

The Uncomfortablists

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Chapter 1

"Did you masturbate this morning?"

Ma is stirring a pot on the stove.

"Fuck, Ma!"

"I know you don't like to discuss it, honey."

"What do you want me to say?"

"It's not about what I want, Ben."

"It's none of your business."

"You know I'm going to keep asking."

She will, too. At least once a day. She doesn't even care about the answer.

"We are not having this conversation."

"Well, try to remember tonight."

I say nothing. I hunch into my jacket and try to warm my hands in my armpits.

Ma slops mush into bowls, puts one in front of me and sits down with another. It looks like beige wallpaper paste.

"What's this?"

"It was on sale."

I pick up my spoon.

"What do you say?"

"Thanks, Ma."

"Say it."

I sigh.

"For what we are about to receive, make us truly uncomfortable."

"Was that so hard?"

"It doesn't even make sense."

"It's not supposed to make sense."

I force down a few swallows and stand up.

"Gotta go."

"Weapons inspection."

I hand over my gun. It's a Colt .38 Detective Special. Series One, snubbie. It used to be my Dad's. She flips open the cylinder, unloads, squints down the barrel and the chambers, checks the ammunition and reloads. She shakes her head.

"Five rounds?"

"Safer."

"Less firepower. And you're not even loading +Ps."

She hands it to me.

I put it back in my pack.

"Yes, you loved your father, so did I, but."

I shrug.

"He had an automatic he might be here today."

I have to get out of here.

"Are you going to be too warm in that?"

"It's freezing outside!"

"Take off your jacket."

I take it off and stuff it in my pack.

"Bye Ma."

I give her a kiss. She slaps me lightly on the cheek.

I run down the stairs. The cold hits me like a fist. I turn the corner, haul out my jacket and put it on, gasping in the icy air.

* * *

The low, leaden sky amplifies the traffic noises. They grate in my skull. I have to run for the bus, and the bus driver pulls out just as I reach it. Then he squeals the brakes so loud my teeth hurt and lets me on. He's grinning and I can't help grinning back.

"Thanks, man."

"Shut the fuck up."

He definitely made me run on purpose. All part of being uncomfortable. I head for the back.

There's a girl on the back seat, at the end of the aisle. I've seen her before in the cafeteria. She sees me looking and looks straight back. Then the bus lurches off. I stumble, fall forward and end up on my knees, face in her crotch. I scramble up.

"Use your head!" she says brightly, with this vacant Barbie face. I don't know what to say, but then she gives a low chuckle.

She moves over and I sit down.

It wasn't exactly an original line. Half the ads in the bus say "Use Your Head!" The other half say "Give Yourself a Hand!" They're really graphic, but it doesn't make you feel horny. Not me, anyhow. Roy says it works for him, but he's a walking hard-on. The government claims it reduces unwanted births. How they figure that out I do not know.

She sees me looking at the ads.

"I'd say they suck, but that's the whole idea."

I try to come up with a good reply.

"They're everywhere."

"They're giving porn a bad name."

Her eyes are brown with dark green flecks. There's a little gap between her front teeth.

"That's just what I was thinking."

"May."

"Oh, yeah, I'm Ben. Ebenezer, really. You may as well know the worst."

"Yeah. Mayberry. Just plain idiotic. We're not supposed to like our names."

"There's this guy I know, he acts tough but his real name's Fautleroy."

"Maybe he deserves it. But his parents didn't know that when they named him, did they? Why do they do it?"

"Oh, my Ma buys into the whole thing. Like "Give yourself a hand". She keeps asking me, you know..."

"Don't you hate that? It's just none of their fucking business."

"That's what I tell her, I say, Ma, it is absolutely none of your fucking business, but she's like 'It's for your own good, honey'".

"Grrr."

She clenches her fist and looks fiercely out the window. Her fingers are thin and there are freckles on the back of her hand. I can see a blue-green vein below the surface.

"Something bad out there? Delivery trucks? Fast food franchises? Maple trees?"

