

BRIGHTER
Graphite

Two Novellas by
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Graphite

I regarded my pencil with incredulity.

It was one from a new case that I had arranged, at no small expense, to import from the far south. I was not used to having the graphite core—also referred to (improperly) as the “lead”—snapping off as I scribbled my notes. This was the third of three sharpenings that had done so, a vexing occurrence, as the tedious process of grinding off the wood to spike the beautiful core was consuming more time and concentration than the work at hand. True, I have been accused of applying undue pressure to my writing instruments—a matter, in my view, indicative only of the clarity of my thought and expression (I rarely need to edit), but, admittedly, a factor in my long-standing patronage of the fine products of the Graphite Pencil Works. To call the breakage unusual would hardly state the case; these pencils were famous the world over.

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Living up to the high expectations that came with the price, they were far more reliable than the cheap local wares favored by schoolchildren and accountants. The broken cores must be a bizarre anomaly, I thought. I burrowed my hands deep into the cedar-fragrant crate to test two pristine specimens from deep within. Extracting the slender wooden tubes, I loosed a puff of the feather packing, from pest-birds turned in for bounty. The pencils were so impressive I had to stop to admire their balance, color, and texture for a moment before sharpening them to finely honed points. But I was disappointed again. And again. My new case of pencils was spoiled—an expensive and disturbing fact I refused to accept.

I communicated my alarm to several acquaintances who (I thought!) shared my appreciation for quality writing instruments, only to learn, with a shock, that they, too, had the same experience over the previous several years, and had actually changed brands. Chagrined that they had failed to inform me at the time, I sternly took them to task for their negligence. After a great deal of stuttered mollifying, I grudgingly accepted their apologies, but silently vowed to even the score when the time presented itself, as it surely would.

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Still smarting from their slight, I contemplated the appalling predicament that faced me. True, I purchased my pencils in vast amounts (at a much better price) and my previous order, consisting of two crates, or twenty-four thousand units, of these most beautiful of mark-making tools had lasted me twelve years. It was profoundly upsetting to realize that those might have been the last of the most perfect pencils ever made—a possibility which instilled a deep sense of regret. But I roused myself. If something could be done, I would see it through, and thus resolved to investigate the mystery in person.

My decision was not spontaneous, or altruistic. It was motivated by pure self-interest, for it was my personal passion, and undeniable intention, to tour the four world capitals of industrial lubricants. Over the years, I had made pilgrimages to Oylee, Siliconia, and Greasemere. I had long been planning a journey to Graphite, the jewel in the friction-free crown of these four great cities. The pleasure of the adventure would be twofold. I had been saving for quite a while, but the timing had not seemed right—until now. The journey could not fail to be enlightening and gratifying, and it certainly could not wait.

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Thus committed, I checked the train schedule; I had five short days to put my affairs in order before embarking and applied myself to that end with singular determination.



On Tuesday morning I milled about with others in the pre-dawn dark at the Bilker's Hump station, awaiting the Number Three Express, which would spirit me along the first leg of my journey, to the abominable Mute Warren, an overly large city I detest. If only it lived up to its name! This hub of the rail system held the most extreme noise levels imaginable, from the constant steam whistles signaling train arrivals and departures, to the continual explosive pressures blasted from its factories as they poured and punched out the absurd cast-iron furniture that was all the rage in the finest rooms of Castaphon and Pallid's Pike. This round-the-clock cacophony forced its rude inhabitants to speak with exaggerated volume, never noticeably modified, even

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in those rare moments of quiet. The factory emissions and the metal smelting fouled the air, rendering any time spent there an unendurable eternity. The schedule called for only a short hiatus in Mute Warren and I fervently hoped it would hold.

As the venerable Number Three chugged into the station, trailing great billows of steam and a settling cloud of carbon soot belched from its iron belly, I thrilled: My journey was beginning. Such a powerful sight could only herald success. First in line, I boarded and headed directly to my reserved berth.

The compartment looked comfortable enough. I settled in, arranging my belongings in a fashion that would afford maximum convenience and efficiency. My travels had convinced me a private berth was worth the cost, as it minimized undue annoyance—I had little patience for most people any time, but in the morning I had tolerance for none. The train jerked, then slowly moved out of the station, and I checked my watch—5:15 a.m., right on time.

