Lucky Alan

by Jonathan Lethem

March 19, 2007

In the months after I'd auditioned for him, I would run into the legendary theatre director Sigismund Blondy at the movies, near-empty Thursday matinées of indifferent first-run films—"North Country," "Wedding Crashers"—in the decaying venues of the Upper East Side, where we both lived: the Crown, the Clearview, the Gemini; big rooms chopped into asymmetric halves, or quartered through the balcony. Blondy saw a movie every afternoon, he said, and could provide scrupulous evaluations of any title you'd ever think to mention—largely dismissals, though I do recall his solemn approval of "A Sound of Thunder," a time-travel film with a Ben Kingsley performance he'd liked. I'd see Blondy when the lights came up—alone, red scarf and pale elegant coat unfurled on the seat beside him, long legs crossed—unashamed, already hailing me if he spotted me first. Blondy dressed in dun and pastel colors, wore corduroys or a dancer's Indian pants; in winter he had holes in his knitted gloves, in summer a cheesy panama hat. He towered, moved softly and suddenly, usually vanished at any risk of being introduced. Soon I'd scan for Blondy whenever I entered a theatre, alone or not. Often enough I'd find him. We never sat together.

If this multiplex-haunting practice didn't square with Blondy's reputation as the venerated maestro of a certain form of miniaturist spectacle ("Krapp's Last Tape" in the elevator of a prewar office building, which moved up and down throughout the performance, with Blondy himself as Krapp, for cramped audiences of five or six at a time), it didn't matter, since that reputation hardly thrived. I'd auditioned—talked with him, really—for a role in a repertory production of several of Kenneth Koch's "One Thousand Avant-Garde Plays." Dianne Wiest sat with us in the back room of the SoHo Italian restaurant in which the Koch cycle was to be staged, and where this evaluative tête-à-tête took place. She followed our conversation soberly, her unexplained presence typical of Blondy's Zelig-like infiltration of the city's culture. Within weeks I'd learned that Blondy had had a falling out with the restaurant's proprietor, stranding the enterprise. I'd waited, expecting some revival of the project, for months. Eventually I assumed I'd been replaced and kept half an eye on the *Times* for a notice of the thing. But the Koch never surfaced; nor did anything else. Maybe Blondy's run was over. Or on hiatus, in some deep ruminative lag. And then, in the months that followed, he gradually became my moviegoing doppelgänger.

The ritual was made official the first time he invited me out for a glass of red after the movie, as though that were the real point of the afternoon. We'd sit at some Madison or Second Avenue wine bar in the dimming hours, invariably alongside those waiting for their dinner dates, those who made even me feel old. Whether Blondy ever felt old I couldn't guess. His grandiosity, his U-turn anecdotes, his contempt for the obvious statement didn't invite such guesses, only the tribute of gratified awe. I gave it. Blondy was like a skater up his own river, a frozen ribbon the rest of us might have glimpsed through trees, from within a rink where we circled to tinny music. I told him I had quit acting the first time we left a movie theatre together, before even finishing a glass. Blondy's intimate smile seemed to say, not unsympathetically, that it was all for the best. We rarely talked about the film we'd just seen; instead we discussed great works—the Rothko retrospective, Fassbinder's "Berlin Alexanderplatz," Durrell's "Alexandria Quartet," whatever formed his present obsession. After two or three glasses on an empty

belly had made me dizzy—Blondy never showed any effects—we'd part on the sidewalk.

By the time it occurred to me that I hadn't seen Sigismund Blondy in a while, I couldn't have said how long a while was. Four months? Eight? It seemed to me he'd been in holey-gloves-and-red-scarf mode the last time we'd slipped from a theatre to a bar, but that didn't narrow it down much. We were headed back to scarf weather now. Maybe Blondy had summered somewhere—Provincetown?—and decided not to return, enlisting some local company to mount spectacles in a dockworker's bar or a bowling alley's lounge. Sig Blondy, big fish in a small pond? I knew no more consummate New Yorker, so I started to worry.

