

# Zibn un Tsvontsik [Twenty Seven]

by

Michael Bettencourt

67 Highwood Terrace #2, Weehawken NJ 07086

201-770-0550 • 347-564-9998 • [michaelbettencourt@outlook.com](mailto:michaelbettencourt@outlook.com)

<http://www.m-bettencourt.com>

Copyright © by Michael Bettencourt

Offered under the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike License

<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/3.0/>

## DESCRIPTION

In 1952, Josef Stalin executed a group of Soviet Jewish intellectuals among whom were counted the best writers in Yiddish to stop a growing movement to create an independent Jewish culture within the Soviet Union.

## CHARACTERS

- 24
- 25
- 26
- 27
- Guard
- Agent in Charge

## MISCELLANEOUS

- Prompted by Nathan Englander's The Twenty-Seventh Man though not in agreement with his presentation of the story.

\* \* \* \* \*

*A prison cell, lit by one grim lightbulb. A piss-bucket in one corner. Two cots.*

*25 sits on the edge of one cot: his bow-tie is still neatly cinched around his neck. The only unkempt thing about him is the number 25 written in grease pencil on his forehead.*

*Door opens. GUARD frog-marches in 26, who is disheveled, unshaven, pissed-off—and has 26 written on his forehead. GUARD gives him a hard shove, sends him tumbling.*

GUARD

I fucking hate Yiddish.

26

I fucking hate that you hate Yiddish. Why have you been told to—

GUARD

I'll rip out your tongue.

*26 goes silent.*

GUARD

I don't need to be told to fucking hate people who talk Yiddish—it's like I breathe.

26

Then I have to fucking counter that I fucking hate that you fucking hate me, since I haven't fucking done—

*GUARD advances on 26.*

GUARD

I will rip it out. I will nail it to that.

26

Strange pleasure.

GUARD

Any other kind these days, eh, zeks un tsvontsik? Didn't think I knew any, huh? I know your number. Fuck off with you.

*GUARD slams 26, leaves, slamming the door.*

26

Why did he call me "26"? Accent like piss.

25

You have a number on your forehead.

26

You have a number on your forehead.

25

I remember them doing something—so that's what—

26

They had to hold me down—I think—I'm pretty sure—

25  
What's mine? I can't see my own forehead.

26  
Twenty-five.

25  
Twenty-six.

26  
Neatly, you know, penned, or just scrawled like a pig would write it—

25  
A neat hand.

26  
Good graphics—humiliating. At least no branding, eh? Sssss!

25  
Our luck runs strong.

26  
Being ironic, even if you don't sound like it.

25  
No I'm not—am I? I find it hard to—

26  
Then this—twenty-six—twenty-six—come on—

25  
Ah! Ah!

26  
I knew you'd know.

25  
Well—the number of generations from Adam to Moses.

26  
Ah, I have even better than that—the numerical value of the name  
of God—

25  
Good!

26  
—in Hebrew formed—

25  
Yod, he—

26  
—of the Hebraic letters—

25  
—waw, and he—

26  
Right.

TOGETHER  
—equals twenty-six.

26  
So fucking blessed, aren't we, by him above.

25  
Beyond measure.

26  
And I thought you didn't do irony!

25  
Really, is it? I guess it leaks [out]—

26  
I think my number will bring me good luck.

25  
Twenty-six—look around us.

26

Irony, twenty-five—back at you.

*They fall to silence and breathe together.*

26

Just so that you don't think I've got bad manners, I know who you are, of course—your non-number.

25

And I know you—of course I know you.

26

But I'm not going to say your name, not in here—underwater in this cesspool, it would be a sacrilege to let out that air.

*25 takes in a big gulp of air and holds it—half-humorous look on this face.*

26

Use 26 for me.

*25 lets out the air as he says the number*

25

26.

26

Instead, let us say how Stalin, our Dear Father, provides—apparently he knows us both.

25

Though a little less “fatherly,” yes?

26

Dear Father must father everything, isn't that true?, to keep the revolution going, keep it on track, keep it pure and—

25

You should stop.

26

Throw me in prison? Throw us?

