Celebrity Left

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SOCIAL MEDIA MAKES HIM THINK about people he doesn't want to think about. The person Sam most doesn't want to think about is Jeremiah Blue, and he thinks about him all the time, because of Twitter. One of his 1.2 million "followers," Sam gets an anger-adrenaline rush whenever he sees one of Blue's tweets in his "timeline," as he does ten or twenty or a hundred times a day. It enrages him that Blue, at one time a close friend, hasn't followed him back.

Come on, prick! Just click the button!

Sam's fixation on Blue is, he knows, pathetic. He makes sure not to tell anyone about it, not even his wife, so he's stunned when, after he mentions Blue in what feels like passing, Lucy says, "Why are you so obsessed with him?"

Two possibilities: Sam unknowingly exudes intensity when talking about Blue, or she checked his Internet history. He guesses both are true—the former likely led to the latter—but he's not about to accuse her of snooping because they're driving to East Hampton to ask her parents for money, and even under less fraught circumstances an argument with Lucy is a grueling, bowel-loosening experience for Sam. Plus Charlie's napping in the backseat, and Sam craves every last second of this precious calm.

The more Sam thinks about her question, the more it irritates him. She asked it only because she thinks she knows the answer. He's obsessed with Blue, she assumes, because the guy's attained the level of acclaim that Sam craves.

Which is true. But it's not the whole story.

To be fair, Lucy's stayed supportive of Sam's flailing effort to become a jour-

nalist. She's just sick of his shit. He knows the feeling.

Evenly Sam says, "I'm not obsessed with him. I'm interested in him. I mean, why wouldn't I be? We used to be close."

"So I've heard. Who is he again? I mean, what's he actually done?"

"We're low on gas," Sam says.

Her question is a good one, though. On social media, popularity reproduces itself so it can be hard to discern its original source, the celebrity's substantive, non-promotional accomplishments, if indeed any exist. Sam's seen Blue describe himself as a journalist, a troubadour, a revolutionary, a radical feminist, an antifascist, a "heartist," and "just a guy who cares immensely about humanity." In a profile that Sam could bring himself to read only after a bourpin (bourbon + Klonopin), the *Times* Arts section summed up Blue's contribution thusly: "Whether embedding with revolutionary Syrians or disseminating videos of police misconduct to his horde of Twitter followers or performing neo-folk ballads about refugee children in Brooklyn hotspots, Blue has emerged as a potent advocate for left-wing causes. He's passionate, earnest, and tech-savvy, and it surely doesn't hurt that he resembles a bookish Ryan Gosling."

Emerged? How'd he *emerge?* Other than Blue himself, Sam knows more about his rise to fame than anyone else. He was there at the creation of Blue's brand. In fact, it was Sam who urged him to come to the Occupy Wall Street encampment in downtown Manhattan, which was where Jeremiah Blue (née Jeremy Bluestein) came into being. Now, years later, Sam isn't entirely proud that he "occupied Wall Street." It's come to seem quaint, more spectacle than movement, let alone revolution, and he mentally cringes when he remembers that he and his camp comrades believed Occupy would, as he repeatedly put it, "change everything."

But man, did he love it at the time. He loved it, that is, until Blue showed up.

Sam was thirty during Occupy. The year before, 2010, after getting a $22,500 inheritance from his grandmother, he'd quit his editing job at a political nonprofit to write a novel. He wasn't sure he wanted to write a novel, but he desperately wanted to have written one. Sam had a need to be seen as smart by strangers. Not just any strangers but artists and intellectuals and activists and combinations thereof, like the punkish poetess who was going to approach him after his reading to tell him his book had changed her life and would he like

to go out for coffee sometime? It was unhealthy and ridiculous and unquenchable, this need. He knew this. He also knew it had something, or everything, to do with his alcoholic father, a community college English professor who used to ridicule Sam's "vacuous" high school papers. Knowing this didn't, however, mitigate the need. His first morning as a "novelist," Sam smoked a joint, walked to the river from his shared house in Queens, and gazed up at the mountain of Manhattan, which he was now set to scale on the strength of his heretofore untapped brilliance. But back in his room he kept deleting the few words he wrote, until he had a panic attack. A year later, he had twenty-seven pages of a mortifying Franzen knockoff and nine hundred dollars left, so he took a temp job at a law firm in the financial district. During his lunch break on September 19th, two days into Occupy, he wandered over. And never went back to the office. Just like that, by simply staying, the non-writing writer had become an active activist.

