



A S T U P I D W A Y

to



DIE

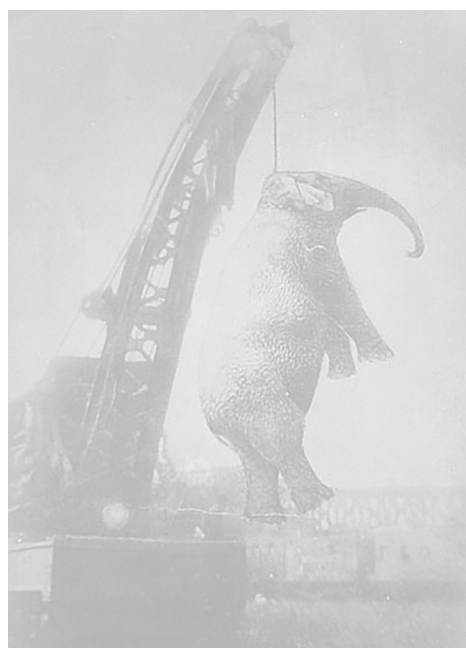


for

N O R E A S O N A T A L L



STORIES, ESSAYS, and MISCELLANEOUS WORDS
by **MATTHEW BRIAN COHEN**





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DIE



F O R N O R E A S O N A T A L L

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FIRST EDITION

2021

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Before each piece, I've included some songs to listen to. Some of the songs I listened to a lot while writing that piece. Others just felt like they hit the same themes I was going for. Others are just songs I think are cool.

Here's a Spotify playlist for easy listening, but I encourage you to support artists by purchasing their music and merchandise, as well as attending their live shows.

[spoti.fi/35S84v3](https://open.spotify.com/playlist/35S84v3)

1

MARY,
the LAST HANGED ELEPHANT

JENNY O. - "GOD KNOWS WHY"

THEY HANGED AN ELEPHANT ONCE.

It sounds too cruel, but it's true. This is how it happened:

In 1916 Charlie Sparks and his circus came to Kingsport, Tennessee, and to promote the event he decided to put on a parade. The star of the show was Mary—a five-ton elephant Sparks billed as “the largest living land animal on Earth.” Riding on top of Mary was Red Eldridge, a drifter whom Sparks found working as janitor at the nearby Riverside Hotel.

It was a straightforward case of supply and demand. Sparks needed someone riding the elephant to keep her in line, and Red presumably needed the cash. The job was simple: you told Mary what you wanted her to do, and if she didn't listen, you poked her in the neck with a spear. If she was still misbehaving, you poked harder. As long as you didn't kill her, you'd be fine. Just keep yelling and poking.

Madness.

There are a couple different accounts on how it all went down. Some say that Red kept poking Mary, and it caused her to go into a rage. She grabbed Red with her trunk, hurled him to the pavement, and stomped on his head. Others say Mary simply flicked him in the head with her trunk, with all the indifference you might show an annoying bug. Still others say she wrapped her trunk around him like a boa constrictor, slamming him into the ground before charging at him and impaling him on her tusks, in what sounds like *Mortal Kombat*-esque fatality. (Of course, *Mortal Kombat* hadn't been invented at the time. The violence was more real back then than it is now.)

There are a lot of different stories, but they all end the same—with Red Eldridge dead on the ground. You can quibble about the details and how much blood was lost, but dead is dead, and there is no coming back.



Elephants aren't like police officers or health insurance executives—we don't let them get away with murder. So something had to be done. An eye for an eye. An elephant for a man.

First, they shot her, but Mary's hide was so thick the bullets just grazed her. Then, they tried electrocuting her. But even the 44,000 volts they pumped into her wasn't enough to put her down. Finally, they decided to hang her.

They took Mary to the Clinchfield Railyards and tied a chain around her neck. As they lifted her up onto the derrick, the chain snapped, and Mary fell to the ground. The two thousand people who had gathered to watch the execution screamed and ran for cover, certain Mary would unleash her vengeance on them. But Mary couldn't retaliate, even if she'd wanted to—she had broken her hip in the fall and couldn't walk. So she just sat there, immobile; five tons of wounded flesh and broken bones.

Take two, this time with a thicker chain. The crowd, still shaken, reassembled to watch an elephant sputter and gasp for her final remaining breaths. I wasn't there, but I can imagine what it must have been like to see her up there, limp and strangling, in too much pain to even flail or thrash about. And when she finally passed and her five-ton body was perfectly still, I bet she looked serene—graceful even—like she had learned to walk on her hind legs.