25  
Because—because it will make your heart—hard—

26  
Your books—

25  
Harder—

26  
All that's in your books—the softer heart—that's why people love them.

*25 gives 26 a searching look.*

25  
And what good has that done? Done them?

*25 has the saddest look on his face.*

26  
Jail. Us. Us in the jail. Crime. Crime, twenty-five—what do you think is our crime?

25  
What?

26  
Our crime. Against the Father.

*Like a hammer on glass, two gunshots ring out. The silence that falls afterwards falls like lead.*

26  
Yod, he—

25  
Our offense? Column A. Column B. Column C and D and—Mix-and-match. Jewish. Yiddish. Writers. Thinkers.

26  
Matzoh-maker, fish-eater—

25  
Shylock—

26  
There you go—but “dangerous”?

25  
That isn’t up to us—has it ever [been]—

26  
My parents never raised me as an enemy of anything.

25  
And that, twenty-six—in your poetry—you do yield—

26  
I’ve never considered myself as “yielding”—

25  
Yield to beauty, I’ve seen it, read it, “what is life’s length without  
beauty’s measure”—

26  
Huh.

25  
I read when I’m not writing.

26  
Hardly “dangerous” in that, is there?

25  
Not to me.

26  
Hardly dangerous your vest and shoes, twenty-five—your bow-tie!

25  
A bow tie without spite.

26

Your books like that bow tie—a night breeze on a sweltering night,  
even.

25

You've shifted.

26

Sometimes my poems strike—sometimes—every once in a while I  
have a word like a nail and paper like wood and I bring down the  
pen—bang! Solid. But you, your words—every one is a nail—  
paper, wood—

25

Even “and” and “the,” eh?

26

Every page—bang!

*Twenty-five mock-pats all of his pockets.*

25

I'm so sorry, twenty-six, they took all my money—

26

This is not ironic. In this stinking dungeon, twenty-five, squatting in  
this rotting hole—two gun shots in some other rotting hole down  
here—not ironic. I don't have the patience of your bow-tie.

*Again they fall into silence.*

26

I have to piss—I have to clear my brain.

*26 goes to the bucket and pisses. The door slams open, and GUARD two-hand pushes 24 in,  
who falls to his knees.*

GUARD

I fucking hate Yiddish.

26

Saying this is part of your job description?

GUARD

You can talk and piss at the same time.

26

When you talk piss comes out, too—only just from your mouth—

*GUARD approaches 26. 25 gets up, though there's not a thing he can do.*

26

If you hit me, I'll piss on your boots.

GUARD

Then I'll wait.

*26 pisses—but he can't piss forever. Finally he finishes, and GUARD clouts him on the back of the head. Then GUARD rubs his shoes off on 26's pants leg.*

GUARD

Just in case.

*GUARD leaves.*

*25 and 26 turn to their new cellmate.*

26

Let me see your face. Twenty-four. See.

24

What do you mean?

25

They've written 24 on your forehead. Look, 25 on mine—26 on his.

*24 remains on his knees.*

25

You should get up—the floor is cold, not forgiving. Here, let me—

*24 shrugs him off. His body shows bewilderment, rage, dismay.*

26  
Of all of us, I guess he'd feel the most betrayed.

24  
Shut up. Shut the fuck up.

25  
There is no need. He's right.

24  
Shut the fuck up!

*Still on his knees, 24 pulls out a watch from the watch pocket of his vest, checks the time, puts it back.*

24  
My wife will be here soon. To speak to the agent in charge. And then I will be released.

26  
You have a number scrawled on your forehead.

24  
It's a mistake.

26  
It's mathematics.

25  
Stop.

24  
Shut! Up!

*But 24, despite his bravado, is in shock.*

24  
Comrade Stalin would not—

26  
Would not jail his poet laureate? Who happens to be Jewish.  
Writing in Yiddish.

24  
And Russian!

26  
What is the math of—

24  
I write in Russian! About him, in Russian!

26  
In jail—Comrade Stalin’s—liaison—to the world of the Yiddish literary universe—the earth is off its axis.

24  
I am sure there is a mistake being made.

26  
Believe what you need to believe.

*24 pulls out his watch again, checks it.*

24  
She’ll be here. Soon. You’ll see.

25  
I think you might prepare for her not—

24  
My wife is strong, she is resolute—

25  
No doubt. But. This is not about her.

*24 stares at floor in front of him. 25 goes to him.*

25  
Come on, get up—it’s cold, the floor is not forgiving.

*24 gets up, with 25’s help. 24 sits on one of the cots. 26 speaks in a low voice.*

