



TONY FRANCE

THE CAGE

When I was a boy I used to think our family's notoriety would provide a clue that would solve the puzzle of my father's absence. In many ways we were an ordinary family. Mother and I shared with aunt Lucille and uncle Ray a nondescript duplex on a street lined with other identical duplexes. The fauns and Apollos keeping vigil on our neighbours' front terraces blended in nicely with our own unobtrusive Dianas and Winged Victories. But uncle Ray wiped us off the map of suburban conformity and drew us into a shadowy realm wherein I suspected my father had vanished.

Mom disapproved of the GWF War of the Gladiators, but I could tell she would peek at the television set from afar in case the ineffable Brainerd Fullbright III fought. She especially liked the post-match interview, an integral part of Brainerd Fullbright's routine.

"Great match Doctor Fullbright. Quite an upset if I may say so."

"It was imperative to implement a re-articulation of power sufficient to subvert hegemonic structural totalities," Doctor Fullbright explained.

"Dainty Danny almost had you with that shard of glass," said the interviewer, wincing at the thought.

"A tactic of spurious authority," said Doctor Fullbright III. Mom would laugh despite herself. "Typical of Dainty Danny to predicate absolute presence within illusive limits of a false exteriority."

"Mom, what's he saying?"

"Doctor Fullbright is very ... well, bright. I used to know him in college."

"No way!" I was astonished. My mother had a distant smile on her face.

"Such a ruse of hegemonic constructs posits an illusive transcendence *ex-nihilo*," said Brainerd Fullbright III.

I asked my mother about wrestling, about Brainerd Fullbright III, about life and the way it seemed fixed, like wrestling.

"Johnny could never manage to settle down."

"Johnny?"

"I mean Fullbright." I couldn't understand why her voice held such a bitter undertone. "Earning an honest living at a regular job was beneath him, because it was all fixed."

What mom said made sense to me on some level, but I felt that Brainerd Fullbright had a point. Ordinary life, what little I knew of it from watching the neighbours, seemed unreal, and merited subversion. Uncle Ray was a genius at that. The years I spent with him were like an eternity of bright summer days more eventful and astonishing than dreams. I thought the show would go on forever. The neighbours, liable to be awoken by the high-pitched giggling of the Mohawk Midgets jumping on the trampoline in our back yard, perhaps hoped otherwise.

Uncle Ray, impresario of the numinous, ruled a pantheon of ministering angels that included The Abominable Wraith, Swami Baba, the atrociously vain Gaylord Priss, and Brainerd Fullbright III. Brainerd, had it not been for an unfortunate episode in which I played part, could have been champion of the Global Wrestling Federation. 'Global', in uncle Ray's circuit, basically meant dank arenas in the working class neighbourhoods of Buffalo, Rochester, Fort Erie, Niagara Falls, Saint-Catherines and Toronto. For all his charisma and inexhaustible capacity for bombast, I don't think uncle Ray was ever really himself. He constantly pushed back at whatever he felt confined him, which pretty much included everything in life—including aunt Lucille. Even those otherworldly cars of his were an attempt at transcending limits—limits of time and space, of personal responsibility, of taste. He had a sublime, candy-apple red Barracuda, twice rebuilt after being totaled by aunt Lucille, a black Chevelle Supersport, a white Thunderbird convertible, and a Monza Spyder, his vehicle of choice for squiring one of the Awesome Amazons to some charity event or another.

There had always been a lot of grappling up at aunt Lucille's, much of it as theatrical as wrestling, although sometimes it was hard to tell. She constantly hectored uncle Ray over the degraded archetypes of masculinity his entourage provided.

"Great father figures—you and the Abominable Wraith!"

"Your sister's never home. He's practically my kid anyway," said Uncle Ray with a shrug.

"My sister has a real job—you can't even imagine what that's like."

I loved aunt Lucille. She was kind, charitable, loving—and as much as I hated to admit it, a stifling bore. Aunt Lucille just didn't cut it, charisma-wise. I began to suspect life was rigged in that way for some strange reason.

"Brazzi's money and the way I launder it is no damn business of yours." Uncle Ray's laconic, raspy voice made me want to jump up and put him in an inverted Death Valley Brain Crusher, or perhaps a Torquemada Powerbomb Spine Buster. Uncle Ray would just laugh and brush her off scornfully.

"You give so much of your time to the homeless you're becoming homeless yourself."

