that was absolute and pure. But there was nothing left in Pliny grand enough to rise in answer, and the failure in that cut him deeply.)

To be clear, it wasn't death he contemplated. That option presented the unacceptable possibility of eternity—of living on forever in a sanitized version of the suburbs, with playscapes, weenie roasts, and gospel sing-alongs. Or reincarnation, little better, featuring recycled Pliny looking out the port holes of a tapeworm or riding the tender pocket of a marsupial, eager to dance and gleam again in the light of the world.

No. Pliny was simply through being Pliny, done with his own exhausted tread down his own ever-deepening ruts.

The question came early and often: was such change possible? At first he did not know. He resolved to begin by changing what he could. Changing the outside, he reasoned, must have some effect upon the inside. The one variable in Pliny's life had been his women. They had come and gone, but the changes in the guard had always been effected by them, never by him. This time it would be different. He would extricate himself from the clammy web of his relationship with Claire Baker, the wife of his department

chairman. Then he would resign his post, then disappear, one thing before another in sequence, as notes ordered on a scale.

Pliny mounted his bicycle and set out across the bridge that connected his neighborhood to the central city. His first stop would be the museum where Claire spent Wednesday afternoons as a docent. The river winked at him tirelessly with its gray chop. The sun was in hiding. Nothing shined. A light rain began to fall. It occurred to him that this could be the occasion when the bridge collapsed, and he patted the handlebars of the bike, thanking it for fifty thousand times across, fifty thousand times back home. His gratitude, he reasoned, should be good for something in keeping his bicycling form suspended above the water for a few more seconds. He marveled again, as he did often, at the powerful resource his fellow humans made of denial. Everyone above the age of reason and spared dementia knew certainly that a bridge would collapse, an airliner plummet from the sky, and the seed of a fatal disease sprout like a demented joke told deep in the house of the body on the most beautiful day in the world. And yet he was surrounded by commuters happy as embryos in the eggshells of their accelerating cars.

He arrived at the museum, left his bike unlocked—another change—charged up the stairs and approached Claire from behind as she led a covey of Sun City seniors just off the tour bus through the Impressionist wing. Against his own better judgment he admired the long, fine turn of her calves arising from black high heels and the taut sphere of her exercised bottom as displayed by her sensibly docent-like black skirt. She wore the apricot silk blouse that did so much for her color, unfastened at the neck and revealing downward the promising sliver of flesh that ended in a seam just above the heart, a glimpse of surface territory Pliny knew would go from pearl to deepest rose when there was passion or laughter or humiliation within. He realized how covert and dangerous this knowledge was, how invincible a tar baby the very thought of it might be. He tried seeing Claire as an abstraction, an image made of dots and streaks on a canvas. But as he rounded the troop of seniors and stood facing her from behind their last rank his heart betrayed him and ran like a long shot at the Derby.

Claire made eye contact and acknowledged his presence with an eyebrow. She finished speaking about Matisse's *Woman Reading in a Garden*. She asked for questions. Pliny raised his hand.

How can I tell you I can't see you anymore? he asked. It was a genuine question, Wittgensteinian in nature, touching on the potent inadequacy of language.

The seniors turned as one. The woman nearest Pliny moved her reading glasses up her nose to better study his profile. He watched Claire gather herself. She was not close enough for him to enjoy the full effect, but he knew the color was on the rise behind the silk, up the sharp V of fragrant, kindling skin.

Go away, Pliny, she said.

He did as he was told.

Next, he awaited Julius M. Baker, Doctor of Philosophy, Yale, Quinien quibbler, satrap for the mindless moneyed, in the chairman's prim, anally constricted office. Baker never appeared. Doubtless he was held by a more imperative appointment. Pliny left him a signed note on a pad with Baker's name and credentials printed at the top. *I resign from the faculty,* it said. And then *Regards to Claire,* with a smiley face beneath. Drawing it, he pondered briefly on what the *Lectures and Conversations on Aesthetics, Psychology, and Religious Belief* might imply about Wittgenstein's potential views on emoticons. The thought led nowhere. He felt an enormous relief.