Neither of the two people whom Blondy and I knew in common had any reason to know that the director and I spent afternoons together, but when I called—the first didn't have Blondy's phone number, and the second had one that he thought was the "old number," then found another he recommended I try—neither was interested enough to ask why I wanted to track him down. Perhaps these days Blondy was less well remembered than I'd assumed. Blondy, likely in his early sixties, always seemed to me terrifyingly vital, but those in their early sixties might suddenly fail. Had I entered, without noticing, some quiet bargain struck among the proud bachelors of Manhattan, to get one another's backs? In my rapidly evolving fantasy, Blondy became pitiable, myself a rescuer. I rang the number. Blondy's machine was set to pick up on the first ring. It figured he'd be an old-school screener.

"Grahame," he said, interrupting my message. His tone was munificent, as if congratulating me for having the name I did.

I'd been reaching for words to distill my concern but now scrambled, defensively, for a joke. His relish at having lifted the receiver in the thick of my fumbling seemed akin to his pleasure at our old, ambiguous encounters in theatre lobbies, before we'd begun drinking. What I said now was "Don't you go to the flicks anymore, or are you ashamed to take the senior discount?"

"Oh, I go. Every afternoon. Just not in the old *neigh*-bore-hood."

"I miss you," I blurted.

He explained that he'd moved downtown, to Minetta Street. Hiding in plain sight, he called it. He'd spoken in the past of his devotion to the block of Seventy-eighth Street, where for decades he'd held down a rent-stabilized bargain, and of his persistent enchantment with the tribes of dog-walkers and nannies he'd mingled with there, once calling the Upper East Side "the last of the true Manhattan." But I didn't get a chance to ask him why he'd abandoned it. "I've got some questions I want to ask you," he said. "When can you get here?"

"Questions?"

"Better than questions, a *questionnaire*. You'll see."

"You want me to come to Minetta Street? Today?"

"Look, Film Forum is doing Mizoguchi—'Ugetsu.' Ever seen it?" There was something of the director in his bullying and beguiling, but it was in my nature, I suppose, to be directed.

"Ugetsu" astonished me. Discussing it after the two-fifteen matinée, while we looked on Sixth Avenue for a restaurant with a suitable bar, Blondy said that for years he'd felt that two scenes toward the end of the film were reversed from their ideal order—the only flaw, he'd always thought, in a perfect work of art—but that today, sitting at Film Forum, waiting for it, he couldn't spot the flaw he'd earlier been so certain of. "What's pathetic is that I'd presumed to go around all these years sure I knew better than

Mizoguchi! It's as though I had to defend myself against the film's perfection." I was awed, as I maybe was supposed to be, at the scrupulousness with which he dwelled on what he cared for. Perhaps I was also awed at the change in our friendship. We'd gone to a movie that Blondy cared about, instead of trash, and for once we'd sat together in the theatre, so I could smell Blondy's faint but unmistakable doggish odor. It felt as though I'd stepped into Blondy's script, was now simultaneously the featured performer and the sole audience for the most infinitesimal of his productions.

When we'd settled down with two glasses of Syrah, Blondy drew from his pocket several worn photocopies. "O.K., these are the questions I've been wanting to ask you," he said, as if he'd been expecting my call in the first place.

"O.K."

"They're from Max Frisch's 'Sketchbook 1966-1971.' Ready?"

"Sure."

"We won't do the whole questionnaire. I'll pick and choose."

"Sure, fine."

"*Are you sure you are really interested in the preservation of the human race once you and all the people you know are no longer alive*?"

"Sorry?"

"That's the first question." He resumed his insinuating theatrical murmur. "*Are you sure you are really interested . . .* "

I did my best with the question, told Blondy I thought anyone ought to feel a value in the continuity of the species, but he interrupted. "No, you," he said. "How do *you* feel?"