They let her hang for half an hour and then dumped her in a shallow grave.



So what can we learn? Two things.

It's a cruel world, and it's always been pretty cruel.

There are a lot of terrible decisions we make that we cannot undo, and the consequences for our actions are horrible and unseen. Things quickly spiral out

of control, and before we know it, we're watching Mary choke to death in mid-air.

Bleak, I know.

But.

We do not hang elephants anymore.

So there's hope.

2

CRUSH



DION - "ONLY YOU KNOW"

IT WAS A FRIDAY NIGHT AND BRAD WAS HOME ALONE. In his twenties, this would have made him sad, but now, older and seemingly wiser, Brad saw these nights in as opportunities to spend some quality time by himself, falling asleep on the couch at 10:15 while watching *Top Chef*.

Brad had a crush on one of the *Top Chef* contestants. Brad never remembered his name, so he called him The Guy With The Tattoos. The Guy With The Tattoos wasn't the typical kind of guy Brad would crush on; The Guy With The Tattoos was only kind of tall, and he didn't have a lot of hair. But his tattoos were spectacular. They fully covered his arms and ran all the way up to his shoulder, as Brad discovered during the episode where the chefs had to cook their take on the classic crab cake in Miami Beach.

The Guy With The Tattoos wore a tank top and made a Thai crab cake with peanut dipping sauce. The Guy's broad shoulders looked much better than his crab cake. None of the dishes The Guy With The Tattoos made looked any good, and it was clear he had more confidence than skill. The judges agreed—Tom said his food lacked “soul,” and Padma wanted to see “more of his personal story on the plate.” But somehow, week after week, The Guy With The Tattoos remained. Brad admired his ability to stay afloat, as well as his sly, involuntary smile when someone else was told to pack their knives and go. And those tattoos!

At work, Brad would talk to his coworkers about The Guy With The Tattoos, but it fell on deaf ears. Brad's coworkers weren't really into *Top Chef* this season, so they didn't get how hot The Guy With The Tattoos looked when he was on his hands and knees planting his herb garden, or the sexy way he over-pronounced each syllable of “pancetta.” They all thought Brad's crush was kind of stupid, but

then again, most crushes are.

No crush has ever died because someone's co-workers thought it was stupid, though, so *Top Chef* became appointment television for Brad. As the season progressed, Brad learned that The Guy was from the Northeast (a very sexy region), was nominated for a James Beard award in 2013 (so much sexier than winning, as losing keeps you humble), and his mother was recently diagnosed with cervical cancer (a sympathetic and sexy backstory, and he didn't harp on it to the point where it became annoying and overwrought).

Brad rooted for The Guy when he succeeded (he smartly chose to make a Wagyu beef tartare instead of overcooking it like the Woman With The Weird Hair did), sympathized with him when he made mistakes (sure, he overestimated his ability to make a sweet potato risotto in fifteen minutes, but he was pushing himself outside his comfort zone!), and marveled at his supernatural ability to tie disharmonious ingredients together with a single sauce. Brad had a crush, and therefore, The Guy With The Tattoos could do no wrong.

Brad even began having dreams about The Guy With The Tattoos. In one dream, Brad and The Guy With The Tattoos were playing basketball. They never kissed, but The Guy With The Tattoos played very aggressive defense. It was very sexy. In another dream, Brad was masturbating thinking about The Guy With The Tattoos. It was strange to dream about masturbating, but dreams, like crushes, cannot be controlled.

One episode, during a Quickfire Challenge where the chefs had to make breakfast using rambutan, The Guy With The Tattoos mentioned that he owned a restaurant in Austin. Brad became very excited, as he happened to live in Austin. It was a fabulous coincidence. The restaurant had a name like "The Pig and the Stone." Simple, but modern. Evocative, but meaningless. Brad thought it suited The Guy With The Tattoos's personality perfectly.

As the finale drew near, and The Guy With The Tattoos was somehow one of the final three chefs, Brad decided he had to eat at The Guy's restaurant. What better way to actualize a crush than to order overpriced appetizers at their restaurant? One Wednesday, Brad called the restaurant to make dinner reservations.

"The Pig and The Stone, or something to that effect, how can I help you?"

"I'd like to make a reservation for tonight at six," Brad said.

“Name?”

“Brad.”

“And how many are in your party, Brad?”

