

New Fiction by J. Malcolm Garcia: “An Arrangement”



Houston Skyline from Midtown

I escaped to America after my fiancé, Farhid, died. He was an officer in the Afghan National Army in Bagarm when he was killed by a roadside bomb. His friend Abdul called and told me the news. He and Farhid had attended school together and had joined the army at the same time. Abdul used to visit us, but I hadn't seen him in years. When I got off the phone, I felt like still air on a clear day. Nothing stirred. No sound and no one around me. An emptiness engulfed me that was not altogether unpleasant. I was adrift but not grieving. I had never wanted to marry him; it was my father's wish that I do so. Farhid was my cousin.

His father, my Uncle Gülay, was my father's brother. Gülay died in a car accident before I was born, and my father took Farhid and his mother into our family. I saw Farhid as an older brother—someone I played hide and seek with as a child—and not as a husband, but my father said he wanted to have grandchildren, especially a grandson. He also thought our marriage would honor Gülay, and he made it clear I didn't have a choice. I don't like Farhid, I told my father, not in that way. Oh, you are a big shame, he scolded me. I didn't ask for your opinion. I decide. I ran to my room. My mother followed and sat beside me as I wept into my pillow. Your father has decided as my father decided for me when I was your age, she said. It will be fine. Your family wouldn't make a bad decision. Farhid is a good boy. Open your heart and you will see him as your father sees him and learn to love him.

After Farhid died, I mourned the boy I knew but not the man I hadn't wanted for a husband. I remembered when he stood with

me on the second floor of our home in Jalalabad when the Taliban left Afghanistan after the Americans invaded. We watched them drive away, their faces grim, angry. After that, my father allowed me to leave the house without a burqa. Farhid and I would walk to the downtown bazaar, and he'd hold my left hand as he guided us through the crowds. He liked to make puppets, and some mornings I'd wake up and find him crouched at the foot of my bed with socks on his hands imitating sheep and goats. Get up, baaa! Get up, Samira, baaa, he'd say and I'd duck under the sheets giggling as he pinched my toes. These memories made me sad. Farhid—my cousin, my brother—was gone, but I felt a certain lightness too because now I'd never have to marry him. I lay in bed and stared at the ceiling and saw hill-shaped shadows rise out of the dark and spread across the ceiling and loom over me and I knew it was the spirit of Uncle Gülay, enraged that Farhid's death had denied him the honor of our marriage.

My father hung a photograph of Farhid in his army uniform in the entrance of our house. I hadn't seen this picture before. He looked older than I remembered. He had a sharp chin, a firm mouth, and a stern look that gave the impression of someone gazing into their future. He wasn't the boy with the puppets. Perhaps I could have loved him, I thought, and for the first time I felt despair but it was a distant kind of grief toward someone I had never really known.

After his funeral, my life resumed as if he had never died. I woke up early and attended classes at Jalalabad State University from seven to one. After school, I took a computer course and studied English so that one day I could get a good job with a Western NGO. One of my favorite memories: accessing the internet for the first time and establishing a Yahoo email account.

Those leisurely days didn't last. Eight weeks after Farhid's funeral, I began receiving death threats from Taliban supporters. Some of them sent text messages: *We know your*

fiancé fought against the army of Allah. He is dead and you'll be next. Some mornings, my father would find notes tacked to our front door: *Whore! You have betrayed Islam by becoming engaged to an infidel. We will eliminate you and all infidels who betray Allah.* Whoever wrote these notes, I believe, set off bombs near our house, too many to count, and sticky bombs on cars belonging to our neighbors. It became normal to hear an explosion and the panicked screams that followed. I became afraid to leave the house and stopped attending school.

My father was a physician. One day he went out with the Afghan National Army to treat sick soldiers when a bomb exploded and shrapnel tore into his left arm and both legs. A neighbor heard the news but didn't want to alarm my family. He asked for some clothes to take to the hospital treating my father. Why do you need his clothes? my mother asked; but instead of answering her, he rushed off without explanation. Then my cousin Reshaf called from Kabul and asked my mother about the bombing. He had read about it on the internet. It killed ten government soldiers, he said. My mother tried to reach my father but he didn't answer his phone. Finally, someone from the hospital called and said he had been injured. We rushed to the hospital and wandered halls where injured soldiers lay on gurneys and stared at us with dazed, hollow eyes. My father lay in a bed in a small room with peeling green paint that overlooked a courtyard. Families sat under trees. Roaming dogs snapped at men who chased them away. A white sheet covered my father up to his chin. His blood-stained legs were raised in slings, and his injured arm was wrapped in gauze soaked by iodine. Dozens of cuts ruined his face. He tried to speak but his voice caught in his throat and I looked away as tears rolled down his face.