Another benefit of camping out was that he separated himself from his friend who'd shown up at his place three days earlier. Jeremy had just moved from Austin, which, he said, had come to feel "too small." Too small was also an apt description of Sam's room, now bursting with Bluestein: his duffels, his guitars, his nasal voice holding forth on his plans, grievances, and injured back, which apparently required him to sleep in the bed while Sam took the floor.

Jeremy's mother lived nearby, in his childhood home, a cavernous Tudor in Riverdale. Sam gently suggested that Jeremy stay there. "I can't," Jeremy said. "I just can't." When he was young, she'd traveled often for work, and even when she was home, Jeremy said, she'd often ignored him. His father, a frustrated sculptor, had raised Jeremy. Saul's death—from cancer, two years before—hadn't brought Jeremy and his mother together, quite the opposite. One night in Queens, as they lay in bed (or on the floor) listening to Jeremy talk, he told Sam the secret he'd learned from his aunt: "Mom was in the CIA." Crazy but believable. Leslie's job with the "State Department" had always been mysterious, and she was eerily inaccessible behind her smiley front. "She's been lying to me," Jeremy said, "All these years."

So he wouldn't be leaving anytime soon. Fine. Take the bed, buddy, take the whole room, while I overthrow capitalism.

Yet at Occupy, Sam thought of Jeremy. Arguing for socialism in a debate with an anarchist, falling in with a group of twenty-four-year-olds, dancing

inside a drum circle with a member of that group, Dahlia, a lovely Lebanese-American grad student: at such moments he found himself wishing Jeremy were there.

It wasn't that Sam wanted to share the experience—no, nothing as generous as that. Sam and Jeremy, dreamers both, shared a longing to defy everyday drudgery and bullshit and oppression. Jeremy had an uncanny ability to act on that longing, as evidenced by his life in Austin. His women, his bands, his fallings out with women and bands. His experimental short film, which he managed to get in front of Terence Malick. His quitting music for film, which he quit for poetry. Blind to both the needs of other people and his own weaknesses, all id all the time, Jeremy stalked his wants with abandon. Sam: not so much. He'd loved being able to tell Jeremy he was writing a novel. Nothing but shame had come of that, but he was onto something new. Sam wanted Jeremy to see him occupying Wall Street.

So on his twelfth day at Occupy, instead of going home to get clean clothes or buying them, he called Jeremy and asked him to bring some. Jeremy, however, was reluctant to go "all the way" into Manhattan.

"Please," Sam said. "My underwear is *crispy*."

"I don't know, man."

His tired tone suggested he was in one of his depressions, which Sam kind of enjoyed. "What's wrong?" Sam said.

"I feel like I'm not really living, you know? It was a mistake coming to New York. Should've gone to, like, Berlin. Or Barcelona."

"You've got to get out of that room."

"I'm feeling a little scared. I don't know why."

Far preferable to his excruciating euphoric moods, his funks brought out the little boy in Jeremy, which brought out the caretaker in Sam. Their friendship had been formed just after Jeremy had learned of his father's cancer, so from the start Sam had played counselor and comforter. These days, he tried to give Jeremy good advice to compensate for wanting him to crash and burn. "Jeremy," he said, "you of all people don't want to miss this. It's happening. This is going to change everything."

He didn't show up that morning and Sam assumed he wasn't going to. Disappointed yet relieved, he went to a media team meeting and spent an hour waiting for the bathroom at a pizza place, one of the few businesses still open-

ing their toilet to the occupiers. Feeling grateful to the proprietor, Sam splurged on garlic knots, which he was eating when he spotted Jeremy walking toward the People's Library. That's where Dahlia worked—she'd helped transform it from a pile of books to a beloved institution recognized by the General Assembly—and she was there now.

Women tended to like Jeremy, at first. He projected a fake melancholy soulfulness that appealed to, fooled, even smart-cool-cynical women, one of whom, their college's resident rock goddess Claudia Beale, had told Sam, while weeping despite herself after the breakup she'd initiated, that Jeremy was a gentle, generous, thick-dicked lover, giving credence to his unendurable claims of transcendent sex.

So Sam ran to the library, darting between people like a schlumpy, super slo-mo Barry Sanders, like Bernie Sanders, and got there just in time to deny Jeremy even a solo second with Dahlia. Through gasping breaths he introduced them.

Depressed Bluestein was suddenly aglow. His appearance was, as always, carefully curated: tight plaid cowboy shirt, blue-tinted glasses, mussed hair, short beard. "Nice to meet you, Dahlia," he said. "Sam's told me a lot about you."