I admired aunt Lucille for all that charity work she did at the Lighthouse Mission, but at the same time found the whole routine impossibly dreary compared to the overpowering glamour of uncle Ray's dark dealings. The Lighthouse Mission was the most depressing place I had ever seen. I whiled away the hours in the lounge area watching television with people who scared me more than the Wraith.

There was a man who always wore a paisley ascot and a matching kerchief blooming out of the breast pocket of a crested navy blazer. He spent hours savouring the meter and rhyme of stock quotes.

"Baycrest Tempora, class B, up three-sixteenths," he intoned. "Zenobia Mines, fifty two week high. Hail Zenobia!" he snickered, then grew sombre and shook his head as though pondering the ambiguities of market poetics.

A darkly clad man, pale as a zombie, almost started a fight with a young lady whose attire seemed to have been chosen with deliberate intent to subvert her prettiness.

"Put it back on *Marooned!*" he screamed as she switched T.V. channels.

"Zero K Crypto-Tech, down a quarter in heavy trading."

Mercifully, there were days when aunt Lucille's mission work would occupy her late into the evening. With mom doing shift work at the Miracle-Mart, I would be entrusted to uncle Ray. My classmates would gape in envy when uncle Ray picked me up at school, with the Mohawk Midgets or Gaylord Priss sitting on the red leather seats in the back of his white T-bird.

"Aunt Lucille says you're dead if you bring me to the gym again." A roguish smile curled under the thin line of uncle Ray's trimmed mustache as the T-Bird pulled away from the high pitched cries of my classmates. I could always count on uncle Ray to laugh off aunt Lucille's death threats and bring me to the X-treme Gym to watch the wrestlers train.

One evening we had supper with uncle Ray's dad, Mr. Joey, who lived in a sumptuous villa which was undergoing renovations. The ceiling of the villa was being painted with vivid frescoes depicting allegorical scenes of a family history which, although glorious, had the minor drawback of never having actually occurred.

"Who's that painted on the ceiling?"

"Great-great grandfather," said uncle Ray. "The other guy's Garibaldi," he added, in passing.

We gazed up at Garibaldi leading the cavalry into Rome. Uncle Ray's paternal ancestor, although absent from the historical record, had been prominently painted in among the horsemen.

"We brought in the top fresco painter from New York," Mr. Joey said. "The guy puts Michelangelo to shame. He worked day and night, almost went crazy—like Charlton Heston in *The Agony and the Ecstasy*."

"The past never ceases to amaze me," said uncle Ray. "I always wake up looking forward to new developments in the past."

After supper, uncle Ray brought me to the Caligula Café. The Caligula Café's terrace afforded a view onto the railroad tracks, and beyond them, the tankers docked at Pier 25. Eastward, a labyrinth of coiling tubes, pipe work, and holding tanks rose above smoke stacks. The refineries flickered into view as flames shot up from the towers. You could always feel a deep tremour coming from beneath the earth.

"Why do you have to clean Brazzi's money?"

"Clean, launder—these are just technical accounting terms. You got your double ledger liabilities converting your asset pool into share capital dividends." He took a snakeskin wallet, thick with bills, out of the breast pocket of his creme Panama suit. He held up the wallet before me and adopted a solemn, secretive tone.

"This is what it's all about, guy."

"What's wrong with your hand?" I winced at the sight of the gnarled, nicotine stained fingers, the swollen joints, the whole mess of it.

"Never mind the hand. This is the *modus vivendi*. You follow?"

"Money?"

"The name of the game."

Uncle Ray vanished into the Caligula Café's back room where he was to

occupy himself with what he referred to as his 'bordello of intertwined corporations'. As was my habit, while uncle Ray was deep in his ruminations over advanced accounting concepts, I would slip into the stock room and sample the various sodas and juices stacked in crates.

The window of the stockroom area looked out over a back alley, and across it, under the shifting shadows cast by lamplight through the leaves of an elm, Justin's One-Man-Shop Garage. Justin often worked long into the night, so I made nothing of the voices I started hearing until a strangled cry shot out of the dark. It sounded like a cry of pain, and I imagined some sort of accident had occurred at the garage. I hopped on a crate and looked out the window.

A dim light cast a pale blue sheen inside the garage's small office. The garage appeared to be closed. I peered deep into the darkness and made out shadows approaching in tense jagged motions. As they crossed the blue light from the office I saw uncle Ray's protégé, Brainerd Fullbright III. He was wearing what might have passed as street clothes for one of the stevedores at dock 25 nearby, but which I found inexcusably vulgar for someone of such athletic and academic distinction.

