

The Suicide Party

Dom is dead.

Like a death knell. Dom. Dom. Dom.

He put a wire around his neck and hung himself in his studio apartment Friday morning. It's almost a full week later, Thursday, the night the writing group drinks, the drinking-writing group Dom started. Dom-less, the group stands in a circle at the far end of the bar spouting suicide theories.

Edward is savoring his role as new leader of the group now that Dom is dead. He over-enunciates his theory as if he knows, really knows, why Dom killed himself. Edward believes it was Dom's anger at the world turned in on himself. Dom's wife was disgusted with him. Dom's daughter was distant. Dom's parents told him he was worthless, told him so his whole life, and kids never grow out of that kind of criticism, according to Edward, the playwright-turned-pop-psychologist with his second vodka in hand. So Dom showed them, Edward is saying dramatically. He killed himself. Put a wire around his neck.

Sheila, Edward's wife, believes Dom was haunted. According to her theory, Dom hated his new place, a studio he rented a few months ago after he moved out of his apartment, after he separated from his wife. Sheila believes Dom heard voices in his studio. Not voices like in a ghost movie, but voices like a force he couldn't get out of his head. Sheila is a small, perhaps once-attractive woman, but now she looks beat-up, holding her own second vodka, like husband, like wife, like bullshit pop-psychologist. Sheila is an actress who never made it and probably never tried too hard, which says it all.

Kyle believes it was Dom's discontent, triggered by the separation, but not based on the separation. Dom wasn't happy with his marriage. He wasn't happy with his job, teaching remedial English courses to remedial college students. Dom wasn't happy with his writing. His last two manuscripts sucked and he knew it. He didn't see his life going anywhere new. He was feeling his age. He was getting heavy. Kyle is

wheelchair-bound, so when he speaks everyone looks down and listens as if his pain makes him an expert on pain.

Melissa and Dana and Raymond and Carl and Schemmer are nodding their heads. Drinking their drinks. Asking questions about specifics, which is how everyone found out it was a wire around Dom's neck and not a rope.

John moves his hand over his chin, a world-weary gesture out of Acting 101. He was the last one to speak with Dom, which makes him closer to the suicide, which makes him the man with the most information, a gossipmonger's dream source. John's a real psychologist too, which may or may not mean he knows any more than the rest of them. He can quote the texts, he can use the jargon, but a psychology degree is as valuable as an education degree. You can teach or you can't. You can read people or you can't. You can kill yourself. Or you can't.

"He was distraught," John says, removing his hand from his chin. "He was so distraught he could hardly talk. His wife said he'd been sleeping on her living room couch in the fetal position. Imagine Dom in the fetal position. I called him a day before he killed himself and asked him if he'd like to meet for lunch and he said no. He just said no. Cut and dry. It was so unlike the Dom we knew and loved. He was cutting off all outside strings and making his old home his womb again."

Deep, I'm thinking. Deep Deep Deep. Dick Dick Dick.

I'm standing on the periphery of the circle, a literal step back from the others. I'm actually leaning against the bar and watching, which is perfect. It makes me a more objective narrator and since I can see straight into their petty theories, and since this is a writing group, a group of writers who talk shop and drink and then drink and don't talk shop, I'm practically the omniscient narrator. If I had a pipe, I'd stuff some tobacco into the bulb, tamp down, light up, exhale long, omniscient, assonant smoke-Os into the air.

"He was regressing," Edward says with theatrical gravitas, louder than ever. "He was looking for the womb again, but it makes no sense. His wife couldn't stand him. They couldn't wait to separate. She complained that he never made her orgasm."

"They'd been having problems in the bedroom as soon as their daughter was

born,” Edward’s wife Sheila chimes in.

I almost step forward. I should confront these two petty people who deserve each other. I should ask why they’ve just revealed Dom’s sex life to the writing group. I should ask if they hold anything sacred. I should ask about their orgasms, since we’re putting everything on the bar for public consumption. I should ask whether Edward’s dick is a shriveled mushroom or if Sheila’s twat is a sewer. But I don’t. I’m not really part of this group. I’ve just come to pay my respects, to have a drink, out of respect, while thinking of Dom.

