

Surabaya Animal Market

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*In loving memory of
Paul George Pinault
1947-2011*

The trim lancet window with the elegantly etched lettering *Hoffman Brothers Investment Management Corp.* has been part of the headquarters façade in downtown Stamford, Connecticut for one hundred and nineteen quietly profitable years. It takes all of two seconds for the glass to explode from the whack of a baseball bat.

The gentleman wielding the bat then turns his attention to me. “Thomas Wilkinson?”

Normally I’d ask if he wants Wilkinson junior or senior. There’s a big difference. Senior is my father, an associate partner of Hoffman Brothers, a top-of-the-line Washington lobbyist, and—until the bailout and Wall Street meltdown—an all-around influential man about town.

Just as well he’s not in right now. The man with the bat is big. Also angry. He brushes glass from his coat and asks again if I’m Thomas Wilkinson, as if he wants to make sure before he takes his next step.

Problem: the desk I’m sitting at sports a nifty little sign that reads *Thomas Wilkinson Jr. If there were time I could say Yes but I’m just an errand boy and coffee-fetcher and lower-order life-form. I’m Junior and you want Senior; Sonny, and you want Dad. Plus I hate this job and it’s boring*

as hell and it always has been and always will be but I just haven't had the spine to walk away from it all.

Yet the truth is they pay me plenty and I like the cash and I guess that truth shines forth a bit in my eyes.

"You," he says. He steps closer. "You, and your investment advice." His voice gets louder. He says something about how I and all the clowns at Hoffman Brothers have lost him his home and wiped out his savings and ruined his life. Now it's time for payback.

The shattered glass has set off alarms and by now security is coming at a run. I should back away and make a dash for it.

But something keeps me in my chair. Maybe it's the anguish in this guy's face and the knowledge that Hoffman Brothers Investment Corp. has destroyed his world. Maybe it's the fact that the building is all but empty and the senior partners all fled days ago to Bermuda and the Caymans and other offshore escapes. Maybe it's the feeling someone should stay to say *I'm sorry we screwed up*. Or maybe it's just what my dad calls his son's foolish tendency to think too goddamned much. Whatever. I stay put.

"You," the client says again. He hefts his bat.

I raise my hands and apologize for the screw-up by Hoffman Brothers and say I'm sorry.

He says I'm going to be a lot sorrier. He says he's going to kneecap every living thing in this building. Starting with me.

And that's when he swings the bat.

Time to exit. I scabble a fast retreat from the desk.

Too slow. The bat hums through the air. There's a crack and a sound like when you splinter wood but good.

* * *

All of which turns out not as bad as it might seem.

“Look at it this way, Junior.” I wish my dad had named me anything but Junior. Dorkhead or Clumsy or Dumbo would all have been preferable and maybe appropriate. I feel like all those things anyway when he calls me Junior. He sits on the edge of my hospital bed, competent and impeccably groomed as always, and gives me one of his look-on-the-bright-side lectures.

He reminds me the bat mostly hit the desk and missed my kneecap and didn’t do much more than tap my leg a bit.

I tell him the tap broke my leg in three places.

“Don’t over-dramatize. You make everything into a drama. Just like your mother. Why do you think I left her? Anyway, that cast will come off in a week.” And then, he says, he has plans for me. He always does.

“Singapore for two weeks,” he decides. Hoffman Brothers has a Southeast Asia branch there, and I can rest up in their Executive Guest Holiday suite and lounge about until the current financial storm blows over. “Congress will approve the president’s 700-billion-dollar bailout. You’ll see. A cinch. They’ll have no choice. And then we can all go back to doing what we’re supposed to do. Make money.”

Oh joy.

He has more plans. “After that I want you to get off your duff and finish that MBA at Wharton Business School the way I mapped out for you.”

I could tell him what I’ve told him before. I like the comforts in the life I lead, true, and I have a weakness for the easy life. But these days I’m restless, and I recall what I once toyed with majoring in at college. Philosophy, or Asian religions, or Eastern meditation. Something

like that. Of course Dad nixed all that but quick. So I did what he told me to and majored in business and hated it. I could remind him of all this but my leg hurts like hell and I want him to go away.

