

Alex felt a chill moving along his arms and chest, panic rioting within him, the abyss opening at his feet.

## Ed Kleiman

# North End Faust

The sun on the horizon flashed like a nearly extinguished lantern, sending its weak crimson glow to drift bleakly among the trees and houses on Riverview Place. It was a quiet street—the Red River flowing sluggishly nearby—and rarely did an unfamiliar car pass between the rows of shiny modern storey-and-a-half houses that gleamed palely in the gathering darkness.

At eighty-thirty, having locked the doors for the night, Alex trudged downstairs to work in his basement study. Glancing at the small, narrow window to see that it was locked, he noticed that the twilight still clung to the budding branches and still shone upon the newly uncovered grass, pale from its long burial beneath the snow. Only a few weeks to go before spring would really catch hold. With a sigh, he pulled the blind down upon the indistinct Winnipeg landscape and settled into his chair. In less than half an hour, it would be dark. The voices of his wife and two children in the living room up above reached him as if from a great distance—another world.

Once he had liked this sense of isolation, the feeling of being in a cell, pitted alone against a difficult problem. Even as a child, after the initial terror of being locked in a closet by his older brother, he'd learned to welcome the darkness. When his parents had found him hours later, they'd been apprehensive, alarmed for his sake, but he'd smiled at their apprehension, as if armed by the darkness with a new secret. As he grew older, he felt nourished and strengthened by these moments of isolation. It was as if they allowed him to regroup his personal resources, look at a problem with detachment. Yet more was involved; he'd become terribly dependent on the hidden vein of strength that these moments allowed him to tap, the luminous images that would then flood into his mind.

Alone in an empty room. That was all that he'd required—the emptiness. And out of this condition he'd managed to build his whole life: a career, house, family, reputation. Others required sophisticated equipment, tools to practise their vocations, weapons with which to wage their war with life. His weapon had been his mind; and his adversary, the emptiness. Yet it had been his ally, too.

As a teenager, while some of his companions in the North End roamed along darkened streets or joined gangs that broke windows and slashed tires, he had spent his time alone—studying his way through high school and, later, through university. When the time came to declare his field of study, he found his decision already made. Nothing could have been simpler. While all his fellow students agonized and procrastinated for as long as the graduate school would let them, Alex turned as if to an old friend. His thesis was entitled: “The Effects of Isolation upon the Human Psyche.”

And the results had been instantaneous. The thesis itself was published within the year; *Maclean's* ran his picture, and devoted half a page to outlining his work; and he was immediately given a temporary appointment to the Psychology Department. Then, almost at once, he'd had to ask for a two-week leave of absence. He'd been invited to New York to give a series of lectures on the probable effects of isolation in situations ranging anywhere from the industrial sphere to the kinds of space travel likely to occur in the future.

Upstairs the sound of voices and footsteps had all died away. Even the television set had been turned off. Kathy must have gone to bed shortly after the children. The silence allowed him to recall with renewed intensity his excitement that first year when one good piece of fortune after another had befallen him. All of it had come out of his ability simply to sit silently by himself, just as he was doing now. No need to be frightened because of his present difficulties: this impasse would be overcome, as had all the others.

Within months of joining the department, he'd been granted the funds to have an isolation chamber constructed in an abandoned storage room on the ground floor of the Arts Building. The

room itself was eight by twelve feet and had indirect lighting. It was wired for microphones, had one-way glass so that all behavior within could be observed, and an emergency buzzer whose operation required very little explanation.

But while that door was shut, the behavior within was a closed environment, as unique as any culture growth developing behind glass. And what developed there—the unique ecology possessed by that room—was still pretty much a mystery to Alexander Markiewicz—despite what he'd written to the contrary. All he knew was that students who volunteered to enter the chamber rarely lasted more than a day. Mind you, the pay was good, and there was no lack of volunteers who promised faithfully to record every detail of their experiences. But, inevitably, after a few hours the buzzer would sound, and the terrified student had to be led, trembling, to a recovery room. One student had even refused, at first, to let go of the assistant's hands.

Alex had met his wife Kathy that way. She was from Oak Point, a town sixty miles to the northwest of Winnipeg. The thought of earning enough money in two weeks to pay a good part of her expenses for the next university term had been too attractive to resist. Alex could still recall her screams as he'd dashed into the isolation chamber. In retrospect, Alex felt disturbed when he recalled the scene and how he had led the paralyzed girl once again into the realm of familiar faces.

For days afterward, he'd questioned her about the experience. He himself could easily spend a week in the chamber without suffering unbearable strain. But for her ... The account she gave refused to settle into focus. She spoke of a sea that didn't seem to have any bound or shore. Anyone else would have thrown up his hands in despair, but Alex had responded characteristically. He'd sat down in his study and puzzled through her comments and images again and again.