“One,” Brad said. “Just one.” Hearing this out loud made Brad feel ashamed, so he tried to turn it into a joke. “But maybe someone will join me!” The moment Brad said this, he realized that not only was it not a joke, but it sounded incredibly desperate and sad.

“If they do, you can update your reservation online.”



Brad arrived at The Pig And The Stone (or whatever it was called) promptly at six. His table wasn't ready yet, so the hostess suggested he enjoy a cocktail at the bar. Brad enjoyed a cocktail at the bar. It cost fourteen dollars and it was very lemony. Shortly thereafter, Brad was seated at his table. He ordered several different appetizers at random, and one entrée that he couldn't pronounce, but was positive contained cuttlefish.

“And the chef is in tonight?”

“Yes,” the waiter said.

“And he'll be making these dishes?” Brad asked.

“Of course, sir.”

“Incredible,” Brad said.

If Brad was a judge on *Top Chef*, the appetizers he ate would be enough to tell The Guy to pack his knives and go. The olives on one plate made everything a little too salty, and the salmon on another dish was rubbery. A third dish felt like Brad had bitten into a pellet full of cayenne. The portions were small, but Brad could only make it through a few bites of each. “How did you enjoy it?” the waiter asked.

“I loved it!” Brad said. “I thought the salmon was cooked perfectly, and the

olives were the star of the plate! May I try three more things?”

The waiter came out with three more appetizers and Brad’s fish entrée. Again, Brad could barely take more than a few bites of each. The cuttlefish was very soggy, the rice balls weren’t crispy enough, and for God’s sake, not everything needs soy sauce!

“Is everything to your liking?” the waiter asked.

“Beyond my wildest dreams!” Brad answered.

“Good. Because the owner would like to speak with you,” the waiter said. And out of the kitchen stepped The Guy With The Tattoos.

He was just as beautiful in person as he was on TV. He walked with the confident swagger of someone who told Gail Simmons that she didn’t understand Peruvian food as thoroughly as he did, but his face was withdrawn and sheepish, like a little boy. He extended his large, rough hand toward Brad, and Brad noticed he did not wear a wedding ring. “Thank you for dining with us this evening,” The Guy With The Tattoos said.

“Of course, of course,” Brad stammered.

“Is there anything else I could get you? Another appetizer? A bottle of wine? Or are you ready for dessert?” Brad wondered why he was getting the red carpet treatment. Brad looked at his multiple plates of half-eaten food and realized that the Guy thought Brad was a restaurant critic. It was a very hot case of mistaken identity, Brad thought. It was a very sexy comedy of errors.

“A bottle of wine would be lovely,” Brad said. “And am I to understand that the pecan ice cream is made in house?”



After dessert, The Guy With The Tattoos came back out and asked Brad how he liked it. Brad lied through his teeth and then asked for the bill.

“It’s on the house,” The Guy said.

“Do you do this for everybody, or just guys you like?” Brad said. Half a bottle

of wine was all it took for Brad to feel cocksure.

“You’re the first,” The Guy said. He put his hand on Brad’s arm. Brad was stunned. It was the kind of stupidly cheesy thing that would only happen in one of Brad’s better dreams. “Would you like to see the kitchen?”

“I suppose I should,” Brad said. “To get a sense of things.” The Guy With The Tattoos smiled and led Brad through the kitchen, where dozens of line cooks were hard at work making mediocre food. “Quite the operation you’ve got here,” Brad said.

“You like my operation?”

“I like what you’re operating with,” Brad said. The Guy smiled. He put his arm around Brad’s waist and led him out the back door and into a secluded alley. How was this real life?

The door to the restaurant closed behind them, and The Guy’s beautiful, piercing eyes met Brad’s.

“I have to be honest,” Brad said. “I recognize you.”

The Guy laughed. “From the show?”

“Yeah.”

“I can’t say it didn’t get me anything,” The Guy smiled. “They don’t give third place shit.”

“You come in third?!” Brad said.

“Yeah. I wasn’t supposed to tell you,” The Guy said. He brushed the back of his hand against Brad’s face. “I guess I’m a bad little boy.”

He leaned in and kissed Brad on the mouth. Brad hated everything about this. The weird self-infantilization, the uninvited face touching, the kiss with too much tongue, and worst of all, the spoilers! The crush had been reciprocated, and Brad had lost all interest.

“I’m sorry,” Brad said, breaking the kiss. “This is wrong.”

“No one has to know,” The Guy said. “You can still write your review.”