26  
We really are fucked.

*Like a hammer on glass, another gunshot rings out.*

There <u>are</u> twenty-six of us—	24
Maybe—	25
More like <u>were</u> , at this point.	26
We all worked together on the anti-Fascist campaigns.	24
Ah, the good old days—	26
Do you even remember the work we did?	24
I remember the work.	25
Who could forget the “work”?	26
We did good work, twenty-six—	25
We good Jewish Communists—	26
Jews everywhere to support the Russian fight against Hitler—	25
<u>Good</u> work—vibrant—	26
In Yiddish, even.	25

24  
The truth—we spoke the truth—

26  
In Yiddish, even—sorry—

*GUARD, unseen, pounds on the door—just to irritate them. Then he laughs and moves away.*

26  
I will piss on his boots next time.

25  
You'll have to ask him for water first—how much hope for that—

24  
Why—

*26 goes to say something, but 25 holds up a hand to stop him, then sits on the cot and takes 24's hand.*

25  
Yes, we did good work to save what we could save. We were good Jews, good Russians, good Soviets, good anti-Fascists, good Communists—

24  
Why?

*A tense silence.*

24  
I was shaving when they came.

25  
Shaving. I was done with my shaving. I was shining my shoes.

26  
I want to say I was fucking my next poem—but they pinched me at breakfast.

24

They let me finish. My wife, hysterical—she can be strong, but—  
I'm trying not to nick myself—

*24 takes out his watch, checks it, puts it back.*

24

Trying not to nick myself—speaking to soothe her while all the  
time I'm—shaking—

25

No shame in being terrified—

24

The razor in my hand—the sound of it—the whiskers—trying not  
to shake—too much—nick—

*24 takes out his watch, checks it, puts it back.*

24

I looked at my wife—looked at them in their khaki raincoats and—  
their blunt ears, these small lobeless—

26

Mine had mugs like baked lard—

*25 holds up a hand to make 26 wait.*

25

Go on.

24

The razor in my hand—one—slice—I thought about that—even  
with my hand shaking I could have—I think I could have—

25

But you thought “This is a mistake, I will get this corrected, after all  
I wrote poems in praise of Josef Stalin”—

24

I trusted, yes, if that's what you're saying.

*26 grunts, says nothing. 24 checks his watch again.*

24

Soon.

25

They let me finish my shoes, like you, your whiskers. It didn't take long—I was on the second one anyway. Same khaki raincoats—mine had mugs like beets—raw beets.

26

Lard-faces ate the rest of my breakfast. I'll have to say they were polite about it—dishes to the sink—though they didn't wash them, now that I think about it—

24

They didn't seem afraid that I had a razor in my hand. I could have cut them.

26

Theoretically—but they knew who you were. You knew who you were.

24

Makes me feel ashamed.

25

Why—because you refused to hurt them?

24

But they had come to hurt us—and I didn't defend. My wife—

26

Please don't check your watch again.

24

I didn't defend.

25

You're doing your best—that's all anyone can ask.

26

What's so good about our best?

24

But I didn't defend—what sort of “best” is that?

*24 jumps to his feet and starts banging on the door.*

24

Guard, guard—I demand to see the agent in charge! Now! Guard, I demand—

*24 continues to pound, but when he stops, there is only silence. 24 looks dumbly at the door, as if he expects it to open. And then it does, smacking 24 hard as GUARD barrels into the room.*

GUARD

Who the fuck do you think you are?

24

I am—

GUARD

You're 24, piece of shit, no name, No-Name doesn't talk back to me, I will break your hands if you pound on my door again!

