

In the late 2000s the obscure novelist Matthew Kittredge shot to fame when his long forgotten first novel “Citizens United,” a radical call-to-arms book about his hippie parents, suddenly became a massive bestseller—and the definitive text used by violent extremists.

It’s all well and somewhat good until the book makes an appearance in the 2016 presidential election. Now Hollywood, investigative journalists, radical true believers and the FBI are disrupting his very private life ...

PART 1: THE THICKENING

If you’ll like me—oh, if that’s not an interesting start. Mental slip or not, I think I’ll keep it. We’ll see how it plays.

If you’re like me, you can no longer dream of your parents; and when you force the issue by dreaming away the day, you conjure only pale ghosts who draw near but never close. I see them as faint images appearing from a dim memory, like bodies, whole and partial, drifting towards me in the deep of a dark lake. My father’s neck emerges from blackness and I fall onto his shoulder. He carries me for a distance while I fight sleep and breathe his long and perfumed hair. My mother will—and will only—appear as a head enveloped in long, straight hair. She floats in a way that makes me feel I am the one drifting, and though her hair does billow in the waters of my memory, like in the midst of a turbulent current, her face remains hidden. In fact I often feel there is no face—a fact I feel communicates a truth. Ah, truth. Truth be told, what I mostly see are cold blue hands reaching out to me. They appear earnest, coming more than half way. They want forgiveness, I know, but it’s just a daydream. If you’re like me you dream that your parents are always and forever asking for forgiveness.

I have five black and white pictures of my father and one of my mother. The picture of my mother also contains an image of my father. They stand in a New Orleans back alley arm in arm. My father wears a light t-shirt and dark pants. A cook's apron is draped around his waist. My mother wears what looks to me as a man's white dress shirt, and dark pants. From the dark cloudy sky at the back of the alley I assume it's dusk and so also assume the photographer has used a long shutter speed to capture the image; my father smiles and stares into the lens, but my mother, though smiling too, has turned to my father mid photo; her blurred face is ghosted half forward and half upturned. She is slim, small breasted, and a bit hippy. Her hair is light—dishwater blonde, I guess, and long enough to throw over her right shoulder. My father is bearded—as in the other four photos, and nearly a foot taller than my mother. His death certificate indicated he was six foot four. His beard and wild but short-cropped hair is jet black.

That had to be sixty-two and more than likely she's already pregnant, my Aunt Julie told me long ago of the photo. To her bastard nephew she could only offer feelings of shame and disappointment. I don't know what to tell you, she'd say. She was troubled. She ran away at fifteen. I think you have her eyes.

For a short time in my late twenties I grew out my beard—my father's full, dense, cave-man beard, and spent time wondering in a mirror. I enlisted the help of friends to compare and contrast. No, was the answer; I did not in any way look like my father, except in body shape: broad in shoulder, naturally trim in waist, and chicken legs. I was an inch shorter, however.

In the second photo my father is still in New Orleans and standing in the middle of Jackson Square wearing a cowboy hat and a country and western styled shirt. It's a tight

shot of just his head and shoulders with the St. Louis cathedral in the background. He is half turned and belly laughing at someone off-frame. His beard is longer, as is his hair. In the third photo he stands in a small apartment kitchen grinning and naked except for his boxer shorts. His beard has reached his chest and his hair is pulled into a ponytail. In his right hand he holds up a monkey wrench. On the back of the photo someone has written '65, which puts me at two, two and a half. I like to think of my mother holding me with one arm while taking the picture with the other. I dream of my father as a funny guy, and that he has made me giggle during the photo. I see he's grinning because of me.

I believe the fourth and fifth photos were taken on the same day. The one I label as the fourth has him newly awake and sitting on the edge of a simple bed in an unadorned bedroom. He is bent forward with his right forearm resting on his thigh and his left hand draping back his shoulder length hair. He looks into the lens with a surprised, sleepy gaze. The fifth photo is a candid close up of him napping on a couch while holding me. He is slightly reclined with his head tipped to the left. His hair is down and covering most of his face. I am high on his chest with my head turned opposite, resting in the crook of his neck. Judging from my physical size, I believe it's '68.

The last proof of life is a short unidentified newspaper photo of SDS members, which someone had written "B. Dohrn, Monday at 4." If that seems mysterious or jibberishy, take a moment and search "weathermen / sds."

And, well, that's that. By the spring of '69 my father, Jack Kittredge, disappeared in New York City, and by the summer of '69 my mother had followed; I had been abandoned in my sixth year with no record of birth, let alone photographic. I feel it's true to say they had not planned my abandonment. I feel it's also true to say they had no plan

whatsoever.