"No, I haven't."

"Well," Jeremy said with a rakish smile, "He should have."

Dahlia didn't smile back. *Of course* she didn't. This woman didn't brook male presumptuousness. A millennial through and through, she was earnest and intersectional. Imperialism, the patriarchy, and the gender binary were all in Dahlia's crosshairs. She'd scolded Sam for ironic homophobia—he'd joked about Obama giving Jamie Dimon a rim job—which was, she told him, as bad as sincere homophobia. It was easy to make fun of her, and Sam did, carefully, but her conviction thrilled him, chastened him. The reason he didn't believe he had a chance with her, aside from his saltine-strong ego, was that he couldn't imagine her falling for an ironically homophobic bourgeois white guy.

Nor, though—Sam realized with glorious relief—could he see her succumbing to Jeremy's bullshit. She was too good for both of them.

"You okay?" Dahlia asked Sam because he was panting and sweating.

"Yes. Fine. Knot?"

"Yum!" she said, and stuffed her hand in the bag.

Jeremy, always weight-obsessed, waved away the knots, and handed Sam his clothes, balled up in a plastic bag. And from another bag he produced a stack of *In the Scrum*. "My little book of poems," he said, setting them on the table for Dahlia.

Sam wanted to let her know that it was self-published. Instead, he said, "This isn't a place to promote your own book."

"I'm not promoting it," Jeremy said. "I'm sharing it."

"It's fine," Dahlia said. "There are lots of chapbooks here."

"I went the self-publishing route to avoid the whole, you know, publishing-industrial complex," Jeremy said.

"Wise choice," Dahlia said, maybe mocking him.

A breeze kicked up, and Jeremy pinched his nose. "Yuck," he said. "Downwind from Sam—not where you want to be."

This seemed aggressive, a way of changing the subject away from his lack of a publisher. Or maybe Sam was losing the ability to laugh at himself.

"We all smell," Dahlia said.

"Not as bad as Sam," Jeremy said.

"It's true," Sam said. "I smell like spoiled pesto."

"I like the way you smell," Dahlia said.

"I love you," Sam said, as if joking.

"So," Jeremy said, turning. "This is it."

Viewing Occupy through Jeremy's eyes, Sam felt let down by the movement he loved. Only a few teens and twenty-somethings were in evidence. Most of the visible campers were post-young and scruffy and very much Caucasian. Like Sam. The whole thing appeared tepid and a little goofy, more Phish show than French Revolution.

Dahlia, by contrast, glowed. She was still tan, her luminous skin setting off the sliver stud in her broad nose. The sight of her now, against the crusty occupiers, filled him with an angry ache that trembled though him and jellied his thighs. Masturbation was a challenge. Pretty soon Sam would have no choice but to join the sordid ranks of the sleeping bag scrubbers.

"You know what Occupy needs?" Jeremy said.

"Porta Pottys," Sam said.

"A list of, like, goals," Jeremy said. "Specifics. Your shit is too vague."

"Not too vague to spark a national movement," Dahlia said. "I'd say the

simplicity of our message is its strength. We're naming the problem. And the perpetrators. More than that, we're practicing what we preach, forming an authentic democracy. What do we believe? Watch us."

Taken aback, Jeremy managed a smile.

"Show him around, Sam," Dahlia said.

"Actually," Jeremy said. "I have a meeting with an editor."

"A poetry editor or…?" Sam said so nonchalantly his eyes were almost closed.

"*Vanity Fair.* I met her at South by Southwest. I'm thinking of doing some journalism."

Because Sam wanted Jeremy to lose control of his body functions during his meeting, he also wanted to give him good advice. "That's great," Sam said. "I'd go into the meeting with specific story ideas."

"Okay, yeah, definitely," Jeremy said.

"You should come back tomorrow," Dahlia said. "We're marching to Brooklyn."

"There'll be other marches," Sam said.

But Jeremy appeared the next afternoon when they were heading for the Brooklyn Bridge. In the large crowd, Sam, Dahlia, and a short, orange-bearded guy named Riley had gotten separated from the rest of their group. Excited to have found them, Jeremy gave them all hugs, stopping them in their tracks. "Who are you?" Riley said after Jeremy had released him.

"Jeremy Bluestein," he said.

Riley, who had a "Crush Capitalism" sign hanging around his neck, eyed him. They were now near the back of the march, as people flowed past them like a stream around a rock.

"This is awesome," Jeremy said of the march.