"Yes, I'd be sad if there were no people."

He leaped to the next question. "*Whom would you rather never have met*?"

My only brush with Harold Pinter had been fiercely disappointing. I began to describe it. Blondy rushed me again.

"*Would you like to have perfect memory*? Just answer the questions that interest you, Grahame. *If you had the power to put into effect things you consider right, would you do so against the wishes of the majority*?"

"Look, Sigismund, what is this?"

"*Are you convinced by your own self-criticism*?"

"Too much, I'm afraid."

"*Are you conscious of being in the wrong in relation to some other person—who need not necessarily be aware of it*? *If so, does this make you hate yourself—or the other person*?"

His voice was so entrancing that I suspected we were both entranced. He might as well have asked to read me poetry, for all that I was persuaded he wanted my replies. I said, "What about *you*, Sig? You answer this one."

He nodded, raised his glass. “And hate myself for it.”

Again, I wondered if I heard the sound of a trap snapping shut. Had I delivered my designated line? Were we perhaps getting to the point?

“Who?” I asked.

“Alan Zwelish,” Blondy said.

Sigismund Blondy had known Alan Zwelish for several years, in the way of a Manhattan neighbor, repeatedly sighting a compelling face in passing instants as one or the other swerved from the street into the entrances of their buildings, which stood across and askew from each other, or in the same Chase A.T.M. lobby on Seventy-ninth, or in the late-night Korean shop collecting, if you were Zwelish, a pack of cigarettes, or, if you were Blondy, a bottle of ginger beer or a packet of wasabi peanuts. Or, most stirringly, far from the block they shared, at adjacent bookstalls in Union Square on a hot Saturday noon, where they honored the strangeness of detecting each other so far afield with a curt nod. That nod could have been the whole of it. But Blondy didn’t play by the Manhattan-neighbor rules. He was provocative, voluble, grabby. He collected life histories, he’d once bragged to me, of the block’s fleet of dog-walkers, maypoled in leashes on their way to the Park, confused to be approached when nearly anyone else would switch pavements to get a berth from roiling terriers. Cooed at strollered babies until lonely Tibetan nannies, invisible persons of Manhattan, practically swooned in his long arms. Blondy regaled waiters, too; I’d seen him do it.

Anyway, Alan Zwelish, short, muscled, his eyes sparkling with suspicion, sports coats pixied with dandruff, became a fascination. Bearded when Blondy first noticed him, Zwelish shaved within a year or so, revealing features younger and grimmer than Blondy had guessed, a knuckly chin and somewhat sensuous lips. Tenured-professorial in the pretentious facial hair, without it Zwelish was revealed to be no more than thirty-five. His Bogart smoking mannerisms seemed the result of mirror study and, like the renounced beard, an attempt to gain control of the lower portion of his face. Blondy watched this proud, drum-tight personality fidget past him on the street and began projecting; he couldn’t help it: an unfinished degree in journalism, concerned married sisters in New Jersey or Connecticut (but probably New Jersey), weights but no cardio, aggrieved blind dates, *Cigar Aficionado* and *Stereophile*, takeout menus, acres of porn. What was positive was this: Zwelish owned his apartment, the basement of a co-oped town house, and made a living consulting on business software—these facts Blondy got out of Alan Zwelish, semi-voluntarily, the first time he introduced himself, on Seventy-eighth Street.