So, then, if you're like me, you daydream away the days, helpless against the memories set off by the most ordinary of sights—or sometimes the most extraordinary of sights, like that of a private Sikorsky S-76C helicopter cresting a mountain ridge and dropping into a lush spring valley somewhere in the wilds of southeastern Idaho, banking hard and flying low along a meandering trout stream, barely topping the pines, its landing gear emerging as it passes overhead and not a quarter mile on putting down in an unseen clearing, all of which sends me tumbling into the Memphis summer of 1971 as I watch an open-door Huey float along a runway five feet off the ground. The *chop chop chop* of its rotors still ring in my head. Soldiers dangle out the side with boots on the skids—open collars, rolled up sleeves, cigarettes and shaggy hair. I could tell even back then they didn't give a damn. One smiles and points a salute to the tall man next to me, my uncle Bip, and Bip smiles knowingly to man next to him. What they know, what they smile at, I have no idea, except it's a man/manly thing. I know it's about men knowing certain things that I don't. My brothercousin Bill is there—always there, we tagalongs to Bip's adventures; where else would boys of seven and eight see real army men magically floating along sizzling tarmac? Where else indeed besides nightly over the shoulder of Walter Cronkite.

O brothercousin and your quick-limp clubfoot. You monkey boy. You bold leaper of muddy creeks. You grand soul. Later you growl and say you'll kill him. I'll smash his head in, you exclaim. You assure me the father raped your girl with his fist. I shake my head, No, she didn't tell you that; she wouldn't tell you that. Brothercousin lowers his grave head: It's true. Her father. A father! Brothercousin knows more things he can't say

about big boned Marcy, the pretty girl who fell for my Billy Clubfoot. The love between them comes quick at dances and pizza dinners and riverfront strolls. The perfect couple. The two saints. But she's a stoic protector who will never abandon her mother or her mother's house. She would never ever. But in death lessons are learned well: the drunk father walks home from his nightly tavern trudge along Cooper street and is hit by a car and thrown into the path of large truck and impossibly thrown, in three loosely connected pieces, up onto the low-clearance train trestle. In death a light doth shineth bright; death can be good; death can fix things; untimely and welcomed death can be part of the game, which I duly note. A correctol. Mother's now happy. Marcy's now happy.

Brothercousin's now happy. All fixed. Everything set right. Everything thing. The monster's name was James Lawrence, 43, an employee of the Memphis Water Department. Wife: Sloan. Daughter: Marcia, who married brothercousin: William (Bill) Ford, Jr., son of William (Bip) and Julie Ford, sister and brother-in-law to Mary Bell Wallace, the common-law wife of Jack Kittredge, parents of Matthew Kittredge: me.

A new memory of my mother floods my system and for a moment here on this Idaho riverbank I wonder if I'm having a stroke. Numbness spreads through my legs and my face flashes with such heat. The memory is only an image. We are at a park. A city park. Swing sets and slides. She is idling on a swing and I have climbed the wrong way up a slide, stuck halfway. We see eye to eye. In my always faulty memory she now has freckles. And blue eyes! The sun is setting and her face glows golden and my mother has freckles and blue eyes. She's looking straight at me. She smirks. She's twinkling and smirking at her boy in a bind. On a knee in this rocky Idaho river I take off my gloves and make and unmake fists while watching the helicopter rise and reverse course. I lift

my hands, my arms, to see if I have stroke symptoms. My lips, my tongue, my jaw, all working fine, but I lean forward to all fours, quivering. After a few hard, deep breaths I recall this isn't anything new and get hold of myself.

This life of mine is lived by traveling through a collapsing tunnel. Listen:

This devil man, this private owner of a Sikorsky, he says to call him Screwtape. Literally, he says this. I asked if that makes me Wormwood? He winked and told me no, Screwtape knows who's boss. This is on our first meeting—over fucking cocktails in a room full of New York players. I saw his play as a tell; men of like minds knew how to proceed. This double-digit billionaire donor (O such clichés!) took in my knowing eye and winked again. I know your work, he said, as he squared his shoulders: You poison the well of youth, you know. Me: I do? Him: If I had your power I could do great things. Me: My power or my support? Him: Screwtape, at your service.

Now listen: Idaho is more remote than even I had imagined, and I am a two-hour hike from my lean-to camp, which is a 300 yards off some lonesome two-lane. This is the fourth day I've made the hike to this boulder-strewn, gravelly bend with its tall grass—search Idaho/trout/stream/beautiful and you'll get the picture; and while you're at it search Idaho/mountain/meadow and you'll see what I'm daily traipsing through. Three weeks have passed since I've spoken to another human. Three months since I've shown an ID or signed my name or shaven or removed my sunglasses in public. And years since this old man casting his flies, trudging up his own fucking private river of death, introduced himself to your humble author as Screwtape. He's gray and wrinkly and wobbly and talks too much to his companion, who, by comparison, looks like a paunchy, balding, little kid. Both in hip waders, new. Both in flannel shirts, new. Both full of

strange ideas on how to display manliness, not new.