"Let's move," Dahlia said, and Jeremy clapped.

Sam feared that Jeremy's ebullience was due to the meeting with the editor, but when he asked him about it, he shrugged. "She's kind of a bitch, actually. I wouldn't want her as my editor." Sam had to admire the clueless fucker. He'd had a bad meeting, likely even worse than he realized, but in his mind he was rejecting her.

Riley started to chant: "Hey Hey, Ho Ho, Goldman Sachs Has Got to Go!" Dahlia looked back and instructed Sam with her eyes to participate, which he

did, full-throatedly, helping it take hold. Dahlia danced-walked to the beat; Sam and Jeremy stared at her swaying ass.

Jeremy put his hand on Sam's chest to slow him and his mouth by his ear. "Are you and Dahlia a thing or can I—?"

"No, and no."

He smiled, nodding his approval. "She's so hot. I *love* Muslim women."

"She's not Muslim."

"You know what I mean. Arab."

"She's from Long Island," Sam said, grossed out even though, or because, he himself exoticized her. At least he was aware he did.

The crowd stacked up by the entrance to the bridge, because the police had shut it off. "Fuck the po po's," Riley said, dead serious.

"Easy there, Ice Cube," Sam said, getting a flash of smile out of Dahlia, a cutup compared to the other people in her group.

Riley started chanting "Take the Bridge." Sam joined in, as did Jeremy, and they looked at each other and nodded and smiled and Sam felt warmth for his friend. He was glad to feel it, because it meant their friendship wasn't total shit.

"Take. The. Bridge! Take. The. Bridge!"

The cops turned and started walking across the bridge, effectively leading the march. A cheer went up and the crowd surged.

"It's a trap," Dahlia said.

"Seriously?" Jeremy said.

She nodded. "If you don't want to get arrested…" She pointed to the marchers heading up the stairs to the walkway.

Ever attuned to Jeremy's moods, Sam felt his good cheer vanish. Quietly, just to Jeremy, Sam said, "What's the matter?"

"Nothing." But then, once he was sure Dahlia wasn't listening, he said, "I don't want this on my record."

"It's nothing," Sam said. "I got arrested protesting the war." And what, Sam wondered, was Jeremy doing in the winter of '03? Writing screenplays in LA.

"Let's go," Dahlia said.

Sam was happy to distinguish himself from Jeremy, so he said nothing more to try to persuade him. It felt like a pivotal moment, a turning point in their relationship, and in Sam's life. Finally, it was he, not Jeremy, doing the bold thing.

Walking away, Sam tried to look scared to deter Jeremy from changing his mind. Inside, though, he was bursting. It was thrilling taking the bridge, not least because he had his arm around Dahlia. Emboldened, he pressed against her, his hip on hers.

"Whose Streets? Our Streets! Whose Streets? Our Streets!"

Once the front of the march had reached about halfway, the cops stopped and turned; more cops joined them, and they formed a line, shoulder to shoulder, across the road, and nets came down. "Fuck the po po," Sam said.

Some marchers, wanting to get their arrest over with, made their way back to the Manhattan side of the bridge, where police buses waited. Most, though, plunked down, and the mood was festive. Dahlia took carrots and homemade hummus out of her backpack. There, suspended above the East River, they sat down and snacked.

From the walkway above, Jeremy called for a carrot. Sam threw him one and he caught it. People clapped.

After a hour or so, the police stopped waiting for people to present themselves. Two guys had mounted the railing to hold up a "99 %" banner. The police ushered them down and when one mildly resisted, he ended up face-first on the pavement with a knee in his back. The cops also cuffed a girl who couldn't have been older than twelve.

"Shame. On. You! Shame. On. You!"

Most of the marchers on the walkway, free from the nets, had moved on, but Jeremy stayed to take phone videos, which he "tweeted out." Sam, self-righteous semi-Luddite, proud owner of an un-smart phone, had only a hazy idea of what that meant.

It was three in the morning when Sam got out of jail. In front of the precinct on West 54th, a small group of Occupiers greeted him. Having spent eight hours in a cell with eleven other men—including Riley, who'd provided steady Foucauldian commentary on the penal system—Sam was in no mood to socialize, so he bruskly received their high-fives and broke away. Trudging down 9th Ave., cold and exhausted, he thought of Jeremy asleep in his bed.

In a diner he shoveled down over-easy eggs, home fries, rye toast, corned beef hash, and a piece of cherry pie topped with a scoop of yellow vanilla ice cream and fell asleep with his head in his arms. The waitress let him doze till

six. That's when she said, "Rise and shine, sweetie," and told him about the homeless shelter a few blocks down.