“Wharton.” He’s repeating himself. “MBA. As soon as you come back.”

* * *

Two days into my Singapore fling, and already I’m bored. Air-conditioned malls stretching for blocks. Starbucks and Pizza Hut and KFC, all fronting onto streets filled with relentless shoppers from everywhere who mill about in the stale tropical air. Nighttime finds me at the Raffles and its Long Bar, where I get moodily drunk while noisy bands blare crappy music.

And worse: at the bar I’m approached by business pals of my dad. Dozens of them. Hoffman Brothers is big. They congratulate each other at having found a safe perch from which to watch Wall Street do its meltdown. They buy me drinks and tell me how smart my dad is. Me, I keep wishing I could find a way to disappear.

Gulping my fourth round of the night, and someone hails me from the far end of the bar. Hell. With my cane and bum leg, no way I can escape.

Van Wadsworth. Colleague of my dad, from the Hoffman Brothers branch in Melbourne. He heard about the baseball-bat incident, he says. Condolences, et cetera. He says I look almost as good as new.

Almost, I agree. “My leg, anyway. Not so sure about my soul.”

Soul. My father would sneer at the word. Don’t know why I said that. Must be these tropical punches I’m drinking.

I’ll give Van Wadsworth credit. He doesn’t sneer. Good guy, actually. Grandfatherly type. He’s known me and my dad for years.

He asks what I'm up to and now that I'm close to healed what would I like to do.

"Healed?" I laugh, tell him I'm bored with Singapore. Through my Mai Tai haze I mumble something about hating Hoffman Brothers and the idea of an MBA and how I wish I could study Eastern religions or something like that.

He says in that case he knows just the thing for me. Just the place to visit. Borobudur. Ancient Buddhist temple site. Island of Java. Practically next door to Singapore.

Borobudur. I finish my drink and say I've never heard of it.

"Beautiful place. And here's an idea." He says tomorrow he's catching a flight to Indonesia. Has a business meeting in Yogyakarta. "That's just an hour's drive from the temple. Why don't you join me? We can take a side trip there together." He says after that he has to fly to Surabaya, but he can make time for Tom Wilkinson's son.

I'm beginning to suspect my dad told Van Wadsworth to spy on me. I tell him my leg still hurts and I lack the strength for anything more strenuous than the bar here at Raffles.

"Nonsense." He insists if I've a taste for oriental religions, then Borobudur's a must-see. "Besides, I can tell you're ready for a change."

A change. He's right. I *am* ready for a change. The bigger, the better. Anything to shed this old life of mine.

* * *

Funny thing, that business with the baseball bat. Details keep coming back to me, things I barely noticed the day it all happened, things that surprise me in the urgency with which they force themselves on me now.

Like how freshly shaved the perpetrator was. Finsternis. Aloysius Finsternis. I asked the police for his name after the arrest. Finsternis:

my college German's rusty, but I remember what the word means. *Darkness. Gloom.* Unlucky name. Ill-fated guy. Freshly shaved, he was, and I remember—because I had a good look at his face as he loomed over my desk—how the skin along his chin and jaw was raw and nicked and blotched with what must have been years of faithful attention from his Gillette razor or Remington or whatever he used.

And he'd shaved the morning he went psycho, too—as if he'd started the day optimistic. Look good, dress smart, you never know, today may be the day you get a new job or find a bank willing to refinance your mortgage and give you back your life. And after all that, Aloysius Finsternis found himself sinking instead into black angry despair.

* * *

Heat. Whew. Hot out here in the Javanese countryside, way more intense than Singapore. Hot enough here to make me almost miss Singapore's foolish malls—their air-conditioned exhalations follow you out into the street, cool you off a bit.

Hot here, but the view makes it worth it. Late-afternoon plains and rice fields, bright green under sun-glare, and far off a mountain with a wisp of smoke curling up. Volcano. "Lets loose with the odd eruption now and again," says Van Wadsworth.

Towering up in front of us: Borobudur. Like a step-pyramid, a zigurat—tier upon tier of ascending stone galleries, connected by stairs. Carved demons frown down on us. I'm wondering how I'm going to climb those stairs. I'm still limping and using a cane.

