

The Elysian Fields, Tian, Valhalla, Swarga Loka, Paradise, Whatever

by [David Wiener](#) (February 2024)



The Love Line, James Ensor, 1924

“ –Call the Code...” was the last thing he remembered.

He was sitting. There was a young woman across from him at a desk. The brass name-plate said, “Kalumtum.” Her eyes glowed like Lebanese amber and she was so beautiful, it made him

gasp.

She was chain-smoking and her huge, green-glass ashtray was overflowing with crushed cigarettes. The place had an ethereal vibe, but it was a lot like every other office he'd ever been in or worked in. The florescent lights hummed, and the floor was missing a couple of brown linoleum tiles.

"Figures," he said quietly.

Kalumtum stubbed out her cigarette and started freshening up her lipstick. She really didn't need to because she had what cosmetologists call "Goldilocks Lips" –just right. Next to her big ashtray and her packs of cigarettes was a little collection of executive toys: fidget spinners, a slinky, and a Magic 8 Ball.

"Be with you in jeeest a sec," she said, brushing on gloss. "Go ahead and play with anything on the desk you want. The spinners and the slinky are OK, but the 8-Ball always comes up 'How the Hell Should I Know?' every friggin' time. Pieca junk never has worked right."

She grabbed a fresh cigarette and said, "Hey, check it out..." She lit up, took a long drag, and exhaled a shimmering golden aurora, streaked with emerald-green and ruby-red flashes, glinting with thousands of tiny silver spangles. She leaned back and watched it float around the room.

"Took me three centuries to learn how to do that," she grinned.

"Guess this isn't a nonsmoking office?" he said.

"It's actually encouraged by the management," Kalumtum said, "same way a lot of rehab centers sort of turn a blind eye to it. Helps calm down the addicts."

"You're not worried about lung cancer?"

She shrugged and said, "No lungs, no cancer."

"I don't see any sort of, um, celestial-computer in here," he said, struggling to make small talk.

"Can't imagine why we'd need one," she shrugged, "celestial or terrestrial. Nope, paper and pencil works just fine, especially for routine office tasks. No offense."

"You know," he added a little hesitantly, "I'm not going back there. Definitely not anytime soon, I can tell you that."

"Well, I'm not going back there at all. Like, never. My name's Kalumtum," she said, tapping her name-plate.

"Pretty name," he said.

"Thanks. Means 'Little Lamb' in ancient Babylonian," she said. "Cute, huh? My parents sold me to a broker who sold me to an Elamite priest in some Babylonian dumpwater town; I was a temple prostitute. It sucked."

She poked him with her pencil and said, "Get it?"

"I get it, I get it," he said.

"Well," Kalumtum said, opening a stained manila folder, "let's take a look at that little old file-arino, shall we?"

Her office door was open and he heard someone say, "Know the first thing I said? Where's the goddam complaints department??" He could see a little knot of people gathered around a water-cooler. They all laughed, and a man wearing what looked like a 1970s Sears business suit said, "Yeah, that's what I'd like to know. Two whole years dying of renal disease and my back still itches where my kidneys were. 'Natural causes.' Natural causes, my ass."

"Ah, you're all lightweights!" a young woman said. "I got my heart ripped outta my chest by an Aztec priest!"

A man with a grizzled beard said, "Big deal! I was whipped half to death, then keelhauled! I'm telling you—"

He was interrupted by a tall red-headed woman leaning against the water-cooler. "Hey, didja hear this one? An SS officer, a Grand Inquisitor, and a serial rapist all walk into a bar—" —but he didn't hear the rest. Kalumtum reached over with her foot and shut the door.

"Sorry about that—people get pretty raucous around here. Makes it hard to concentrate. Oh, and by the way—please don't go looking for Jack Kennedy just to ask who really killed him. He hates that. Ask him about PT-109 instead. He'll talk about that for hours..."

She went back to his file.

"Let's see," she said, "one child, a daughter, died in a car crash caused by a drunk driver?"

"Yes, that's right," he said.

"Well, she's fine now—you'll see her soon," Kalumtum said, still reading.

"I wanted her to be fine at school, not crushed to death in a Kia on her way to junior year at state college!" he shouted.

"I know how you feel," Kalumtum said, shrugging. "Believe me, I know exactly how you feel..."

The shrugging was getting annoying.

He looked out the window.

At least, it felt like he was looking out a window.