I met Dom in a bar, another bar, farther uptown. I was drinking alone, as I often do, watching a Yankees game on TV with the half-interest of a bored single man in Manhattan who could make a half-dozen booty calls at the end of the night if necessary. This solid-looking guy, thick arms filling a black T, asked me what the score was. I told him I didn’t know.

“Good for you,” he said.

In a different voice, this could have been an insult. But Dom’s Bronx accent was honest, innocent, not cynical, not too-tough at all.

“It’s only a game,” he said.

“It’s *only* a game,” I said.

“Struck him out,” he said and laughed and when he laughed his face went from man to boy.

Dom introduced himself, introduced me to some of the other writers, then focused back on me. I was impressed. I couldn’t do shit for him, couldn’t advance his writing career one literary iota, but he didn’t seem to care. He enjoyed talking and I enjoyed listening to him and he got it when I cracked sarcastic. When it comes to conversations, I’m a counter-puncher.

We talked for a solid hour. Dom told a good story about a gang he’d belonged to while growing up in the South Bronx. Their favorite stunt was to steal cars from car thieves. They’d wait until the thief was in the car, until the engine turned over, waited right until the point before foot pressed pedal. Then they’d beat the car thief, take his

wallet, take the stolen car for an all-night city drive and in the early a.m., when the sun kissed the horizon, which is how Dom put it, they'd park the stolen car in front of the nearest police precinct and leave the car thief's wallet on the dashboard with the car thief's driver license exposed for all to see. Dom said the story was in a novel he'd written.

Dom invited me to join the Thursday night writing group. He put me on the group's email list. I picked up a copy of Dom's book and liked it, though I thought he was a better storyteller in person than in print. I went out a few Thursdays nights with the group, enjoyed Dom's company, didn't enjoy the others' company, slept with one of the writers one time, Melissa, who's standing in the circle red-eyed. Then I stopped going to the Thursday night meetings. I don't stick with many things. I'm a hit-and-run kind of counter-puncher. I'd make a good car thief.

Six months later I got an email from Melissa. She wrote she had some news to tell me if I hadn't already heard. She left her number in case I didn't have her number anymore. I didn't have her number anymore. I called Melissa back and she told me the news. Dom was dead. Dom. Dom. Dom.

So I'm here.

And they're here. The writing group. Standing in a circle. Spouting. Drinking.

"It's so horrible," Melissa says and starts to cry. She hasn't looked at me once since I walked through the bar's door. That's okay. I only looked at her that one night and I'd been drunk. Melissa kneels down so she can rest her head on Kyle's crippled lap. I wonder if he feels her head, if his cock is capable of even the faintest tingle. Maybe Edward can tell me, or throw the question out for discussion.

"It's just so horrible," Melissa says.

"It is horrible," Edward says and breaks from the circle to get a third drink.

"I'll have another one too," Edward's wife Sheila says.

Edward orders two Absolut's from the bartender, asks the bartender if he remembers Dom. The bartender says he does and Edward lights up beyond the vodka in his blood.

“He killed himself,” Edward says and waits for the bartender to ask *Why* so he can kick-start his dramatic monologue.

With one man out of the circle, the circle breaks. I’m thinking how symbolic that is, a writing detail if one of these writers cared to write it down. Dom is gone and the group will fall. Inevitable as death. But the group is talking, not observing. Drinking, not writing. I don’t see a pen or piece of paper anywhere.

Kyle wipes the tears from Melissa’s eyes.

John, the real psychologist, holds therapy-court with Dana and Raymond.

Sheila corners Carl and Schemmer.

I stay where I am, leaning against the bar, calculating how many more minutes I need to stand here before I can leave without disrespecting Dom’s memory.

“He liked you.”

I turn to the too-loud voice. Edward is looking at me dramatically. He drinks down half his vodka.

“He did,” Edward says. “Dom liked you.”

“Okay,” I say.

“No. I mean he really liked you. He had a generous spirit, but deep down, he didn’t like many people. You, he liked.”

“Okay, that’s nice to hear.”

“Anger,” Edward says. “He was so angry. I just didn’t know how angry he was. He stopped talking to me and no matter what I did to try to get him outside of himself, he wouldn’t listen. We didn’t speak for a month. He stopped taking my phone calls. For one whole month before he killed himself. And now we’ll never speak again. He was so angry and no one knew how angry he was.”