But my dad's colleague has thought ahead and hired us a guide. A local Buddhist monk, name of Wayan. Young, speaks okay English. Shaven head, saffron robes, like you'd expect. Smiles a lot. Also

muscular. He grips me by the arm and all but lifts me up the stairs and steers me into the first gallery.

Once we're inside, I see it's an open-air labyrinth. We're enclosed in a narrow passageway, with high stone walls to left and right that shut out the countryside view. Even hotter in here. Whew. The only escape: the sky overhead.

"No choice," announces our guide. "We must plunge forward, follow the path. That is the lesson here. Try to rise to the next level of incarnation. Just like existence itself." Big cheerful smile. "Yes."

The gallery walls, he points out, are carved with lessons, sculptures, thousand-year-old stories in stone. "*Jatakas*," he says. "Tales from earlier lives of Siddhartha, the lord Buddha." Tales, he says, for the benefit of pilgrims.

Hard for me to make sense of the carvings. The walls swarm with figures—men, women, animals, creatures with wings, all worn smooth with time. But the monk knows these figures, knows them like friends, he says, and while I limp and sweat and shield my eyes from the sun he tells favorite stories from the tales carved on the walls.

A starving tigress in a jungle lies helpless, too weak to hunt food for its cubs. A wandering prince—Siddhartha in an earlier life—moved with pity, surrenders his body to the tigress so it can eat and feed its young. Another carving: a king comes upon a blind man and feels sorry for him and yields up his own eyes to transfer his sight as a gift. A third story: a Brahmin priest, faint with hunger in the forest, is about to die but is rescued by a hare that jumps into the priest's cooking pot and turns itself into dinner.

Slowly we move along the labyrinth. The walls writhe with swans

and deer and figures in torment, all involved in extravagances of generosity and suffering.

“Pretty crazy, huh?” I turn to Van Wadsworth. But he’s been here before. He’s got out his BlackBerry and is busy text-messaging, head down, as he follows me and the guide. Which doesn’t seem to bother Wayan a bit.

“Mister Tommy. Look. Look up.” The monk grips my arm. Overhead, high above the labyrinth: a flight of birds, in a tight V formation. Moving fast. The late-afternoon sun lights their wings from beneath.

The monk points and smiles. Auspicious, he says.

Full of purpose, they seem. As if the birds know which direction to go and how to get there. I like that. I ask Wayan where they’re headed.

“Direction Jakarta,” he replies, with a wave of one arm.

I ask and then after that?

“They head north.” Another wave of the arm. “North. Up over the Java Sea, and then to some outer island.”

I stand and stare up at the receding V. For no reason a thought comes winging to me: *You could have had a different life*. Behind me Van Wadsworth is still text-messaging.

Another tug at my arm. Wayan the monk is talking some more about the sculptures. I catch two words: empathetic substitution.

“Yes.” The guide sees he’s recaptured my attention. Lord Buddha, he says, didn’t become Lord Buddha all at once or in one lifetime. “In turn after turn of the wheel”—with expressive hands he sketches a circle of incarnation—“Lord Buddha chose to engage in empathetic substitution.”

He sees the puzzlement in my face.

“Yes. The prince exchanged his own allotted comforts”—another smile—“for the sufferings of others.”

Van Wadsworth snaps his phone shut and says there’s a message from my dad. “Guilty plea by the bat-perp.”

“By the what?”

The perpetrator with the baseball bat, he explains. The guy who gave me my limp. “Not to worry,” Van assures me. “That individual is facing a stiffish sentence. Many years to mull over his misdeeds in prison.”

He says this as if the prospect of punishment should make me feel better. It doesn’t. I think of that morning and mostly remember the desperate cornered look in the guy’s eyes.

Oh yes says Van Wadsworth and there’s more from my dad. Investors are hurting and the Dow dropped another 500 points this morning but Tom Wilkinson Senior of Hoffman Brothers says now is the time to buy. The long-term prospects are always good for those with money to spare.

“He’s also spoken to the dean,” says my father’s colleague, “and the admissions people at Wharton. Old friends of the family. They’ll be glad to expedite your application to business school. A fast-tracked MBA. I say, old lad, is something the matter? You look a bit done in. Your leg misbehaving again?”