Listen, this is how you assassinate/remove/makeright/murder congressmen and billionaires in the wilds of Idaho: You live completely, utterly, in your head. You never allow a witness. No one is ever privy. You don't leave notes. You don't talk to yourself in empty rooms. No one has, or ever will, know your thoughts, fears, shame, guilt, self-loathing, self-righteousness, loneliness or feelings of a godlike protector of the world's innocent. Listen, this is what you do: You wear goodwill boots and pants bought two years ago in Birmingham, Alabama, with cash—always and everywhere with cash. The T-shirt, sweatshirt and goose down jacket at a Penny's in Urbana, Illinois, more than a year ago. The gloves, the sunglasses, the stocking hat at random gas stations around the country at your convenience. But getting the gun? With this you need to take special care and do it long before you commit, long before a dark thought enters your head—and it will help if you are over 50, white, physically fit, and six foot three. You'll need a thick caveman beard, biker sunglasses, and two or three pieces of camouflage clothing, preferably a plain or Bass Pro camo cap. You'll need to find a small gun shop (an owner/operator) in the outer (decidedly white) suburbs of a very large city. Don't browse, don't hem and haw. Tell the man or woman what you want and then ask for the price without tax, even though that's how the guns are listed. Peel off your bills—twice the quote—and then wave your hand over the transaction, intimating the deal is closed. If they do hesitate, or say they'll need an I.D. for the paperwork, just shake your head and wait. If they press, remove from your pocket—in a very grave and serious slow-motion style—a pocket-sized edition of the Constitution of the United States of America. Place it on the money and tell them it's theirs to keep. I suppose at this point if they still refused

you would take your cash and leave the store, but, truth be told, I've never been refused.

The paunchy kid has correctly, and competently, deferred to Screwtape, letting the old man take the lead, letting the old man do his River Runs Through It thing!;akjsd ;lfkj as;d;lfkj as;ldkjf ;laskdjf ;laskjdf ;laksjd f;lksdjf ;laksjdfuck it.... Helen, I can't do this. They don't want what I've given them and I can't give them what they want. Screwtape and the Paunchy Kid, what the fuck?! Five fucking years of writing and it's down to Screwtape?! Meet me in Atlanta for the university talk thing. My dime. Make sure I don't drink a whole bottle beforehand. Ain't no more books ever coming so, what do you say, let's get paid. Let's talk deal points and then fly out to LA together. Time to cash in—or out. PAY ME! PAY US! say the greedy Americans. God, my fifties have hit me hard. I don't know how you do it, you old lady. I feel like that guy in the Nietzsche movie, the Tarr thing, The Turin Horse. Except that lucky bastard quickly ran out of time and taters. Me? I'll fall face to plate with festering gout a thousand years from now. Damn it, lady. Either I don't get it, or I've got it completely, and I don't think I'll ever know either way. I get swayed in many directions these days. "Anyone with a ready answer." Age sways me in its vast understanding of ignorance; I thought by now I'd have an answer to something, to anything. Age knocks me to the floor with a bang. It holds me above the fray. It hurts me. It makes me laugh. It empties me of passion. I am a cynical grouch filled with love and caring for most everyone. I'm a mess.

I should read this over before sending it off....

If it just wasn't for the fuckers. If not for the little bombs of human disease dropped piecemeal in an otherwise decent maelstrom of sentimental citizenship we'd have a smidgen of a fucking chance. Pedophiles and priests and dancing Baptists and politicians

who read 1984 to get ideas and Hilter and Ghandi and Trump and Woody Guthrie and Mao and Very Lynn and dear old mom and dad. Did I get it? Do I get it? Am I just whipped by the whirlwind? See you in Atlanta. Destroy this email.

But Helen didn't destroy his email. In fact she copied and dropped it in a file named MKSCITIZENSUNITED2JUNK and then printed a hard copy for her same named file cabinet. Finally, and to be safe, she starred and archived it into two different cloud accounts. After that she screwed around the rest of the morning and just about didn't tell her assistant to score a flight to Atlanta. That was Monday; this was Thursday; and fucking flying monkey butts if she didn't have the last middle seat to Atlanta out of New York. On the plane she got lucky and sat next to the spitting image of Robert De Niro from Goodfellas but with a big-time sense of humor. They were one-upping each other on all the crazy things they've seen over the years, and Helen, raised in Brooklyn and 40 years in the Village, was royally kicking the Georgia peach's ass. But then he asked if she would like to hear about his last moments as a cop ten years ago. O she'd been played!