As Pliny pedaled away from campus, the lights of the oncoming cars beamed ahead in the rain like promise itself.

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But what would he do with his time in this new life, if he was no longer to publish philosophical tracts and teach pup philosophers to fetch? His education and experience did not suggest a career path outside academia. He was a bit long in the tooth to re-train. And earning a paycheck as a data point among the cogs of an incorporated entity did not appeal.

The swift delivery of his answer came as a surprise. While he pushed a cart between the bright rows of brands in the detergent aisle at the supermarket, an unknown individual penetrated the locked door of his new apartment, apparently with the aid of a crowbar, and freed him from his laptop computer. Far from feeling victimized, he was inspired so completely that he dropped dead on the spot and, after the briefest transmigration, I emerged from his ashes, bold as Fulvius on his charger, into the brilliance of that particularly cloud-free afternoon.

Plunder was so obvious a solution! It was time-honored, the world's second oldest profession at a minimum. From an ethical standpoint, it was near blameless, as my own mission statement would be to take only from

those who could afford the benefit of being taken from. They were consummate consumers, after all. My debits from their possessions would provide them the opportunity to do what they enjoy most: acquire more things. Pliny's training in the classics and art history would serve me well in my new calling. And as a practical matter, this strategy would assure a high return on my investments of time and energy, because the proceeds would be precious in the eyes of the world. In terms of the competitive landscape I would be, as far as I could tell, *sui generis* among the common practitioners, such as my role model, who smashed and grabbed at every random opportunity to keep a drug of choice thrilling through his arteries.

In a moving ceremony, Pliny's impressively framed diplomas, once displayed like hunting trophies, were consigned to a bonfire. I observed, admiring the dancing figures in the flames, how documents that purport to confer identity can in fact conceal it. I was so much more the new being than the old.

I invested six months in the study of the literature of my chosen trade. There are few how-to manuals and post-graduate courses on burglary, aside from those available within the walls of prisons. But there are abundant texts on the prevention of burglary and the apprehension of burglars, on theft-

defeating devices and the like. It was a pedestrian exercise to turn this fearful knowledge on its head. I took more pleasure in the chronicles of those I wished to join as a peer in the craft.

Flaubert, for instance, in his first published story—*Bibliomania*—drew upon this fertile history. The story steals the case of Don Vicente, a Spanish monk who began his career with the simple pilfering of rare tomes from his monastery's library. In 1830, Vicente dropped out of the order and set up shop in Barcelona as a seller of antiquarian books. He improved his stock by plundering other booksellers, with a passion so rabid that he murdered his rivals and removed their best stuff before burning down their homes and places of business. His downfall was that he could not bear to part with his favorite acquisitions. I understand this failing all too well. At his trial he explained his philosophy. *Every man must die, sooner or later*, he said, *but good books must be conserved*. A noble sentiment, even if I found little in the monk's methodology to incorporate into my practice.

As the next step in my plan of action, I cemented a relationship with an associate known in the parlance as a *fence*. The late, un-lamented Pliny had hoisted a few tumblers of ouzo in the University Club with one Teddy Diomidis, a darkly curl-topped bear of a dealer in antiquities known for his

skill in redistributing bell kraters, Etruscan spear tips, statuary, and other items encrusted with cultural patina from their countries of origin to museums and private owners. In his cups, Teddy liked quoting Heraclitus, and he saw Pliny as a useful companion due to his ability to throw quotes back across the table. *No man ever steps in the same river twice*, he would say. And Pliny would answer *the path up and down is one and the same*. I knew that discretion was the essence of Teddy's profession. I confided the bones of my business model to him and he confirmed that, were I to deliver items of value, he would present them for sale to his clients in return for a generous commission.

The rest was common sense. Following Heraclitus' good example, I taught myself by questioning myself, and my first operations were seamless—and quite profitable—ventures. The proceeds ran into the millions. In fact I discovered that the most time-consuming aspect of my reeducation was learning how to hide the money. Teddy's counsel was most useful in that regard. I did acquire a few gadgets I thought might help me along, but nothing about breaking and entering is rocket science.