The next time they passed, Zwelish attempted to look the other way, as though offering up this information had been a paying of dues, and he could now revert to nodding acquaintance. No dice, not with Blondy, who launched one of his *in-medias-res* gambits (the equivalent, maybe, of a Max Frisch questionnaire): the parrots were missing, had Zwelish heard? What? Zwelish hadn’t ever seen the flock of green parrots, rumored to be pets escaped over the years, and which congregated in certain trees on York Avenue at Seventy-seventh, around which you could hear a tropical cloud of parrot conversation? These birds were a totem of the neighborhood; it was essential Zwelish see them. But Blondy hadn’t managed to spot them for more than a week. Was Zwelish doing anything urgent at the moment, or would he join Blondy for a walk to search them out? Incredibly—or not, given Blondy’s charismatic sway—Zwelish excused himself for a moment to put his briefcase inside and take a leak, then rejoined Blondy, and they strolled together to York. It was a perfect afternoon, a temperate wind rebounding off the river. They found the parrots easily. (Whether they’d ever been missing at all Zwelish was left to wonder.)

Now the hard little man had been cracked open. As Sigismund Blondy saw him, Zwelish walked in a fiery aura of loneliness, but Blondy had got inside the penumbra. Zwelish would grab Blondy on the street

and describe family plights: the barely tolerated Passover at his—yes!—sister's in New Jersey, the difficulty of properly liquidating his father's gnarled-up assets, which were under his elderly mom's watch. And brag, essentially. Was Blondy drinking the crap water that came out of the Seventy-eighth Street taps? He should install such-and-such purification system in his sink. Cash sitting in a money-market account was as good as thrown away; Zwelish was in certain arcane tech stocks and had also acquired a Motherwell print. Blondy was invited to an East Hampton guesthouse weekend? That place was hell, trust Zwelish. Zwelish's high-school buddy had a place in the Berkshires, a better value. Blondy *rented*? Hopeless! Everything was a competition in which Blondy wouldn't compete, saying, "Look at who you're talking to, Alan. I'm like the parrots, just roosting here, decorating the area. I'd rather leave nothing behind but delicious memories." Bohemian standards Zwelish wouldn't ratify. "You're a fool," he'd say. "Yes," Blondy agreed, "I'm a fool, exactly." Zwelish narrowed his eyes. "But you don't know how dangerous it is to be a fool. Dangerous to yourself and others." Blondy thought, What others?

Possibly Zwelish meant the women. Sigismund Blondy, like any tall dissolute specimen, had women around him, in roles likely unclarified even to themselves: exes, friends, liaisons. Zwelish witnessed a certain number of the comings and goings of this elegant flock, which culminated in an introduction at a First Avenue Greek diner during morning hours suggestive of an overnight visit, before collaring Blondy alone one day to say, "O.K., Sig, how do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Five different women I've seen you with in the past two months."

"Friends, Alan, those are my friends."

Zwelish crushed his cigarette under his running shoe, the way he wanted to stub out Blondy's line of defense. "Don't bullshit me. I see them lean into you. That's not friends."

"When you reach my age, women lean into you for a variety of reasons."

"I could use some friends like that."

Blondy felt he'd been offered a significant confidence. Insouciant as he was, he hadn't ever felt that he could quite ask a man as unattractive as Zwelish how he made do. Before any tenderness broke out between them, however, Zwelish thrust a knife in. "I've seen you hitting on those illiterate babysitters, too. The whole block talks about it, you know."

This prospect tipped Blondy back on his heels for an instant: that he, who prided himself on his panoramic insight into Seventy-eighth Street, could be himself under the microscope. And, using that instant, Zwelish made his escape.

A bruising friendship, if it was one. And, like Blondy and me at the movies, many weeks could pass between encounters. Did Blondy only fantasize that Zwelish peered out of his basement window slats deciding whether or not, on a given afternoon, he wanted to see Blondy? In any case, when they did meet, Zwelish generally seemed to have some willful challenge ready, as if he prepared with flash cards. "Not awake yet?" if he saw Blondy with coffee in the afternoon. "Never awake at all anymore," Blondy would say, always willing to play the decrepit jester, the has-been, hoping he could un-push Zwelish's buttons. "Want a job, Blondy? You should write an opera about Donald Trump. He's what passes for a hero these days!" Blondy didn't compose operas, but never mind. Still, after Zwelish's initial remark they'd often fall into the earlier style of more relaxed banter. And Zwelish sometimes let his guard down and complained, obscurely, about "modern urban women." He'd only gloss the topic, and Blondy didn't press at the sore point. Zwelish seemed to know how vulnerable Zwelish wanted to get.

