

NUMB  
(a short story by Kelvin C. Bias)

Insanity is no fun. Caleb Jax knew this for he was going insane. He had thought of the scheme and replayed it over and over in his mind, like a lonely man sitting in a Times Square porn shop circa 1974 only wished he could do. Caleb Jax was going to kill his landlord. Fast and clean. Simple as that. A push off the Empire State Building? A push onto the tracks of an oncoming 2 train? Or a push in front of a renegade taxi driver from Pakistan? All three methods would do the trick. Which method of destruction should he choose? Caleb, the 28-year old starving artist man, sat in his empty SoHo loft and stared at the blank walls. He'd been sitting there for hours. Moonlight trickled through the open window and Caleb's shadow was too tired to play with itself. Killing his landlord was just one of the myriad thoughts firing in the synapses of his brain. He quickly came to another. Manhattan is becoming an amusement park, and the price of admission is about \$150,000 a year. That is, if you want to get a good apartment. The starving artist was no longer a rock star. He was now simply a man without money. It wasn't cool. He wasn't fucking a model. He wasn't on the guest list of every club promoter in the city. He was a wag, an urban drifter, Holden Caulfield incarnate for the 21<sup>st</sup> century. "I'm going to kill my landlord," Caleb yelled as he leaned his head out of the fire escape window.

"I'm going to kill you," a muffled cry echoed back up from the cobblestone streets.

The tell tale sign that Caleb was going insane was not the fact that he tilted his head out of his window and yelled across the vast dementia of a New York City night. The clock on the wall, Caleb's only worldly possession, besides the Armani suit and Italian shoes he was wearing, told the tale. It was 4:44 in the a.m. The clock was the only semblance of

civilization decorating the vacuum of whiteness surrounding the polished hardwood floor that was Caleb's loft. Perhaps "the yeller" was someone from one of the old apartment buildings across Wooster Street returning from a late night at Lotus. Maybe it was his landlord. Caleb surmised that the yeller also battled the demons of insanity--temporary or otherwise. Anyone responding to the fire escape rant of a lunatic had to be one himself.

Wait. 4:44. He had to make a wish on the clock. Caleb lifted his head, peered around at the glistening walls for a moment and then closed his eyes. As his eyelids came together, a wave of premillennial tension swept over him. In that instant, Mr. Jax had made his wish. Actually, it was more of a wishful proclamation. "No inhibitions. Zero. Damn restraint."

The wish would never come true, he thought. He had a better chance of tripping down the fire escape. Caleb laughed out loud. He was desperate and he knew it--a lethal combination. He sensed how a terrorist must feel just before deciding to unleash nerve gas in a subway station in midtown. No inhibitions. His bank account brimmed with -0.37 cents. That was the best he could muster? Where was the genie when he needed one?

There was a naked girl sprawled on the bathroom floor. Her red hair swirled in large curvaceous circles around her head and against the cold white tile. The bathroom light flickered off and on, creating an eerie, post-nuclear radiation effect. Caleb stood up, the affects of alcohol firmly in control. He rose like the Jolly Green Giant on acid except there was nothing in the room to smash. Staring down at the girl--he couldn't remember her name--he tried to recall the circumstances that had led him to this very instant. Thank God she was still breathing.

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"Do you want to come up?," Caleb asked politely.

"Ye....." He cut her off. "You'll have to excuse the mess. My loft is being renovated

right now, but I think it might inspire you.”

“To do what?,” said the girl.

“Whatever you want, Delia...,” he trailed off quickly.

“It’s Celia. With a C.”

“Celia. Very pretty name.”

“Don’t wear it out.”

“If I went out wearing a name like Celia then I would be a transsexual.” The words slurred across Caleb’s drunken lips. “Or a transss....vesssstite.”

“Aren’t you going to invite me up?”

“I already did.”

“You never let me answer. You interrupted.”

“I’m sorry my dear,” Caleb suddenly transformed into James Bond. Never mind the fact that he had just one red cent in his Armani pockets. “Would you like to retire to my lair?”