I get a call, he says, that two holy rollers are at a gas station accosting customers at the pumps. Nothing serious, just blocking and preaching, making sure everyone gets a good dose of the word. This was in Savannah. Born and raised in Savannah. Afterwards, within a month, I moved to Atlanta—not that Atlanta was any better, but not being a cop in any city is okay by me. Anyway, I'm by myself and drive up to the station and these guys remind me of Laurel and Hardy. Except their suits are white, and no hats. Big guy's shirt won't stay tucked into his pants, and the little guy is too skinny for his clothes. Oh, and they wear white nurses shoes. Like from the old movies. Both of them. I show up and it's the standard move along, move along, okay, okay, you've had your say, but the big

guy has had it. He's emotional. Emotional like this world is becoming a bit too much. He points at the clerk inside the gas station and says, Oh this is perfect. Out here being polite and speaking the word of god and he calls the cops, but now having people over behind the dumpster smoking crack, now that ain't a big deal. Let them be. I say What do you mean? Who's smoking crack? He points: Over there! Right over there! Just follow the footprints. So I follow his arm with my eyes and see cartoonish footprints leading to and around the dumpster. The prints are powdery and orange, like what I remember Tang was like before adding water. The drink? Tang? The astronauts' drink? Cartoon footprints. Perfectly outlined orange footprints. As I start to walk around the corner an orange man comes running out and throws something at me; later I find out it's a steel padlock the size of my fist. It hits me on the chin and bounces off my collarbone. This man—clearly he's homeless—has this orange stuff all over him, especially on his shoes, hands, and his mouth and nose. As he runs past me orange powder drifts off his scraggly beard in a wispy trail, and even before I can yell Stop, the big preacher man in his nurse shoes takes off after him, yelling I got him! So I check my chin and unlatch my gun holster and step around the dumpster. There, up against a wall with his back to me, stands an ordinary looking guy in a white shirt, tie, dark pants and decent shoes. He's smoking a glass pipe like it's the end of the world. I announce myself. Police! Empty your hands and put your arms above your head. He turns more toward the wall like a three year old holding something he's not supposed to have. I announce again. He keeps smoking. I come closer. He turns farther away and starts load another hit. I see he doesn't have a weapon so I get both hands on him and bring him to the ground. He starts whining, Leave me alone! Leave me alone! He won't open his fists and let go of his drugs and I struggle to

get his arms behind his back. He just wants to smoke, he says. Leave me alone and let me do what I want! Then he starts in on this caterwaul moaning. MOAN! A-MOAN! A-MOAN! But then I get it. He's saying Mona. He's calling out for someone named Mona. I scan the area and there she is: a late stage meth-hag pointing a gun at me while desperately trying to pull its trigger. Now I'm sure it was only an instant before I stood and pulled my gun, but I remember that I took my time. I remember feeling this weird acceptance that of course it would be a meth-hag named Mona. Of course it would end this way and not some John Wayne shootout where I would save the president's life by losing my own. I remember a clear self-admonition that I'd fucked up my life. So I rose and pulled my gun and was about send her to hell when the skinny preacher threw that damned steel padlock and hit Mona square in the face, knocking her flat. When I stepped over to pick up her gun, my shirt and tie guy took the opportunity to light up another hit. Twilight zone, you know? Right? I took that strange moment of calm to get a breath, a single deep inhale and exhale while I calmly watched shirt and tie suck it deep, and, well, this gave the newly revived Mona a chance to get up and run, which she did, right into the skinny preacher. As they started slapping and pulling on one another, I got on my shoulder radio to call for back up. When I saw Mona pull a still-pumping gas hose from an SUV, I added that they also needed to send fire and EMT. The skinny preacher got doused a good one and fell back coughing and spitting. By the time I took two steps toward Mona, she'd pulled out a lighter and told everyone to get back; I suppose she thought she could use the pumping hose as a type of flamethrower. To show she meant it, she lit her lighter, which instantly set her hand, arm, and hair on fire. By the time I could blink, the area went up in a fireball. The blast wave knocked me on my ass, and from

there I watched the skinny preacher, fully aflame, run screaming into the cross street. Turning my gaze back to Mona, I saw she was now mostly cinder and strangely flopping about on the concrete. Shirt and tie was gone. I did the paperwork out of professional courtesy. I stayed late at the station to finish so I didn't have to go back. I never went back.

Helen thought she might say thank you for your service. That'd be funny. It was of the moment a la the military and national shaming lkaj d;lfkaj d;flk...fuck it. I know, I know, but this is how you ramble through a collapsing tunnel. Listen: Helen, listen: Many things are happening at once, and everyone outside this noggin of mine—by the way, everyone inside this noggin has a very strong/simple view of priority organization—but, everyone outside is dialing for dollars ... why in the hell would those movie assholes say it's an offer I can't refuse? Watch me.

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The plane descended over the suburbs of L.A. and Matthew or Matty or MK or Matt or the preferred Kitt closed his notebook, the notes of which were entered weekly into a computer file indeed named MKSCITIZENSUNITED2JUNK, and tossed it into the seatback before him. He liked the weird orange man, along with skinny guy burning up, but, still, nothing about the scene made any real sense; it was, as Helen would often say, without any context ... and quit tinkering. The somewhat confusing Idaho scene, however—especially attached to (with?) the parents—showed promise and aching realism even if only half formed. But was it a commercial page-turning tour de force that will sell a couple hundred thousand copies by Christmas? No. Or rather, No, it's not fucking commercial goop so quit fucking asking! Though, yes, tinkering was right; Kitt

hadn't written a publishable word in over eight years.... Now there's some fucking context. The Hollywood sign drifted by his window and he asked Helen if she'd ever been to Atlanta. Yes. Savannah? No. She'd been to Charleston, if that counted. It didn't.