To be locked up in a totally unresponsive world—wouldn't that remove one's sense of reality, dissolve all boundaries; or, to use her terms, remove the shore from the ocean? let the unconscious well up uncontrollably? Was it possible that simply per-

ceiving everyday experience was responsible for keeping that darkness locked within bounds? And if that last restraint were to vanish, who could predict what would happen next? All historical development might reel backwards—beyond pagan practices, even beyond primordial man and his cults, back along the evolutionary scale toward an emptiness that had never known time, but consisted only of a still and endless space.

At one point, Alex had been startled by a sense of recognition when she spoke of being stared at from within the darkness of the room. He had, in fact, been haunted by the same experience, but never mentioned it to a soul. He simply hadn't felt as alarmed by the experience as Kathy. Also, his research so far had evoked almost no skepticism, and he had no intention of having his work jeopardized now because of one hysterical student.

Still he found himself strongly attracted to her; perhaps, at first, simply because she could give a voice to the emptiness that had so long intrigued him. Over the last few years, he had begun to assume—without actually formulating the thought—that one price he would have to pay for his good fortune was his own personal isolation. After all, he seemed to have embraced loneliness almost like a bride. But now that bride had taken on material form. Mind you, he hadn't even the ghost of a notion how to begin courting a pretty twenty-two year old. Nor, he realized, did Kathy herself fully understand why she was so drawn to him, though he sensed that she alone had been able to see past his loneliness and pride ... to some secret longing that he was only now aware of. So instead they spent the winter in a series of interviews during which he attempted to record every detail of her experience.

By that spring, he had gathered enough material to publish a new research paper. It had been a period of triumph. They'd each felt as if they'd broken out of their isolation cells forever. The sense of freedom lasted just long enough for them to get married. But once the children were born, Kathy no longer seemed the same. She blossomed in their presence and her days were soon caught up in their days. A new kind of tempo had been

established from which he was not excluded; but though it called to him and he desperately longed to join it, he found he could not. The children's lives were so different, so vibrant. Was it any wonder that they had soon won Kathy away from him?

As Alex sat at his desk in the silent house, he puzzled where things had gone wrong. That people should be terrified of the experimental chamber no longer surprised him. He could still recall, from years ago, the battle-hardened American marine sergeant who had scoffed at the danger and warned that he'd bankrupt not only the Psychology Department, but also the University itself, perhaps even the whole province. True—he had not pushed the button. But three and a half hours later he had to be led from the room, his eyes staring, his limbs frozen into stillness. Nor was his case unique: some students had required psychiatric help after a single experience. Others had emerged shaken, seized their money and quickly departed.

More recently his reputation had begun to take a curious turn, mainly as the result of the odd news item that had found its way into the international press. Escaped political prisoners had made it abundantly clear that totalitarian governments in Eastern Europe had also discovered his publications—and were finding them useful. Where physical torture was impossible to use because of adverse public opinion, psychological torture had proven surprisingly successful—and avoided world censure in the bargain. Later he'd heard that similar techniques had been used in Vietnam.

Alex himself was certain that, under similar circumstances, he would never have broken. In fact, not quite two years ago, he'd set some sort of record by remaining in the chamber for over two weeks. He had developed his own way of coping with the kind of dread that lay waiting in the isolation cell. When the emptiness welled up within him, and the walls became unreal, and he began to suspect that the buzzer had been disconnected by a disgruntled graduate student, or that his colleagues monitoring the experiment behind the one-way glass had become jealous of his reputation ... when all these doubts began to assail him and he

lost track of time, and terror began to nibble at the edges of his consciousness, he would immediately throw himself into a special psychological maneuver he'd devised to insure his self-preservation.

He was leaping from a rowboat onto an island in the far north, where he was going to build a summer cottage he had designed himself. Axe stroke by axe stroke, he cleared a path well into the interior, later chopping the logs into firewood. Painstakingly, he erected a shelter for the night and then lit a fire to cook his food. Early the next day, before dawn, he was again busy clearing brush from the site, setting out concrete foundation blocks, levelling beams. Over the next week or two, he created his own daylight and darkness, brilliant sun and wheeling stars, winds, rains, cloudy days, bent nails, and split shingles. But when everything was on the verge of completion and he had to feel that there was nothing left to do, his whole island paradise had begun to turn unreal. Not knowing what to expect next, he had pressed the buzzer.

The door had opened and there had been ... the University President himself, newspaper reporters, his colleagues, admiring students. He wasn't surprised to learn that he had established a record of sorts. More importantly, he had emerged again from that empty room with all the resources needed to bolster a reputation that was just beginning to sag.

That was his last success, he remembered, and, lately, the criticism had once more become intense. Parents of students who still felt some of the effect of their experience in the isolation chamber wrote heated letters to the Minister of Education. And just last month, he'd been totally confounded to learn of a TV interview in which an I.R.A. spokesman had denounced him for providing the occupation force in Ulster with the means of breaking the will of political prisoners. Was it his imagination or had his colleagues recently begun to look at him uneasily? And what would his parents have said if they were still living?—his parents, who'd fled to America themselves to escape persecution?