“Only if I get to see the lion,” Celia purred. Caleb’s broken heart skipped a beat.

The slow patter of feet echoed in the silent foyer of the building. Caleb pulled back a black metal grate, took Celia by the hand and then shut it behind him. He was the only tenant in the building. It was a good thing; the elevator creaked, croaked, groaned, moaned, clanged and rattled. It was a bull market and Caleb struck it rich in a big way. Bankruptcy. The product of lavish spending trying to mend a shattered heart. Benders in the Hamptons. Escorts in Manhattan. A cell phone. A few trips to Spain for purely hedonistic reasons. The running of the bulls in Pamplona and Bunol for Tomatina, the annual tomato throwing frenzy. In both places the streets gushed blood. Nobody else knew except his accountant and the landlord who was trying to evict him. A pre-emptive eviction. One more atom bomb for

Caleb to face.

“Wait a second,” Caleb pushed the button just before the door closed. “Hold the door.”

Caleb took two steps forward and then looked back. Celia’s red hair flowed down her head and all the way to the small of her back. Had Caleb been at God’s destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah, he would be a pillar of salt.

The latch on the grate didn’t lock--neither did the front door. But his loft was in the midst of bohemia. Nobody would dare take shit. Well, the front door had a lock and even bolted shut. It was rendered useless by the gaping hole behind a hidden metal plate. The “hidden” metal plate was actually the buzzer plate. If Caleb ever ordered pizza, instead of spending \$200 a night chasing models at Lotus or Lot 61, it wouldn’t take the delivery boy long to figure it out. Depress the button, peer into a gaping hole. A quick twist, a jimmy here and anyone could fit their hand through and turn the latch. Unless they were a mutant basketball player with big, ten-fingered hands. It had been like this for the past two weeks. The plate had simply fallen off into his hands. Caleb knew it was the landlord. Another not-so-subtle hint to vacate the premises. If one didn’t know it was loose, however, one would never know. Caleb figured he was safe. What did he have to lose anyway?

Nevertheless Caleb had found a temporary solution. A two by four. He placed it on the floor between the door and the metal grate leading to the elevator. It was about four feet long just long enough to fit into the tiny foyer which led to the Herk elevator. It was a slight inconvenience for that little extra feeling of protection.

“What are you doing?,” Celia asked.

“I dropped something.”

None of it mattered now so Caleb lied. At least he had a place to live, his furniture, an

inebriated hottie stumbling up to his bed (he hoped), his red lava lamp, one shiny penny that he had picked up for luck on West Broadway in the front left pocket of his Armani slacks, a gash on his thumb from crushing an aluminum can in his fist, hair on his head, a brain, two eyes, two ears, ten fingers and toes....

This was getting ridiculous. What was he doing? The interior design of the foyer oozed into oblivion. The blur blurred into his reality, which was a testament of nothing. Caleb's throbbing temple lied, not in ruins. But it was a lie.

"Aren't you coming up?," Celia asked. "You do live here, don't you?"

"Could be. I think so."

Caleb's Bond act began to wear thin. He lurched into the elevator. As he did, he looked up. The closed-circuit camera was smashed. There would be no documentation for his nosy landlord, who for the past two weeks was keeping videotapes of everything--all of Caleb's comings and goings. Caleb began renting the place a few years ago, at 25, when he sold his first script "Mayhem" and simultaneously began playing the stock market. It was an action movie about a husband and father of three who exacts revenge on the bounty hunter responsible for his wife's death. Lots of blood, lots of bullets and lots of dead bodies. Caleb sold it for 1.1 million. Guaranteed money. The movie still hasn't been made. Development hell his agent said. Packaged with 10 different stars and 10 different directors who envisioned 10 different endings. The money lasted 10 minutes. Or so it seemed. The atom bombs continued to go off in Caleb's head and he fell into Celia's arms.

"You're beautiful," he slurred. The elevator went nowhere but up. Shake, rattle and roll. "Last stop. Fifth floor."