And there it was—The Guy’s specialty, a simple but clarifying sauce to bring cohesion to an otherwise tumultuous dish. “I’m not actually a...” Brad stammered. “What I mean is, I think you just assumed—”

“What?” The Guy said. He took a few steps back. “Then why? Oh, God. Were you trying to meet me? You stalker! Did you set this up?”

“I didn’t do anything!” Brad said.

“You’re fucking psycho,” The Guy said. “Get out of here. Freak.”

“You lied to me!” Brad said.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” The Guy said, and Brad realized that despite knowing almost everything about him from television, he didn’t know shit.

In the end, Brad went home alone. A stupid crush ends stupidly—how apropos. The week after, Brad watched the *Top Chef* season finale, and, as foretold, The Guy got third. Tom said that once again, The Guy’s dish lacked soul. Padma wanted to see more of his personal story on the plate, and Graham Elliot said his dish promised something that it couldn’t deliver.

3

SOMETHING *for* LATER

ADRIANNE LENKER - "ANTHING"

BRENT HOWETT DIED WHEN HE WAS HIT BY A DRUNK DRIVER on his way home from the grocery store where he worked. He was twenty-five. It was a tragically common way for a lot of young men to go.

He was Henry and Melissa Howett's only child. His death devastated them, as you'd expect. They cried and cried, and then they made funeral arrangements. The service was lovely and cathartic. Friends and family came from all over. Brent's uncle Adam even offered to stay with Henry and Melissa for a few weeks while they dealt with the aftermath. "Such a horrible way to die," he told them. "For no reason at all."

Henry and Melissa thought nothing could feel as bad as getting the call that Brent had been killed, and that the worst part was over. They would soon find out that this was wrong, that everything else was the worst part. They quickly learned that a human life has many echoes, both profound and mundane. There are childhood friends who call with condolences, offering flowers and money and time to ease the pain, but there are also credit cards, student loans and Facebook accounts; employers who want to know why their employee has suddenly stopped showing up for work. Each phone call or email dredged everything back up, ripping open a raw wound, unleashing a fresh torrent of pain. The dead cannot stay dead for long.

Four weeks after Brent died, Henry and Melissa were moving Brent's stuff out of his apartment. Some things they could keep in their garage, other things they were going to put in storage. Most things they were going to give away. Let someone else find a use for a dead man's colander.

But then there was the matter of Brent's laptop. It sat on his desk, taunting them. Daring them.

"I don't want to," Henry said, answering the unasked question.

"There might be something on there," Melissa said. "You know, passwords, PIN numbers. To make things easier."

"I don't think it's a good idea," Henry said, but Melissa could not be deterred. She was determined to sort through the wreckage of data and piece together the remnants of her son. Maybe, with enough files, she could preserve him—not eternally, of course, but long enough to give her peace. Here he is, digitally, and when the battery runs out, he can return to the great beyond.

They turned the laptop on, the startup chime sounding like an incantation, and it booted straight to the desktop. Brent didn't have a password. Brent was the kind of guy who didn't think he had anything to hide. He'd sometimes forget to lock the front door when he left his apartment. One time, when he went down to Nashville to visit friends, it was unlocked for an entire weekend, and someone stole his floor lamp and nothing else. Classic Brent. Henry and Melissa used to laugh thinking about that story, but it was much funnier to hear Brent tell it. It was much funnier while Brent was still alive.

Brent's computer was similarly mundane. His files were like everyone else's files: a collection of ordinary scraps that gave an unsatisfactory glimpse into the person who saved and organized them. Old college papers, MP3s from a punk band that disbanded long ago, and the occasional piece of porn. But there was also something else, something far more tantalizing. A single folder, sitting right above the generically-named "Stuff" folder, labeled "Something For Later."

"What is that?" Henry said. Melissa did not respond. She just clicked.

Inside were easily a hundred text files—not formatted Word documents, mind you, text files—all of them with different names, names like "Strawberry Ice Cream," "The Boat," "The Theory Of Everything," "On Being Free On A Saturday Night," "Fantasy Football League," and "Snow."

Melissa clicked on one at random, then another. "These look like poems," she said.

"I didn't know Brent wrote poems," Henry said.

“He did some creative writing in high school,” Melissa said. She was referring to the fact that Brent had played some original songs in his freshman year talent show. But he had stopped playing guitar when he decided to focus on a degree in marketing. She kept clicking. “These go back a long way. Years. Some pretty recent ones, too. This one’s dated a week and a half before... you know.”

