

**THE BURNING ROOM**

Written by Bill Albert

Copyright 2021 by Bill Albert

INT. THE BURNING ROOM

There are no windows so it is impossible to tell when and where this is. In the center of the room is a battered pot with black scorch marks on it. There are three chairs in a semi-circle around the pot and each has a young woman, early 20's, tough, raggedly dressed, sitting in it. They are looking at the pot, and not saying anything. They may be strapped into the chairs but there are only a few lights hanging from the ceiling so there are lots of shadows. From left to right is JESS, DALLAS and then PETRA. We see all this under the following.

STATE (V.O.)

In 2018 much of the United States' infrastructure was crippled by a cyberattack from North Korea. Using a combination of DHS and FEMA protocols the government took over. The attacks were stopped and order restored but the protocols remained. A State of emergency was established.

The three women finally look at each other.

DALLAS

I wonder who did it?

JESS

Who did what?

DALLAS

Turned us in.

PETRA

It shouldn't be that hard to think it out. Not that many people knew.

DALLAS

And we kept close tabs on those who did.

(eyeing JESS)

At least I did.

JESS looks away.

PETRA

JESS?

JESS

No. I was very careful.  
Only specific contacts knew.

DALLAS

Including?

JESS

Knock, Carson, Alejandra knew.  
(pauses, shyly)  
Barto knew.

DALLAS

He wasn't supposed to know.

JESS

He wouldn't say anything.

DALLAS

(angry)

I warned you about breaking  
trust.

JESS

He talked about what it was  
like growing up with one. It  
was exciting. It was fun. We  
had one of his favorites. I  
just wanted him to know that  
they still existed.

DALLAS

Dammit! Now what does he have?  
What do we have?

(indicates pot)

Ashes.

JESS

He promised to stay quiet.

DALLAS

And what do you think the State promised him for selling you out? Privileges? Movement? Access? There are bounties for smugglers like us. The State has made sure that is known.

JESS

He wouldn't sell us out to the State. I know he wouldn't.

PETRA

He didn't.

(they look at her)

I've seen the way they work. We all have. If the State even suspects you are hiding something they don't waste time taking you in. When they don't need a warrant, search and seizure is pretty quick.

JESS

It's been weeks since I told him.

PETRA

And he's been dead for weeks.

(Jess is shaken)

They took him in a round up. Officially, he died in interrogation. There are a few things the State is willing to share.

(Dallas softens as she looks at Jess's heartbreak.)

JESS

He was so sweet.

DALLAS

(to PETRA)

Any ideas where we are?

PETRA

After they tossed us into the van they pulled out and turned left. We'd have been going west on Dekker. We hit two stops.

DALLAS

They weren't running hot. They didn't want the attention.

PETRA

Which made us a big catch.

DALLAS

Part of me was hoping they'd brag.

JESS

I heard the third avenue ell signal bells.

PETRA

Followed by a steady, slow turn to the south on to the express way headed south and west.

DALLAS

Two hours.

PETRA

(correcting sternly)  
Two and a half.

JESS

We're in Springfield?

PETRA

Or very close.

JESS

We're a long way from home.

DALLAS

Not too far.

JESS

We're going back? We'll be  
hot there.

DALLAS

Very, but there are some things  
I need to check out. A few  
stories I've heard of and  
don't want to leave behind.

Jess and Petra look at her in surprise.

JESS

We have to get out of here fast.

DALLAS

(glances at PETRA, who nods)  
We will.

They hear a DOOR OPENING and SLAMMING SHUT in the distance. A  
RATTLING OF KEYS, then the steady MARCH OF BOOTS as someone  
approaches. The STATE enters. He is very military, clean cut,  
pressed clothes, his uniform familiar yet unrecognizable. He  
comes to a complete stop just outside the light. His face is  
unseen as he slowly circles them then comes to a stop in front  
of the pot.

STATE

(over JESS)

Insurrection.

(over DALLAS)

Sedition.

(over PETRA)

Treason. Do those words  
mean nothing to you? Do you  
understand just how serious  
they are? They do, in fact,  
best describe a cancer in  
the heart of the State. You  
remember cancer? Of course  
you do, it has only been  
seven years since but State  
eliminated cancer in all its  
forms. Citizens of the State  
have full access to a final  
solution that prevents cancer

(MORE)

STATE (CONT'D)

form eating away at the  
body. We survive, we prosper,  
we celebrate without cancer.

(pause)

Yet, it appears, the State  
itself has a cancer. A cancer  
spread by insurrection, sedition  
and treason. Like the cancer of  
the body we must find a solution  
and eliminate the disease. We  
must isolate it and remove it  
before it can spread.