Pitch black. Except for strands of moonlight seeping through the windows. Caleb pulled

open the metal door. The elevator went directly to his loft. No doors to unlock and no dead bolts to unlatch. Caleb and Celia slid forward as one into the surreal. Caleb tried to flick on the lights. The moonlight already confirmed his nightmare. No furniture.

“Where’s the bed?,” Celia submitted the first formal inkling of sex. Caleb jiggled the switch. No response. Only moonlight. Again. Nothing. “We can just fuck.” Bang. Point-blank. The ball was in his court.

Celia moved to the center of the room. Surrounded by four blank white walls, her hair--the centerpiece, glowed like a neon light. Sex in neon, Caleb thought. But he was going to do more than just talk. He was no Holden Caulfield. His last \$200 dollars had already been slipped to Celia at Lotus. She wasn’t even a prostitute--simply the victim of Caleb Jax’s tears-of-a-clown mentality, which manifested itself at a bar through provocative smooth-talking.

Celia, in a black evening dress, twirled in the center of the room. The fact that the landlord had swiped back Caleb’s leased furniture did not faze her. The dress--she wasn’t wearing lingerie--fell to the floor in a slow wisp. She lay bare her soul. Her red hair hung over her breasts. Her legs blended into heaven. She beckoned Caleb. Her finger spoke to him. Then she fell like a log.

Caleb was instantly sober. The rush of clarity electrified his body. “No. No. No.” Caleb rushed to the center of his cage. His furniture-impaired lair. “Wake up. No. Please. wake up.” No response. He dragged her naked body into the bathroom. Maybe the cold tile would bring her out of her ecstasy and alcohol frenzy. “Why did I do I this?”

Caleb’s conscience finally arrived. Though she was a little late to the moonlight party. All Caleb could think to do was run to the fire escape and yell. Blame it on the landlord. The

synapses in Caleb's brain were firing on this one thought. Blame it on the landlord. It was bad luck or handy work that had put Caleb in this predicament. No money, no bed, no sex. Blame the owner of the building. He should have wondered why there were no other tenants when he moved in three years ago.

Caleb stood on the fire escape and emptied his tired lungs. He took a deep breath and contemplated his existence. Maybe he should just hurl her body off the fire escape. He'd get a free ticket to eternal damnation. He loved crucifying himself. He thought about it for less than a second. "Not a good idea" flashed in fluorescent red hair in his mind's eye.

Caleb went back inside and communed with the moonlight. He sat there for hours, staring at the window that he had left open. The hole in his soul. Every hour he'd yell out of it. If for no other reason, but to give himself proof that he existed. Wasn't Armageddon supposed to hit soon? It never happened.

"I'm going to kill my landlord!"

The yell echoed and echoed and echoed. Caleb vented. He couldn't hurt a fly. Not even a mean-at-the-country-fair-on-top-of-your-ice-cream fly. And he could do without the Spanish fly. Poetic justice. That was the perverse, pervading thought in Caleb's skull. He stood up and went to the bathroom, not even glancing at the gorgeous, naked woman at his feet.

In the medicine cabinet he hunted the Rohypnol. He struck like a whaler's harpoon, popped open the bottle and popped back a pill. Then he sat back and waited. To pass the time he fumbled through the girl's belongings. What was her real name? Bingo. As he found a license, the Rohypnol found him. He couldn't remember her name. He stood again trying to flee the bathroom before he became a rumpled mess right beside her. Caleb hovered over flowing red hair. He chuckled--the New York license said her name was Celia. It came back to him at

the same instant he landed cold on the hardwood floor, red hair his dream.

When Caleb awoke she was gone. So naturally he went back to sleep. He wanted to dream some more. Two minutes later he lunged up, stared toward the still open window and screamed. Then he clanked back-of-the-head first to the floor. Caleb felt no pain. His eyes blinked slowly. Caleb adjusted his eyes to the blinding whiteness. It was what he imagined a futuristic prison would look like. the only thing missing was a prison droid with a phaser baton. he blinked again and again, slower and slower. The ceiling was a million miles away. The howl came from a place beyond his bowels. “Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!!!”