“What’s Fantasy Football League?” Henry asked.

“A bunch of stats on Melvin Gordon and David Johnson.”

“Why would that be there?”

“I guess it was a mistake?” Melissa said, with a hint of sadness in her voice, as she realized that while she could conjecture, she would never, ever, truly know.

“Let’s put this away,” Henry said. “It’s not for us.” Melissa nodded, choking back tears. But before she could close the laptop’s lid, she saw one poem, the most recent one, “Funeral.”

Neither of them spoke for what seemed like minutes. “Why did he call it that?” Henry said.

Melissa opened it without a second thought. She had to know what this was. Instructions? An omen? The ghost of her son? Of course, it was nothing of the sort. It was simply a poem that Brent had seemingly completed just a few days before he died.

Funeral
Brent Howett

When you die
I’m not going to go to your funeral
no matter how short the trip,
the bereavement fee, the bonus miles, the ticket already paid for.

I’m not going to go to your funeral
the lonely drive from EWR, the night at my parent’s house,
eating turkey and Swiss cheese from the fridge at 11pm,
staring at the suit in my childhood closet,
now far too loose around the shoulders and calves.

The style has changed; I've lost some weight.

I'm not going to go to your funeral.

*Damn the burned bridges—the aunts and uncles shaking their heads in dismay,
 “How did we raise such an ungrateful child?”
 their idle pity, the empty diner on Bruckner
 “Is it too late for him?” “How does his mother feel?”
 the endless coffee, Western omelette, pastrami on rye.*

I'm not going to go to your funeral.

*It's not personal—I just don't
 need to remember the worst of you.*

*“Eat your young, or they'll eat you,” you said,
 “Life is about reaping more than you sow.”
 And look at me now—I reap more than I sow;
 I'm lucky.*

I'm not going to go to your funeral,

say a few kind words,

light a candle, put on a show,

mumble the Kaddish, put a rock on your grave, pretend this won't happen to me.

Why would I go to your funeral?

I'll have plenty of time

while I'm still alive

to ruminate on the selfishness of a self-made man—

All sales were marked final,

the return policy is clear

your life is over and you took what could with you into the ground.

I'm not going to go to your funeral.

*Though I suppose it'd be worth attending if I
 could let you know this:*

The things we cherish are small and

what they ruin is unfathomable

“Is he talking about me?” Henry said. “He thought I was selfish?”

“The things we cherish are small,” Melissa repeated. “And what they ruin is unfathomable. Is that a novel?”

“My own son hated me,” Henry said, robotically.

“What diner on Bruckner is he talking about?” Melissa asked. “The one we went to when my father died?”

“I never told him to eat his young,” Henry said. “That’s just not true.” Henry took a deep breath. “I told you this was a bad idea.”

“I don’t want to fight about this now,” Melissa said.

“Does this change things?” Henry asked.

“What?”

“If this is how he felt, you know—is this who he is?”

“You don’t even know if this is about you,” Melissa said.

“Well, who else told him to reap more than he sowed!” Henry screamed. He was referring to the time he sat Brent down on their family vacation to Maine and tried to explain business to him. Later that night, Brent ate lobster for the first time. Henry made a big to-do of walking Brent up to the tank to pick one out, but Brent just thought it was weird he was eating a bug. “Who pays money to eat a bug?” Brent had said. Kids.

“Relax,” Melissa said.

“I just wanted him to have a good career,” Henry said. “Something stable. Christ, it’s not like I forced anything on him.”

“It doesn’t matter,” Melissa snapped. “Let’s just drop it.”

“This is our son!”

“It’s just a poem, Henry.”

“Of course you say that, you’re not in it!”

“Maybe I wish I was,” Melissa said, her voice quiet and quaking, as if it could collapse and implode at any moment. “Just something to know that I mattered.” She wasn’t referring to a particular moment, but rather the distance she had always felt between herself and her son; the lingering feeling that she was unloved.

“Honey,” Henry said. He put his arm around Melissa’s shoulder, and thought about how most couples that experience the loss of a child end up divorced. You would think the opposite, as it’s a shared loss that only these two people can understand. But the thing that’s shared is only on the surface, the physical matter that was Brent that was expelled from the universe, the impression of Brent that permanently carved its way into their hearts. Deep down, Henry and Melissa’s suffering was unique and indescribable. They could try talking about it, but words are just a symbol of the thing—shadow puppets on the cave wall of consciousness. Like archaeological ruins from an ancient civilization or poems from a twenty-five-year old grocer, they are a sliver stabbing blindly toward a greater meaning, and if you stare at them long enough, they will distort and mislead. “I think this is all the stuff,” Henry said. “Did you want to get something to eat?”