I seem to have locked into some stupid jolly mode.

She gives me a puzzled look, then glances at her fist. The knuckles are white.

"Just something I was thinking."

She opens her hand and puts it on her knee. For a while we ride in silence.

It's like a staring contest in reverse. I crack first.

"Thanks, by the way."

"For what?"

"For being ok about me falling on you."

"It was an accident. Wasn't it?"

"But, you could have acted embarrassed, or mad. Or weird."

"I wasn't weird?"

"Well, maybe a little."

"Just comes natural. You're pretty weird yourself."

"You're too kind."

"Not at all."

"Thank you so much."

"Shut the fuck up."

* * *

There was the usual traffic jam around the lockers.

"Hey, Ben, did you finish the assignment?"

It's Ted from my homeroom. Full name Asafoetida. He never gets assignments done on time, and he gets himself in this anxious state about it. All the time and energy he spends panicking he might as well do the assignment.

"Sure. You?"

I know the answer anyway, but while he's clenching his trembling lips together and building up to admitting he hasn't, I think I see Roy at the other end of the corridor. He has his camouflage pants on and a big coat and he's carrying a sports bag.

"Roy," I yell. He turns. His eyes are dark underneath, as if he's smeared paint on his face. He doesn't even nod. Maybe he hasn't seen me. He turns and goes around the corner in the direction of the gym.

"That guy is a dick," blurts Ted.

I look at Ted for a second, deciding there's not much point in discussing Roy with him.

"He's OK," I say.

* * *

The class stands and faces the flag and we move our lips while the old P.A. distorts the pledge:

"Party's over, that's enough,

Do it now and do it rough.

Look behind you. Lock and load.

Zero parking. Clear the road.

Pain is gain and gain is pain,

Learn to like it, don't complain,

Use your hand and use your head.

Do it right or do it dead.

Death to spammers."

Beamish says it loudly in his high, cutting voice, making every word a threat, and his little black eyes dart around, looking for students who aren't suitably awestruck by the emotional power of the occasion. The trick is to do it completely deadpan. If you crack a smile he'll haul you out and give you a week's detention. You can't even roll your eyes. We get it over with and Beamish says "Be seated".

Then he calls the roll. He does it in this accusing, sneering tone, as if our names are our fault, and he lingers on each syllable trying to extract the maximum annoyance. When he calls out "Fauntleroy Nebuchadnezzar Kelly" no one answers. I look around. Sure enough no Roy.

"Has anybody seen Fauntleroy?" Beamish asks. I don't say anything and I give Ted a look. He looks at me and clenches his lips and keeps quiet.

"Absent," says Beamish with great satisfaction and makes sure he records it immediately on his laptop so it will go straight into the database for all eternity. Roy is going to get himself expelled if he doesn't start coming to class. He's missing at least one day a week. It's not really his fault. Ma can be irritating but she does care whether I go to school. Roy's Dad is really strict but only when he comes home, which is not often. They have this really messy apartment with a sink full of plates and falling over piles of magazines everywhere. Roy is pretty much looking after himself and he can't get organized.

Then the door bangs open so hard it slams against the wall and everybody jumps.

The guy in the doorway is in full ballistic gear. He's wearing a riot helmet, with a tinted visor so you can't see his face, full vest and groin protector. He has a Swock in each hand and an M4 slung across his back. He has a belt hung with equipment and ammunition belts criss-crossing his chest. He looks like a fucking battle robot. He walks into the room.

Beamish hauls out his pride and joy from under his desk. It's a Barrett M82A1. The fucking thing will blow a hole through armor plate a mile away. It makes no sense whatsoever to have it in the classroom for close combat, but Beamish thinks it makes him a big man. I doubt

he can really even hold it up. The truth is nothing in the universe could make Beamish a big man.

The gunman simply walks between Beamish and the students. If Beamish fires the 50mm high velocity bullet will go straight through the gunman and kill any of us in its path and probably through two more classrooms, out of the school and into the library next door. Check-fucking-mate. Beamish gets this dimwitted confused look on his face. He obviously doesn't have the faintest idea what do to next.