I shake my head, say nothing. Wharton. MBA. All arranged. Hard not to envy those birds up in the sky.

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Night, and I stare at the hotel room’s ceiling. Van Wadsworth told me he’s flying to the port of Surabaya tomorrow morning and asked would

I like to come. I said why not. Sure I could fly straight home but home to what? A Wharton MBA and making more money under my dad's supervision at the expense of all those luckless bat-perps out there.

* * *

Surabaya: hot, like Borobudur. But dirtier, more crowded. Much more crowded. The streets pulse with people. Soot; fumes; diesel exhaust. "Helps if you don't have to breathe," smiles Van Wadsworth. He knows how to laugh things off. Underfoot: cracked concrete walkways. Overhead, a hot angry sun in a dull hazy sky.

My father's colleague says he has a meeting to attend with local Hoffman Brothers reps. Any sights I'd like to see in Surabaya while he takes care of business? He says he can hire me a car and driver.

I tell him actually there is one sight I'd like to see. A place Wayan the monk recommended. The local *pasar burung*. "Bird market," was Wayan's translation of the phrase. "But actually all kinds of creatures are sold in such places."

"Surabaya's animal market?" Van Wadsworth frowns. He's been by there, he says. "Pretty depressing." He asks why anyone would recommend such a place for sightseeing.

Actually I'm not sure. All the monk said was it might do me good. "Might help the healing," were his words. He wouldn't say more. My own attitude is what the hell.

* * *

Van has found me a driver with pretty good English. He introduces himself: Bapak Bambang. Little guy. Smiles a lot. Mouthful of bad teeth. Smokes plenty. Tries to compensate, as he noses his cab through traffic, by dangling his cigarette hand out the window. Doesn't matter.

The street air is so fume-filled one more Marlboro can't make much difference.

"*Pasar burung.*" Bambang turns and says from here we walk.

The animal market extends for blocks. Narrow alleys, filled with a press of people—idlers, strollers, and shoppers, food vendors waving skewered chicken bits, cage-makers hauling wickerwork, motorists on scooters forcing paths through the crowd. From wire-mesh boxes and stacked crates lining the way come pleas of every description: snarls and yelps, barking and howls and trills.

Dealers call to me from stalls lining each alley. *Mau ke mana, mas?* Yesterday I bought a language phrasebook and I'm pleased I recognize the question: where you heading, pal? I stop and thumb through the book for the response. *Saya mau jalan-jalan saja:* Just strolling around.

"Hey, mister. You speak pretty good our Indonesian." A hand grabs my sleeve. An elderly man, presiding over a cage crammed with sparrows. Weak fluttering. "Unusual," he says, still holding my sleeve. "Unique birds."

I see how unique. Each bird has been spray-painted—wings, beak, head, everything—in bright metallic high-gloss colors. Some lavender, some electric blue, others candy-red. I stare, feel faint, manage one word. *Mengapa:* why?

The old man rubs his hands, chuckles, and says something in reply. Bambang the driver translates. *To attract buyers. To make money.*

Suddenly my leg throbs where Aloysius the bat-perp broke it in three places. The old man sees the look on my face and says something more. Translation by Bapak Bambang: *No need to feel bad. Birds like that die fast anyway.*

The old man has more to offer. Atop the sparrows, a cage full of parrots. In their grief at confinement, several seem to have bitten themselves so badly there's little left of their feathers. Atop the parrots, a cage of squirrels. They race along the wire mesh, back and forth: frantic.

The old man sees me stare. "*Kamu suka?*": You like?

He opens the door, reaches in with his hand, tries to pull out a squirrel for inspection. Desperately it clings with one paw to the wire. With a careless sharp tug the man pulls it loose. He repeats his question: "*Kamu suka?*"

Cages everywhere, stacked high. Cockatoos. Songbirds. Lizards. Doves. Where do they all come from, I wonder.

Bambang the driver has guessed my question. Here, he says, in the *pasar burung*, is where poachers and hunters sell the live animals they steal from the jungle. All the result, he explains, of deforestation. Logging companies build roads through the woods for their trucks. Then poachers follow the roads into the forest and net and trap every creature they see.