24

I want to see the agent in charge!

*GUARD moves toward 24, who cowers. GUARD looms over 24.*

GUARD

I will break your hands bone by bone.

25

Really, sir, ease up on him—he meant no harm to your door. Look at him—what harm could he do? Look at your door.

*Without responding to 25, GUARD kicks 24 once and hard, then turns to 25.*

GUARD

You better make sure of it.

25

I am a great protector of doors.

GUARD

Yiddish, Yiddishit—

*GUARD spits, exits, slams the door shut.*

26

I wonder if it's locked.

*26 tries it—it's locked. 25 helps 24 off the floor.*

26

Just a thought. Who knows what games?

*26 lends a hand, and they sit 24 on a cot.*

26

So, not that again, eh?

24

I don't think he broke anything.

26

They're experts.

25

Hard to remember there is humanity in them—

26

This is not time for one of your books.

24

Do you think they have everyone?

25

I don't know—when they brought me here, I saw a few—I think I did—paraded, handcuffed—but I don't how many of us they have.

26

“Us”—

24

I'm assuming—

26

The Yiddish cream, floating on the top. I wonder how they numbered us—if they ranked us—if these are rankings—

25

I suspect that because our names end the alphabet—

26

Cossacks as critics—critical Cossacks—the small details that make the terror terrifying—

25

It's often the [small]—

26

Stop it—I was being sarcastic—maybe all due to a clerical error—the wrong keystroke—but they'll still slip the bullet into the brain because—

24

A clerical error—

26

You're in the hospital, the chart says, "Grind his nuts" instead of "Bind his cuts" because two flies fell into the typewriter and—

24

I want to see the agent in charge.

25

Please don't bang on the door—I've taken a bond out on you.

*24 goes to the door, but this time he stands to the side.*

24

Guard. Guard. I would like to see the agent in charge. Please.

*The door opens, and GUARD tosses in another person, a young man, with 27 greased on his forehead.*

24

I would like to see the agent in—

*But before 24 can finish, GUARD pushes 24 back and shuts the door.*

*The three of them look at 27, who looks back at them.*

27

I know who each of you is.

24

But who are you?

27

What I don't know is why I am here—I mean, with writers like you, so much better than I am because I'm nobody. I could be brought here for other reasons, I suppose, though I don't know—

24

But they've thrown you in with the twenty-six of us—they've given you a number.

27

What's my number?

26

Twenty-seven.

27

The twenty-seventh—could be a title for something—

25

You are young.

24

But who is he?

27

We all have to go through being young—it's not my fault.

25

Some of us would like to have that fault again.

26

Not me. My adult faults have been so much more interesting.

24  
Do you have a name?

26  
Leave him alone.

24  
I want to know if he has a name!

26  
He has something better—he has a title!

27  
I think I prefer the title—I think when I get out of here, if I get out of here, I will use that rather than my name—I will use it even while I'm in here. Please refer to me by twenty-seven.

25  
Sit down—sit down next to me, twenty-seven. Do you have any idea why you're here, any specific idea?

27  
None.

25  
What happened to you?

27  
I was writing at my desk, as I do every day, when these two men—

26  
What kinds of faces?

27  
Faces. One had a face the color of the inside of my cheek, and the other—a broken sphincter.

24  
This is how you write?

27  
This is how things come in to me.

I think it's excellent. 26

No grace. 24

You say that because your ribs hurt. 26

What did the men do? 25

What did they do. One stuck his hand inside my typewriter. To stop the keys, though I would have stopped if he'd asked me. The other lifted me out of my chair. 27

And you? 25

I did ask them who they were, which they didn't answer, and I asked them if they wanted tea, which they didn't take, and then I asked them why they were there, and they laughed. 27

So you don't know. 25

Who is he? This is outrageous. He's nobody. 24

Feeling professionally insulted? That our coming deaths will be less operatic if an innocent is folded in? No wonder you were a good laureate to Dear Father. 26

Please. 25

I don't mean to hurt your ears—it's just that his [smug]— 26

24

We were known as The Twenty-Six, not The Twenty-Seven—what are they telling us by throwing him in with us? We don't even know if he knows Yiddish!