Get this: This is how you're treated when the rich and famous covet your property: Matthew Kittredge's New York book agent, Helen Ballas, had a car pick her up and drive her to the airport. A first class seat took her to Albuquerque, where she changed to a private jet used to shuttle film stars back and forth to L.A. She and an extremely chipper steward had a pleasant flight north to Taos, where Kitt boarded both sober and without incident. When both writer and agent landed in L.A., a car took them to a 1920's Mediterranean style bungalow deep in the Hollywood Hills. The driver's tone intimated an address of intrigue and glamour. He added that the price—as the former owner now lives in Holmby Hills!—was just shy of four million; and so and so lives a few doors down, and so and so used to live there, and that's where they filmed such and such, and then Helen told him to keep it in his pants as they weren't his audience. He knew the game and tipped over into efficiency: Gotcha; the house is stocked with food and liquor, but here, the phone number on this card will get you anything you want. I'm to make sure you understand this. Anything you want. Just ring up and say I want dot dot dot. This evening you have standing reservations at the restaurants listed on the back of the card but—he quick-flipped a credit card—of course you may go anywhere you like and use this to cover all your expenses. You can drive yourselves—the car in the garage is yours to use—or call me and I'll be happy to drive you. I am on standby until midnight, less than 20 minutes away. If you'd like to stay in and have your meal catered, please, again, call that number and say “I want dot dot dot.” Remember that your agent, Ms. Rachel

Simmons, will be joining you here for a catered breakfast at 9:00am. If we do not see each other again this evening, I will see you both at 10:00am tomorrow. I believe your first meeting is at Red Studios on Cahuenga. Did you know that's where they filmed I Love Lucy?

After a few minutes of touring the Mediterranean, Helen announced she was going to bed. Kitt reminded her he had a Hollywood credit card burning a hole in his pocket. She reminded him she was on New York time. He asked if she didn't at least want to order some dot dot dot. No, what she wanted was to time warp back to the summer of 1968, get high, catch Joni Mitchell at the Troubadour, and then go to a party in Laurel Canyon; but, absent certain miracles, she was old-lady tired and going to bed. Kitt wanted to yell out that it was some hell of a deal to finally get the Hollywood A-List treatment and be in your I-don't-give-a-shit fifties sharing a house in the Hollywood Hills with a tired assed old lady. She added that he shouldn't get knee deep in the liquor as Rachel just texted and was on her way over with a new deal point on the contract. A rider. A sweetener. You'll like it. Perks.

Well, fuck.

Yeah, well, living as a one-percenter ain't easy.

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Listen: It's a crisp, perfect morning. Will you believe me if I told you the clearness of the trout stream has a specific sound? A crystal sound? Crystal clear, without cliché? It's amazing. The tall pines along the bank draw me. They stand watching, witnessing, offering a slurred, high-pitched whistle of wind against the reoccurring roar of a weather front sluicing through mountain valleys both near and far.

Quickly it's straight out of "A River Runs Through It." Screwtape has a beautiful cast and knows it. The Kid is a bit clumsy and awkward, but he knows to stay to the back of the old man and keep quiet. Military man carries both backpacks, on his back and his front, and trails them both. (Need exposition on the Military character. Guide? Guard? Build and type that looks the part.) The Kid makes another awkward cast and glances toward Screwtape—and then does a double take as Screwtape is facing upstream and stopped. He's holding up a hand for the others to also stop. The Kid takes a beat and then turns to Military—who is already moving past both. He sees my short pyramid of rocks, the little pile in the middle of the stream that rises a foot out of the water. Its top rock has "NO TRESPASSING" written boldly in black paint. Military motions for the others to stay put and steps forward, squatting, leaning in, squinting. Now he reads my other, smaller words, "BY ORDER OF CITIZENS UNITED." A clear uh-oh flashes across his face. That's right, boy-o. Uh-oh. Military takes a very deep breath and exhales. He slowly looks up and scans the left bank and then scans the right bank. His eyes stop. He thinks he's seen me. He slightly turns his head ... oh fuck.