Pleased with the punctual departure, I sat back, watching the dark landscape zip by as the train gained speed. The geometric urbanity of the city gave way to

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the casual arrangements of the suburbs, then those thinned to the cool green of the countryside as the sky grew pink. The sun was starting to peak over the twin foothills (dubbed Bilker's Rump by the local wags) that marked the southernmost claim of the city. It was a beautiful scene, suffused with roseate light, which also implied the advent of rain. I basked in the glorious scenery until another clock—my stomach—informed me I had neglected my morning meal. I roused myself and headed off to breakfast.

Being the lone diner in the car, I received the full attentions of the decrepit attendant. I slowly (and repeatedly) placed my order and read the papers—yes, papers in the plural—until my food arrived. Due to the man's lack of speed, the unsatisfying repast was delivered lukewarm to my table, but I did not have the heart (or stomach) to send it back to the kitchen, lest I starve. The ancient waiter toddled off without a word of apology to my sharp rebukes, pushing his little cart, without which he no doubt would have toppled over. The jellied mangoes were too sweet, with none of the tartness one would reasonably expect. I regarded the oatmeal with distaste; it resembled a bowl of lumpy and discolored plaster.

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Deciding not to chance this horrid breakfast stew, I instead poured a single dollop of milk into my coffee, which sank from sight without discernibly lightening the beverage. A tentative sip revealed it must have been brewed at least two days prior to being served; it was bitter as gall. I shook my head, lamenting the sorry state of gourmandise. My appetite thus slaked, I paid my bill (sans gratuity), returning to my compartment to while away the hours and my hunger.

The sun was well up now, burning off the morning mists from the nooks and creases in the hillsides. The green of spring and the sharp blue sky induced me to open the compartment window and take several deep breaths of the bracing air, but I soon was compelled to close it, the oxygen-rich atmosphere making me heady. It was a pleasant day and I resolved to enjoy my journey.

My mind strayed to several subjects of recent preoccupation; I reached for my notebook to jot down a few more thoughts concerning the dormant ambition of the inert. While hastily detailing new insights into that old chestnut involving the behavior of bubbles in a vacuum, my pen malfunctioned. In a lurid gush it expended its

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reservoir of ink onto the page and thence, by virtue of gravity, onto my pants. My reaction to impede the effects of the accident completed the horrible fiasco; my hand jerked across the page and negated, in a wash of ink, what may well have been significant conclusions. I dropped my notebook and stood in a rage, helplessly watching as the inky shadow spread down the left leg of my fine hand-woven miniature tartan plaid pants. I had no doubt they were ruined but, being the match to the jacket and vest I sported, I slipped my braces and struggled out of them. I inserted one of my monogrammed handkerchiefs into the left leg to stay the ink from transferring to the facing fabric. Hurriedly, I donned the tailored black wool riders I pulled from my rucksack, then hailed a porter. I explained the situation in a frantic rush.

The porter—Bebo, by name—was not reassuring, and explained that the cleaner had taken another position and had not been replaced. But he would see what he could do and left with my spoiled trousers. Despite my recent resolution to enjoy the journey, my mood had turned glum. The trip was not proceeding well at all. And the mishap with the pen made me pine for the sim-

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plicity of a well-made pencil. To top things off, we would arrive in Mute Warren in less than three hours.

Desultory and groggy from waking early to make the train, I decided to nap through the trial of lunch. I would need my strength at the transfer point, God knows, and would find a quick bite there to help pass the time in that purgatory. Though we were chugging through the Vulvine Gorge, I fell asleep, having seen the damp and uneasy wonder several times.

A timid tapping on compartment door gently brought me round, and after a moment's confusion I came to, refreshed and cognizant. It was the porter Bebo, to whom I had entrusted my tartans. He signaled me with a little smile and a slight wave. Perhaps it was his good-natured personality, or maybe a premonition, but I felt optimistic despite the damage I had endowed upon my trousers. I opened the door, bidding the small fellow to enter.