27

I've written eight novels—five in Yiddish, one in Russian, one in English—it's very bad—one in Esperanto—five six seven eight—yes, that's all of them, not including the one I was working on when—

24

Why haven't we read your novels?

27

I've never published. Asked to be published. Why would I do that? Such a waste of time. I've also written poetry—

*27 pulls a sheet of folded paper out of his back pocket.*

26

They didn't take that from you?

*27 shrugs.*

25

Let me see.

*25 reads it, hands it on to 26, who then hands it on to 24, who hands it back to 25, who hands it to 27.*

27

You can say whatever you think to me because it doesn't really matter to me. I just write. I write whatever asks me to write it—just in the brain, out it comes—

24

It's not [very]—

*26 interrupts him.*

26

It's the only way to keep it pure, keep it clean. If that's your way, then that's your way, no one can say a thing about it—

24

But—

25

It's because your ribs hurt you want to say something. It's your ribs talking criticism.

*Like the hard slam of two doors, two gunshots ring out. They all listen.*

26

One for each of his names: Josef. Stalin. Or, "Kremlin Highlander." Or "Vozhd," twice. Which of his noms de famille did you like to use?

24

Shut up.

27

So they're assassinating all of you?

25

That seems to be their agenda for today.

27

Aren't you all afraid?

25

Would you be afraid?

*This question strikes 27—he doesn't have an immediate response.*

24

Where are your parents?

27

My parents.

24  
You do have parents?

27  
Everyone has parents.

25  
So where might they be?

26  
Were they there when Inside-of-the-Cheek and Broken Sphincter  
came?

27  
I think so. I can't—say—they must have been—

24  
Did they say anything?

27  
I don't know—I was writing—things, certain things, do not make  
themselves known to me when I am writing—

24  
Do you love your parents?

26  
Really—

24  
Well, he doesn't show much feeling for them.

27  
I am not—human—when I write. I know that. About myself. My  
parents have said.

24  
Well, the poem—

26  
Shut up.

27

Afraid. You asked. I don't know. I don't know if I've been afraid, before. I was irritated when they came—they were interrupting.

24

Just outside that door they are killing people—eliminating! And for nothing! And you talk about “interrupting”—

27

I'm sorry, I don't mean to show disrespect, but when I'm writing—when I am not human—I don't think I'm afraid—get afraid—can you say that about when you're writing? I suppose if the writing doesn't keep you from being afraid, then what's the point?

*A silence falls into the room.*

24

We were once praised—in a good cause—

26

Used-up anti-Fascist Jews----

24

A good cause.

25

It was [good]—

24

We can argue against this! I will argue against it when I see the agent in charge. My wife will—

26

If she's not in here, that is. Ah, that made him shut up.

25

Twenty-seven—

27

Yes.

25

Do you understand any of this?

27

What I'm beginning to understand is that everything I have written is worthless. That writing itself may be worthless, though I'm still turning that one over, because I do not feel afraid, because I am not worried about my parents, because this poem says nothing—because I am in here. With you.

*27 looks at them all.*

27

Superfluous, right? Yes.

25

It is a possibility.

24

No!

*At that moment, GUARD opens the door, and AGENT IN CHARGE enters, dossier in hand. GUARD brings in a chair for AGENT, who sits.*

AGENT

Outside.

GUARD

I was told to—

AGENT

Outside. If they gang up and kill me, it'll be over before you can barge in here. So be it. It won't make a difference.

*GUARD pauses, then leaves, closing the door. AGENT looks at them all.*

AGENT

Now.

24

I want to protest.

AGENT

Duly noted.

24  
On behalf of—

AGENT  
Duly noted.

24  
I haven't finished.

AGENT  
Duly noted.

26  
Next.

24  
Why are we here?

AGENT  
There was a reason I wanted him to leave. About ganging up—I suppose you could do it—you could take this pen and stab me—turn a pen into a sword—hmm, clever—but what would it gain you? Besides, you're all civilized men—we are all civilized men—nothing so brutish.