Melissa closed her eyes and nodded. “Honestly a Western omelette sounds good now that he’s got me thinking about it.” She laughed involuntarily, half happy, half sad. It was the last way Brent Howett would impact the land of the living, and it was small, but meaningful. And as Henry and Melissa drove to a nearby diner, they reflected on the fact that there was no way to ask Brent what he meant by his poem anymore, but also, that there would have been no way to ask him about it when he was alive. Our secrets and private lives tell us nothing we don’t already know.

How did he feel? What did he do when we weren’t around? What could have become of him and what might have been? Everything remains inscrutable. The people we want to be known as and the people we actually are are constantly at odds, never to be resolved. While we are living, we are so much more than the art we make, but after? We are only our art and nothing more.

So all of this is to say that the things we cherish are small, and what they ruin is unfathomable.

4

the DOLLMAKER
GETS *to* MAKE *a* THING

PAUL WESTERBERG - "MR. RABBIT"

THE DOLLMAKER WORKED AT NIGHT. The dollmaker cherished the solitude, the feeling that while the rest of the world was asleep, he was stealing time. When the dollmaker was working, everything else disappeared—the steady ticking of the clock, the dull hum of the night air, the crickets chirping outside, and the wispy wind gently swaying the nearby trees. At night, there was the dollmaker, the doll, and nothing in between.

The dollmaker picked up his brush and painted the eyes. This was his favorite part. Not for some highfalutin reason like the eyes being a window to the soul—the dollmaker didn't even know if he really believed in the idea of souls—but because the eyes were the very last thing that he did when he finished a doll. Putting the tiny black dots in the middle of the iris was when he could finally take a step back and examine the doll as a whole, to bask in the satisfaction of a job well done. It was the end of the work, but in some way, a summation of the work itself. The dollmaker placed the finished doll on his shelf and smiled. The dollmaker had made thousands of dolls in his lifetime, but the sheer act of making never felt routine. Each doll had been brought into existence solely by his own two hands, with no outside influence other than the desire to see the project to completion. This was who he was: the dollmaker made dolls, and he would make dolls as long as he physically could.

The dollmaker's agents came in the next morning. There were three women—one taller, one thinner, and one prettier—but otherwise, they were identical. They never told the dollmaker their names, and the dollmaker never asked for them. It was better that way; their relationship was not personal, but purely transactional. The dollmaker wanted to make dolls worthy of the craft of dollmaking, and the agents wanted dolls they could sell.

“I love it!” the taller one said, and the dollmaker was pleased.

“So pretty,” the thinner one said.

“How do you do it?!” the prettier one asked. The dollmaker’s agents walked around his workshop, running their hands absentmindedly over everything they could find. “I mean, I’ve thought about dollmaking, but I could never.”

“I just make dolls,” the dollmaker said. “And when I finish one doll, I start another.”

“I love the hustle,” the taller one said.

“For sure,” the thinner one said.

“Are these all the dolls you have right now?” the prettier one asked.

“Yes,” the dollmaker responded. “But I thought you said you loved my new doll?”

“We do, it’s just we’re looking for high-concept dolls. Those are really selling right now,” the taller one said.

“For sure,” the thinner one said. “Like *The Good Place*.”

“Do you have *The Good Place* of dolls?” the prettier one asked.

“I can make any doll you want,” the dollmaker said.

“Ooh, we’d love to see a deck on that,” the taller one said.

“Do you think you can make a deck on that?” the thinner one asked.

“We have a lot of generals we can send you out on if you make a deck on that,” the prettier one said.



The dollmaker put together a deck. It was more difficult work, as he was not entirely sure what *The Good Place* of dolls was, but he tried his best nonetheless.

A step removed from dollmaking, the dollmaker struggled to describe precisely how he would make the doll. “Tools: brushes, lathe. Materials: oak, rosewood. This doll will incorporate elements of popular culture that are relevant to Gen Z,” he typed into the Google Slides presentation, but no matter how he massaged the language, it all felt wrong. The sun rose and the dollmaker struggled to make sure the margins of each text box were just right. Formatting, he was told, was of the utmost importance.