Edward finishes his vodka with a flourish. I think about mock-applauding his little performance. But I don’t.

“You seem a little angry too,” I say.

“How so?” Edward says.

“The volume of your voice, for starters. I think it’s more than your acting

training.”

“It’s the drink,” he says and tries to laugh it off.

“Maybe. But I think it’s more than the drink.”

“Who are you?”

“Just a guy coming to pay my respects.”

“That’s very decent of you,” he says. “Very fucking decent.”

“More decent than talking about a dead man’s sex life in public,” I say.

“Dom wouldn’t have cared. He was an open book. Anyway, why the fuck am I explaining myself to you? It’s not like you’re a writer. It’s not like you came to our Thursday night meetings more than a handful of times.”

“You’re absolutely right.”

“So don’t worry about how loud I talk or what I talk about.”

“I’m not worried. I’m just pointing out some details. Isn’t that what writers like to do? Point out details? Come up with enough details so you can make grand pronouncements like, for instance, why a man kills himself?”

“And why do you think he killed himself?”

“I wouldn’t even attempt to guess.”

“That’s because you don’t know him.”

“Do you? Did you?”

“I knew him for forty years. We grew up together.”

“Did you steal cars?”

“Why?”

“Just curious.”

Edward looks for the bartender, in need of a bracer to continue this conversation that doesn’t involve lecturing a bunch of so-called writers slash mourners. But the bartender is at the other end of the bar, talking to a couple of women, and it’s obvious the bartender, who remembers Dom, has forgotten Dom. I look over at Melissa. She’s raised her head from Kyle’s lap and is smiling at something Kyle said. I hear the too-loud stage laugh of Edward’s wife Sheila. I turn back to Edward.

“I’ll have a bourbon,” I say.

“Excuse me?”

“When you get the bartender’s attention, you can order me a bourbon. We can drink a toast to Dom. And then you can tell me the story about how you stole cars when you were a kid. If that’s what you did.”

“I don’t know if I want to toast with you.”

“Okay, then just buy me a drink.”

“I don’t know if I want to buy you a drink,” Edward says.

“Okay. I’ll have bourbon on the rocks. Preferably Wild Turkey.”

“Preferably I don’t care.”

“Okay. Make it a Wild Turkey then.”

“What are you talking about?”

“What were you talking about?”

“I’m done talking to you.”

“Should we circle up the writing group? Should we give you a little podium so you can continue spouting your suicide theories?”

“Fuck off,” Edward says.

“Respect,” I say. “Remember. Dom liked me.”

Edward turns away. He walks down the bar to the bartender, and I watch the bartender pour a long count of vodka, then put the drink in front of Edward, on the house. It’s probably time to walk out of here. I’ve paid as much respect as I can and these people don’t care if I’m around or not, except for Edward, of course, who definitely wants me gone.

I could use a drink, though. I could use a few minutes to think about Dom and death and how the now-you-see-it, now-you-don’t fragility of it all is just too depressing and too mysterious and too big to think about, let alone talk about.

Suicide. It’s not a theory, but I’ve always thought it was a brave act. To put that wire around your neck, to get up on that chair, to attach that wire to a support in the ceiling, a beam, maybe a ceiling sprinkler, maybe a hook for some long-ago hanging

plant, to take that breath, that last breath, like before jumping into a pool, but knowing there won't be any coming up for air, then kicking out that chair and feeling that wire cutting into your neck, making real what you've safely imagined so many times before, when you breathed freely, when you merely thought about it, easy thinking.

I walk down the bar to Edward.

“Did you steal cars with Dom?”

“I assume you're referring to his novel. Sure we stole cars. That's what our gang did. We out car-thieved the car thieves. Good fiction's always based on reality.”

“I'll remember that. And what are good suicide theories based on?”

“Fuck off. I'm done talking with you.”

“Let's steal a car,” I say.

Edward looks at me with theatrical disdain.

“As a tribute to your fellow gang member,” I say. “As a tribute to Dom.”

“Have you ever stolen a car before?”