He recovered but he couldn't walk without help and often used a wheelchair. Nerve damage in his left hand prevented him from using medical instruments. He spent his days in his small

clinic sitting at his desk and offering advice to colleagues. He watched them work, and when he grew bored he scrolled through his computer until he grew tired and rested his chin on his chest and slept.

The threats against my life continued. That summer my father began making inquiries, and through a friend in the Ministry of Interior he secured a visa for me to emigrate to the United States that was given to families who had either fought or worked with Western forces. Her husband was an Afghan soldier, my father told his friend. She can't stay here. That night while I was in my room preparing to go to bed he called for me. I followed his voice out to our garden where he stood in the light of a full moon. Cats yowled and the distant barking of dogs rose above the noise of car horns and of voices in the shopping centers of Shar-e-Naw. My parents' bedroom window opened onto the garden and I could hear my mother crying. Without looking at me, my father said I'd fly to the United States in the morning. Arrangements had been made through an NGO to take me to Houston, Texas, where an American aid organization would help me. You will leave us to start a new life, inshallah, my father said.

I ran from the garden to my mother's room but she had shut the door and wouldn't let me in. There is nothing I can do for you, she called out to me. I slid to the floor and wept. In my bed that night, I wondered where Texas was in the United States. I thought of Farhid and the resolute look on his face in the photograph above our front door. I decided to have that same kind of determination, and I embraced his image, ignored my fear, and withheld my tears until something inside me retreated to a far corner.

My father and mother took me to Kabul International Airport. I held my mother for a long time, our wet faces touching. A plane carried me to Qatar and then to Washington, D.C. That evening, I flew to El Paso and stayed in a tent in a U.S. Army camp near Fort Bliss. I couldn't count the number of tents and

the number of people filling them. Like a gathering of nomads stretching without end across a white desert. The suffocating summer heat, I thought, was worse than Jalalabad. Sand and dust swirled endlessly. There wasn't a single second I didn't hear babies crying, heavy trucks driving past, and announcements over loudspeakers. One morning a soldier took me to a room in a square, concrete building where a man sat alone at a table. He said he was from the Department of Homeland Security. He asked me about Farhid. I told him how we used to play as children. I know nothing about his life as a soldier, I said. But he was your fiancé, the man insisted. My father arranged our marriage, I explained. He asked about my parents and if they had ever traveled outside of Afghanistan. No, I told him, they hadn't. He thanked me and the soldier returned me to my tent.

I lost my appetite and would sit on the floor of my tent and spend hours rocking back and forth as I had as a child when I was scared. A nurse told me I suffered from panic attacks, and she gave me medication that put me to sleep. I had dreams of bomb blasts. In one dream, I told my father, Let's go away from here. You're in America, he said, don't worry. Another time, I dreamed my father was in great pain. When I called them, my mother said, Your father's legs were hurting him. That's why you had the dream.

Two months later I flew to Houston, where I was met by a man named Yasin from the Texas Institute for Refugee Services. Welcome to Houston, he said, and then he led me out of the airport and into a parking lot. The hot, humid air wrapped around me so tightly that my arms felt stuck to my body. My clothes clung to me like wet paper.

Yasin told me he was my caseworker. What is that? I asked. It means you are my responsibility, he said. He had dark hair and brown eyes and he wore a white shirt with a thin tie and a gray suit. He said he was from the Afghan city of Herat and had worked for an American NGO until he came under threat from

the Taliban. He got a U.S. visa like mine and had flown to Houston three years ago. I told him about Farhid. I'm sorry for you, he said. When I think of Afghanistan and everyone I left behind, I shake with fear. His sad look touched me.

He led me to his car, a hybrid, he told me proudly. Turning a knob, he switched on the air conditioning and a chill ran through me as the cold air struck my sweat-dampened clothes. He gave me a bottle of water and told me I could remove my hijab; in America, he explained, women don't have to cover their heads. I told him I felt more comfortable keeping it on. I wore your shoes once, as the Americans like to say, he said, but don't be scared. After a while the U.S. won't feel so strange and you will take off your hijab. He smiled and showed all of his teeth.

We drove to a Social Security office where I signed up for refugee benefits and Medicaid. He said these programs would provide a little bit of money to pay for housing, food, and health care. He took me to a small apartment in a five-story building owned by the institute. A swing hung motionless in an empty playground and large black birds hopped on the ground, and the noise they made flapping their heavy wings reminded me of Jalalabad merchants when they snapped carpets in the air to shake off dust. We took an elevator to a second-floor apartment. It had a sofa and a table with two chairs. A small bed with sheets and a blanket took up most of the bedroom. Blue towels hung from a rack in the bathroom. This will be your new home, Yasin said. I looked out the living room window and saw nothing but the doors of apartments across the way. Through my kitchen window I noticed people sitting on steps leading to the floors above me. Shadows converged over them and I became depressed, and I thought of Farhid's spirit rising toward paradise—a dark journey toward light—and I decided this was my dark journey and eventually, inshallah, I'd find light and happiness in this my new home.