(runs a hand across Jess's  
cheek)

Are you a cancer?

(frightened, she shakes  
her head)

Of course you are not. So pretty...

(grabs her throat)

To pretty to be a threat to the State.

(gently touches Dallas,  
who is spitting nails at him)

You must be a cancer. I can see it  
in your eyes. And of course, you...

(Petra looks back dispassionately)

Are you a cancer? Or do you just  
think you are?

Dallas and Jess look at each other. They have gained confidence  
in his reaction to Petra.

STATE

(points to pot)

Was all this worth it?

Sacrifice yourselves, betray  
the State, for this?

DALLAS

Yes. You are wrong! Everything  
about you and the State is  
wrong.

STATE

The State has brought us peace  
like never before. There has

(MORE)

STAE (CONT'D)

never been this much prosperity  
in the history of the planet.  
No crime. There hasn't been a  
criminal act in this city for  
two years.

DALLAS

After three years of blood from  
your shock troops. Entire blocks  
burned, homes confiscated, privacy  
robbed. No warrants necessary.  
Suspicion justified everything.

STATE

Extreme measures had to be taken.

DALLAS

Extreme isn't accurate enough.  
Enhanced interrogation. Cleansing,  
was what the State called it.  
With secret prisons, shadow  
transports and water boarding  
as the norm.

STATE

It prevented disobedience and  
extremist acts. They had to be  
dealt with to prevent any more  
attacks on our civilization.

DALLAS

Famous words from our history.  
You would know what they led  
to if you'd read about them,  
or at least, were allowed to read.

STATE

The State will tell you what  
you need to read.

(scoops a handful out of  
the pot and as he lets ashes  
slip through his fingers)

This is what will happen to the  
things you don't need to read.  
Burned like trashed and dispensed  
with the wind.



JESS

Sounds like the definition of  
a holocaust.

STATE

An event which the State has  
ruled never really happened.

JESS

An event in which millions died.

STATE

Which never really happened.

(looks at pot)

Tell me, if it had taken place.

Would having one of these have  
prevented their deaths?

(she wants to speak but

withers as he dominates her)

I didn't think so.

(to PETRA)

Would one of these save you now?

(she blinks and looks

away but is not really

afraid of him)

You have been charged with  
transporting illegal contraband  
for the purpose of spreading  
sedition and treason. You received  
them from an agent in Philadelphia  
four days ago. Distributed two  
in Columbus, then made several  
transactions in Chicago including  
an undercover agent working for  
the State. You were apprehended,  
tried, no defense necessary, and  
brought here after establishing  
your guilt. You will either be  
reprimanded to labor resource centers  
or reconditioned if the State  
appointees find it possible.  
Recondition will be conducted by  
State approved officials and  
guidelines and can include a  
variety of techniques including  
sensory stimulation or TCEs.

PETRA

Electro shock therapy. Water  
boarding just too old fashioned  
for torture these days?

STATE

These are officially approved  
advanced interrogation techniques  
and not considered torture.

PETRA

It never is when the State wants  
to use it. It's interesting the  
words you choose. The way you  
change their meaning when it  
suits you.

(pauses)

Or is it when you are afraid of it.

STATE

The State is not afraid.

PETRA

Oh, yes it is. Doing whatever  
it can to get rid of the words  
it doesn't like.

STATE

The State only makes things  
simpler for people. The State  
chooses the words that are  
necessary. The rest are unnecessary.

PETRA

Another interesting choice.  
Unnecessary sounds so much more  
acceptable than banning. Less  
restrictive than forbidding.  
Less intense than burning.

STATE

You will agree that it is  
the duty of the State to  
protect the citizens from  
terroristic attacks and  
influences and it is the

(MORE)

STATE (CONT'D)  
citizen's duty, in return, to  
report possible terroristic  
activities. Under State law  
smuggling contraband is treason.

PETRA  
Contraband! Something generic  
that can cover anything the  
State chooses. That, in itself,  
shows your fear. You are so  
afraid of them you can't even  
use the right words.

STATE  
The State is not afraid of  
illicit material but must  
monitor its use.

DALLAS  
Or deny it!

JESS  
Or deny it!

PETRA  
Or deny it!

STATE  
A cancer must not be allowed  
to spread.

PETRA  
(furious)  
Say the word!

STATE  
Would you allow a disease  
to spread freely?

PETRA  
Books! Books!  
(STATE shivers)  
We carried books! That is  
what they were and changing  
the name doesn't change what  
they were.

DALLAS

And even the State, with  
absolute power, can't destroy  
them all.