In the bathroom he washed his hair with hand soap. His beard was long enough now to qualify as a real beard and, to his horror, there was gray in it.

He'd woken with a desire to see Dahlia and by the time he'd taken the train downtown, it'd sharpened into desperation. Maybe he was in love—how else to explain this raging need? Love or not, it was a feeling any self-respecting person would act on, and as Sam ran around searching for her, he vowed to do so.

A crowd had gathered in the media tent to check out coverage of the march. That's where Sam found Dahlia. "I haven't slept!" she said.

He braced for her hug and when it came he could've cried. As she told him about her night in a Greenpoint cell, all he could think about was her physical presence, which her sleepless night hadn't dimmed; on the contrary, she looked flushed and loosened, post-coital.

"Dahlia?" he said.

"What?"

"It's good to see you."

She put her hand on his cheek and rubbed his beard.

There was a stir in the tent. CNN was interviewing an "Occupy Wall Street protestor" no one knew. No one, that is, except for Sam and Dahlia, who together had pushed in close to the TV. "Oh my God," she said.

Nothing about this, aside from the name change, surprised Sam. "Jeremiah Blue," going for retro with slicked back hair, a bomber jacket, and Buddy Holly glasses, was standing on a street corner. The reporter mentioned that Blue had "tweeted out videos that went viral" and asked him if he thought the police had acted "improperly."

"Improperly?" he said. "Worse than *improperly*, I'd say. I mean, we were marching peacefully. This was, like, a crackdown on peaceful protestors."

"Good answer," Dahlia said.

"*We*?" Sam said. "He said we."

"The police tell a different story," the reporter said. "They say they arrested only the marchers who blocked traffic."

"But the police *led* people across the bridge," Jeremiah said. "And you know what? Police *should* be marching with us. They're part of the ninety-nine per-

cent."

"Fuck that," Dahlia said. "They're security services for the one percent."

"Tell it, Dahl!" Riley shouted from somewhere.

"Are you a leader of this movement?" the reporter asked.

"No, no," Jeremiah said. "We're a leaderless movement."

"You're not in the movement at all!" Sam said.

"Last question," the reporter said. "Why are you so vague about your goals?"

"I'd say the simplicity of our message is its strength," he said, aping Dahlia word for word. "We're naming the problem. More than that, we're practicing what we preach, building an authentic democracy. What do we believe? Just watch us."

A few people clapped; nods all around.

"Well," Dahlia said. "He stole from the best."

"Shameless," I said.

"It's almost impressive, his audacity."

"Seriously?" Sam said, and she shrugged.

He waited for Dahlia or someone else, anyone, to blast the fraud.

He kept waiting. In the next few days, Blue did interviews with other major outlets, penned an op-ed for the *Observer*, and even found time to stop by Zuccotti, where campers neither cheered nor spurned him. As it happened, Blue was one of a bunch of people using Occupy to build their brand. Blue, at least, was mostly on-message.

As Blue made the rounds, Sam kept his distance. Eventually, Blue came up to him, all smiles, and Sam didn't know what to say. It was suddenly unclear to him what exactly he'd done wrong. "You didn't go to jail," Sam said.

"I never said I did?"

"You never said you didn't."

"Whatever. Listen, I moved into a new place. But what you did, putting me up while I found my footing, it was huge. It's something I'll always remember. I owe you big-time."

Sam gave him what was meant to be a withering smile. Blue smiled back.

Blue's star turn filled Sam with an envy he couldn't shake. Sometimes at night, as he lay alone in his bag, it literally nauseated him. To hear Dahlia disparage Blue would've curbed if not cured his envy, but she didn't care about him enough to resent him. When Sam complained about Blue's sudden popularity,

she gave him a scowl, which he took to be a charge of vanity and possibly a comment on his privilege.

The birth of Blue, and Sam's bank balance, were pushing him to leave. Dahlia was reason not to, but if his ego probably wasn't up for the challenge of her before, it certainly wasn't now, so upon waking on his sixteenth day, after a rainy night of barely sleeping under a broken umbrella, he stuffed his stuff into a garbage bag, hugged Dahlia, and went back to his life, such as it was.

His room in Queens, which wasn't quite clean, smelled like Jeremy, his slight salami odor. The pages of Sam's aborted novel were on his desk. Across the top of the first page, Jeremy had written, "Keep going! Has potential!