I'm deep in the brush dressed in brown hiking boots, camouflaged pants, a camouflaged hoodie cinched tight around my face—he sees my eyes and nose—and the latex gloved hand which points a Glock semi-automatic pistol. Pop. It's that simple. I hit Military in the head, which splatters the two other men. As they try to figure out what just happened—and while also watching/wondering why Military is falling into the water, pop! Screwtape is hit in the head—splattering the Kid, who steps back, confused. And pop! The Kid is also hit in the head and goes down. I step into the stream and check on the victims, who are all very dead. The Kid is starting to slip away—or float away—with

the current. I high-step it over to the Kid and grab a boot and start to—well, shit, here comes Screwtape floating down stream. I belt the pistol and grab Screwtape's boot with my free hand. It's a haul, but I'm big and strong and willing to do a hard day's work.

I leave the three bodies lie on their backs, side by side, along the quiet trout stream. Listen: This is what I do. This is what I do so they know it's me: Scrap pieces of cardboard are duct taped over their faces. Written on the cardboard in black marker is "A service of Citizens United" with the Z written, neatly, in five strokes with two dots. I don't do this to Military. In a clear baggie I leave the paint, the markers, duct tape, empty shells, the gun.

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Rachel was into her third tequila and asked Kitt how many twinkle lights he thought illuminated the back patio and yard. She asked what he was writing in his notebook. He said Citizens United II, a malformed confessional shoot-em up in which I sell my soul for dollar bills. She asked how tall he was, if he rode his bicycle everyday, if he was seeing someone right now, who was the love of his life, what type of cancer killed his wife, was she really just twenty-four, did he really live in Lincoln, Nebraska, for 25 years, what was Helen like 30 years ago, had he gone to Graceland, had he gone more than once, was it true he lived in a real adobe house, did he think international terrorism diluted his brand. Kitt? Do you think there'd be any less murders if you hadn't written Citizens United? Is that unfair? No one ever gave a shit, I mean not until CU v FEC (she pronounces it sue – v – fuck) and suddenly whackos are whacking big dogs and laying them at your feet. Kitt? Huh, think of the wouldas if you'd called it The Summer of '69. Woulda been sure we ain't sittin' here 'bout to get paid. Kitt?

He asked if she wanted to hear a true story.

She jumped to her feet; yes she did. But she also needed more Tequila. Matt spoke of DUIs and she mentioned an overnight bag. On her way into the house she called him Mr. Money Bags. He reminded her that he drank bourbon. After she went inside he grabbed his notebook and wrote, ‘She quipped. Over her shoulder she quipped, without losing a step. She quipped, “Good Lord, you really are southern,” and then pulled the French doors with her.’ With an arrow to the margin he cribbed, ‘Remember Rachel’s quip about bourbon on the LA trip, her face, house off Outpost, Southern Gentleman, a gentle southern man.’

Story time: In Taos a while back I’m walking to lunch, walking past Brodsky’s Books, and I run into a neighbor couple exiting the shop. A little of the polite back and forth and then I remember—or sense the absence—of their big dog, Duke. A horse of a thing. Where’s Duke? Well, there were hip problems, back problems, and this and that and they put him down. Two years of diapers and vet bills, the man says. A dud breed, she says. Shouldn’t have been made, she says. Now I’m sure I said goodbye. I’m sure I was pleasant and polite, but the woman’s face, I don’t know. A dark and ugly time from my past had surfaced and I think she saw it. She could see it inside me; I’d describe her look as repulsed. I wandered on toward the Plaza but then doubled back in the direction of my house. I felt a great desire to find the old notebooks and ease my soul, to read through the notes and see a good man, a striving man, a man who sometime, somewhere in his past was more pure of heart. But I turned back and went on to lunch. There ain’t no magic in this world.

We only lived together in Nebraska. She wasn’t my wife. I’ve never been married.

Her parents paid for all of her medical treatments. There were out of pocket costs, of course, but she was still on their medical. I was out of college and editing the wires at the newspaper, but she was still in graduate school. When you're 23 and get breast cancer there's something really wrong. She got sick, and then they took both breasts, and then she got sick again. She spent her last month in the hospital. The routine through all this had her parents spend the day with her in our little house, and I'd get the evening shift. It carried over into the final hospital stay, with the parents squeezing into my time. That's when I started writing in my notebooks; I'd found if I kept my head down and pen moving the parents would ignore me, or at least leave me alone. They quietly blamed me for everything without reason or evidence, especially for all their personal grief, current and future—lots and lots of future grief. Whatever. They're both dead now. So she was the child of a farm-equipment salesman and a grade school office secretary. Me? I'd been abandoned. She was the child of second-generation Nebraska sodbusters who wanted nothing more in life than to raise up their child to be happy and love god and life. But me? Well, fuck you, I'd been abandoned. She suffered unduly and rarely complained. Me? I began to wonder how long all this was going to take. One night I wrote about her as a dud. I wrote about how I'd picked a mate who was a dud. From a dud breed. My actual words. I recall that as I finished writing my dark scribbles she turned to me. She looked into my eyes for the longest time. Then she says, We're just grains of sand, aren't we. I nodded. She then smiles slightly and says Funny though how we all think our grain is a few yards from the surf on sunny Waikiki beach. I tell her there's room for both of us at Waikiki. She turned back and looked at the ceiling. She says There's relief in knowing I'm surrounded by other grains, all alike and different and utterly alone; me and my little

group of pals all huddled together in the middle of the Pacific three feet under the ocean floor.