We all have to get down to give Beamish his shot. Which he probably hasn't got the guts to take. I look around fast in the hope the others will catch on and then duck under the desk. My bag is there. I take out the snubbie, as quickly and quietly as I can. From under the desk I can see one combat boot. He's still covering Beamish. He's going to hear me cock the hammer so I'll have to cock and fire in one movement. Three shots rip out in rapid succession and in the noise I fire at the gunman's boot. He goes over and his helmet hits the ground right in my field of view. He seems to be looking at me but I can't be sure. I get out from under the desk.

Beamish is down. He's taken two in the head without firing a shot. One of his beady eyes isn't there any more. The gunman is moving a little but it's like he's lost interest. He's dropped his semi-autos and his M4 is under him and he can't get up with a shot foot anyway. He's making a high sound, not quite crying. I move around, covering the gunman, and kick his Swocks well out of reach. Then suddenly the class wakes up. They pull their guns and take aim at the gunman. Ted is

doing it strictly by the book, right arm straight, left hand cupping the butt, and his jaw is working as he clenches his lips.

"No Ted!" I yell but he has fired before I get it out. Then the others open up and I have to fall backwards out of the way. It feels like it goes on for about ten minutes. It's probably only a few seconds. I'm in the corner holding onto my knees with my back against the wall.

I don't really follow things too well after that. There's a lot of running and shouting. People keep yelling "Don't touch him, don't move him, wait for the paramedics."

Paramedics aren't going to be able to do much except collect shell cases.

One of the local vigilante groups arrives about ten minutes before the cops. They come in two by two cover formation, in battle robot outfits just like the gunman except for the last one, who is Roy's dad. He's just wearing regular clothes, and he's unarmed. He's still the boss though. They all take up positions looking dangerous but they wait for him to decide what to do next. He's a big tall guy and he doesn't look excited at all. He scans the room, taking in Beamish, the gunman, me in the corner and the kids who are standing around still holding their guns. Then he says "Stand down."

The robots lower their weapons and the kids start putting their guns away.

He checks out Beamish and nods to himself. He walks over to the gunman and looks down at him. He sees the wound in the foot. He takes a big breath and swallows once. Then he bends down and opens up the visor.

He knew it was Roy. Roy had all his Dad's gear, after all. We all knew. The face is still recognizable. He has this strange expression, though. It's not like an expression a live person would have. You can still see the dark marks under his eyes. Two big bruises. Roy's Dad looks at him, breathing quietly. Then he turns away without a word and walks straight out.

The vigilante robots don't know what to do. They shuffle their feet for a few minutes. Then one of them says "Fuck," and goes. The others trail after him.

Then the cops show up. They do more or less the same thing the vigilantes did, but with less style and more shouting. The cops are mad because someone has touched the body and they like to do their forensic shit. They're very territorial. They hate it when vigilantes get there first.

The paramedics arrive. Somebody points them at me. One starts prodding me and asking questions.

"Are you hit?"

My mouth isn't working very well. I manage to croak "Don't think so."

I'm starting to shiver and he drapes a blanket around me.

The paramedic is trying to get me to lie down but I just need to stand up. I feel a little dizzy and I lean on the wall until it passes. I

sort of want to throw up. A detective comes over and shows me a badge and says something. I can't even focus on it.

"Name?"

"Ebenezer Hollins".

"You fired the first shot?"

"I don't know. I think the gunman. Roy."

"Roy the perp? You know him?"

"Yeah. Fauntleroy Nebuchadnezzar Kelly."

"Jesus fuckin' Christ. Helluva name, even these days. How many times you shoot your friend?"

I'm out of breath and it's hard to talk.

"One."

"You the foot?"

"Right."

"So he shoots the teacher, you shoot him in the foot, he goes down, the rest of the kids tap him."

"Yeah."