26  
Except that you are shooting someone out there—we can only assume they have foreheads above twenty-four.

AGENT  
Assume what you want. While you are in here, your assumptions aren't my concern because they can't circulate anywhere but in here, and in here belongs to me—well, not to me but to our Dear Father. But you understand. No, that is not why I asked the guard to go.

27  
It's about me.

*AGENT lets out a sigh, shakes his head.*

AGENT  
He is clever.

*AGENT opens the dossier, takes out three sheets of paper and hands one to 24, 25, and 26.*

AGENT

Please, look it over.

24

These are all our names.

25

See, I was right about the end of the alphabet.

26

Except—

*AGENT points his pen at 27.*

AGENT

Who is he?

24

He is not one of us. This name—I've never heard of it. We've never heard of it.

26

He is at least right about that. All these others—yes. Him—no.

AGENT

Then why?

*The question descends upon them all. AGENT take the papers back.*

AGENT

That—that is the thing. His name—right there. This is the list that Comrade Stalin approved—he looked it over at his breakfast, he approved it. Him—he has to be one of you.

25

But he isn't it. Someone made a mistake.

AGENT

No. There is something else going on here. The name is on the list.

26

Clerical error.

25

A fly falls into the typewriter—

AGENT

What are you talking about?

26

You have to make this right, don't you, even though you know it isn't.

25

You must answer to someone who answers to someone who—

AGENT

This is how civilized men gang up.

24

We do not acknowledge him as one of us. He should be released. He should be apologized to. He should be free. Freed.

25

We deny him three times.

AGENT

So you're denouncing him.

25

We're not denouncing him.

AGENT

That's what I heard.

26

We're telling you what you need—

AGENT

You said "deny," which means you withdraw your protection of him.

24

Wait!

AGENT

I'll wait.

24

We can only protect him if we say he is one of us even when he isn't even when you are going to shoot us which means he will have no protection but if we deny him tell you he is untainted by association with us that puts him in danger—

26

Wheels within wheels—

25

It's only about the look of things, isn't it?

24

You just want an official record!

27

May I speak?

*Everyone looks surprised because they have forgotten 27 is even there.*

27

I am talking notes of all of this because it will make for a very good story I am sure but this is how it has to end. If they will have me, I would like to be considered one of them, at least for official purposes. Yes?

25

You know what that means.

27

I have written as many novels as any of you, good or not, and poems and essays, whatever their quality, and in more languages as well as Yiddish as all of you so at least by volume I should be twenty-seven. I think that is my application. I don't need my parents' approval.

*A studied silence falls on the room. AGENT looks at all of them.*

Application accepted? 25

Yes. 26

Yes. 24

AGENT  
So he can be considered one of you?

Yes. 27

*AGENT makes a note in the dossier.*

AGENT  
“—is not a clerical error but is—”

*AGENT finishes writing with a flourish, closes the dossier, stands.*

AGENT  
Good. Well. Good.

24  
You still haven't answered my question.

AGENT  
That?

24  
Why are we—

AGENT  
Really? Your question is quite useless.

24  
Not to me.

AGENT  
We are done here.

24

Not to me.

26

Humor him—humor us—why not, agent in charge? It'll at least confirm you're a different species than the guard out there.

25

Civilized men, after all, you said—you did say that.

AGENT

The truth of the matter—one of the matters, at least—is—I lied. About that—about you being civilized.

24

What, because we're Jews?

AGENT

That's irrelevant. Anti-Semitism—a waste of time. No, it's about you being what you are—writers. The kind of writers that you are.

26

Kind.

AGENT

Is this really the sort of thing you want to talk about now?

*26 laughs.*

26

You mean, as the end times slouch towards us? What could we be losing by talking about it?

25

We're Jews, agent in charge—not irrelevant to us. The end times are always just around the corner for “the Jews.”

AGENT

Well. All right. Please, sit.

*The others sit on the cots, except that 27 sits on the floor. After they sit, AGENT sits.*

AGENT

What do you want to hear?

24

Kind.

