

ZERO – A story by Harry Gamboa Jr.

*“Due to yesterday’s terrorist attack on our country, we are canceling your retrospective exhibition, ‘Trigger Mixxer’, and hereby notify you that the full amount of funds already provided to you by The Museum must be returned within 10 days and that the remainder of the budget is now rendered null and void. It is all spelled out in the contract that you signed several months ago. I’ll be away in Mexico City but you can call my assistant if you foresee any problem arising out of this sudden situation.”*

The recorded message was the only one left for me on my answering service on September 12, 2001.

I could not have anticipated such institutional malice and certainly wasn’t prepared to deliver the \$4,000 that had already been spent on unspecified items and services. The cancellation of the additional \$35,000.00 associated with the solo show wiped out the façade of economic stability and laid bare the tenuousness of my attempt to prop up my life by juggling bank loans supplemented by seemingly endless monetary rotations that involved many revolving lines of credit. I had taken the opportunity to exploit certain structural loopholes by convincing the corporate system that I was creditworthy even though I was minimally employed and often made the minimum monthly payments while securing additional credit cards to cover such costs. I had started on this path one day several years before when my bottom line was at zero. My art career was on the upswing because I could support my performance art and photography projects by waving plastic cards wherever and whenever costs would arise. I was dependent on the success of this solo exhibition for sales, commissions, and honorariums that would be forthcoming, thus placing me in a position to pay down my debt. My strategy for prosperity had collapsed into an unanticipated desperate need for a miraculous escape from the onslaught of bill collectors that would surely follow as the multiple lenders, credit agencies, and banks would attempt to recoup the aggregate balance of \$186,994.56 that I owed them, plus compounded interest charges and unspecified fees. I was at that moment without leverage or any realistic hope of being able to continue in my effort to fully extricate myself from the abject poverty that was now once again closing in on me after having had a terrific run at reckless consumerism for a nearly lucky seven-year itch to spend and spend.

I immediately used my indispensable Nokia 3390 cellphone and dialed a local 415 area code number. I reached an operator at an unnamed switchboard for the nonexistent brick and mortar institution called The Museum, which was in the process of perpetual fundraising to reach the lofty goal of 30 million dollars.

*“Thank you for calling The Museum, our vision is your vision...”*

*“I need to speak to the executive director.”*

*“Your name and number sir, and I will happily forward your message.”*

*“It is a money emergency. I’m The Museum’s commissioned artist. I burned through all of the cash and am mailing the ashes of my scorched contract to your temporary office in Daly City.”*

I hung up the phone and realized that a new period of uncertainty had already begun. I did not have a plan of action but

my survival instincts were in high gear. I took out my wallet to be certain that all 16 credit cards were in order and that my multiple bank cards were ready for use. I counted \$1,000 in cash and remembered that another \$80 were in my jacket pocket. I knew that I would have to hurry in order to capitalize on the brief window of opportunity that was open to me before everything would surely come crashing down hard to cancel my transactional way of life.

I switched on the TV while getting dressed in a hurry. I cranked up the volume as I tied the laces of my shoes with a double knot.

*“Terrorism is the ruthless extension of the human will that unleashes merciless chaos. We must defend our country against future violence and support capitalism at all costs.”*

I grabbed the keys to the rental car and stuffed my few belongings into the travel case as I slammed the door shut to run out of the hotel room. I would have to drive 400 miles from San Francisco to Los Angeles in the upgraded rental car because all flights were temporarily grounded across the continental United States. I used the Amex card to settle the expensive hotel bill and filled up the tank using one of several Visa cards. I pulled into the parking lot of a Bank of America financial center in San Mateo to withdraw \$9,865.00 from my checking account (leaving a \$1,000.00 balance). I then drove several miles to a small branch office of Wells Fargo bank in Palo Alto where I withdrew \$2,500.00 cash of the available \$4,000.00 from a personal line of credit. I also withdrew nearly \$11,000.00, emptying several credit union accounts from various institutions along the California coastline. I somehow managed to extract \$270.00 from a malfunctioning ATM that failed to provide me with a printed receipt. I had a satchel containing 94 \$100.00 denomination traveler checks (converted over a period of three years via various cash advances and points rewards from many separate credit card accounts). I drove southbound nonstop to San Luis Obispo. I checked into a nondescript motel where I decided to hole up for the next three days so that I could conceive of an appropriate strategy to save myself from corporate justice.

#### Day One

A newly formed oversight agency left a message on my answering service at 7:00 a.m. (PST) stating that my recent cash withdrawals had been flagged. They provided me with identification codes and left a 1-800 callback number in order for me to contact them so that they could discuss the mandated options. I deleted the message and headed out for breakfast at a cheerful cafe along a tree-lined avenue.

I was reading an article about the harrowing attack in The New York Times while enjoying a stack of pancakes, bacon, and orange juice when an idea began to take form that might lead me away from assured punishment for my financial practices. I picked up the Nokia phone and called several members of my performance troupe, explaining to each of them that they would be participating in a high stakes game of conceptual no

chance. I directed them to bring specific clothing items, accessories, and to pack their bags in a hurry so that they could get to the fantastical Madonna Inn where they would be booked for a one-night stay with meals included. I would be meeting all of them for lunch at noon the following day. I then called the 1-800 number. A beeping sound was followed by several verification questions:

Q "Account number?"