“No. But I bet I can pay someone to steal one for us and then we can steal it from him. You could relive the old days. We could get the group involved. We could steal a van and all of us could go for a joy ride all over Manhattan. Talk about the perfect tribute to Dom.”

“I don't think so.”

“A stolen van. A real tribute. Better than a drunken night talking shit.”

Edward finishes his vodka.

“Hold on,” I say.

I pull out a twenty and buy Edward another drink.

“A real tribute,” I say.

Edward downs half the vodka I've bought him.

“A dramatic tribute,” I say.

“The rest of the group wouldn't go along.”

“Sure they will. They'll listen to you. You're the new leader of the writing group. Even I can see that.”

Edward smiles, the first genuine expression he's made all night. He shows some teeth. His eyes squint up. He finishes his drink.

"You don't have to tell them what we're doing," I say. "Just tell them to wait here and we'll pick them up. They'll listen to you. The perfect tribute."

"The perfect tribute," he says.

"To Dom."

"What the fuck," he says and I know he's drunk. "Hold on."

I stand at the bar and watch Edward walk to the group, assume the pontificating position. I'm far enough away so I don't hear his words, but his over-the-top gestures tell me he's delivering his lines. When Edward finishes he turns, walks toward me, nods once, and I wait for him to pass so he'll feel like the leader, turn, and follow him out the bar.

It's a cold night, too cold for November, but the right temperature for a suicide party. It's nice to be outside, even in the cold, away from all the theorizing. There's a real bite to the air. Real.

"So, car thief," Edward says, sarcastic and theatrical, punctuated with a laugh. "Where to?"

"23rd Street," I say, serious and calm. We're a study in opposite voices.

I hail a passing cab and we get in. I tell the driver where to take us. The city looks dead for a Thursday night, the streetlights too crisp, the traffic lights too bright, nothing hazily romantic like some nights when Manhattan looks like it's being filmed through a soft-focus lens. Maybe I'm just not drunk enough. The cab slows and stops where I've asked, an avenue block away from the U-Haul place. The driver punches the meter and I reach for my wallet, pay up. The cab speeds off, rear lights too red.

"Wait here," I say.

"You don't need help?"

"I like to work alone. Like a writer."

"Whatever," Edward says. "Just be quick. It's cold and I'm thirsty."

This is what Edward sees. He sees me walk down 23rd Street. He sees me

disappear into the U-Haul lot. He sees the passing traffic, cars moving up Tenth Avenue. He sees drinkers coming out of Half King, a writing bar the writing group never goes. He sees a U-Haul van pull to the curb, me in the driver's seat.

Edward has a hard time getting up into the van and the effort takes his wind. Alcohol exhaustion. I know how that is, but not tonight. Tonight I'm too sober, soberly paying my respects to someone I didn't really know. Edward turns to me.

"Impressive. Did you really steal it or just rent it?"

"Buckle up," I say.

"So you're not going to tell me. Keeping it vague. Keeping it mysterious. Forcing the reader to turn the page."

I turn the corner, turn the corner, speed down Ninth, cut east on 14th Street, cut downtown, drive to the bar where the party's still going. I pull to the curb, stop hard just for the joy of seeing Edward lurch forward. I'm gauging his reactions. He looks at me, perturbed.

"Thanks," he says. "I appreciate the G-force. You're sure you're up to driving?"

"I'm sure. Go get everyone. Let's pay our respects to Dom."

"Dom," Edward says.

"Go on," I say.

He does what I say, Dom's name lingering in the van's empty space.

I blow into my hands for warmth and wait. The East Village types walk by the bar's closed door. Too-loud students bar-hopping on a Thursday school night. Fake artists posing in their artsy costumes that took them longer to put together than their body of work. A thug wannabe with a hoody sweatshirt acting like he deals drugs even if he doesn't. A homeless man pushing a shopping cart stuffed with can-stuffed Hefty bags. Central Casting could fill its East Village files in five quick minutes. The bar door opens. The writing group files out, all nine of them, nine not including me, once a perfect ten when Dom wasn't dead. I get out of the van and wait until everyone's in except for wheelchair-bound Kyle. Edward and I each take an arm and lift him into the van. I fold up his chair and store it in the back. Edward gets in the front passenger seat. I get in the

driver's seat. Gentlemen start your engines.