My notes, those and many notebooks more, became the source material for Citizens United: a screed against the stupidity and immaturity of my parents; a screed about those who rail against the world's injustice but ignore the hard, staring-you-in-the-face ugliness of human nature. It was a gotcha book. An epitaph for all the buried grains of sand. Her death, our loneliness, our utter failure at understanding what life was about—we were so young—it got me in the habit of writing and sketching scenes. And it came quick. She died in the spring of '86 and I'd finished the book by Halloween. Helen took the book before Thanksgiving and closed a book deal by the new year. When the advance check came I quit my job—never working an honest day again. But the book, you see, the book has never been read as a screed against my parent's radicalism; never read as failed responsibilities to family. Shit, it's become an extremist how-to written by someone doesn't know how-to. My parents made it up as they went along, and I do too. It's maddening; I have no memory of them but I follow their footsteps. Radicals, radicals, everywhere radicals. I'm rambling.

I wanted to tell you a true story. This is a true story: In the fall of 1989, on Tuesday, the third of October, still in that little house north of Lincoln, my power was shut off. It was just a matter of days for the other utilities. I was down to water from the tap and a quarter jar of processed parmesan cheese. Citizens United never came close to earning out its advance, and since I really didn't know how to write a book, the next novel was a half-written embarrassment. Helen had tried to be helpful, suggesting I just write something formulaic, maybe a thriller or mystery using the 60's as a backdrop. People eat

that shit up, she says. Just get it down on paper. Get it out, get a little money, and then put the hammer down on the next one. It's the publishing game, she says. The third book is where you make your career. And me yelling at her through the phone: You fucking sell your soul and then you tell me about it. Helen: It's just a thought. Me, the self-appointed leader without followers: I would rather starve and die. Helen: Get all your fucking pages together, slap a Citizens United II title on it and send it to me. Me: I don't have the fucking money for postage. Helen: Jesus Christ. And she hangs up. I grab a notebook and write something like the following: For the first time I have the opportunity to write something that matters. I have no desire to create anything that has no chance to change the world. I strive to believe we all share similar worries, concerns, and basic dreams, but what I fear is that we don't, and I'm alone in the world. Not that I'm off in head, but just completely adrift from all others, just as they are from me. Rather like grains of sand at the bottom of the ocean. The only relief is knowing I'm surrounded by other grains, all alike and different and utterly alone....

When it hits me that I'm plagiarizing my dearly departed I believe I had something akin to a psychotic break. I ain't really been right since.

On Wednesday the phone rings most of the morning, and it's really putting a damper on my pity party. I'd made it to the bedroom sometime in the middle of the night, and now, for the sake of my dwindling sanity, I had to get up and cross the house to turn on the answering machine; by the insistence of the calls, I thought it might be bad news from or about my Memphis stepfamily. But just as I turned on the machine, it rang again. It was Helen. She said, after the beep, quote: Listen carefully, dumbshit. Over the summer I'd heard that Memphis State had chosen Citizens as part of their entry level reading list.

Hometown boy does good, I guess. I called them and lied that you were traveling by train from Chicago to New Orleans and had a few days free. I said that you get five grand plus expenses for a speaking fee, but I said that I'd get you to do it for four. I got three and a room at the Peabody. I've wired a grand to your local Western Union. Get your ass to the airport and figure out a way to be standing in the lobby of the Peabody at 11am tomorrow morning. I picked up the phone and said OK. She said You're welcome.

Rachel waited for more and then told him he shouldn't get near the movie script if that was the end of his story. He reminded her that she couldn't score script approval in her hard-nosed negotiations. She said to finish the fucking story.

Turns out I'm good at public speaking, in an irregular sense. I have sort of a humorous depressive quality. And I tell the truth. The kids eat it up. Word got out from Memphis and Helen booked a few more universities in the spring, at 4K a pop, plus expenses. By the fall I'd hired a speaking service and was fully booked at 5K a pop. I made—make—a killing. After 2010 and the movie rumors we bumped it up to ten, and now twelve five; but I only do eight a year now. Two weeks in the spring and two weeks in the fall. Service thinks this current politics shit can get us into the moral soup of high dollar corporate conferences. Sky's the limit. About the second book? Helen found 30 good pages and I went from there, which took me ten years to finish. God bless those college students; they gathered up their dollars and bought the damn thing, which wasn't anything like Citizens United. Another ten years go by—that produces another lovely batch of students with dollar bills—and I get the third book out, which very much ain't Citizens United. Rachel—listen: I've got issues. Certainly. Lots of issues. My soul might be ugly and damaged, but it's all I really have. Citizens United is all I really have. I give

it to Hollywood and it's gone. Selling the only thing I have, for any amount of money, is completely and utterly against everything I've ever stood for.