A "1968-51-00000-1"

Q "Favorite author?"

A "Oscar Zeta Acosta"

Q "First kiss?"

A "Never"

A 10-second buzzing sound was interrupted by a brief moment of silence.

*"Hello client, we are fully aware of the difficulties facing our nation. Your personal responsibility to fulfill contractual obligations to repay loans and other credit mechanisms including cash payouts is of utmost importance to the continuing supremacy of corporate rights. An agent will be on the phone shortly."*

The prerecorded robotic voice contained audio hints pertaining to authority and emotional distance.

*"Hi Friend, this is Mr. Spahl, and I'll be walking you through our point of view from Lincoln, Nebraska. Our conversation is being recorded. Ready?"*

*"That is why I called, to get a bit of clarity."*

*"Due to the current National Emergency Red Alert, all of your banking, credit, and loan accounts have been merged into a single outstanding sum that reflects your late payments and other irregularities. Your payoff amount of \$250,000.00, must be received within seven days. Now, how's that for clarity?"*

*"Mr. Spahl, could it be that you landed my account by offering the lenders 25%-50% of the total? I'm sure the value is lessening as we speak. Nebraska! You'd be lucky to get 15%. Just to show my good faith, you can withdraw \$1,000.00 that is available in my Bank of America checking account."*

*"It'll take a second. Confirming your approval. Done. Now, please, hand over the remaining balance."*

*"Oh, excuse me, I'll call back. Drug lords pulling into the driveway. I'll explain later."*

I hung up the phone, then poured extra maple syrup on my pancakes as everything suddenly took on an added sweetness.

## Day Two

The six performers, who were all dressed as an Indie Film crew, gathered at the Madonna Inn's Copper Cafe while I ordered everything on the lunch menu so that everyone could fully enjoy the experience of dining while I explained how we would set fire to \$2,500.00 in United States currency while spilling Hollywood-style fake blood and creating a scene that would appear to be a drug cartel mass killing. The performers had brought along the specified rubber lookalike handguns and other prop weapons similar in appearance to AR-15 and AK-47 automatic rifles. All of the simulated action would take place in the Krazy Dazy room with apparent lifeless fake-bloodied bodies strewn across the pink shag carpet. I would then use an SX-70 Polaroid Camera to create instant photographs of the 25 burning C-notes. A Canon EOS D30, Digital SLR with a 3.25 megapixel CMOS sensor would then be employed to photograph groupings of several Polaroid photographs to reveal the destruction of the currency (with serial numbers visible in each frame) as the convincing visual element to affect

the Internet viewer's experience via emailed JPG images.

At 3:00 p.m. I called Mr. Spahl, and offered \$1,500.00 as partial payment that was immediately transferred from my Wells Fargo account. I explained to him that things were becoming increasingly dangerous and that I was being forced to make life or death decisions. I told him that I'd be calling the following day and hung up.

The rest of the afternoon and evening involved setting up the various tableaux, ephemeral moments, and staged death scenes that I would photograph to arrive at a highly realistic documentary style of imagery that would be difficult to discern from fact or fantasy.

## Day Three

I checked out of the motel and paid the bill for the one-night stay at the Krazy Dazy room. I met the performers in the open space of the Madonna Inn parking area and handed them a single small envelope containing \$3,000.00 in cash to cover their expenses and to express my gratitude for the wonderful conceptual performances. I mentioned that we would definitely work together on other performance art projects.

I ditched the rental car in the parking lot and took a taxi to California Polytechnic State University. I located an unattended desktop Apple computer on campus that I quickly accessed to send numerous image files via email that were addressed to Mr. Spahl using the high transmission speed of the university Ethernet. When the final image was sent, I called Mr. Spahl for the last time.

*"I have experienced a disaster. The cartel killed all of my crew, my investor, and stole all of my production equipment. I have \$15,000.00 in cash and am about to go into hiding in Mexico. You won't see another penny from me."*

*"C'mon Friend, let's not make rash judgements."*

*"I'd be willing to give you the cash in exchange for zeroing out the rest of the bill. I'd need your word and I'm recording this conversation."*

*"A total payment of \$17,500.00 barely makes a dent on the \$250,000.00 you owe us."*

*"Then, it's nothing."*

*"Wait, let me talk to my manager."*

*The phone was silent for 10 minutes.*

*"Hi Friend, where is the \$15,000.00?"*

*"It is all in cash, send a courier with a signed declaration establishing my zero debt."*

*"It's a deal. Give us the address anywhere in the world and our people will be there in 30 minutes."*

Within half an hour, a man with the physical attributes of a trained killer approached, he took the cash in hand and sifted through the loose currency until the full amount was accounted for satisfactorily. He then handed me a printed form that looked like a capitalist diploma stating that I was debt free but that I would be restricted from securing any credit for the next 10 years.

That evening, I boarded an Amtrak train in San Luis Obispo to Los Angeles. While viewing the impressive expanse of mountain and ocean scenery that swept past during the smooth ride, I smiled knowing that there was still money to burn in the form of traveler's checks, cash, plus some pocket change. I counted and recounted how things could have gone differently. After all of my calculations, my officially recognized status of zero appeared to be the perfect nonentity position by which to set forth in the hyper-capitalist 21st century.