Fullbright was engaged in a hand-to-hand melee with a man who appeared to be at least fifty years old. I was troubled by the mismatch and by the rabid fierceness of the struggle. This was what a real brawl looked like. Fullbright tossed the man into the garage. I heard wild thrashing, and a desperate, muffled gasp. I was stricken with horror and fear at the sound of a deep, guttural growl that sounded a lot like one of the wild dogs from the used parts lot. It was scarcely audible, until finally there was silence save for the deep tremour of the refineries.

The garage door opened and a van backed up into the dock area. Brainerd Fullbright III came out of the garage and walked toward the van. He looked around, glanced in my direction, and for several seconds stared straight through the window at me. I quickly ducked out of the way. My heart was pounding. I heard the doors of the van shut, the sound of the engine igniting. I peeked from the edge of the window and watched the van slowly cruise away. Further east, as fire shot out of the torches rising above the refineries, a mass of deep violet clouds appeared out of the surrounding darkness.

Every year on Labour Day uncle Ray put on an exhibition match in Shevchenko Park. Brainerd Fullbright III stopped in the neighbourhood to promote the event. I was with uncle Ray in the Caligula Café when a giant walked in wearing a robe of red damask trimmed with gold lace. A mortarboard was poised on his dark curls. A crowd forced its way into the café.

"Hey Johnny, aren't you supposed to be in jail?" someone snickered.

"Brood of degenerate babblers!" Brainerd Fullbright III retorted, immersed in thought.

"Johnny?" Mr. Fenchak looked up from his newspaper and shook his head slowly. "Johnny Nardi. The damned smartest killer in the world."

"There are dimensions in space-time that your primitive thought patterns cannot even imagine," Brainerd Fullbright intoned through a sneer. Fullbright's

massive hands traced delicate lines in the air to illustrate his nebulous thoughts.

"Shall we speak of magnetic monopoles? May I engage you in discourse over heterotic strings and solitons?"

"Isn't he great, uncle Ray?"

"You lovers of puerile certitudes. Heisenberg showed how uncertainty lies within the very fabric of reality."

"Who's Heisenberg?"

"He had the Gold Belt back in sixty three," uncle Ray replied.

"Cretinous scoundrels, don't you know that in the very act of measuring, analyzing reality, we generate alternate universes where countless other potentialities are played out?" I was awed and mystified by his eloquence. Then he saw me and stood, silent and staring. I couldn't bear to look in his eyes. I could feel them fixed upon me. Brainerd Fullbright III faltered for a few seconds, lost in his own personal silence far from the jeers and mocking laughter.

They materialized before me under a strange otherworldly light breaking through a low ridge of clouds: representatives of dark dominions and mutinous principalities, giants, men of renown, the Damned themselves. The Wraith appeared in a cloud of smoke at ringside. Draped in a black cape, wearing a black mask and trunks, the Wraith's infernal presence made me pity his opponent, the dashing but diminutive El Niño.

The acrobatic El Niño put on a display with his trademark moves. He gingerly avoided The Wraith's opening gambit: a double Chickenwing Camel Clutch. El Niño saw the Anaconda Vice coming, countering with his patented Tijuana Flying Scissors. He slapped the Wraith down on the mat, but the Wraith went along for the ride, using the downward momentum to surprise everyone with a Babylonian Death Grip, at which juncture El Niño pulled off a perfectly executed Lady of the Lake, which had everyone in stitches. The Wraith countered this ridicule by slashing El Niño with another of the various sharp objects he kept in his trunks and that no referee ever seemed capable of detecting in the pre-match shakedown. Blood splattered all over the ring, and the crowd cried for vengeance.

I screamed with excitement as El Niño literally flew into a rage, jumping from one rope to another, doing a Piranha Pirouette. El Niño leapt off the top rope and came crashing down with a Mayan Sacrifice Body Slam and pinned the Wraith for the count.

A massive steel grating was lowered from a crane over the wrestling ring in preparation for the next match. The cage: Supreme Tribunal, Arena of Final Judgement. Just looking at it gave me the shivers. Uncle Ray directed the work as men bolted the steel framework solidly around the perimeter of the ring. Uncle Ray smiled as he tested its firmness.

I couldn't understand why the aura of culture and refinement surrounding Brainerd Fullbright III drew jeers and laughter. To the sound of Elgar's "Pomp and Circumstance", Brainerd Fullbright III strutted through the crowd and hopped daintily over the ropes and into the ring.

