

AARON PECK / from *The Bad Arts*

Bernard could see where the security cameras were, where their proverbial eyes were scanning. He felt sure that that specific corner of the store was not being surveyed. It was like the space beneath a freeway overpass in which anything could happen. He could calculate the area over which the cameras had purview, and there was no way that this specific corner of this specific aisle was being recorded. He was in a blackout zone, an orphan space. The security guards, or the manager (who, in the case of a theft, of course, would send footage to the police, if he even bothered), had no visual data about what happened in that corner. It was, or Bernard was, *free*, unlike the queue at a border crossing, he thought, with its cameras that capture your license plate number even before you reach border patrol; unless, of course, the pharmacy had those cameras in the ceiling, which was always a possibility, those ones the size of pin holes, little HALs monitoring the entire space. But then why would they bother with the larger, somewhat outmoded cameras, unless they were remnants from an older security system, evidence of a surveillance palimpsest, ones that perhaps had been installed improperly, leaving the specific corner he was in unmonitored? He looked at the objects on the shelf. Should he pocket the soap? With no one watching, why not simply take the product he had intended to purchase? The nearest employee was on the other side of the huge pharmacy and there were no other customers within three aisles. Again, he looked at the soap and picked it up. It was a simple product, Pears, the kind his mother had bought for him when he was young and had severe allergies. He examined the box more closely than he had in years. A detail was missing. Nowhere on it stated that the product was “hypoallergenic.” (He would read later that the claim had been dropped a year earlier in 2009 when new ingredients were added to the formula, although he had not noticed any change to the box in the past year, a claim which no longer affected him, because his childhood allergies had abated, but he continued to use the soap anyway. Pears, he would discover, which was the world’s first branded product, was developed to provide a healthier alternative to soaps of the 1700s, most of which at the time contained arsenic or

lead. He would read that it was originally manufactured in one small plant in London and that that little company had been sold in the 1950s and was now manufactured in Mumbai. The scent, which had also recently changed, although he had not noticed, had been originally designed to smell “like an English Garden.” He would also read that it had never boasted of any “rejuvenating” formulas, the word rejuvenating itself a sham, promising to return us to youth, to re-juvenile us, he would think, as if anyone wanted to become an awkward teenager again.) Regardless of changes to the box, there, in the pharmacy, he looked at the package. He had a large overcoat. It would be easy enough to slip the soap into his pocket, but he had no reason to. He could afford it. In fact, he had a strict budget, which he wrote out on a ledger, every month, with a column listed “soap: \$2,” including tax. With his index finger, Bernard started tapping the box in his hand. He could hear the dull thuds of his finger against the cardboard. Cameras were everywhere. The building he lived in, for example, like most downtown condominiums, had a concierge desk, and whenever he would go to speak to the concierge, either to pick up a package that hadn’t fit in his mailbox, or to check on a specific piece of housekeeping, he was always fascinated by the row of tiny monitors, each of which broadcast a single video channel from the many security cameras throughout the building. In the corner of his eye, he would notice the amount of activity recorded, now being viewed at a central command station, by himself and the concierge. He had once observed a couple make out for what felt like five minutes while the concierge tried to find an oversized package, Bernard attempting to avoid gawking, his eyes periodically returning, as the man on the monitor pinned his lover against a wall. Again, Bernard looked at the soap. Somewhere, someone was or was not watching him deliberate, although probably the latter, because the efficacy of surveillance doesn’t rest on certainty but uncertainty, and the entire system would collapse if everybody began acting as if they were not being watched, which was quite probably the case, or if someone was watching, it was probably someone like Bernard with that couple, an unintended or indifferent eye. He

looked up at the camera. The pharmacy's intercom announced a two-for-one deal on all Coca-Cola brand soda for a limited time. He looked down at the soap. He walked over to the cash register and paid for the item, where, on impulse, he also purchased a pack of chewing gum. As a child, he would often hide in his father's garden, because there was always an out-of-the-way corner, a small alcove behind a shrub, or somewhere that no grown-up would find him, being just out of call or reach.