Anyway, he was definitely seeing elsewhere, beyond Kalumtum's little office to the street outside. He saw brick and wood buildings, old storefronts mostly.

It was a dark afternoon, a cold, damp winter day in what looked like Deaths of Despair World Headquarters, somewhere in the deep Midwest. A place you turned your nose up at and turned your back on. A place that didn't matter, so the people who lived there didn't matter either—a town that had its guts sliced open and a cat sewn inside.

He saw a run-down barroom, the kind of place that's still called a tavern in some cities. Inside, it was all bare wood and vinyl seats, lit by colored bulbs and neon beer signs.

He looked at the wooden bar and suddenly, he realized he knew everything. Everything. He knew the type of wood the bar was made from, he knew the trees it used to be, where they grew, the lumber-mill where it was cut and formed into heavy planks. He knew the carpenters who turned the wood into the bar, he knew the lady in the office who took the order, the guys who packed it and shipped it, he knew the truck and the truckers who drove it out to delivery. And the growth rings in the wood on the bar stood out with unimaginable clarity – he could see each and every one of them and, in each growth ring, he knew the year and each and every thing that had happened in the whole world during that year and every, single thing, thought, and event that had happened to each and every person living in the world that year, everyone who was born, lived, and died in that year.

The lady bartender was drawing some beers and setting them on a big tray with a large order of fries. He knew her, too. When she lived, when she died, her friends and her family. He even knew what kind of perfume she wore, when she bought her last bottle of it, and he knew the saleslady who sold it to her and everything about her, too. *L'Air du Temps*. And he knew exactly how it smelled in the bottle and how it smelled when it was warmed by her skin.

And he wasn't confused or overwhelmed by it. He just knew it—the same way he knew a red light meant “stop” and a green

light meant “go” and a touchdown was six points.

He saw a man and a girl sitting together at a tiny, little bar table like a couple of old friends. It looked like a high barstool topped with Formica instead of padded vinyl. The girl wore concentration camp rags with her head shaved down to her scalp and she couldn't have been more than fourteen years old. The man looked to be in his late 60s. He was smoking one cigarette after another and wore a threadbare T-shirt that said, “I was liquidated in the Laogai and all I got was this lousy T-shirt.”

The young girl and the old man were working their way through a bottle of Jack Daniels, two shot-glasses at a time.

Suddenly, the girl jumped up and cupped her hands around her mouth and shouted, “Hey guys! How 'bout them guardian angels, huh?”

Everyone in the bar pumped their fists and yelled, “Woot! Woot! Woot!”

And in less than a nano-second, he heard millions, billions, tens of billions of voices join in, a chorus of “Woot! Woot! Woot!” ringing through eternity.

Then he saw a tree in bright summer sunshine; it was a big oak, with thousands of dark-green leaves. The tree was warm from the sun and he could taste the aroma of the leaves and wood.

Sitting in a patch of shade under the tree was a young woman and a little boy. And he knew they weren't mother and son.

“There's a camel over there,” the little boy said, pointing up at the clouds.

“Uh-huh,” the young woman said, smiling. “And he's got two humps.”

“Yup!” the boy said. “Two humps, that’s him.”

The young woman pointed with a leaf she was holding and said, “And that one looks sort of like a unicorn, see it?”

The little boy nodded. “Think so—he’s kind of up on his hind legs?”

The young woman laughed and said, “Yeah, that’s him—dancing around up there in the sky...”

He knew who they were.

The young woman was famous—she was—had been—Elizabeth Short. The “Black Dahlia;” tied up, beaten to death, butchered like mutton, then cut into two pieces and left in Leimert Park in Los Angeles.

He knew the little boy, too, everything about him. His name was Thomas and he was found in an abandoned refrigerator in an empty lot near his home; he had gotten trapped inside.

He turned to Kalumtum and said, “This is just a horrible, horrible system, you know that?”

“Hey,” Kalumtum shrugged, “I just work here.”

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David Wiener has written cover, feature, and interview articles for various performing arts magazines including *American Cinematographer*, *Producers Guild Journal*, *Cahiers du Cinema*, and *The Journal of the Royal Photographic Society of Great Britain*. His plays have been produced in London, India, Canada, Australia, Mexico, and the U.S. and have been published three times in the Smith & Kraus “Best Plays” one-act anthology series. He In 2007, he completed a Literary

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