"Where are we going?" Edward's wife Sheila says.

"We used to steal cars when we were kids," Edward says.

"Don't tell me you stole this, Ed?"

"Let's just enjoy the ride," Edward says too smoothly, too vaguely, like this was his idea all along, which is fine with me.

I pull onto Houston Street, a cross-city straightaway, step on the gas.

"Why are we doing this?" Melissa says.

"Remembrance of things past," Edward says.

"Is he too drunk to drive?" Melissa says, referring to me in the third person, a point-of-view switch.

"I had one drink," I say. "I was watching all of you drinking. I wasn't drinking myself."

"Very observant," Edward says and laughs. "It looks like our driver here is a writer in training,"

"It's all in the tactile details," Kyle says and the rest of the writing group agrees. They've moved from suicide theories to writing theories, but I'm hoping this ride will get them back on their foolish track.

"Give me a list of all your publications," I say, loud enough for all of them to know I'm talking to all of them.

"What do you mean?" Sheila says.

"This is a writing group, right? I'm just curious what kind of publishing record you could compile in this van. Besides Dom's book, what have you all published?"

"Well," Schemmer says and from talking to him once I know he has nothing in print, unless he got lucky in the last few months, but *Well* is all he says.

"I have four poems in literary magazines," Dana says. "Good literary magazines."

"Good good," I say.

"I have an article in *New York Press*," Kyle says.

“An excellent article,” the real psychologist John says, his concerned voice all positive reinforcement.

“Excellent excellent,” I say. “*An* article. Anyone else?”

“My husband is a phone call away from getting his play published,” Edward’s wife says.

“Just a phone call away?”

“Yes,” she says. “Just one phone call.”

“What about books?” I say. “Any real books? I mean, are any of you real writers?”

“We’re all real writers,” Melissa says. “Except for you.”

“I never claimed I was a writer. But in this group I could say I was a writer and get away with it. It sounds like my credentials are about the same as everybody’s here.”

“What exactly *do* you do?” Melissa says. “I never caught that.”

“You never asked.”

“Well I’m asking now.”

“Really,” Edward says. “What do you do?”

“I drive,” I say and on cue I take a sharp right onto Sixth Avenue that presses everyone left.

“Watch it,” Edward’s wife Sheila says.

“Come on,” Edward says, checking his seat belt. “Take it easy.”

“So Dom was the most successful writer out of all of you,” I say.

“It depends how you measure success,” Kyle says.

“I measure writing success by the number of books published. It’s just a strange gauge I came up with.”

“There are other ways,” Kyle says.

“Do tell. What’s your gauge for success?” I say.

“How much you work. The kind of work you do. I don’t need to have all of my work published to be successful.”

“And you believe that?”

“We all believe that,” psychologist John says. “Even Dom believed that. He knew publishing wasn’t the true mark of success. Have you looked at some of the crap in the bookstores lately?”

I weave between two cabs and get into the Fire Lane, green traffic lights lining up in front of me.

“When did Dom tell you this?” I say.

“Only recently.”

“When he was depressed?”

“He was always depressed. He just covered it,” John says.

“But he couldn’t get his second book published. That didn’t make him more depressed?”

“What does that matter?” Sheila says.

“Just curious,” I say.

“Our writer-in-training is curious about a lot of things,” Edward announces to the van and Sheila stage-laughs.

I step on the gas and take the greens up and up and up, past 28th Street, past 29th Street, past 30th Street.

“Where are we going?” Melissa says.

“Sit back and enjoy the ride,” I say.

“These aren’t exactly luxurious seats.”

“Sit back anyway. We’re living. That’s what counts.”

“I don’t think I want to do this anymore,” Melissa says.

“I don’t either,” Kyle says. “Why don’t you pull over and drop us off? We’ll take a subway back.”

“A few more blocks,” I say. “As a tribute to Dom.”

“How is this a tribute to Dom?” Kyle says, leaning forward, his muscular arms over the front seat, miles and miles of rolling wheelchair-wheels in his biceps. “This ridiculous drive has nothing to do with Dom.”

“We used to steal cars when we were kids,” Edward says, trying to sound like the

leader, like the car thief, like the drunken decision he made to take this drive was the right decision. “We used to go joyriding all over town.”