In the past, whenever faced with a threat of this kind, he had returned to the isolation chamber only to emerge with new material

on which to base academic papers, and win the admiration of his colleagues. But the last time Alex had entered the chamber—about three months ago now—he'd had to press the release buzzer after only forty-five minutes. For one terrifying moment, nothing had happened. Had they all gone to coffee, certain that they wouldn't be hearing that buzzer for another week or so? But then the anxious, questioning faces had appeared at the door. "Sorry," he smiled. "I'd forgotten I still have a set of essays to mark for my Honors Class."

Alex was certain others would feel that here was proof the compelling nature of his original research was now a thing of the past. Gradually, he had grown to doubt his colleagues' respect and concern, behind which he thought he sensed an envy of his accomplishments, perhaps even hatred. To them, everything must have seemed so easy. They thought he had paid nothing for all the honors he had won. They would know, of course, that there ought to be a price, but somehow there seemed to be no one to take an accounting.

The following week Alex busied himself with departmental work and stayed as far away from the isolation chamber as he could. He even made a point of using the doorway and stairwell at the other side of the building. Once, however, at the end of a meeting, he'd been obliged to walk right by the room housing the isolation cell. And he'd frozen. He'd had to be helped out of the building. Later, he didn't even attempt to explain what had gone wrong.

He knew he must find some way to have that isolation chamber dismantled. An excuse—that's what he needed. It shouldn't be too hard. His research was now complete, he'd announce, and he needed the laboratory space for a new project. Of course, there never would be any new project, and after a few years everyone in the department would realize it. So what? Let them think that he'd somehow burnt himself out. At least he would no longer be living with constant terror.

Now, as he sat at the desk in his basement study, Alex felt a chill moving along his arms and chest, panic rioting within him,

the abyss opening at his feet. He had sat at his desk as often as he dared these past few months, planning ways to have that isolation chamber dismantled, even imagining himself rushing into the deserted building one night with a sledge hammer and doing the job himself. And each time, the results had been the same—chills, sweat, the barbaric darkness opening beneath and within him, and the sense of being stared at by some dark, gigantic presence. Involuntarily, Alex reached for the emergency buzzer, then looked blankly about him for a moment until he realized there was no emergency buzzer to press.

And so he did what had by now become a habit. He rushed from the house—from his wife and children—and walked quickly off into the darkness. At the corner, he turned left and set off for the city's North End—unaware of the trees, the other houses with lights in them, the passing cars, school playgrounds, passersby. He could not have been less aware of the life about him if he had been walking through an underground tunnel. When at last he turned the corner of Redwood and Main and caught sight of the bridge spanning the Red River, he felt himself gulping down the cool night air as if it were well water. He and his friends had played beneath that bridge after school, had rented rowboats and paddled beneath it on weekends.

If he could no longer dispel that inner emptiness by dreaming of a summer cottage on his own private island, then he would set his childhood memories in place of those dreams, use them to counter that endless outpouring of darkness that welled up within him constantly. His childhood memories—they were still there. Surely they would last for a while before being used up. Give him time to think. Find some way to dismantle the invisible isolation chamber that was always around him now.

He must have come here half a dozen times this spring, hoping against hope that he'd find some way out. But he could still feel those walls around him: at a departmental meeting, during a class, even at breakfast while talking to his wife and children. These everyday contacts now did not have as much reality as that vacation cottage he'd built and rebuilt on his imaginary island.



The coming of spring, the melting of snow, grass slowly turning green—he had hoped that they would relieve his awareness of those ever-present walls. Instead the quickening of life all about him had only intensified his anguish. He hadn't spoken a real word to a real person for almost the whole term. His previous record in the isolation chamber had been a little over two weeks. He'd already lasted longer than he'd ever dreamed possible, exploited and exhausted resources he didn't even know he had, survived beyond all possible limits and measures—and there was still no end in sight. No buzzer to push. Not a single human face among all those he had known that he could respond to. It was not their fault—it was his own. Long ago, he did not know exactly when or how, he had made some secret pact in the darkness. What kind of bargain was it anyway that he had unwittingly struck?

Still, there must be some way out, some hidden spring that would open a yet undiscovered door. All this pain, the constant sense of loss ... And for what? As he peered about him now, his eyes strained desperately against the darkness. Like a blind man, all his senses became more acute. What was that sound?

From beneath him, Alex heard the voices of his childhood—his companions in the rowboat—calling: "Hey, it's my turn at the oars. Watch out, will you. You're tipping us. That rock ... Pull on your left oar, stupid. The current here is too strong ... Come on, Alex, we're going to the island." They were real—he was sure of it. Not giving himself time for a second thought, Alex climbed onto the guardrail of the bridge.

Now he had only to join his companions in that final, dangerous crossing. And then he could spring from the rowboat onto that island; then he could build that cottage. As he stepped into the darkness ... and felt the water move about him, he could sense gigantic black wings gathering and unfolding in vast sweeps that blotted out the sky. Arms flailing, he made the hammer fly in his hands as he drove nail after nail in board after board. The dark walls rose swiftly about him. Hammering. Building. He didn't dare stop. Quicker. Faster. Soon his island paradise would be complete.