STATE

(shaking the pot)

All paper books will be turned  
to ashes! Ebooks deleted. You  
see these? Your precious books!  
Ashes! Gone forever! With one  
swoop the State removed them  
and any influences they may  
have had. Shakespeare, gone!  
Harper Lee, gone! Dickens, gone!

JESS

Choice, gone!

DALLAS

Independence, gone!

PETRA

Free will, gone! An illusion  
under the State.

STATE

On the contrary. There is more  
free will than ever with so much  
less to worry about. No bills  
to pay. Very little crime, no  
hunger, fewer concerns with less  
decisions to make.

DALLAS

Like who to vote for?

STATE

In the last presidential election  
only 42% of the country voted.  
A majority didn't bother. They  
wanted someone else to make  
the decision.

JESS

Of course more and stricter voter registration and identification laws established by the State had nothing to do with it. Limited poll hours and locations with fingerprint and background checks. It was easier to buy a gun than it was to vote.

STATE

One less thing to worry about. People don't want to have to make those decisions. They'd rather have a king than a president.

DALLAS

So the State gave them an emperor.

STATE

Why do you think so many families thrived in politics? The Kennedys? The Bushes? The Clintons?

DALLAS

At the time the majority wanted them.

STATE

The State serves the majority and the majority must serve the State.

DALLAS

How can you say it's what a majority wants when you refuse to give them a choice?

STATE

They had a choice and they chose the State.

JESS

NO! We never gave absolute power to the State. The State took it and decided to keep it.

STATE

The majority wanted protection  
from the North Korean cyberattacks.  
The majority wanted services restored.  
The majority wanted the State to  
take control.

DALLAS

Only in the crisis months when  
people were hungry and afraid  
and without power. We needed a  
leader at that moment.

STATE

And you got what you wanted.

PETRA

(calmly)

Be careful what you wish for.

DALLAS

And at that moment the State  
took absolute power.

STATE

And then came unprecedented  
prosperity in exchange for  
some liberties.

JESS

All liberties.

STATE

The facts have proven the State  
right. 11 years of success.

JESS

Tighter rules and less freedom.

STATE

Not in the opinion of the State.

PETRA

What happens when the opinions  
contradict the facts?

STATE

(stumbles, they are getting  
to him)

The State has the ruling opinion.

PETRA

No matter what the difference is.

STATE

The State also decides the facts.

PETRA

What about the differences?

STATE

(uncomfortable)

There are no differences in the  
State. The State decides.

PETRA

In whatever benefits the State.  
That will be its failure.

STATE

(furious)

I will not fail!

PETRA

The difference between the  
very smart and the very  
dumb is that the very smart  
will change their opinions  
to fit the facts while the  
very dumb will try and change  
the facts to fit their opinions.  
Which are you, not the State, you?

The State walks over to Petra.

STATE

There is one thing you fail to  
take into account.

(caresses her face, then  
snaps her neck)

It can be so much easier to  
change the facts.

Dallas glares at him with pure hatred.

DALLAS

(spitting nails.)

Your own brand of a final solution!

(she stumbles at the sound  
of Jess laughing)

JESS

(laughing, lost)

You said I. She said the State  
would fail. You said that you, I,  
would not. You can't tell the  
difference anymore. She was right.  
You don't know where the State  
ends and you begin. You wanted  
to change the facts. Did you?  
Can you, or the State, change  
what she said?

(pause)

You think you can but you can't.  
Why not? They are just words.  
You may be able to burn the books,  
everyone you get, but you can't  
burn the words!

STATE

You must be dealt with. For the  
safety of the State.

DALLAS

When was the last time you did  
something you wanted to do?  
When was the last time you did  
something without the State's  
approval?

(State doesn't respond)

This is your choice. Do what  
the State wants you to do or  
not. Either way, even without  
the books you've burned, the words  
have beaten you.

STATE

You over estimate your importance  
or influence. You are a minor



threat to the State.

DALLAS

But we are a bigger threat to you.

STATE

(uncertain, confused)

I must serve the State.

DALLAS

But does the State serve you,  
or does it only serve itself?

A ringing of a DOOR OPENING AND BEING SLAMMED SHUT.

FADE TO

The State sits alone in the Burning Room staring down at the burnt ashes. He picks some up, hears whispers of the three prisoners.

JESS (V.O.)

You may be able to burn the books,  
everyone you get, but you can't  
burn the words!

PETRA (V.O.)

We carried books! That is  
what they were and changing  
the name doesn't change what  
they were.

DALLAS (V.O.)

But does the State serve you,  
or does it only serve itself?

In a mixture of rage and confusion he tosses the pot aside and storms off.