Rachel sipped her drink and went still. Kitt recalled for her that in 1987 he gave a producer attached to Warner Bros. an eighteen month option on the book for 500 dollars. She acknowledged the irony as she said goodnight and went to her room. A few minutes later he took his notebook and wrote of the near future: I woke to downstairs chatter, crisping bacon, and the rising dread of facing two very dispirited women. Or maybe, rather, two conspiring, determined, and newly untrustworthy women—as in, Matthew Kittredge can go fuck himself if he thinks we're going to bow out when he suddenly gets the heebeegeebees. Poor little Kitt and his delicate sensibilities. Fuck him! You with me? After a few minutes more he wrote: If I were a character in a Tom Landis film, Rachel would have come back down in a sensual negligee and knelt at my crotch, saying something banal like, I know something that will change your mind.

As he finished his drink he heard the French doors creak open behind him, and since his unoriginal life was as real as it gets, he didn't turn around to see it was a fully-dressed Rachel about to say something very un-banal: Listen, buttercup, you'd have to ask a thousand people before you'd find someone who could name ten modern writers by name, but every single person who can fucking feed themselves knows your name or the title of your little screed. God has reached down with his boney finger and touched you. Get you're fucking soul in order.

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Some required back-story exposition: This is how we got here: Throughout 2010 lowball inquiries began to trickle in about movie rights and options for Citizens United.

Blogs began pulling quotes. PDFs of the full book were shared. Alt sites appeared with names like The Real Meaning of Citizens United, What Real Citizens Can Do When They're United, and RealCitizensUnited. New and thoughtful book reviews appeared in quality rags. Years of college speeches found their way to YouTube, providing hours and hours of the droll and sardonic Matthew Kittredge. In the fall Helen brokered a new quality trade paperback that rode the bestseller list through Christmas and peaked on Father's Day, 2011. Fun was had by all.

Then those two congressmen were gunned down on that Texas ranch on July 4th.

Then the Times reported that the FBI had been investigating what they were calling the Citizens United Killings since 2002.

Then I did that ill-advised network interview where I admitted to being questioned by the FBI on seven different CU murders dating back to 1992. Interviewer: You're saying that you know of seven murders tied to your book, Citizens United? Me: Yeah, well, more of an appropriation in the name of, not so much because-of, but, yeah, and now with those two dudes from the fair last year, it makes nine. Helen sent a text: DUDES??!!!!

Then, boy-o, Hollywood really came calling. By the end of the week, in a clear example of price fixing, Helen had three boilerplate offers for two million bucks—each with the same bullshit if/when deal points. By early in the next week Helen had planted a story in the film trades that if someone would actually pick up a pen and write a check, Matthew Kittredge would answer his phone. She failed to report that I'd actually said three million in cash or they can fuck off. But zippity-zap we had an offer for three million by the end of the following week. And zippity-zap, I told them to fuck off. But

they wouldn't. And didn't. And haven't.

But then, good god almighty, on Halloween night 2016, that Trumper threw my book at Hillary. It careened off her left breast and a photog snapped the big one: her horrified face recoiling from a fluttering paperback copy of Citizens United. The next night all the news shows did stand-ups in front of their local bookstore interviewing all those who grabbed the last copies. Helen sent a text the next morning: SOLD THE FUCK OUT! Later in the afternoon she texted: They're printing a full mil and I'm going to the fucking bar!

It took a strange and calm three days for Trump to get his copy airmailed. Glad-handing a rope line after a trucker-hat campaign rally, a copy brushed his forehead and caused a comb-over flip-flop. The poor soul who launched Matthew Kittredge's money-maker was summarily pummeled and dragged away; though, as properly noted by the press, during the poor soul's frog-march through the crowd, a few more copies—up to ten?—took flight with no harm done. By the Trumpster's third rally post Hillary's breast dustup, rally goers were relieved of all reading materials at entrance gates. Every newspaper and news organization in the world lead with the images of large signs reading BOOKS ARE NOT ALLOWED AT TRUMP EVENTS, which were propped up against full barrels of discarded copies of Citizens United, and, of course, copies of The Art of the Deal. The clincher was the video of a Secret Service agent trying to remove a copy of Citizens United stuck on the windshield of Trump's moving motorcade vehicle. The unfortunate man was struck by a flailed second copy and lost his balance, tumbling down but away from the passing car. The print run jumped to one million.

On the morning after the 2016 election, Helen texted: Well, it makes sense. Rachel

called. Hollywood just got serious.

And now you're caught up, if ill informed.

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Back-story addendum: You got that, right? People are dying because over 30 years ago I chose to title my book Citizens United. My little book about my radical hippie parents is killing people. People are excited to meet me because of death. You get that, right? In death lessons are learned well.

... end sample ...