In a rush, he explained that this was my lucky day, for as he explained the impossible cleaning task to his fellow porters, he had been overheard by one of the passengers, who demanded to examine the damage. The passenger grandiosely declared that he would need a private berth and a quart of the finest bourbon to be had from the club

car. The swell had further instructed Bebo to bill the owner of the pants for all costs incurred. Bebo complied with trepidation, relinquishing my tartans to this imperious man and ushering him into an unused compartment, where the stranger gave one last order, that being a small collapsible table, which was soon delivered, along with the top-shelf whiskey. Bebo was to return in an hour, at which time, he was assured, the damage would be completely reversed. Efficient Bebo reported that this man had laid out a number of bottles and tubes in preparation for his task, then opened the bourbon and poured himself three stiff fingers. Saluting the porter formally, he drank off the potent draught with nary a shiver before shooping the train attendant out.

When Bebo returned, the man was well into the bottle, good-natured but incoherent. He motioned at Bebo to take the trousers and go, which he hurriedly did, sensing a potentially uneasy situation.

Bebo thus proffered the pants for my scrutiny. To my eye, it was as if the damage was never inflicted; the disaster was undone, my tartans miraculously restored to their pristine state. Overjoyed, I slapped Bebo on the back, in congratulation, before regaining my composure.

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“Ah, they are beautiful. But, Bebo,” I queried, “what is this oddly pleasant smell that imbues my pants?”

Bebo explained that he had learned from the other porters that the gentleman who had saved my trousers was a painter of some repute. He had not actually removed the stain from the fabric, but fixed it with solutions, and then perfectly matched the pattern with oil colors, accounting for the smell and heavy stiffness with which the once sinuous material was now invested. The workmanship was superb, of the highest quality. I thanked Bebo heartily and tipped him well (though not as well as if my pants were not still ruined), and settled the painter’s exorbitant bar tab before sending the porter on his way. I tested the surface of the repair and my finger came away clean. The clever artist must have used a drying agent in his pigments, which rendered the material stiff and unyielding. I worried about the craquelure that surely would eventually ensue, but my concern proved unfounded.

While I was folding the tartans into my rucksack, I heard another soft knock at the door. It was Bebo again.

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“Excuse me much, sir,” he stammered, “but the gentleman has just finished with this.” He displayed my monogrammed handkerchief with which I had tried to stanch the flow of ink. Instead of the immaculate white with gold monogram, the field was black. The gold letters stood out in a bold impasto. Attached was a barely legible note in pencil, thanking me for my hospitality (the drinks, I supposed) and presumably signed, though I could not make out a pronunciation from whatever letters I fancied were written there.

Bebo bowed gracefully, announcing that we would arrive at Mute Warren station in ten minutes.

I have never since had occasion to wear my tartans, nor can I imagine a situation in which I would. I have had them framed, and exhibit them in the foyer, along with my monogrammed handkerchief and the illegible note. Though I do not know his name, or anything of his career, I will venture that, for a painter, he made a fine tailor.

Pulling into the station, I felt the clamor before actually hearing it. I fetched from a pocket of my rucksack the wax-covered pignoli nuts so skillfully wrought by the miniaturist artisans of Rawwoody, and fit them

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Damn these filthy pest-birds! Such a nuisance, a twittering plague! Their numbers increase every season—and their stays seems longer and longer. Years past, they would be far south by now, scouring the landscape clean. Like locusts, they are . . . except they eat locusts as well—their only worthwhile trait. They cling to what little purchase they can find on my cocoon, my wrappings, making what time I have left of my mortal life an absolute hell, chirping and squawking and pecking away at my flesh with their sharp blood-sucking beaks. Shoo! Shoo, you dirty things! Oh, damn this outrage! I haven't even the energy to scare them off. Not even the noxious fumes from my cocoon seem to bother them, though the stench makes me ill. My eyes have not stopped watering since I was bound, and now these vile birds peck the frozen tears and the tallow congealed on my face. I think the blighted little bastards are actually *attracted* by the volatile fumes. No doubt, they are a part

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of my apotheosis to godhood, perhaps a favorable sign, as those candidates who preceded me did not have to suffer this particular humiliation. . . . Hah!