The dollmaker presented the deck to his agents in the morning.

“As you requested, this first slide gets into who I am as a dollmaker,” he said. “I was born in Sicily...”

“That’s so unique,” the taller one said. “I have the perfect doll I can send you out for.”

“That’s great,” the dollmaker said. “But I didn’t know I was going out for other dolls.”

“Do you know Giuseppe Giovanni?” the thinner one asked.

“Vaguely,” the dollmaker said. The dollmaker had taken a workshop with him when the dollmaker was younger, but the dollmaker doubted Giuseppe would remember.

“He’s got a doll in development. It might get picked up for series. You should reach out to him. Work that connection,” the prettier one said.

“I don’t really know him,” the dollmaker said. “I mean, I know him, but I don’t know him know him—”

“Sorry, can we get back to the deck?” the taller one said. “I have another call in forty-six seconds.”

“Right, sure. Where was I? Oh. I was born in Sicily—”

“Giuseppe is such a great dollmaker,” the thinner one said. “Have you seen Nurse? It’s the doll who is a nurse. It’s great, right?”

“It’s great,” the dollmaker lied.

“You know what you’d be good for?” the prettier one said. “Vroom.”

“Totally,” the taller one said. “We should send him out for Vroom.”

“What doll is this?”

“It’s not exactly a doll,” the thinner one said. “It’s more like a car that they’re shrinking down.”

“Like a Hot Wheel?” the dollmaker asked.

“Mmm, yes and no,” the prettier one said.

“Can you meet with the Vroom people tomorrow?” the taller one asked.

“Sure.”

“Perfect, you’re all set,” the thinner one said. The dollmaker never finished his deck.



The dollmaker met with the Vroom people. Their offices were in Santa Monica, which was very far from the dollmaker’s home in Sicily, even in midday traffic. The meeting was six hours long and the concept of Vroom only came up once toward the end of hour five. The dollmaker had the suspicion that nobody in the room had any idea what the shrunken-down car was supposed to be, but the more the dollmaker thought about it, the less he understood it, either.

Perhaps there wasn’t a way to make a shrunken down car that wasn’t just like a Hot Wheel, or perhaps the dollmaker was just tired from the overnight flight to Burbank. Regardless, the Vroom people were being paid a lot of money to make the shrunken-down car happen, so it didn’t really matter if anyone understood it at all. As the meeting drew to a close, the dollmaker couldn’t tell if the Vroom people actually enjoyed talking with him, or if they just didn’t want to go back to thinking about making the shrunken-down car—which, from what he could gather, was more of an idea that was thrust upon them rather than something they came up with. At one point in the meeting, the Vroom people asked the

dollmaker what dolls he liked.

“There’s so many great dolls,” the dollmaker said. “Teacher, Soccer Player, Businesswoman. I love the whole Professions expanded universe. They’re taking a lot of risks, but it’s really paying off. It’s truly a golden age of dollmaking.”

“Do you know Giuseppe Giovanni?” the Vroom people asked.

“Oh yeah,” the dollmaker said. “I know him real well.”

“I made a doll with him for this doll streaming service that never got off the ground. God, what a piece of shit.”

“Yeah, he’s a real piece of shit,” the dollmaker said.



When the dollmaker landed in Sicily, he had an email from his agents telling him the Vroom people thought he was great. A few weeks later, his agents called the dollmaker to tell him he got the job. He was painting the eyes on his latest doll at the time, so the call went to voicemail.

The dollmaker flew out to Santa Monica again. He stayed at an Airbnb that was near the beach. During the day, he went into the dollmaking room to work on the shrunken-down car. There was a lot of brainstorming and wasted time—the head dollmaker would spend hours talking about dolls he hated and how much he was spending to send his kids to private school—which frustrated the dollmaker. It wasn’t dollmaking, but it was closer to dollmaking than making decks.

The dollmaker didn’t know anyone in LA, so at night, the dollmaker stayed in and watched television. He wished he could have been making dolls, but he didn’t have his tools with him. And he was tired, more tired than he’d ever been. Where the work of dollmaking was energizing, talking about dollmaking was, quite frankly, exhausting. One day, right as everyone was about to go home, the head dollmaker decided that he didn’t like that the shrunken-down car was red. “Every car is a red car,” he said. “It’s so obvious. What are we really saying?” He kept the dollmakers at work until two AM thinking of colors that were “like red, but not as cliché.” They ultimately settled on burgundy. The dollmaker had initially suggested burgundy, but the head dollmaker didn’t like how quickly the dollmaker had solved the problem, so they all had to wait for enough time to

pass that the head dollmaker believed he thought of the color burgundy himself.



