

THE MATERIALIST

Eric Garcia

DR. ALBRECHT WOKE from his afternoon nap to find himself on fire. At least, that's how it felt: like someone had taken an acetylene torch and given his body a good talking-to. In the seconds it took him to wake, scream, and leap from the cot, tearing off his nightshirt and batting wildly at flames that, to his surprise, did not seem to exist, Albrecht came to the conclusion that the source of his agony went deeper than a bit of charred flesh.

His reflection in the bathroom mirror gave him his first clue: his skin shimmered. Light from the naked bulb overhead reflected off a viscous substance that coated his torso from neck to groin. Patches of it spotted his legs and forehead, too, irregular globs that spread, slowly but steadily, until they touched and merged. Though the pain was intense, Dr. Albrecht had enough presence of mind to scrape a handful of the gunk from his armpit and into an empty soap dish before jumping into the shower and scrubbing every blazing inch of skin clean of the offending substance.

Forty minutes later, the pain had subsided into a residual itch as his pores ceased production and the last few flicks of the shimmering goop sluiced down the shower drain. An hour after that, he was down at the lab near campus, bribing a young tech who hadn't been around long enough to know to avoid him.

"It's silver," said the lab tech. She peered up at Albrecht with deep green eyes that, on any other day, would have caught and held his attention. "Ninety-five percent pure, with some organic matter mixed in that's given it a low melting point."

"That's not possible," he said impatiently. "Run it again."

The girl shrugged. "It's your money."

Four more labs, four more tests, but each time, it rang up true: his body had been covered in silver. The metal, in a semi-liquefied state, had leached out of his skin while he slept, and now he had only an

acorn-sized hunk of silver remaining, representing \$143.92 at current prices. By Albrecht's calculations, he'd washed approximately \$1500 down the shower drain, and the only thing he could think on the drive back home was: How can I make this happen again? With that kind of money on a daily basis, he could fund his cancer research for years. Damn the grant applications, the constant reviews, the laughs at his controversial theories. He'd show them all.

For three weeks, he attempted to replicate the exact conditions under which he'd been operating in the days preceding his silver production. He wore the same clothes, dirtied his hands with the same chemicals, and ingested a duplicate course of the antibiotics he'd been taking to fight off a bit of strep. Recreating past meals down to the smallest pea was more difficult than he'd anticipated, but in the end it didn't matter. Each morning he awoke, expecting the fire, expecting the silver, and finding only crusty eyelids and jock itch.

Two months later, while cleaning out the cage of his white rats, Dr. Albrecht felt a stab of pain that started in his lower back and shot like a pinball around his midsection. He lurched up the basement steps, barely making it to the bathroom in time to direct a flow of white-hot urine into the commode, where it promptly sunk to the bottom, sparkling like a crisp mountain lake on a bright summer morn.

Platinum. The precious metal had chosen a different, but no less painful, way to emerge, only now he had twenty-four thousand and change to show for his trouble.

What's more, he now had data to analyze. With the extra cash, Albrecht hired an assistant to help him run the numbers and adjust the variables, and within weeks he was sneezing out balls of rhenium and hawking loogies of ruthenium. Carefully monitored bouts of regurgitation produced a trove of

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palladium. To his assistant, Albrecht assigned the unenviable task of straining his stool, but minimum wage was minimum wage and good luck finding someone else willing to kick in health benefits. The \$62,184 in iridium proved well worth it. All of the money went back into the new lab – more equipment, faster computers.

“Platinum and silver are all fine and good,” Dr. Albrecht told his assistant, now working for minimum wage plus bonuses, “but I’ve got a higher goal in mind.”

“Your cancer research.”

“Rhodium.” Selling at ten times the price of gold, rhodium would make him wealthy beyond his wildest dreams. He’d have everything he ever wanted. Houses. Cars. Women. And funds for cancer research, of course.

For six years, Dr. Albrecht and his assistant lived in a shack on Slaughter Hill, emerging biweekly to sell their wares. People talked. There were nasty rumors.

Then, one morning, the assistant came down alone. His first stop was

the local police station; his second, the mortuary. When the sheriff’s deputies found Dr. Albrecht, he was face-up in the bathtub, his arms and legs sliced open from tip to top. The coroner said the wounds were self-inflicted. He also reported that all the blood had been drained from the doctor’s body. As if someone had taken it. As if such a thing had any value.

His funeral was short and simple. Few mourners attended. It was paid for, in cash, by Dr. Albrecht’s assistant, who, after ensuring that his former employer was well and interred, took a cab to the nearest airport and boarded a flight for Costa Rica.

They say the assistant still lives down there. That he lives like a king, behind thick walls and gates of steel. He has cars and women and gives food to the poor on holidays. Every once in a while, he sends \$25 to cancer research. No one knows how he made his fortune, but no one really cares. It’s blood money, they say, as if that explains it. As if that tells the entire story.



ERIC GARCIA



Eric Garcia is a 97-year-old Norwegian fisherman who occasionally writes novels and screenplays under the pseudonym Eric Garcia. Aside from his meaty catches of arctic flounder and northern pike, he’s best known for his novels *Anonymous Rex*, *Casual Rex*, *Hot & Sweaty Rex*, *Matchstick Men*, and *Cassandra French’s Finishing School For Boys*. *Matchstick Men* was made into a 2003 film directed by Ridley Scott and starring Nicolas Cage, and while Eric had nothing whatsoever to do with the adaptation other than hanging out on set and eating craft services, he’s quite proud of the result. *Anonymous Rex* was made into a 2004 movie for the SciFi channel; the less said about that, the better.

He co-wrote the screenplay adaptation of his upcoming book, *The Repossession Mambo*, which is currently being filmed in Toronto for a Spring 2009 release, starring Jude Law, Forest Whitaker, and Liev Schreiber. These days, he’s readying the film version of *Cassandra French’s Finishing School For Boys* while working on his next novel.

The photograph you see of Eric Garcia is not actually Eric Garcia, but one of the children of Flash Fiction Online’s editor-in-chief Jake Freivald. Eric Garcia didn’t have time to find a hi-res picture of himself for publication. You read all that nonsense up above; he’s a very busy man. Now go away. You’re bugging him.