It was a year later that Sam next saw Blue, at a "birthday party" for Occupy at a Brooklyn bar. As when he'd lived in Austin, their friendship now consisted of phone calls. Sam listened to him hold forth despite himself, sustained by Blue's somber moods, which suggested that his life wasn't as grand as you'd think from his social media posts chronicling his mounting celebrity.

At the party, Blue was one of six speakers. It no longer mattered, if it ever had, that he'd never spent more than one continuous hour at Occupy. The applause for him when he took the stage equaled if not surpassed that for the previous speaker. He had a guitar and announced that, after brief remarks, he'd play a song.

Riley, visibly drunk and leaning against the back wall, seemed the person here most likely to disparage Blue, so Sam went to greet him and got a sloppy hug. "Great to see you, brother," Riley said, now leaning on Sam.

"Seen Dahlia?" Sam asked.

"Nope. Not her scene."

In fact, she'd emailed Sam the flyer for the party. They'd kept in touch via email but had seen each other only once, in May, at a protest. They lay beside each other in the street outside the JP Morgan Chase shareholders meeting.

Blue's song was called "Occupy" and its lyrics, delivered in a whiny but passable voice, were as explicit as the title: "We came to protest injustice. And we were not alone. The cause demanded our presence. And we never went home."

"You went to my home," Sam shouted at no one. "This guy's a fraud."

"An opportunist," Riley slurred.

"Yes! *Exactly.*" Get this man a microphone.

Sam thought Blue's song was trite to the point of embarrassing, but he bounded off stage to sustained applause and was swarmed by congratulators.

Including Dahlia. Blue took hold of her hand and gave it a quick squeeze and the floor seemed to move below Sam like a wavering elevator. He stepped closer and waited for her to see him.

When she did she smiled and pointed him out to Blue, but Sam pulled her aside. "Are you having sex with Blue?" he asked, hating himself even more than usual.

"What? Are you insane? Never. I never would."

"But you're friends?"

"I guess. We go out for coffee sometimes."

"Like on dates?"

"No! We talk about the Middle East. I'm trying to deprogram him."

"His mother was in the CIA."

"Wait, what? Seriously?"

"He's a fraud."

"He's your friend, Sam. I know him because of you."

"Yeah, well. I have higher expectations for you than I do for myself."

"That's just sad."

"You're right. You're right!"

Sam had stayed friends with a person he rooted against and looked down on. Who exactly was the fraud? He left the bar excited to not return Blue's calls.

But no calls came. After a month, Sam mentioned to Dahlia on the phone that he'd not heard from Blue. "Yeah," she said after a pause. "Riley told him you called him a fraud."

When he hung up, Sam didn't know how he felt. He wished he'd called him a fraud to his face. Yet he felt bad he'd hurt him. He wanted to call him up to apologize. He wanted to comfort him, then tell him he didn't want to be his friend anymore, because right now Blue believed it was he who'd initiated their breakup.

None of this mattered, he decided. The deed was done. Sam was free.

Sam had been editing from home—"consulting"—for the nonprofit he'd left, with the idea that he'd also do freelance journalism, but not until his breakup with Blue did he send out pitches. No assignments came back. The problem, aside from his lack of clips, was that he was reading Marxists, whose influence was making his pitches even less appealing. *GQ* just wasn't going to run a theory-laden piece on the League of Revolutionary Black Workers.

Sam refused to water down his pitches. There was no point in doing this if he sold out. He would be as unlike Blue as he could be.

Finally, he got an assignment. He spent six months doing a piece on the International Monetary Fund for *The Nation*—and got paid $250. He longed for a staff writer position but to get one he'd need many more clips. This would take a while.

The following year, he caught a break when his girlfriend suggested he move into her one-bedroom on the Upper West Side. A social worker bankrolled by her parents, Lucy would take care of the rent so that he could cut back on consulting.

Freelancing continued to be an infuriating grind, however. He was lucky if an editor so much as emailed him back. His pitches went into the ether. The pieces he placed on obscure radical websites like Amerikkkan Dream didn't count as clips.

At Lucy's urging, he blunted the ideological edge of his pitches, and eventually her friend, an editor at a website affiliated with a progressive think tank, assigned him 850 words on ISIS. Sam ended up handing in a 2,800-word piece that the editor said was "one long cluster-fuck conspiracy theory." Sam received a twenty-five dollar "kill fee."