The fingers of the hand, though strong, curve gracefully. I take the last four steps with some deliberation. I do not move past the edge of the landing. The body is a middle aged man's. The head is bald. It rests on its right side, eyes wide, in a slick of inspissated blood that blots out the flowers on the carpet. The most outstanding feature of the head is the ordinary, household claw hammer driven claws first into the back of its pate. The effect is that the head came with a handle attached, by which it could be waggled about. I do not put this to the test. I recognize the head as that of the paterfamilias of the household. I have watched him leave for work on several occasions from my vantage point on the adjoining hill. This is the former Natarajan Mehta, a software magnate whose company fashions brains for the computers of the financial services industry, with a global sales force and a sprawling campus of developers in Bangalore. The cracked shell of Mr. Mehta is dressed casually. His belly spills out beneath a golf shirt that has come untucked from his slacks. He wears slippers.

I descend the stairs in double time. As I round the bend in the staircase I see two beefy Sheriff's deputies, one he, one she, blocking the open doorway below. My Stinger battering ram rests just outside the door. I have a veiled bee keeper's hat on my head and two empty duffel bags in my hands, which

are sealed in surgeon's gloves. I am not the picture of innocence. Schopenhauer said *the world is my idea*. He was wrong.

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Socrates was surrounded by his students as he waited in his cell for the hemlock to kick in, and he took advantage of the teaching moment to explain how irrational it is to fear something we know nothing about, i.e., death. My cell mate in the county lockup is a cadaverous old man with an insinuating, tooth-deprived smile. He smells of rotted meat. He amuses himself with mumbles in the language Wittgenstein identified as *Privatish*, a self-invented tongue only he can understand. In an interlude of silence, his jaundiced eye falls in my direction and he appears to notice me for the first time. I decide to try a little Socrates.

Does the soul admit of death? I ask him.

He endangers himself with laughter, ending a long spasm in wheezes and violent coughs that bend his slight body in half. The air that reaches us through the bars jumps with curses, screams, metallic slams. There seems little opportunity to teach.

But at that moment a guard materializes at the iron portal with a visitor, a lawyer referred by Teddy Diomidis, who wears a hand-tailored suit, a salty goatee, and an oily ducktail haircut.

He brings welcome news. The late Mr. Mehta's widow, together with her children, has been apprehended at a customs desk in Mumbai, and has confessed to wielding the hammer. She is more Durga than willowy trophy, it appears. I remain on the hook, the lawyer tells me, on a variety of charges, and the District Attorney is staying up nights devising more. Even so, my astute counsel points out with a conspiratorial bounce of eyebrows, since I didn't have time to steal anything and didn't even break the door, the worst my captors can make stick is criminal trespass. He will arrange my bail. Before we part company, he pulls me toward him and whispers with the hairs of his goatee against my ear. In the unlikely chance that I might have committed similar offenses dressed in a beekeeper's bonnet and swinging a battering ram, he says, it is just possible that my *modus operandi* might lead an interested party to a review of the aforesaid priors, some of which may possibly have involved major acquisitions from persons in a position to throw weight if not money around in the legal system, i.e., people who pay to have

judges elected and prosecutors employed. He pulls away and delivers a look that underscores his meaning. Red tracers run through his eyes.

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Late the next afternoon I meet Teddy over espresso at a sidewalk café I have never visited before. The light dances around us. Birds eavesdrop in the tree overhead. The eyes of the waitress reflect the deepening colors of the sky. It has never been more clear that everything is sentient, that the very stones are frozen music, as Pythagoras observed. Teddy is ebullient. He reminisces about his boyhood on an island his family owns in the Aegean. It is a paradise for gentlemen and scholars, he tells me, a place a man of my caliber, for example, would be both welcome and invisible, in return for a negotiable fee. He leans back to regard the sunset, overtaken by a philosophic cast.

The sun is new each day, he says.

Change alone is unchanging, I answer.

Kirk Wilson has shape-shifted through lives as a journalist, filmmaker, business man, and author. His fiction, nonfiction, and poetry have been published in books, anthologies, and in many literary journals. Kirk lives in Austin, Texas. His website is www.KirkWilsonBooks.com.