In the following days, Yasin took me to a job preparation

class. The instructor was impressed I knew so much English and I explained I had studied it in Jalalabad. That is a good start, but you don't know everything, he said. He told me that when I met someone, I should shake their hand and look them in their eyes and say, How do you do? Nice to meet you. I told him in Afghanistan this wouldn't be possible; a woman would never shake a man's hand or look at them unless they were their husband or family. You aren't in Afghanistan, he reminded me. After class, Yasin would always walk ahead of me and when we came to a door he would stop and open it for me. I told him he didn't have to do this, but he insisted. He was very kind. Slow, slowly, in the evenings in my apartment, I began to think that I might like America. I thought I could love Yasin.

After four weeks, Yasin told me he could no longer see me. Catholic Charities worked with refugees for only one month. He was very matter-of-fact. He told me to stop at a flower shop near his office. It was owned by a friend of his, Shivay. He had spoken to him and Shivay had agreed to hire me. You are fully oriented to the city, he told me, and now you will have a job. You're set. Go and live your life. He smiled his toothy grin and stuck out his hand to shake mine. I don't understand, I said. What don't you understand? he asked. That stillness I felt when Abdul called me about Farhid returned, but this time it was Yasin's absence I began to feel and I didn't want him to go. He looked at me without understanding. I resisted the tears I felt brimming in my eyes and took his hand. Thank you, I said, looking at him. It was nice to meet you.

The next morning, I met Shivay. He told me he was born in Houston but his parents are Afghan. They came to the United States after the Russian invasion. I tried to speak to him in Dari as I sometimes had with Yasin, but he shook his head. My parents always spoke English around me, he said. They wanted me to be an American. That is what you should want to be too, Samira. He provided me with a table and a calculator to ring

up sales. I inhaled the fragrance of red roses that filled buckets on the shelves by the door as I waited for customers, prompting memories of my childhood in Jalalabad. In those days, Farhid and I helped vendors put roses in pails of water outside their stalls on narrow streets hazy with dust. Orange trees bloomed in the summer and after the fruit had set, Farhid climbed them and dropped oranges down to me. The Kabul River passed behind the bazaar and we dangled our bare feet in its clear water. The frigid winter weather made us shake with cold and we stayed inside under blankets, eager for the comforts of spring. The sun blistered the sky in summer making the days impossibly hot, but no matter the heat we'd be back in the bazaars helping the vendors with their roses, deep red and cool in their buckets.

The flower shop took up a corner lot in a quiet neighborhood near a park where people gathered in the afternoon. I'd see men walk up to women and hug them and after a brief conversation they'd walk away. In Afghanistan, a woman would never hug a man outside of her family. Who were these men, I asked myself? The women wore slim dresses that revealed too much of their bodies, and I wondered how they felt, almost naked in public pressing their bodies against a man, some of whom didn't wear shirts, and I saw the men's bare chests and my heart beat fast and I blushed when I caught Shivay watching me. He laughed. Here, there are many men and women who aren't Muslim, he said. In America, it isn't shameful to look.

One morning Shivay surprised me with a cup of green tea. My parents always drink green tea, he said. They say it's an Afghan custom. Is it? I told him it was and from then on he made green tea for me every morning.

At midday, Shivay would buy us lunch and after work he'd walk me to the nearby bus stop, and he'd wait with me until the bus arrived. I told him he didn't have to do this but he insisted. You are a pretty girl and shouldn't go out alone at night. When the bus arrived, I'd get on and watch him walk away. I

felt warm all over. I thought I could love this man.

Two months later, however, Shivay told me he no longer needed me. He had hired me as a favor to Yasin, he said. That night when he walked me to the bus, he suggested I apply at a nearby Wal-Mart. He promised to give me a good recommendation and then he handed me a half empty box of green tea. I don't drink it, he said.

Wal-Mart didn't have any job openings. I applied at other stores, but no one called me. I called Yasin. He said he'd try to help me, but I was no longer his client. I stayed in my apartment and when I grew bored I drew henna tattoos on my hands and feet, and at night I took the pills that helped me sleep. Then one afternoon, my father called. He said Farhid's friend Abdul had received a U.S. visa and would be arriving in Houston soon. He has visited your mother and me many times since Farhid died so that we'd know he honors Farhid's memory, my father told me. He is a nice boy. I have spoken to his family, and we are in agreement that he'd make a good husband for you in Texas.