"OK, future reference you maybe shoulda shot him a little more but you did good, kid, and the other boys and girls came through. Look, there's no suspicious circumstances here, standard school massacre, we got your name, we may be in touch. OK?"

"Yeah."

"You can go."

He turns around and yells "People, we are done here. Let's wrap it up."

The forensic guys move away and they start zipping up body bags.

I decide to sit down on the floor.

Chapter 2

The next few days I just stay home. Ma isn't letting anyone in the apartment. They say they came to offer their condolences but they just want to hear about what happened. It's a bit of excitement for them. The local paper sends a reporter round. Ma tells him to fuck off. They run a page one headline "Fuck Off!" with a picture of Ma at the front door giving the finger straight to camera. She prints it out and puts it on the fridge.

I hear Ma at the door. She is saying "I'm sorry May, but he really doesn't want to talk about it."

"Ma, let her in," I yell.

May has brought a cake. I have no idea what it cost her. It has fruit and chocolate and this sugar glaze on the top. We have it on the sofa. Ma sits with us for tea and cake and then she leaves us alone.

"How are you doing?" says May.

I put my arms around her and kiss her on the lips. She holds me and we sit there for a while.

"I'm not too bad," I finally say.

Her hair smells like cinnamon and vanilla and wood smoke. We kiss some more.

"What's happening at school?" I ask in a break.

"Wall-to-wall rent-a-counsellor. A death of a school community member is a traumatic event. Your grief is a normal reaction to abnormal

stress. As you come to perceive the enormity of this tragedy we would caution you not to engage in dangerous, self-destructive, or socially unacceptable behavior. You may experience denial, anger, bargaining, depression, and finally acceptance. I mean fuck. Just mail me the PowerPoint."

I kiss her again.

"The tragedy being Beamish and Roy."

"I don't think anybody much is going to miss Beamish."

"I do miss Roy."

She moves her fingers around in my hair. I literally do not ever want her to stop.

"Why don't you talk to his Dad?"

"Roy's Dad. Fuck, Roy's Dad did it!"

"He was at fault, but you two have Roy in common."

How does she know these things? It's like this whole other form of intelligence. After that we don't talk a whole lot.

So I try to call Roy's Dad. No answer at Roy's place. In the end I reach him through the group, Eternal Vigilance 14674. I leave a message and ask if we can meet. He calls back an hour later.

"Zeb Kelly, returning your call."

"Mr Kelly, my name is Ben Hollins. I was a friend of Roy's."

"Ben Hollins."

"Yes."

"The foot?"

"Yes."

"You want to meet?"

"Yes."

"Grounds for Prosecution, 15:30".

I start to say "OK" but he has hung up.

Grounds for Prosecution is a cafe near the law courts. I show up early and find a table. I buy a coffee so they don't mind me sitting there, although I can't really afford it. He shows up at 15:30 on the dot. He sees me straight away and nods. He gets a coffee and sits down.

"So."

"Mr Kelly, I'm so sorry about Roy."

"What is it you want?"

I have to think about that. It's the obvious question, but I don't know the answer.

"I want to speak at Roy's funeral."

"You knew Roy before?"

"I was a friend. I want to talk about him."

He looks at me hard. It's the same way he looked at Beamish.

"You saw the whole thing?"

"I saw some of it."

"Roy got off three shots?"

I don't know what to say to that. I nod.

"He hit that teacher twice? The teacher with the Barrett?"

I just stare.

"The teacher didn't get off a shot?"

I am struggling. What does he want from me?

"Roy stayed cool, Mr Kelly."

Then he seems to slump.

"I didn't know my own son."

I can't believe I'm feeling sorry for the old bastard. He beat Roy whenever he felt like it.

"I want to talk about Roy at his funeral. May I do that, Mr Kelly?"

He nods, head bowed over his coffee.

The funeral is a big event. It happens on the Thursday. The whole school shows up, and some media. There's all this organ music as we go in, like random notes but maybe it's Bach. There's no obvious place to end but finally it stops.