"In this corner, from Cambridge Massachusetts, weighing in at 225 pounds, Doctor of Divinity, PhD in Particle Physics, degreed in Finance and Classical Studies—the Damned Smartest Wrestler in The World—Brainerd Fullbright III!" To derisive applause, Brainerd Fullbright III doffed his black academic gown and square cap. Swami Baba strolled in with the full pageantry of a champion. He removed his massive championship belt, held it up over his head, and glowered at his opponent.

Brainerd Fullbright III's gallantry was immediately put to the test by the treacherous wiles of Swami Baba. For every one of Brainerd Fullbright's academically executed Cambridge Clasps, or Sorbonne Sleeper holds, Swami Baba countered with a barely concealed illegal move, like the Transcendental Eye Poke, or the Chakra Choke. I saw my school friend Gary screaming with outrage at Swami Baba's illegal head butts.

"They don't fight for real," I said.

"I know Gaylord Priss sent El Niño to a *real* hospital with that Hollywood Death Grip," said Gary.

"You hit somebody for real, your hand gets all swollen up."

Suddenly a police cruiser appeared on the grounds. I saw panic in Brainerd Fullbright's eyes. He no longer appeared to be hurting, nor did he seem the least bit weary as he now sprang to his feet. Swami Baba, inexplicably helpful and even civil, rushed him out of the cage and towards a crowd of ruffians who surrounded him and escorted him to safety. Brainerd Fullbright III was shoved face down into the back of uncle Ray's white Thunderbird convertible. The Thunderbird spun its wheels upon ignition, and the vinyl roof came down as though to seal a secret.

Later that afternoon I heard an ominous tumult coming from upstairs.

"Where are you going?" mom cried.

"Going to see the fireworks in Shevchenko park."

"You can see them from our front porch. Come back here!"

I ran up the stairs. The sun was warm and golden-hued as it hung just over the rooftops across the back alley. Upstairs, the kitchen beyond the back door netting lay in darkness, except for a wedge of light cut by the crisp outlines of sharply shifting shadows. I heard blows, a muffled cry, the thud of a body thrown against a wall. I felt the wall's tremour. After a long silence a shadow shifted and faded into darkness.

Darkness fell. I opened the back door and stepped into the dark kitchen. Gradually, the figure of aunt Lucille sitting on the living room couch grew delineated in the obscurity. I opened the door to aunt Lucille's bedroom and fell on my knees before the icon. I prayed for aunt Lucille. It was a serene and ardent prayer. The candle flame illuminating the icon was perfect in its stillness. In the candlelight, the halo around Jesus, layered in minute, intricate motifs, shimmered with gold. The fullness and urgency of that prayer was like a burning, a consummation, an outpouring. I kept a burning gaze on Jesus seen through the flame. I did not flinch or tire, but when the flame flickered I heard a deep, low breath break the silence.

I was not alone. I shared the darkness with a looming presence. A name came back to me as if carried by the night: Johnny Nardi—a creature lurking in the shadow.

The man's bulk seemed to modulate the silence in the room.

"You're a gentleman and a scholar, Doctor Fullbright."

"What do you want?" He looked at me funny, like he was afraid of my answer.

"That wasn't a fair fight."

"Fights are like that."

"I bet you didn't mean to run away." He examined me, looking for something in my face, in my being.

"They're buffoons! A disgrace to the craft."

"You're too smart for your own good, Doctor Fullbright." He laughed at that.

"Tell me about it. If I really had brains I wouldn't get into so much trouble." I was shocked to see a look of sadness appear on his face. I found any trace of sentimentality disgraceful.

"People are jealous," I said "Like when you talk about all that Einstein stuff. Wrestlers aren't supposed to be so snotty."

"Get lost." I was reassured by the gruffness. I turned to go, but stopped and looked at him.

"Can I ask you just one thing?"

"Yeah, all right." I faced him and struggled to get the words straight.

"How come uncle Ray has so much class if he's such a bastard? And auntie is the greatest but she doesn't really cut it, charisma-wise, you know?" Brainerd Fullbright watched me fidget nervously, and averted his gaze.

I jumped back as Brainerd Fullbright leaned forward slightly. We stared at each other silently.

"Maybe you can do it," I said.

"Do what?"

"Make him stop."

"What do you want me to stop?"

"Stop him from stealing the show." He pondered that for a while, finding something serious in it to ponder.