Hard to hear. The sun is making my head hurt. Man it is hot. My leg throbs. The cane drops from my hand.

Bambang recovers my cane for me and suggests we head indoors. To the covered part of the market, he says. Sheltered from the sun. We can finish our tour in more comfort.

* * *

Indoors it's almost as hot as it was outside, but at least we've escaped the eye of the sun. Dim twilight; I'm still wobbly. Hard to see. I grasp my cane hard, steady myself. Strong smell in here, musty, metallic, so strong I can taste it on my tongue: blood; urine; sweat; fear.

First thing I see clearly: a pair of huddled black-furred creatures in a cage, clutching each other, clinging for dear life. Fright in their faces, plain to see. “Langurs,” says Bambang. “Ebony leaf monkeys.” A protected species, like many of the animals here. Illegal to sell, he says. I ask what will happen to them.

“If lucky, pets.” If not, he says, they’ll be smuggled live out to Vietnam or China, then butchered and sold, their body parts good for aphrodisiacs, traditional medicines, food delicacies.

Noise from the back. A big television. Loud. With the cane I feel my way forward. A half-dozen men sit on the floor and smoke and laugh and shout at the screen.

They’re not the only ones near the TV. Stacks of crates—ten, twelve boxes to each stack—line one wall. Inside each crate squats a monkey, big, with sizable paws and a short tail like a pig’s. “Those are macaques,” says Bambang.

Each is chained by the neck to a peg in its cage. Some pace but most just sit and stare. They know I’m watching. One grips the mesh and presses its face against the wire. The expression is unmistakable. Mute appeal; sadness; terror; despair. It extends a paw through the mesh.

Beside me Bambang breathes a phrase so softly I take it at first for a prayer. *Mereka sungguh-sungguh menderita*. He translates: They really do suffer.

My impulse-wish: to rip open every cage, snap the chains, set all these creatures free. I raise a hand to the extended paw.

Bambang coughs a warning.

A tap-tap beside me. I look round. Two vendors have been watching me. Well-muscled jokers: each holds a length of metal pipe. One man taps his pipe against the palm of his hand.

So much for my impulse. It goes nowhere, like most of my thoughts. I step back from the cage.

A squeal from the TV. Bright lights on a stage and what looks like contestants shrieking for joy. Must be a game show.

One of the seated men turns to me, grins, says in English, "You wanna be a millionaire?"

He stands up. A skinny guy, taller than his colleagues. Mirrored sunglasses, a baseball cap that reads *Chicago Bulls*, and a t-shirt with the logo *Bintang Beer*. He adjusts his cap, says something to his mates, then addresses a speech to Bambang.

"He says he has something to show you. Something very special."

Before I can explain I'm a drifter with no thought of buying, Chicago Bull has led me behind the TV to a hulking shapeless object covered by a tarp. Big smile and more words from the Bull.

"Something special," repeats Bambang. He says the thing has already been sold—for a very high price—and it'll be shipped overseas tomorrow at noon but the smuggler wants to show off his prize.

The tarp is twitched aside, to reveal a cage.

Inside: a bird. I can see why Chicago calls it special. This creature is huge. If it could stand upright (which it can't; the cage is much too small), it would be close to three feet tall. Its chest and wings are a dark brown, mottled with black. Contrasting with this darkness: the yellow color of its talons and the yellow of its face. Even more arresting: its eyes, a fierce bright gold like a flare from the sun.

The smuggler nudges the cage with his foot, mumbles a name.

Elang ular bido, repeats Bambang. "This is a serpent-eagle." My driver adds a comment. These birds are known to soar over jungles,

hunting for food, then diving to the forest floor to snatch lizards and snakes.

But this eagle's soaring days are done. It crouches hunched in the cramped cage. The wire-mesh walls of its prison confine its wings and press down on its head. Barely room in there for it to turn around. It looks miserable.

"A good bird," insists Chicago. "Healthy. See." From a crate he plucks a banana, opens the cage door, offers the food. Refusal: the bird backs away from the hand.

"Healthy," he says again, and he laughs as he pushes the fruit at the bird. Proudly it turns its head: a clear no.