AGENT

Kind. Writers—I mean, who are they anyway? Who are you? You ask why you're here. You have made this happen to yourselves by dealing in dreams. Yes, you are here by the choice you have made. By making people believe that what they believe inside—in here—the heart or the gut or wherever—is the truth. It's not truth—it's just an experience, an event, nothing more than what it is. This is not to say that dreams are useless—we use them all the time to keep people on the true path. But dreams have a shelf-life, they have an expiration date that is usually set by those who have the power to separate this from this and that from that—and when a dream has expired, then—deletion. There is a mechanics about this, a bit, but it has a sanitary purpose: to banish the ghosts so that the real work of history can proceed. You want to populate your readers with ghosts, with phantasms—their feelings, their spirits, their utopias or paradise—Jewishness—or even their despairs or ironies—inward-focused, that's all of you. You cheapen what it means to be a human being.

*AGENT stands.*

AGENT

Don't try to offer a defense—your specialness, the voice of humanity, the “unacknowledged legislators of the world” sort of thing—you were useful in the anti-Fascist effort—you made useful ghosts then. But not now.

*27 stands.*

27

If this is the world you offer—

*AGENT laughs, pinches 27's cheek.*

AGENT

Some find naïveté charming. I don't. But if it gives you comfort—who am I to say—

27

What would a world be like without these things you hate—ghosts, such an insult—

AGENT

Clean. Modern. Rational. Scientific. Guided by logic. For starters.

26

I guess you're not so different from the guy outside.

AGENT

What? Did you think I'd reveal some secret unity with self-named artists—with you?—a closet artist myself? You see, that is one of your weaknesses—you believe in a spark of humanity within each body, ignited into a kind of Christian—is that offensive to you?—a Christian generosity, we are all brothers—I'm sure you know the lingo. I am the agent in charge and you are not—enough said.

*AGENT checks his watch.*

AGENT

And I do have to wrap this up.

*AGENT knocks on the door.*

AGENT

You can come in.

*GUARD enters. AGENT nods to him.*

GUARD

Turn around. Now. And keep your mouths shut.

*All four face upstage. GUARD unholsters his gun, then shoots 24, 25, and 26 in the back of the head. As he goes to shoot 27, AGENT puts a hand on his hand. 27 stands there shivering.*

AGENT

It was a clerical error, I understand that—that simple—twist, that—torque of the universe—it designed your fate—ludicrous, isn't it, how our lives get their meaning. But even though it was a mistake doesn't mean it was wrong. You want to die with them, don't you? You belonged with them even if you weren't one of them, yes?

27

Yes. I am proud—

AGENT

Ssh. And listen. I can, within my powers—I can change the outcome of history—unscrew what has screwed you over. Would you like to be released? To go home to your parents? To write your nonsense in peace?

27

What about your paperwork?

AGENT

It is like the Jewish physics of Albert Einstein—it can change its nature by the way it is observed. Well?

27

You would do that?

AGENT

Would I give you back your life? Yes. If you do one thing for me. Denounce those three as traitors. Just say it. They're dead—what does it matter to them? And your words? Will never leave this building. Ever. No one will ever know. Confirm what we have done, and history is changed. What will you do now?

27

They were—

*The eyes of AGENT and 27 lock on each other, then 27 faces front again.*

27

They were—traitors.

AGENT

Good. Good. Smart. On your part.

*AGENT raises GUARD's gun-hand to the level of the back of 27's head.*

27

You have confirmed my suspicions about human nature.

*AGENT mimes shooting the gun, and GUARD shoots 27 in the back of the head. They both look at the fallen body.*

Go on. AGENT

Why did you do that? GUARD

I'm a story-teller. What can I say? Good. That one, I believe, finishes the case. AGENT

You would know. GUARD

Yes I would. And I do. And it is done, as I said. Do your duty. AGENT

*AGENT takes the chair and exits. GUARD holsters his gun, turns and leaves, leaving the door open.*

*After several moments, GUARD returns with a bucket and mop and a large piece of burlap.*

Fucking staff cuts. GUARD

*GUARD spreads out the burlap and rolls one of the bodies onto it. As he stands up to drag the body out, light bumps to blackout.*