Some raiment for my ascension to the throne—a crown of raucous and ratty little pest-birds, my royal mantle fashioned from the sluice of their foul droppings! I daresay not a single one of my clients would recognize me. Me, the nattiest dresser of all art dealers, the dandy without peer! Once I had dealt with DeFleur, at any rate, he did not wear his clothes well, with that broken body of his. Yes, I am the greatest art dealer, and I await the ultimate test to be the most brilliant artist of my time—perhaps of all time! I left nothing to chance for this trial. I made certain that I would shine the brightest—by paying a quick, quiet, and costly visit to Granatois, the body-binder for the Proof, in the few hours allotted me before turning myself in for purification. If only these evil birds could be bribed so easily! Behind my back it has been whispered that I am a parasite in the trade; if that is so, then I now serve as the parasitic host to these disgusting feathered monsters. Oh well, I hope they keep to their current perch when I am set alight!.....

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DeFleur demanded perfection from all but himself. But am I not the very epitome of that quality? He surely did recognize and laud excellence, but that lofty ideal was a distant second to his lust for lucre. His quest for perfection was applied primarily to his employees, and few could tolerate the blatant hypocrisy. Ha! Despite DeFleur’s discerning eye and scholarship, and his instincts and deep commitment to aesthetic philosophies that have guided the history of art, he utterly overlooked my potential! Little bent man! After a cursory glance at my paintings, he shrugged dismissively and mentioned he had an open position at the moment, caring for his inventory. It would be of value, he suggested, for a young painter to learn the business side of art. Ha! The fool! If he could only see me now!

But at the time I had no choice in the matter, really. My meager resources were exhausted soon after being booted from the studio of that cretin Falibone—of all people!—telling *me*: “Janos Gambon, you are good for

nothing but painting signs!” and demanding I leave his service at once. I cannot think of a better example of the blind teaching the sighted to see. And yet the atelier system and its ethos of standardization thrives. The fool blamed *me* for failing to live *down* to his expectations!

DeFleur taught me more in our first meeting than Falibone had in three years, simply by telling me, with a twist of irony, “Young man, just remember this: Never sell your honor twice!” Haha . . . DeFleur should have taken his own advice. Or kept his counsel to himself, as things ultimately played out. And as for *his* opinion of my paintings, I took it too much to heart, for, as I later learned, his crooked body and ruined leg resulted from a beating he received for cheating a young and reckless painter whom DeFleur was promoting. I suspect the brutal thrashing he received led to his dealing only in vintage works by long-dead artists. The trade was certainly more lucrative—and dead artists have little fight. The decrepit clientele who collected such art retaliated only with writs and lawsuits. DeFleur, of course, retained the best legal heroes in the field, his soldiers who, at his direction, would draw out the suits as long as possible, seemingly forever. He considered such disputes a

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war of attrition. The few cases that were found against DeFleur, as much as they grieved him, were infinitely preferable to a painful and deforming fight. I am absolutely certain DeFleur deserved every blow delivered him by the angry young painter, and probably more.....

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On rare occasions, DeFleur would ask how my painting was progressing, motivated by the sheer boredom of a dead Saturday afternoon, or a sudden inspiration of politeness, or, most likely, making certain I was not making strides that would free me from his thrall. But I always found these moments gratifying, considering them as acknowledgments, of a sort.

All those years drudging in DeFleur's painting storage, caring for the artworks, assisting in showings, taking the blame for errors of my underlings as the business expanded, silently suffering his demeaning comments in the presence of royalty and the wealthy for my inability to be in two places at once. . . I could waste the few hours left to me listing the indignities I endured in the service of

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the old cheat. And yet I stayed, the compensation sufficient to survive on a fairly comfortable level, though the schedule left me but one day a week to recuperate and, if sufficiently motivated, to work on my paintings, of which I had completed a small but personally satisfying group. DeFleur, on dull summer Saturdays, would sometimes engage me in conversations to relieve his ennui, and seemed to appreciate some of the insights I expressed about gallery works that intrigued me. I was quietly pleased to subsequently hear some of my points used by the old dog in his efforts to sell said works. He seemed to develop over time a grudging respect for my opinions, though he took much greater delight in proving me wrong or simply dismissing my comments as idiotic blather. During slow periods, if I was current with my work, he never badgered my whiling away dead work hours in the gallery library—one of the most compendious in private hands—from which I borrowed ideas for my personal work. In this way, and over time, we came to an uneasy and grudging regard for each other, though I despised his callous abuse until realizing that he considered everyone an inferior and thus discovered his fatal flaw, the chink in his armor.....