Santa walks up to the pulpit. He stands there a moment, looking gravely out at the congregation. The majestic red suit and flowing white beard do their work. When he speaks there is total quiet.

"I giveth and I taketh away," he says, and pauses for effect.

"Hallowed be my name!" he says, and someone says "Amen."

"We are here," says Santa, "to celebrate the life of Fauntleroy Nebuchadnezzar Kelly."

Roy, I want to shout.

"Ashes to ashes," intones Santa, and it is a beautiful sound, almost a song.

"Dust to dust." It's the wind blowing over the desert of time. I have no idea how Mr Kelly can afford such a good Santa.

"To talk about Roy, I am going to call on Ben Hollins."

I walk up the aisle. Barbie meets me with a dazzling smile and leads me to the lectern. I have my notes in my hands, but the papers are snapping and rattling and I have to lay them down for a minute. I look up.

"Roy was my friend," I say. I look down at my notes but they start rattling again.

"Roy was just a normal kid," I say. "He wanted what everybody wants."

I look up again. They are waiting for me to start making sense.

"The Roy I knew cared about his Dad, and about his friends, and about his axolotl. Roy was interested in nature, and he could tell you plenty about astronomy as well, even though he didn't have a telescope. "

I'm losing them. I press on.

"I went home for lunch at his place sometimes, and we had spaghetti-
os. Roy and I would watch Discovery Channel and just talk about
stuff."

I know what I want to say now.

"Roy didn't know he was a good person, but I did."

I look up. No one seems to be getting it.

"I knew."

I pick up my notes and walk off. Barbie intercepts me and directs me
off the back way. The organ starts up again.

I'm looking for the bathroom on the way out. There's a sign outside
one of the chapels. Beamish.

I put my head around the door. There's an old lady in there. She's
sitting very straight and staring at the coffin. Then her head snaps
around to me. There's nothing for it but go in.

"Mrs Beamish."

"Yes."

"I'm sorry."

Lipstick is leaking out of the wrinkles around her lips into the deep grooves beside her mouth.

"Forty three years I kept him alive," she says. She looks down at her folded hands. "Come March it would have been forty four." Her small dark eyes are red-rimmed and watery.

"He was trying to do his job."

She gives this snort, like steam escaping. Then nothing.

I can't stop my footsteps echoing as I leave.

I'm waiting around outside to see if May is there. Zeb comes up. He towers over me for a moment, then he holds out his hand. I take it and he pulls me into a hug. What the hell. I hug him back.

He lets go of me. Behind him I see May.

"Excuse me, Zeb."

He nods.

I go over and take May's hand. Snow is falling softly.

Synopsis

The Uncomfortablists

This is told in the first person, from the point of view of Ebenezer (Ben), a disaffected teenager. His country has been under Uncomfortablist rule all his life. As we progress through the novel he slowly comes to articulate the source of his frustration and fury with his family and community: the Uncomfortablists have become comfortable with being uncomfortable.

Ben's friend Roy is killed when he attempts a school massacre. This focuses Ben's disillusionment. Roy's father Zeb takes up with Ben and then with Ben's mother. Ben realizes Zeb is planning to act out some terrible revenge against the system to expiate his guilt over his son. Ben tries to stop him but is himself arrested. Zeb harnesses his vigilante forces to rescue Ben but is killed.

Ben defends himself by telling his accusers that they are hypocrites, only willing to pursue Uncomfortablism where it suits them, unwilling to accept dissent. To his dismay, they accept his defense and acquit him, smugly congratulating themselves on their willingness to accept him as further proof of their commitment to the Uncomfortablist dogma.

The structure is episodic, with each episode focusing on a tenet of the Uncomfortablist agenda. The infodumps are handled with excerpts from history lessons at Ebenezer's school, media moments, and through Ebenezer's anguished internal dialogue.

Uncomfortablism arises from the ashes of a world destroyed by consumerism, environmental catastrophe and anti-terrorist measures.

Below is the Uncomfortablism Agenda, which was revealed to me about 18 months ago.