"How do you expect me to do that?"

"You're the greatest. Just tell him to stop."

"The show he's stealing ain't worth squat anyway. Your uncle's a coward. Your aunt is a constant reminder of what he really is."

"The big show sucks. Like you." He was stunned by that. "You don't fight for real." Brainerd Fullbright's gaze became fervid. He sat motionless, tense with mounting anger.

"You think wrestling is fixed? What about theatre? Did you ever see Hamlet win in the end? What about everything else in this damned life?"

"You're big and strong but it's just a show." I shook my head and clasped my hands together. "There's no way out, is there?"

We heard the fireworks go off over Shevchenko Park. Rockets exploded in a cascade of red silver and gold fire that glimmered off the dresser's mirror, lighting aunt

Lucille's trinkets: a tiny gondola, porcelain angels, a skater in a crystal paperweight.

"One day the bell is going to ring for your uncle Ray," said Brainerd Fullbright. "And then your aunt will be raised in triumph. And she'll have complete and final victory, forever."

"Yeah. I guess you're right."

"And all the people who have suffered unjustly will embrace each other and cry tears of joy, and they will share everlasting victory."

"You believe that?" He seemed strangely sincere, a completely different man.

"It's the truth! And all the suffering your aunt endured will then seem to her but a fleeting moment compared to an eternity of joy."

"You're the best! I never believed what people say about you." I felt a heaviness suddenly permeate the room. The intensity of Brainerd Fullbright's gaze was paralyzing.

"What do they say?"

"Just crazy lies. I don't believe them."

"Lies about what?" His voice was tremulous. I saw sweat on his brow. His eyes were feverish.

"You know."

"Lies about what? Go on, tell me."

"You know, that you killed a man."

Brainerd Fullbright recoiled, stunned. He seemed bewildered, ashamed.

The strange, pulsating emanation that was Brainerd Fullbright III sat in shadow before me. A series of six titanium flares sparkled in the darkness. I wanted to run but was trapped in the afterglow, within the ever narrowing perimeter of an eerie pallor. The whole room seemed to be caught up in a fitful tremour, a convulsion.

Brainerd Fullbright III tried to laugh it away, but he knew he was trapped in a cage match. He seemed perplexed, as though he couldn't figure out what, or even who this boy was talking about. He shook his head, wondering about that other life, the one that seemed so unreal.

"It's just crazy what people say." Brainerd Fullbright was overcome by laughter. His eyes were squeezed shut by the convulsions, but his expression was one of pain. He shuddered and buckled like he was at the receiving end of a reverse Kobayashi Mind Slap.

"Mr. Nardi, people don't know anything," I said as Johnny Nardi buried his face in his hands and wept. I suddenly felt an arm on my shoulder, looked up, and saw aunt Lucille. Aunt Lucille was the greatest, and Johnny Nardi was right: she would outlast them all, left standing like she was now, gentleness etched on her weathered face. She put both her hands around me, held me close, and we watched the crying man.

Then Doctor Brainerd Fullbright III got up and walked out of aunt Lucille's room. I saw him slowly step out onto the second floor balcony. He stood there in the night, his hand resting lightly on the balcony railing. In the darkness above him rockets blew up in red and blue chrysanthemums, blinding flashes, fire crescendos and green

palms. He ignored everything and everyone, even as people gathered below to stare in awe at the apparition on our balcony.

Uncle Ray was with Mr. Joey in Shevchenko Park just across the street. It was Mr. Joey who first noticed the crowd gathered in front of his son's house. Uncle Ray peered in the distance and made out a darker angel amid the statuary on the terrace. A thundering fire was cascading from the skies as police cars converged in front of our home. The final salute consisted of three deafening blasts, and Brainerd Fullbright III stood without a trace of emotion as the police got out of their cars with guns at the ready and uncle Ray looked on in disbelief.

I thought uncle Ray would live forever, and that the show would go on endlessly. I miss uncle Ray, but mostly I miss being in awe of him. When uncle Ray passed away he took my capacity for awe with him. Perhaps uncle Ray traversed the scene onto a more brightly lit stage, and left behind a world flickering to dimness.

Aunt Lucille, God bless her, still does her charity work, and I'm really happy that mom has more time to help out at the Lighthouse Mission and at Saint-Michael's. As for Johnny Nardi, he was never really anyone to me, or to anybody else, and I wonder what he ended up doing with all the knowledge and intelligence he had.