“Think of this as a joyride,” I say. “It might even give you some material for a story if you pay attention. It sounds like you’re all in need of some fresh material.”

“Speak for yourself,” Sheila says.

“Okay,” I say. “I will speak for myself. I could use some fresh material.”

“But you’re not a writer,” she says.

“Neither are you,” I say. “Neither are any of you,” I say and wait for an annoyed cacophony, which comes, which blends with my horn, pushing slower cars out of my way.

“Slow down,” Edward says.

“So let’s get this straight,” I say, speeding uptown, up and up. “Just for the record. Just for curiosity. Why did Dom kill himself? What’s the prevailing theory at the end of the night? I heard a lot of theories at the bar. Did you come to some consensus?”

“Anger,” Edward says.

“Fear,” Sheila says.

“Discontent,” Kyle says.

“He reverted to a place where life was too hard, but he wasn’t a kid anymore with resilient coping mechanisms,” John says.

“No consensus,” I say and speed forward.

“Slow down. You’re going to kill us,” Edward says.

I step on the gas. 44th Street. 45th Street. The string of green lights is perfect. As if all the mechanisms that make this city run, all the details that stop and start us, have clicked into place, and all I have to do is sit back and drive. The city gods are with me. They’re letting me give time a run for its money. There’s a poem about that, a famous poem I’ve read, but I’m not good with names and titles. I just know time always wins the chase, but right now, right here, I’m speeding timelessly, uptown.

“Dom is dead,” I say.

“We know,” Edward says.

“No you don’t. He’s dead. Dom is dead. That should be enough. You have no idea why he killed himself. You have no idea what was in his head. All your suicide theories are so much bullshit.”

“We were just coping,” John says. “It’s a coping mechanism. Do you mind slowing down?”

“I do mind. Let’s try to go so fast we forget about Dom. That’s what you’re going to do anyway. So let’s go that fast.”

“I think you’re going that fast now,” John says, but his voice has lost its clinical calm.

“Not yet,” I say and press the pedal. Uptown uptown. We’re eating up the blocks and there it is, what I’ve been driving to. Barnes and Noble. The Lincoln Square Barnes and Noble. The bookstore that sells more books than any other Barnes and Noble in America. The most successful bookstore in the world.

“Slow down,” Sheila says and then she says it again loud. “Slow down!”

“Slow down!” they’re all yelling.

“What are you thinking about?” I say.

“Slow down, slow down, slow down!” Their yells have turned to screams.

“What are you thinking about? Right at this moment, the moment you’re about to die. What are you thinking? Tell me your theory.”

I turn to Edward. He’s white, holding onto the dash in front of him. I check the rearview. They’re in shadow, probably all white, pinned to their seats. A van full of writers relegated to two words. *Slow down*.

“We’re going into the Barnes and Noble,” I say. “Right now. We’re going straight into the bookstore. That’s your dream, isn’t it? Not like this, but that’s your dream. So what are you thinking? Right now. Tell me. What exactly are you thinking?”

“Slow down,” Edward pleads.

“We’re going in. What are you thinking?”

There are no more words coming from these writers. Just gut sounds.
I drive straight for the store. Fast. Fast.
Tires touch curb.
Tires touch sidewalk.
Then I pull the steering wheel, skid back onto the street, press the brakes instead
of the gas, slow the van, pull it over, park.
Edward exhales long and loud. His forehead's wet.
"Now," I say. "Why did I do that?"
Edward looks at me, sick.
I check the rearview.
"Dom. Dom. Dom," I say.
No one says anything.
"Why did I do that?" I say again.

"I don't know why you did that," Edward says quietly, his first quiet words of the
night.
"Exactly," I say. "You don't know."

Adam Berlin is the author of the novels *Both Members of the Club* (Texas Review Press, winner of the Clay Reynolds Novella Prize), *The Number of Missing* (Spuyten Duyvil), *Belmondo Style* (St. Martin's Press, winner of the Publishing Triangle's Ferro-Grumley Award) and *Headlock* (Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill). His stories and poetry have appeared in numerous journals. He teaches writing at CUNY's John Jay College in New York City and co-edits the lit mag *J Journal: New Writing on Justice*. For more, please visit adamberlin.com