I didn't know what to say. After a moment, I hurried outside and took the elevator down to the playground and sat in a swing, gripping my phone in my left hand, and rocked back and forth, thrusting my legs out to gain momentum and stared at the sky through the sparse trees. Motionless clouds blocked the sun. Lean shadows cut across the sidewalk. I rose higher and higher, lulled by the rhythmic creaking of the swing. Hello, Samira, are you there? I heard my father shout. No other sound but his voice disturbed the resigned stillness until I was ready to emerge from its quiet consolation. I ceased pumping my legs, let my toes drag against the ground. I slowed to a stop. Yes, Father, I'm here, I said into my phone. I asked him to text me a photograph of Abdul. Seconds later, a young man with a smooth face stared out at me from my phone. He had a distant, moody look that conveyed a seriousness of purpose, of someone who believed he was performing his duty. As would I.

Over time, I was sure I could love this man.

New Fiction from Mike Freedman: KING OF THE MISSISSIPPI



The only thing to fear is missing out. Sources indicate all opportunities to pre-order a first-edition of *King of the Mississippi* will be lost forever by July 9, 2019. Click the image to avoid missing out.

The shine and swagger of a new day.

Great Recession? Not Houston. And yet, and yet there had been a speed bump in September 2008, sure, but that had been assessed and corrected; and now the city of Brock Wharton seceded further from the rest of the flatlined country in the first week of September 2014. As Wharton was considering whether to rearrange his weekend schedule to pencil in sex with his wife, one of the strangest men he had ever laid eyes on breached the space of his open doorway. Of average height, the boyish, sun-cooked man appeared taller than he was as his askew brown hair lashed out in every direction. His rangy build (accentuated by the too-small, off-the-rack, navy

double-breasted suit he wore as if he were a redneck admiral at a regatta that Wharton would never enter) seemed pulled at the sinews' seams. It was the sort of flawed build that none of the South Texas ranching families would ever breed. If not for the intensity of the blue eyes—divided by a comic eagle nose that dived toward raggedly chapped lips—so nakedly sizing him up in return, Wharton would have dismissed the figure as an apparition too absurd to be real.

Unnerved by the fixed eyes that looked through him to some burning skyscraper or falling zeppelin outside the window, Wharton twisted around anticipating to be hit by a tornado. But the downtown skyline was undisturbed. Annoyed by this intrusion and humiliated that he had been tricked into a search beyond his window, Wharton spun around in his chair to regain the initiative. "Who—"

"You're the man to beat?" A smile the size of the intruder's face tore through the puffy lips and exposed a series of swollen red gums congregated around two monstrous white tusks for front teeth, which, if not fake, the hospital-white fangs had avoided the yellow staining of the other teeth and clearly swam in their own current in the man's mouth. A muddy five o'clock shadow surrounded the giant mouth, which surely, upon closer inspection of this dark facial sandpaper, would be attributed to not shaving than some

celebrated regeneration of stubble.

His piney, log-cutting aftershave sprayed Wharton's office with his scent. A hand slithered in the air above his desk toward Wharton. He stood and asked in a harsh tone that betrayed the mask of imperturbability he wished to project, "Who are you and what is the nature of your business in my office?"

"I'm Mike Fink," the man said in a mysterious dialect, a dialect hailing from a region that Wharton could only place as from the land of the lower class while his limp hand was grabbed by Fink. His flagrant confidence-man grin expressed an expectation that Wharton knew the name, if not the reputation. "I'm here for the leadership position."

I, Wharton declared to himself, will personally see to it that that never happens. This was a case that needed no analysis. Wharton pulled his hand from Fink's clasp and came around from his desk. "Be that as it may, I have never heard of you. I am sure we can resolve this misunderstanding in no time if you would please . . ." But Wharton trailed off, watching in horror as Fink plopped down unmasked in the chair across from Wharton's desk and wriggled his lanky body to find an incorrect posture. This creature's cheekiness apparently knew no bounds. Wharton found himself slightly behind Fink and facing his back; Fink tapped his right foot, waiting on the start of an interview.

Wharton was not about to give such an entitled lout. *Leadership* position? Papers rustled behind where Wharton stood, but he could not take his eyes off the hunched back of Fink.

“I see that you used your Special Forces navigational skills to find Brock’s office, Mike,” a squeaky voice said behind Wharton.

“Too easy, Carissa. Didn’t even have to *consult* the compass.”

“Consult,” Carissa repeated in a higher pitch that no doubt carried a waving of a finger at clever schoolboy Fink for his introduction of an unimaginative punning attempt to their colloquial exchange.

“A good consultant never consults a compass.”



Click on the image to order the “Catch-22 for the millennial generation.”