Uncomfortablism - The Agenda

While other parties conceal their intentions for fear of electoral disapproval, we make no secret of our policies. It is not our job to be popular. At the core of our agenda is the tenet that a policy, whether or not it makes any sense or does any good, must make people uncomfortable.

Abortion

We will sidestep the entire debate, devoting resources instead to a massive reduction in the frequency of unwanted pregnancies. From the Clinton/Lewinsky scandal it emerged that oral sex made a great many people uncomfortable. We will mount a cross-media promotion of oral sex and masturbation: Give Yourself A Hand, Use Your Head.

Underaged Drinking

See above. There is a limit to the number of things you can have in your mouth at the same time.

The Obesity Epidemic

See above.

God

The separation of church and state is an ideal to which people comfortably subscribe without examining whether it is attained. We will launch a merged state religion, with at its head the only universally respected religious figure, Santa Claus; at his right hand, the Easter Bunny, symbol of fertility; at his left, the virgin

Barbie, goddess of elective surgery. All rites, convictions and practices, however oppressive, archaic or contradictory, will be embraced and vigorously defended. The church will be evangelistic, highly profitable and eventually universal. There will be entertaining ceremonies, colorful frocks and funky music. Its motto: "People can believe anything".

Gays

We will widen the scope of the marriage contract to embrace all relationships. Not only may any person marry any other person, regardless of age or gender, but other barriers such as species, biological status, and absence of concrete existence will be lifted. A woman may marry her job, a man may marry his car, a child may marry her guinea pig, and a bigot may marry his prejudices.

Guns

Guns will be compulsory. All citizens will learn from kindergarten age to correctly maintain and operate a wide range of firearms. High noon contests will dominate the sporting arena. Make my day.

Law and Order

See above. Unchecked vigilantism will work hand in hand with a corrupt and decadent police force to maintain the status quo.

Drugs

We will just say yes. All drugs, however pointless, dangerous and destructive, will be legalized, and regulated with the same delicacy, sensitivity and responsibility as are alcohol and tobacco today.

Health

The sickie will end: sick leave will be renamed health leave. Hospital waiting lists will be halved, and the number of hospital beds doubled, in both cases by simply chopping them in two. All pubs and clubs will be required to display in large letters on their doors the words "Fuck off". Fast food outlets will be required to place at their entrances and exits a maze of gymnastic equipment, judged so that the calories consumed in eating and exercising are equal. Watching sport without participating will incur a hefty fine. Smokers will be required to wear an airtight helmet. Office managers will lead all workers in calisthenics or community singing four times daily.

Education

We will encourage children to think. We will tell them what we know of the truth. We will honor idle curiosity. This will make everyone uncomfortable. We will assist universities by funding a great many ill-considered studies into matters of doubtful importance.

Foreign Policy

Other countries are a rich source of unease. We will let them go about their business unmolested. We will draw attention to their practice of doing things differently and not caring what we think about it.

The Environment

Parking will be illegal. Only self-composting pit toilets will be permitted. Showerheads will be blocked. Toxic plumes will be returned to sender. A costly research project will examine the viability of

supplying all energy needs with methane captured by cunningly designed underwear.

The Economy

We will instigate a variable random regulatory regime that keeps them guessing. No one will become comfortable with the loopholes long enough to scam them. Consumerism will be discredited by a wide range of practices and promotions. For each advertisement for a product or service, the advertiser will be required to fund a campaign of equal penetration explaining why you're better off without it. Party members will wear shabby clothing and be transported in poorly maintained, inexpensive vehicles. Ostentation will be ridiculed.

Taxation

Against.

The Arts

All art is propaganda. All art is pornography. The more the merrier.

Spam

Death to spammers.

Immigration

All immigrants will be required to arrive in leaky boats. This will test the mettle and resolve of prospective citizens, prepare them for the uncomfortable life ahead, select for Olympic swimming skills, and provide a welcome shot in the arm for the struggling leaky boat sector.