Meanwhile, having started following Blue on Twitter, he knew that his former friend had written an exposé on human trafficking for *The Daily Beast,* an Occupy reminiscence for *Vanity Fair*, and an "edgy" first-person article about doing whippets with Austrian neo-Nazis for *Vice*. His politics were generally leftwing but safely so—or not at all. Blue, for instance, kept calling on the US to bomb Syria in support of Free Syrian Army "revolutionaries," whom he glorified, until it was revealed that they had a nasty habit of teaming up with Al Qaeda, at which point he stopped talking about Syria, except to blast the "Assad apologism of the Stalinist left."

Nonetheless, Blue *seemed* radical. He talked the transgressive talk. He inveighed against capitalism, white supremacy, and transphobia. He tweeted "Fuck off" @Dick Cheney. Just as he'd ridden the Occupy wave, he made his Twitter account a clearinghouse for videos of police violence after Black Lives Matter had brought the issue to the fore. In 2015, during the presidential primary, Bernie Sanders re-tweeted a Blue tweet about child poverty, and a Hillary surrogate re-tweeted a Blue tweet lamenting Bernie's "difficulty grasping the needs of poor women of color."

What rankled Sam even more than Blue's pseudo-radicalism was the tale he spun about himself. At first he didn't lie; rather, he mentioned facts that, in isolation, obscured more than they revealed. That he'd grown up in "the Bronx," for example, and that his father had driven a taxi. He grew bolder, describing himself as a "prole." On Twitter he said he and Bernie both hailed from the "outer-borough Jewish working class."

Sam stared at this tweet. It was four in the morning. Lucy was asleep beside him, as was their ginger cat, Manfred. It took Sam many minutes to craft a response: "You're lying & you know I know you're lying." He figured his tweet, with its casual authority, would get attention, some "likes" and replies asking for elaboration, but just in case, he added "#celebrityleft," Twitterese for social-climbing pseudo radicals.

The next morning, however, there was no indication that Blue or anyone else had seen the tweet. It was as if it didn't exist.

Charlie is still asleep when they arrive at Lucy's parents' house. Sam transfers him without waking him and lies down beside him in the king size. Charlie, who has a cold, blows a booger bubble with his nose. It pops. Two hours and counting, his nap. The kid doesn't get enough sleep. Sam gave up consulting to take care of Charlie. Still freelancing, he has several clips but no breakthrough ones, and his days of trying to make it as a journalist are likely numbered. With Charlie starting preschool, he'll have to get a job.

Lucy comes in and turns up her hands: what are you doing? The dutiful husband stands up. At attention! They decide to ask for money right away, over lunch. Lucy's mother has prepared vichyssoise and a salad, which they eat on

the deck overlooking the garden. Lucy's parents are rich but not, how sad for them, beachfront rich.

Len goes on about a case—he's defending a corporation from a suit alleging it stole the idea for pretzel crisps—and it's a good ten minutes before Lucy has an opening. "So," she says, going for breezy, "Charlie got into two preschools, but the better one is super expensive. We're wondering if you could help us out?"

"Of course," Rebecca says.

"Hold on," Len says.

"It's education," Rebecca says. "I mean—"

Len, who's bit of a prick, puts a finger to his lips. "Before I give you more money, I'd like to know your plan for turning your financial situation around."

Lucy looks at Sam, genuinely interested in his answer. "I'm going to get a job," he says. "Ideally in journalism but if not, not."

"And what's your plan for getting a job in journalism?" Len asks.

Sam says nothing and feels sweat form on his upper lip.

"You can't keep writing tendentious political crap," Len says.

"Actually," Sam says. His idea is so perfect he almost starts laughing. "There's a juicy profile I can do. A juicy profile *only* I can do."

The Trump era has been kind to Blue, who's conveniently become a "militant" anti-fascist whose father's family was allegedly wiped out in the Holocaust, and who takes bold stands against white nationalists on Twitter. He's become so well known and ubiquitous that only a week after sending his pitch to several outlets, Sam signs a contract with *Vanity Fair* for a 6,000-word piece at $3 a word.

Sam makes calls during Charlie's naps. Ex-bandmates in Austin say Blue's narcissism and dishonesty forced them to kick him out. A former friend in LA says Blue stole his ideas for screenplays. Sam confirms that Blue's mother was a spook; she was an agent overseas before taking a desk job in the CIA office in the World Trade Center. On top of the money she earned at the CIA, Leslie has family wealth: three million dollars. Blue is the opposite of working class.

A vivid portrait of a fraud emerges. But Sam doesn't want it to be a simple hit piece. It's important to discuss his own flaws: his jealously, his insecurity,

his complicity. This is the story, in part, of a friendship between two fucked-up people.