“Miss Barnett, what is going on?” Wharton asked, as he swung around to see the top-heavy recruiter giggling and swaying her head to the savage’s tapping beat. Was she blushing? Her lips certainly now bore the mark of lipstick, adorned in a Valentine’s Day red to match a pair of six-inch stiletto heels that had magically sprouted up from her earlier flats like weeds in a trailer park. She was without her jacket, and it appeared that—was it possible, even amid the other illusions?—she had lost three or four buttons, too, judging by the excessively gratuitous amount of breast on

exhibit. All at once, Wharton felt the butt of a joke, a weary traveler who had stumbled into some rustic country inn for shelter only to be mocked by the randy bar maiden and the regular patrons.

“Oh, Brock, I’m so sorry. I guess you hadn’t been notified that Mike would be interviewing this afternoon. He was traveling from New Orleans and wasn’t able to make it for the morning block of interviews.”

She ruffled through the stack of papers in her hand and pulled a badly mauled page out and passed it to Wharton. “Here’s a copy of his résumé. Like I told Mike, you are the only one left to interview him before the meeting in the conference room in half an hour to decide on who the new hires are.”

Wharton waved her on before she disclosed any more details of the hiring process. Oblivious to the intent of his wave, she leaned over to Wharton with the bright eyes of a much younger child, a mercurial silver sparkle that screamed antidepressants, and whispered audibly for Fink to hear, “He’s a Green Beret.”



“I don’t care if he’s the pope, Carissa, as I have only a half hour to give an intensive interview,” Wharton said truthfully, for despite his conservative Christian upbringing, he now cared little for religious figures. Indeed, besides possibly

salvation, little reward stemmed from religious fervor beyond the required Christian affiliation among his strategic-friends crowd. Wharton thought even less of people in the military, despite the nauseating resurgence of post-9/11 glorification of a segment who'd been the frequent subject of derision prior to that day. In Wharton's youth, the military was the last stop for the talentless who could not do anything else in life. It usually wasn't even much of a choice: *You can go to prison, or be all you can be in the Army.* Now everyone was expected to shake their hands, pick up their checks in restaurants, turn over their first-class seats on airplanes, and worst yet, stand up and clap for them at sporting events while nodding that the only reason the sport is even being played is because of heroes like them fighting in some country with cities no one can pronounce. An inane rah-rah yellow-ribbon patriotism, a shared ritual offering peace between the jingoes, Middle America, and pinkos where everyone emerged feeling good about their participation. Doubtless this explained how this Fink character was granted a CCG interview.

"Well," Wharton said to Fink, shutting the door on Carissa, "it appears I am to interview you. I'm going to take a minute to scan through your résumé."

“Take your time,” the applicant advised the interviewer. “There’s a lot there.”

There, Wharton quickly realized, was not a lot there: current employment listed as *none*, no work experience (unless ten years in the military counted), a 2.9 GPA, and a bachelor of arts in English literature (was that not the easy major?) from Tulane University (a bottom first-tier university that CCG did not even review applications from) the same year Wharton graduated. Lo and behold, Fink’s résumé was actually a mirror out of a fable, in that if you held it up, your exact opposite looked back at you.

“An English literature major?” Wharton murmured, bringing the CV closer to his eyes.

“With a minor in theater. I read somewhere that English majors make the best consultants. Stands to reason.”

Had recruiting seriously thought the special forces bullet in bold letters at the top alone merited an interview? Special Forces could not be that special if Fink lacked the cognition to apprehend that he did not belong at CCG. That his presence, an interloper squandering his time, was offensive to a Brock Wharton, who had conducted a life cultivating a résumé. Fink was a great example of a candidate not having researched CCG; how had he passed the first-round interview? In fact, Wharton assessed it to be the most

heinous résumé ever submitted for his review: not even the oversized font or alignment from section to section was consistent in what amounted to only a stretched half page of largely questionable achievements (high school senior class president?). Wharton looked up at Fink in time to see him fondling his Texans football!

“Put that down!” Wharton pointed at the ball holder on the wall next to Fink, who on his orders positioned the ball upside down on its seam.

“I apologize. I had forgotten that you were drafted in the last round after playing for UT.”

Wharton searched the blue eyes sunk back in the triangular face for an intended slight in the usage of “last” to describe the still-prestigious seventh round. What it seemed Fink hadn’t forgotten was the chatter of sports columnists, recruiters, superfans, and boosters who had once ranked Wharton the top high school quarterback in the South and proclaimed him the next UT football savior. He in turn ranked this same mindless mob number one in cowardice after four years of enduring their catcalls every time he was injured and being denounced by them for betrayal when their impossible expectations for their fair-haired boy were not met on the field. “Were you drafted as well after graduating college?”

“Drafted by our country,” Fink said, startling

Wharton with a belly laugh loud enough to be heard down the hall.