“Can’t you get one of those babysitters to do your laundry for you?” Zwelish said one day when he saw Blondy humping a Santa Clausian bag to the Chinese dry cleaner. Zwelish seemed particularly keen and chipper, and rolled up his sleeve to show off a nicotine patch. More bragging. He explained that he’d already stepped down two patch levels, after fifteen years of pack-a-day smoking.

“I never thought of this before,” said Blondy, “but if you *wanted* to smoke but were having trouble getting started, the patch could really do the trick, couldn’t it?”

“What are you talking about?”

“If you wanted to be a smoker,” Blondy said, explicating the joke. “You could step up instead of down.” Zwelish brought out his silly side; he couldn’t help it. “Once you get to the top level, you tear off that patch and—voilà!—you’d want a cigarette *urgently*.”

“Fuck you,” Zwelish said, and walked away. His self-improvements were apparently no laughing matter.

Yet Sigismund Blondy, being who he was, found Zwelish all the more precious for his touchiness. He constituted a test that Blondy, who’d sledded on pure charm through so many controversies, couldn’t pass. He adored Zwelish for causing him, at this late date, to want to do better, try harder, give more.

It was months later that the real opportunity came: Alan Zwelish’s definitive self-renovation, one that Blondy instantly vowed to treat only reverently, beatifically. Zwelish returned from a mysterious trip in possession of an Asian wife. Blondy heard it first from another neighbor (shades of “the whole block knows”), who included a nosy speculation as to whether the union had been made by online advertisement or some other mechanical arrangement, before he saw her for himself. From Vietnam, it was revealed when they met on the street, and tiny enough to make Zwelish look tall. Doris, Zwelish introduced her as, though he later confided that her name was something else, Do Lun or Du Lan. Bright dark eyes and features so precise they seemed tooled. At this first meeting Blondy clasped Zwelish’s hand, took his elbow, gave his warmest congratulations. Almost bent to kiss Doris, but thought better. She was too self-contained and skittish, a cipher. Zwelish pulled her close to him, seeming for once immune to hurt, a being formed only of pride and delight. Blondy was a part of the family if only because at the moment anyone, even a passing stranger, would have been. Blondy watched them disappear into the basement apartment, Zwelish gallantly rushing past Doris to unlock the gate, and felt a disproportionate happiness, one he suspected he’d have to make an effort to conceal.

Zwelish never attacked Blondy now, his sarcasm apparently totally evaporated, and if Blondy ever experimented with a teasing joke (calling Doris “Mrs. Z”) it seemed to go right over Zwelish’s head. Or under it, as if the man were floating. They’d greet each other heartily, with or without Doris in Zwelish’s tow. It was as though Zwelish had advertised the director to Doris in advance as a sterling friend, a local pillar, and then so invested in the notion that he forgot his old wariness. Doris, when she was along, watched carefully. Her English wasn’t hopeless, once you pierced the gauze of the almost total deference she showed her husband, never speaking without checking his eyes for cues. Who knew what else she was capable of, what life she’d led before, what life she’d expected coming here? Zwelish, who worked increasingly from home, who made fewer consulting trips out of town, kept her attached at the hip.

Soon enough Doris’s pregnancy was noticeable on her scrawny frame. Her posture was too good to hide it past the third month. Zwelish accepted these congratulations, too, but distantly. This was a cold winter, everyone battened into woollen layers and readily excused from dawdling in the open, and Zwelish and his expectant young wife were more and more like figures in a snow globe, viewable but uncontactable from the human realm. They didn’t seem happy or unhappy, just curled into each other, whispering on the street, a totally opaque domestic unit. Blondy couldn’t get a rise or anything else out of Zwelish, and I knew Blondy well enough to feel how this irked him. It explained the reckless choice he

made. Likely, given his history with Zwelish already, Blondy knew it was reckless, though he did it wholly in gentleness and out of sheer enthusiasm. One day when Doris was five or sixth months along and spring had broken out on the street, Blondy ran into her alone as she returned, waddling slightly, from the Korean market. He insisted on carrying her plastic bags to the door of the basement apartment.