Blue emails the article to Dahlia, whom he hasn't seen since the Occupy party six years earlier. He assumes she's still in touch with Blue because not long ago he posted a video of a tenants' rights demonstration that showed her shouting through a bullhorn.

"I'm not sure why you sent this to me," she says on the phone.

Sam's sitting on the side of a sandbox, helping Charlie dig a hole. "I'd like your opinion," he says.

"Who does this help? What useful political purpose does it serve?"

This kind of question from Dahlia would've once intimidated him. But Sam now has an answer at the ready: "Remember what Lenin said about opportunists?"

He sends Blue an email summing up the piece, and they agree to meet in a basement coffee shop on 72nd. Blue's half an hour late, but Sam's sure he'll show.

And there he is. The celebrity looks the part: sweater jacket, scarf, sunglasses. His stylish scruff is the length of his buzz-cut. People turn to look at him, and he pretends not to notice. Sam waves at him from his table in back.

Blue stops short and lifts up his glasses so that Sam can see his look of disgust. "Libel," Blue says, staying standing. "It'll never see the light of day."

"It's all true, Jeremy. You know it is."

"My lawyers have identified five different libelous assertions."

Having steeled himself, Sam's unfazed. This is easier than he expected. "It's going to be published. It'll be better for you if it's published with your comments."

"Here's my comment: Fuck you, you traitorous, back-stabbing motherfucker."

"Okay, we're done here."

Sam literally jogs out. He's done his due diligence. But he hears clomping footsteps on the sidewalk behind him: Blue running in his clogs. Suddenly he has his hands on Sam's shoulders. "Please don't do this. *Please*. Even if you don't care about me, think about what this is going to do to my mom."

"Your *mom*?"

"My grandmother! Bubbe follows me on Twitter."

"Didn't she perish in Auschwitz?"

Blue lets his arms drop, sighs. His front falls, one of them anyway. "I'm not proud of some of the shit I've done. But do I really deserve this? A public fucking flogging from a guy I used to think was my best friend?"

"I also flog myself in the piece."

"But *you've* got nothing to lose."

"You'll come out of this fine. You always do."

"I'm *begging* you, man." Jeremy's crying now. Sam has to stop himself from giving him a hug. He pats Blue's arm and turns away.

Lucy's taken Charlie to the Museum of Natural History, so Sam has the apartment to himself. The completion of his article calls for a small celebration, he decides, so he has one hit of weed and one shot of ice-cold, syrupy vodka.

At his desk he logs onto his laptop, and, before sending in his article, checks his Twitter account. Something is happening: he has 153 notifications. Now 157.

He goes through them and discovers that Blue has not only followed him but also tweeted: "Y'all should follow my friend, the fierce BRILLIANT thinker-journo-activist @SamLBodine." So far 77 people have heeded his call.

Blue also tweeted a link to Sam's article on a socialist website about the US-caused famine in Yemen, and a bunch of accounts have re-tweeted this tweet.

Sam also has a direct message from Blue: "Consider this a down payment."

Another message comes in: "I'm in texting-touch with a dozen editors." This is followed by an Emoji winking and pointing to his temple: think.

When Sam stands up, he realizes that he's shaking. He goes into the kitchen and takes another shot of vodka and it seems to shoot through his veins to his fingertips, which pulsate. He imagines them ballooning up, cartoon-style.

He goes back into the living room, where Manfred, curled up on the couch, watches him pace. "Here's the choice, Fred. On one side is 18,000 dollars, minus taxes, and a great clip, which could lead to others, maybe even a job. On the other, Blue's help."

Manfred, disinterested or disgusted, looks away.

If he chooses Blue's help, he'll have to lie to Lucy, tell her the story got

spiked. But that'd be nothing new, the usual dishonesty, the usual disappointment. There's also the question of ethics, integrity, all that. To take Blue's help is to join him.

Another shot of vodka, and with his pulsating fingertips he gets back on Twitter. An hour ago he had 1,814 followers; now he has 1,982.

No use pretending he doesn't love this. Or that he hasn't made a decision.

Because of this, more people are reading about the famine in Yemen. A political purpose is being served, Dahlia.

Oh, bullshit. Who knew selling out could feel so good?

The notifications keep coming, like an impossibly long run of points after a pinball turn, or money from a slot machine with three cherries. While he sits here at his desk, his name and flattering avatar are traveling at warp speed on countless invisible branched pathways, entering homes and minds, becoming known.