Wharton avoided Fink's face to conceal the anger he was sure must be reddening his own cheeks. He found refuge in Fink's résumé. A review of it demonstrated that the undereducated Fink knew absolutely nothing beyond the art of exploiting some tax credit for businesses that interviewed veterans. Another bending of the laws, no less egregious than allowing veterans a pass in public with their PTSD service dogs while their pit bulls created anxiety for everyone else. Wharton pushed aside the flash of resentment that made him want to physically kick Fink from his office. He settled on an approach he was convinced would inflict far more damage to this impertinent CCG impostor's candidacy: cede the stage to an unwitting Fink and allow the veteran to shoot himself, hailing as he did from a demographic statistically known for its high suicide rates.

"Thank you for your service. Now why don't you walk me through your academic accomplishments?" Wharton began anew, chumming the waters of that pesky foe of Delusion: Fact. "I see here that you had a two-point-nine grade point average at Tulane."

"Two point nine four five to be exact, but if you round that up it is a two point nine five, and if you're really telling a tale, you could round that to a three point zero."

“CCG, almost as a rule, requires its applicants to have a GPA of three point six or above from a top-ranked college. You are applying for the position of consultant with an undergraduate GPA of two point nine against a field of applicants that all have MBAs, and, in some cases, two advanced graduate degrees. Have you done any graduate-level course work at all?”

“The Special Forces Qualification Course.”

Fink was making this easy for Wharton. “I don’t think I follow,” Wharton said, baiting him to continue his charm offensive and rambling lack of reflection, which conformed ideally to Wharton’s plan of wrestling back control of the interview. “Can you elaborate specifically on how this course qualifies as graduate school and how it relates to a career in consulting?”

Fink straightened up in his chair. His arrowhead chip of a face leaned in over the desk. Was he applying for a job or auditioning for a small part in a play?

“*De Oppresso Liber*,” Fink said, enunciating each Latin word for Wharton’s appreciation.

Wharton stared dramatically at the now confirmed lunatic and awaited a further terse three-or-four-word inadequate explanation that was not forthcoming. It was not as if Wharton lacked experience playing a part; he knew full well what was expected of him in life’s starring role. Finally, Wharton

asked, "Excuse me?"

"Motto of the Green Berets." Fink thumped his chest with his fist (in the spot where the handkerchief, which could have been the only item to make his costume more ridiculous to Wharton, was missing). "It means 'To Liberate the Oppressed.' "

"What does this have to do with consulting?"

"For a decade I trained not only on how to operationally liberate the oppressed, but also how to free my mind from the oppression of conventional thinking. A consultant referencing unconventional thinking in a plush CCG office and actually being unconventional when the stakes are high are as different as a yellowbelly catfish is from a bullhead catfish," Fink exclaimed. He had also managed to concurrently use his hands to grotesquely elucidate the contrasting courage of each subspecies by forming what Wharton interpreted as human female and male genitalia. "Like consulting, it's about being adaptable. Who is the most adaptable? Ain't that America? Now, I'm not a big war story guy, but you asked me to describe a situation where I had to lead a group of people and convince them that an unconventional solution was the right way and to that I say: how about every day in Iraq! If that--"

"Two alphas battle to be top dog at a global consultancy in

*this amusing satire on business, ambition, and entitlement...
A solid entertainment from a writer of considerable talent
and promise."*

– Kirkus, Starred Review

"I didn't ask you anything of the sort. You are barking up the wrong tree."

"I once stared the bark off a tree I was so riled up," Fink offered as further qualification. He laughed and winked at Wharton.

"Too much time overseas in the sandbox dodging death this past decade will do that to you. The relevance of my graduate work in the Special Forces Qualification Course is that I have unique professional training and a record of success in solving and analyzing complex problems. As I explained to the senior partners, and this perhaps fails to come across in a limited reading of a CV, there is a value in being able to establish networks of influence—"

"Influence," Wharton repeated. "You are claiming to have acquired this from the military?" Here was a hick who could not influence the next banjo number at a hoedown—could Wharton get a witness among the kinfolk (because they're all related) messing around on the hay bales?—and yet Fink thought himself up to CCG snuff. The true tragedy of these small-town military applicants not being that bright was that they were unaware of it. Seeing how everyone else was afraid of the possibility of veterans returning to the office

and shooting up
the place, Wharton saw it as his duty not to coddle military
candidates, but
rather to use the interview as a teaching moment to direct
them to their
intellectual rung below dieticians. He did not doubt that they
probably thought
his posture that of a cheese dick. But comporting yourself as
such was part of
the game, be it assimilation of the fittest douches. In
Wharton's CCG class,
there had been an ex-Naval Academy nuclear submariner who had
lasted a year out
of the Houston office with his conventional mind-set, his
pervasive logical
staleness onsite incapable of turning the client ship around.
He'd even had a
gut.

"May I please just be allowed an opportunity—" But a
knock at the door cut Fink off before Wharton could cut him
off again.