This was bad enough, really, since it wasn't beyond Zwelish's established range to feel this as a rebuke for not having accompanied Doris to the store. But worse, much worse, at the door Blondy reached under Doris's sweater and T-shirt, not without asking first, and cupped his palm underneath the globe that burgeoned there. He did it elegantly—nothing but elegance, with a woman especially, was possible for Blondy. Doris wasn't jarred. Blondy didn't linger. Just felt it and murmured something about "a miracle," and something else about "lucky Alan." Asked "Boy or girl?" and Doris told him: "Boy."

Zwelish, who'd heard their voices and come to the window, now rushed out, unlocked the gate, and pulled Doris inside. He seemed to have some imprecation caught in his throat and which produced a kind of angry hiccup as he glared up at Blondy. Then, with his wife, he was gone.

Conveniently, Zwelish was alone when he next met Blondy on the street. He lowered his shoulder as they came near each other, and, when Blondy said his name, he squared and delivered a sour look. "What do you want from me?" he asked Blondy. "Nothing you wouldn't want to give" was Blondy's reply.

"Why'd you call me 'lucky'?" Zwelish asked.

"What?"

" 'Lucky Alan.' What's that supposed to mean?"

"Nothing," Blondy said, exhausted at last.

"Then why don't you just keep your distance." Zwelish exited on the line.

Now came the deep valley in their relations, though Blondy somehow never doubted it would eventually be crossed. Weeks or a month could go by without their passing on the street, and words were never spoken. Blondy was busy then, in the effort that included our own first meeting, the Koch plays. The boy was born, and the little triad was sighted on Seventy-eighth Street, always self-reliant and self-contained, always in a hurry. And, finally, Blondy uncovered the existence of the "whole block"; it consisted of an older woman (meaning, I guessed, Blondy's age) living in Blondy's own building, whom Blondy mainly identified with a boring dispute over recycling, and who, it turned out, was eagerly running him down to absolutely anyone, from the market Koreans to new tenants; to the dog-walkers she'd interrogate after their talks with Blondy, as if deprogramming them; to, presumably, Zwelish. One of the dog-walkers, the most garrulous and multifariously connected (he walked the Jack Russell and the corgis and the aging dachshund), spilled it all to Blondy, at last. And also said that Zwelish himself had once halted on the sidewalk to take part in the latest Blondy-trashing session. That Zwelish had said he'd never trusted Blondy, was "always just playing along," whatever that meant. As though Blondy's affection were so pernicious it had to be negotiated with.

In the earlier months of this stalemate, Blondy had spotted Zwelish with or without his new family four or five times, then Doris alone with the boy in a stroller two or three others. Blondy hadn't noticed to what degree he'd pridefully withdrawn from the daily life of the block (this would have been the period of the great escalation in my multiplex encounters with Blondy, when we most frequently "accidentally" rendezvoused, and ended up at wine bars) until the garrulous dog-walker stopped him and delivered the news: Alan Zwelish had died, suddenly, of an inoperable brain tumor, discovered only weeks before it killed him. Doris and the child had inherited whatever he had, and an insurance claim was going to keep them in the apartment across the street. Here was the full horror of a relationship that both relied on

chance meetings and was subject to utter estrangement: what you could miss in an interval. In this case, the whole end.