The sound lingered in the stillness. Cold air swept into the room in an instant; a chill iced Caleb’s veins. The ceiling came down to him and enveloped his soul. His prone body served as its canvas. Tears streamed from the corner of his eyes. Only a shiny penny from the street to his name. Plenty of tears, anguish and being ashamed. He thought Celia would help; it only made it worse. More morose. The thin black line into his sub-atomic core. He blinked and blinked and blinked....

Caleb was just feeling sorry for himself. Once again. Now the girl wasn’t even around. Nowhere to drown his sorrows. Celia. Then it clicked. Where was the license? It had been in his hand--an extension of his dream--not five hours earlier. The girl was gone. The license had to be somewhere.

Caleb rose as if he were an Egyptian mummy wanting to avenge his death. He rose from the dead to rejoin the land of the living. He knew because he had a splitting headache and it had Celia’s name on it. He had to make things right. Be truthful. No inhibitions. Don’t let the past hold you back or create a monster. Don’t be afraid to fix things. His original brain was back in his head. The only thing missing wasn’t the prison droid. It was Celia and her

flowing red hair. Caleb stood and surveyed the land. In an instant it was his. The bare floor was a desert; the license his oasis.

The license peered up at him from the barren hardwood. It called to him. Caleb stooped and picked it up. Celia Bordeaux. French, he thought. A ballerina. An aspiring actress. A model--was he back in business? No. He didn't need to be in business. Celia Bordeaux likely was none of the above. If she were, a Jolly Green Giant on acid wouldn't be staring at her mug on a two-by-four inch piece of laminated paper. Address: 233 E. 5th St. The East Village. Caleb flashed his last bucks and she had taken the bait. An electric red, eclectic soul named Celia Bordeaux. Her red hair alone did that. The possibilities were endless. There was no right and wrong. Only right now. And right now she could be anything he wanted her to be. A world of possibilities. 233 E. 5th St. his new destination. "No inhibitions," he quietly mumbled to himself. The least he could do was return the license.

As he took the first step into the first snowflakes that were striking the sidewalk, Caleb reached into the pocket of his now-wrinkled Armani slacks. He pulled out the shiny penny and eyed it carefully. The small 'D' imprint for the Denver mint was perfectly engraved. He rubbed the penny between his thumb and index finger and without even thinking flipped it through the air. The penny made a high arc and then gravity took over and it wedged itself in a crack in the cobblestones. He hoped someone else would find it soon and have their fortune reversed. His was already set. Caleb had somewhere and nowhere to go all at the same.

A simultaneous paradox. The starving artist man had nowhere to go but up.

Caleb's long strides had him down the block in no time. The snowflakes were melting as soon as they smashed into the ground. It was a crisp morning and Caleb owned this empty stretch of Wooster Street--save a wayward bump in the road. Caleb stumbled slightly. As

his weight shifted to catch himself, he could feel a small object hitting against his chest from the inside of his Armani jacket.

Caleb knew what it was instantaneously. The cell phone. They made them so thin nowadays you could barely feel it. No wonder he had forgotten about the toy. The digits trickled into his head as readily as they had 18 months earlier. One thought. One word. One name: Jane. “Jane,” he muttered to no one but the silent street. Then he effortlessly dialed the number--the first time in over six months. The seconds between when Caleb dialed the final “7” and when the phone actually began to ring were eternal. His love had been eternal.

“Hello,” the soft voice of a woman pierced the snowy air.

“You can find a new tenant Jane. I’m moving out now.”

“Caleb?.....”

The phone was high in the air before Caleb even heard the word. Sailing in a high, noble arc, the phone reached for the sky. It hit its apex and then headed back to the chasm where it would shatter into pieces. “Caleb.” And then silence. The phone broke into three easily discernable pieces on the slick cobblestone. Caleb kept moving on. Homeless, phoneless, penniless. One foot in front of the other, he kept moving on.