Nathan Ellison, a senior partner in his midforties
with the body and energy of a younger man able to both network
around town at
all the right social gatherings and find time to teach Sunday
school, stepped
inside. "Didn't realize you were still doing an interview." He
apologized to
Wharton, then noticing Fink, asked, "Is Brock giving you a
real pressure
cooker?"

"Can't complain, no one's shooting at me," Fink
said, bounding up from the chair to straighten his corkscrew
backbone into an
erect figure of authority for a handshake, with a nod to

Wharton. "Yet." Their hands met and held, arm wrestling blue veins popping out in the kind of kingmaker handshake set aside for finalizing backroom palace coup plots. They smiled at each other and continued to ignore Wharton as if he were a naked man changing in *their* locker room row. "Only jesting. He's great, Nate."

Wharton brooded over the liberty taken with Nathan's name, paraded as it was by Fink, who no longer sniffed the air but deeply inhaled the noxious fumes that he had introduced to the office.

It dismayed Wharton that the late-afternoon autumn light from his window slightly softened the crags of Fink's bird-of-prey profile, the challenging mannerisms and hillbilly hostility of the hawk-nosed dive bomber jettisoned for the litheness of the assassin, high on hash and his mission, who moves limberly along the corridor wall in wait on the balls of his feet. "Unlike our intellectual discussion, Brock and I were sparring about the value in establishing networks of influence onsite with clients. I suppose we represent differing schools of thought"—Fink motioned with his hands to group him and Nathan on one side against Wharton on the other—"regarding the best method of how to mine pertinent data to achieve effective results. Just waiting on him to give me the case, but if you two are in a rush to get to your meeting, I am happy to skip over the bio part."

“Can’t talk about it,” Nathan said, and turning to Wharton added, “or he’d have to kill us.” Was the newly christened infantile persona Nate, once a sober CCG senior partner by the honest Christian name of Nathan, as high as Fink?

“Influence.” Fink flicked his wrist in the air to snap an imaginary towel at Nathan, who laughed and closed the door. Fink’s reciprocal laughter, forced to begin with, stopped the moment the door shut.

Wharton hypothesized that Fink’s true intellectual capacity could be brought to the surface quite easily with the right application. Deployed not to the Middle East but to the far more unsympathetic region of high finance, how would Fink operate in the world of big money?

“Let’s play with some numbers. We have to know that you are comfortable with numbers and speak the language of the business world while coming up with unconventional solutions to complex problems, as I recall you endeavoring to frame it earlier. The best way for us to discern whether you have the skill set required for the intellectually rigorous environment of consulting is by walking you through a case and seeing how . . . you . . . compete.”

“Mike Freedman writes with a distinct sensibility. His new novel King of the Mississippi throbs with humor and American exuberance.”

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“I like to win . . . in . . . life.”

Win? Was Fink attempting to commandeer *winning*, the very ethos Wharton lived by? Wharton handed him four clean sheets of paper and a clipboard with a pen attached. “How many in-flight meals were prepared on an average day last year for flights from George Bush Intercontinental Airport?”

“Forty thousand.”

“Come again?”

“Forty thousand.”

Wharton could not have been felled harder had Fink launched his entire gangly frame at his knees. *In point of fact*, Wharton would have normally explained if Fink had not rendered him speechless, the correct answer to the market-sizing question was forty-three thousand after factoring in the four thousand meals for the international flights. Wharton attempted to salvage some dignity from this unfathomable opening checkmate that had always stumped even the smartest business school students by an incorrect margin of at least ten thousand. “Would you care to illustrate how you arrived at that number?”

“For the reason that around forty thousand is the right answer,” Fink charitably clarified.

“I am interested not in Hail Mary guesstimates but your thought process. That you were on the runway for ten minutes and watched two other planes touch down that you then multiplied by six to calculate how many per hour. You then extrapolated out that there were three runways total and each plane on average carried one hundred forty-five passengers. Which you multiplied by twenty instead of twenty-four, as the time from midnight to four in the morning is essentially a dead zone for departures. And that, of those domestic flights, only twenty-five percent of them provided a meal service.”

“Which is how I arrived at around forty thousand meals. Just do the math like you just did. I solved it like I had one shot, one kill. Some of us applicants have been vetted—and I don’t mean at an investment banking desk job playing with myself and numbers.”

Fink released a cackle of a laugh aimed to pierce what patience Wharton had left. The Prohibition gangster-suited Brer Rabbit across from him had duped Wharton into illustrating a method aloud that backed Fink’s wild-ass guess, now claiming ownership of Wharton’s mathematical reasoning. What next: squatter’s rights to Wharton’s office? After Fink’s barrage of assaults on football, his manhood, and the nonvetted like himself who had played with themselves while investment banking, Wharton suspected that his colleague Piazza was behind all of this. The explicit attack on investment

banking by Fink was an overplaying of the inside information he had been fed, revealing the puppet strings. It was time to cut them, as Fink was still an applicant applying for a job at Wharton's firm. Why hadn't he stuck with the Dr Pepper case, a straightforward branding case? Fink could not even articulate his own identity.