There was only one possible choice at the news. Blondy rushed to the apartment to see Doris. She let him in. Entering Zwelish's lair for the first time ever, seeing—yes!—the high-end audio equipment and the pile of free weights, as well as the framed Motherwell, and most of all the one-year-old playing in a folding crib littered with the plush toys he suspected were Zwelish's hand-picked tokens of adoration, made Blondy's heart righteous, as if confirmation of his old guesses proved the claims Zwelish had always refused. Doris sat across from him, rigid in her chair, eyes dry. She offered him nothing, and he didn't approach her, or the child—this wasn't a visit, it was a reckoning. He started with the only words to start with, "I'm sorry," meant as an overture to the explanations he wanted to offer whether Doris cared or understood. But she had a clarification of her own to make, one that threw his motives into irrelevancy.

"I'm glad he's gone."

Blondy hadn't misheard. Her syntax was exact and unmistakable, despite the accent. The sentiment laid bare.

"Why?"

"He never let me go anywhere." Doris's tone was angry, the feeling fresh. "We only fighted all day."

Blondy just nodded, needed no prompting to accept the truth of this account.

"I didn't love Alan. Now we"—she turned, to make Blondy understand she included the boy—"have this. Much better."

Blondy began weeping, openly, pouring out stuff he didn't know was inside, matters of his fear of death generally, as well as rage at Alan Zwelish for having pushed him away and at himself for having let himself be pushed.

"You cry," Doris said, not cruelly.

Having been chosen or volunteered to receive the confession from Blondy that Doris Zwelish had preëmpted, I fastened on the real-estate implications. They seemed to me not inconsiderable, given Blondy's Seventy-eighth Street rent stabilization. "Your response was to move from the block?"

"I couldn't confront the recycling lady, to begin with," Blondy said. "Let alone watch Doris raising the kid before my eyes—what if he came out looking like Alan? The block wasn't mine anymore. I was like a zombie—they'd be right to shun me after a while. I was embarrassed for myself, but also for Zwelish. Nobody could forget him if I didn't go."

"So it was altruistic, moving away?"

"*Necessary*, Grahame."

Again I felt a paranoiac certainty that in telling his tale Sigismund Blondy had enlisted me in a theatrical invention—cast me in a role—for the benefit of an unknown audience, perhaps only himself. There was no Alan Zwelish, or Alan Zwelish had never married or died: the whole episode was confabulation. For an instant I wanted to go to the library and dig for an obituary. But then I knew that the story was true. Inventing a smoker who'd quit and then succumbed to cancer was beneath Blondy. No, my feeling of unreality was a sympathetic response, not a clue to a lie: I'd been infected with Blondy's own fear, that grandiosity had made his human self specious—a *zombie*. He fled Seventy-eighth Street afraid he'd

made it a stage for theatrics. In his nightmares he might have heard this accusation, delivered in the recycling lady's voice: not that he was molesting nannies but that he treated others as figures in a shadow play.

The moment I suspected this horror I wanted to assuage it, by speaking of his true and inexpressible feelings for Zwelish. "You don't choose who you love, Sigismund."

Blondy looked relieved that I was chasing a moral in his fable, rather than staring with him into the black hole of his personality. "I like that," he mused. "You don't choose who you love. Or who loves you. *That* was Alan's problem."

"No wonder he was pissed. Whatever he was searching for, nothing could have made him expect *you*."

"Ha!"

I'd have done anything for Blondy at that moment, and, correspondingly, I loathed Alan Zwelish, though I knew there was more Zwelish than Blondy in me, which was likely the reason I was seated here. I hated Zwelish for showing Blondy death, just as I'd hate a teen-ager for informing a five-year-old that Santa Claus was a fake. I hoped Blondy would live to a thousand, for revenge.

"*Let us assume that you have never killed another human being. How do you account for it*?"

"Sorry?"

"That's the next question." Blondy had unfolded his photocopies again. "Or this: *Which would you rather do: die or live on as a healthy animal*? *Which animal*?"

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Illustration: ADRIAN TOMINE