Angry now, the man tries to thrust the food into its mouth. The eagle cries and its head writhes out of reach. The beak snaps at the hand and the man backs away just in time. He snarls and shouts and slams the cage shut.

Interesting: the lock consists of nothing more than a length of wire twisted through the cage door and the surrounding mesh. The eagle cocks its head and fixes its fierce gaze on me. Bright gold, like a flare from the sun.

An urge to stoop and untwist the wire. But Chicago Bull and his mates with their metal pipes are watching and I lack the strength to take them on. Plus it's hot as hell and I'm worn out and my leg is acting up again.

Another cry from the eagle. Still eyeing me. If I could somehow just fuse its courage with my human brain, that prison would burst open in no time.

Chicago bangs his foot against the cage. The bird tries to open

its wings but the space is too cramped. A grunted comment from the smuggler.

“He says,” Bambang tells me, “it is time now for you to leave.”

The eagle eyes me as I retreat.

* * *

Van Wadsworth has booked a room for me at the Hyatt Regency, the best hotel, he says, in Surabaya. A long drive to get there: the road is blocked by a parade. From the back of the cab I glance out the window. Masked dancers, dressed as tigers. They do backflips and jump and charge the crowd. Onlookers with sticks shout and drive them back.

One tiger stumbles against the door of my cab with a thump. I know this is supposed to be joyous—people laugh and clap—but all I can think of are animals writhing and lashing about in cages.

* * *

Nice room here. Air-conditioned. Plush. Night sky through a high-rise window. I sit on the bed, my bad leg propped on a pillow, and click the remote. This TV’s bigger and newer than the one at the market, but the first channel I get features a game show just like the show Chicago Bull and his pals were watching. Contestants writhe and jump about. An announcer croons in English: *Do you wanna be a millionaire?* Click the remote, change the channel.

Do I want to be a millionaire? Hoffman Brothers Investment Management Corp. and that MBA program are lying in wait for me. Also the memory of the desperate face of Aloysius Finsternis the bat-perp, in jail forever with his own memories of a failed mortgage and a ruined life. I think of those temple carvings Wayan the monk showed me and what he said about empathy and the wheel of existence. Tigers writhe

and animals press in protest against their confinement and langurs stretch their paws between the bars.

Last click of the remote. The TV goes dead. Quiet.

I check my watch. Midnight. That eagle will be shipped away to its fate come noon. Still time, maybe, to do something, though I'm not sure what.

I phone downstairs for a cab.

* * *

Fewer people, smaller crowds, but the *pasar burung's* still open. I get lost but find my way with my few words of Indonesian and finally see the covered market. I pass the squirrels and the painted sparrows by the entrance and go inside.

Yes: at the back, sprawled at ease on the floor, the Bull and his boys are still watching TV. And between them and me, half-concealed by the same tarpaulin, is the cage I want.

Have to move fast. I limp to the spot, pull away the tarp. And there's the eagle. Sleepless, hunched—tortured but proud—within its confinement. It lifts its head to me.

Chicago Bull sees me. A sputtering of English: *Hey. You. Mister. What you doing?*

Must move fast. I stoop and grab the cage door and begin to untwist the wire hasp. The bird retreats, cocks its head, watches.

Trickier than I thought. This will take time.

Time I don't have. The Bull and his boys are on me. They start to pull me back.

One last try, one last turn of the wheel. I thrust my fingers through the mesh, breathe a prayer, try to reach the bird.

I touch the beak. The eagle gives a majestic flex of a curved talon and rewards me with a great golden flare of its eyes.

* * *

And then the human stands and smiles and stretches his arms wide: a soul trying out a new body. He studies the cane in his hand and then flings it away. I see him walk off, confident and proud. No limp. No doubts. No backward glance.

Good. That's one thing at least I accomplished in this turn of the wheel.

As for me: I've got work to do. The other humans have gone back to their screen. Soon they will sleep.

I probe with my beak at the twist of wire that holds in place the door. Metal mesh presses against my feathers but I will not let it stop me.

I can do this. My wings are cramped but ready for flight. I can force open this cage.

And then I know where I'll fly.

With any luck: north, up over the Java Sea, and then to some outer island. ▣