"You will need to write down your calculations and structure an outline for the remaining part of the interview. And I will be collecting your notes when we finish for confidentiality purposes."

"I understand. You're talking to a holder of a Top Secret security clearance."

It occurred to Wharton that such a fact, if true, did not bode well for national security. Wharton got up and walked to the window. "For the sake of simplicity, let us use the number forty thousand meals a day." He faced Fink and began the mad minute of firing.

"Our client, a company called Swanberry Foods, is responsible for fifteen percent of the daily in-flight meals at George Bush Intercontinental Airport with a profit margin of one dollar per meal—but the meals only stay edible for eight hours. Recently, management at Swanberry Foods has been considering an overhaul, moving to frozen meals that stay edible up to twenty-four hours, enabling our client to increase its profit margin twenty-five percent per meal.

The technology and new equipment to switch to the frozen meals costs fifteen million dollars over five years." Fink's pen lay untouched atop the paper.

"What would you advise our client to do under the circumstances? You may take a minute to structure your—"

"I'd pull the trigger and double down on this new technology if our client's only objective is to maximize profit over the long run. You've got to roll the dice to make money."



Clicking on the image above jumps to the Amazon page for KING OF THE MISSISSIPPI.

"Please demonstrate beyond the usage of military and gambling metaphors how our client should strategically approach this decision. This time, be so kind as to walk me through your calculations that support your hypothesis after taking a moment."

Fink held up his index finger to Wharton and began to scribble manically. The same index finger reappeared two more times separated by three-minute intervals between flashes. It took all the reserve in Wharton not to snatch the finger on its third appearance and break it.

"What do your numbers say?" Wharton asked, putting an end to the longest ten-minute silence of his life.

"Profits of almost six million dollars a year if Swanberry switches to the proposed plan. That's before I

shave their fixed costs to trim them down.”

“I think you mean variable costs,” Wharton said, allowing a laugh to escape at such amateur histrionics.

He leaned over to try and read the chicken scratch on the top piece of paper.

He was enjoying this and shook his head slowly at the illegible writing,

indubitably representative of the mind that had dictated it.

“God only knows

where, but I’m afraid you have an extra zero or two in there somewhere. I don’t

know where to begin helping you because I can’t make out a single number on

your paper. This is why a *successful* applicant will use this as a dialogue

and voice aloud each major step in his or her explanation; that way we can help

guide you a little should you stumble in one of your calculations. Had you done

the math correctly, you would see that at their projected rate of sales

Swanberry would lose almost a quarter of a million dollars a year over the next

five years, and that it would take almost six years just to break even after

the investment if they could withstand the initial losses.”

“I was shooting for long term,

the big picture.”

Like the trajectory of a clay pigeon, Wharton had anticipated this

rationalization before he fired. “If you were thinking ‘long term’ and the ‘big

picture,’ you would have noted they needed to increase their market share by

marketing to airlines that their newly designed meals would last longer and save the airlines money compared to the other products being offered by competitors. Even acquire a competitor and streamline costs. And that's only after analyzing whether the industry is growing. You would have recommended that they diversify with other products or at least expand their current market into supermarkets, hospitals, retirement centers, prisons, and even your military base chow halls. And that is exactly what we did, because I worked on this for eleven months—though the real company was not called Swanberry.”

“Not bad, though, for ten minutes versus what took you a year, right?”

Wharton did not bite on this tease designed to distract him from closing in for the scalp. “Where's your outline or structured strategy? I need to collect your scratch paper as well.”

Fink first handed Wharton a sheet from the bottom, the outline. “There might be a gem or two buried in there y'all could use,” he thought he heard Fink say as Wharton gazed transfixed on the only two things written on the paper: $\text{profits} = \text{revenue} - \text{costs}$, and circled below it, always look at the revenue.

“ ‘Always look at the revenue.’ I don't even know what this means,” Wharton muttered in shock, letting the outline float down to his desk. “This is your foundation?”

“Winning,” Fink instructed, standing up and tapping with the familiar index finger on the written equation at the top of the outline. “Or in the more narrow terms of this particular world, maximizing profits. In a wildcatting oil town like Houston, a thin line—”

“I must conclude this interview, for I have to attend our office meeting,” Wharton said, rising from his chair and sparing himself from Fink’s clichéd interpretation of the essence of Wharton’s hometown.

“Do you have any questions for me?”

Fink held up his hands as if about to make a confession. “I’ve got nothing for you.”

Wharton thought it was the first valid point Fink had made.

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