When the shrunken-down car was finally finished, the Vroom people threw a party at the Ace Hotel. Everyone drank too much and gushed about how great the shrunken-down car was. Even the dollmaker was impressed with it. Maybe he was just so deep in it that he lost all perspective, but he had to admit it was not like a Hot Wheel at all, while still evoking the positive feelings associated with the Hot Wheel brand. The dollmaker kept saying this phrase over and over, so many times that it began to lose all meaning, and whenever the dollmaker said it, all he could hear was the noise of the words, the shrillness of each vowel, the slurry way the word ‘brand’ escaped his lips, the elongated squeal of the word ‘feeling’. The dollmaker talked and talked until his agents called and told him they got him a meeting with the dollmaker who was running the American Doll reboot for the last remaining Toys “R” Us store that forgot to close its doors. The meeting started five minutes ago and it was in the middle of the Pacific Coast Highway. It was extremely difficult to nail down this meeting, the dollmaker’s agents said. Some people are always so busy, but they never work a day in their lives, they said, and we should all be so lucky.

5

NICK GAGE IS ENOUGH

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*MARCHING CHURCH - "KING of SONG"*

*“I don’t care if I live or die. All I got is wrestling”*

- Nick Gage, July 25, 2017

[youtube.com/watch?v=MT7N\\_htmfIU](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MT7N_htmfIU)

NICK GAGE DIDN’T WANT TO WRESTLE on the night his brother, former professional wrestler Justice Pain, committed suicide.

When he spoke to the crowd after his wrestling match at the recent GameChanger Wrestling show in Los Angeles I attended, Gage said he heard the news when his plane landed, and that he briefly considered missing the show entirely. And while Gage didn’t clarify what made him decide to wrestle tonight, I kept thinking about a YouTube video he made in 2017. Gage, in the middle of the woods, wearing a tank top and sideways baseball cap, stares directly at the camera. “Let’s just keep it real,” Gage says, his eyes looking hollow and lifeless, his mouth frozen in a permanent scowl. “I don’t care if I live or die. All I got is wrestling.”

Nick Gage is about as popular inside the world of independent professional wrestling as he is unknown outside of it. The thirty-nine-year old New Jersey native is a far cry from the muscled-up strongmen you might find on WWE’s *Wrestlemania*—performers who, if declining television ratings are to be believed, are less culturally relevant than ever before. As an independent wrestler, Nick Gage is a niche inside a niche. But to the fans of ultra-violent deathmatches, where combatants routinely smash each other over the head with fluorescent light tubes and wooden doors, Nick Gage is something of a folk hero.

Nick Gage often calls himself a deathmatch God, and his fans treat him as such. They rarely refer to him simply as Nick Gage, preferring to add the word “fucking” in the middle out of respect and admiration for his willingness to bleed for their entertainment. The mere mention of Gage’s name is enough to spur hundreds of fans to gleefully chant “MDK!” in unison for minutes on end. For the uninitiated, “MDK” stands for “Murder, Death, Kill”—one of the several



fictional gangs Nick Gage belongs to, along with Eastern Bloc and H8 Club. Despite the violent connotations, the only members of these gangs are Gage's devoted fanbase, along with Gage himself. To join, one apparently needs only to love Nick Gage, or, if you're Nick Gage, to love everyone else back. At one GCW event I attended, while Nick Gage was on the microphone thanking everyone for coming to the show, a fan yelled out, "I love you!" Nick Gage pointed at the fan, looked them straight in the eye, and said, "I fucking love you, too." This was the moment I became a Nick Gage fan. When Nick Gage says, "I fucking love you," he means it with his entire being. He has an intensity and authenticity to him that is impossible to deny. He doesn't just love his fans—he needs them. Without them, Nick Gage would be dead.

Nick Gage is a convicted felon. On December 22, 2010, Nick Gage robbed a bank in Collingswood, New Jersey. At the time, he was addicted to painkillers and living on the streets, but remarkably, still wrestling. When police released the bank's security camera footage, it was wrestling fans who helped identify Gage. But Nick Gage wasn't mad. In his own words, he wanted to get caught.

When he was released in 2015, he experienced something of an unlikely career renaissance, as fans became sympathetic to his attempt at redemption. Gage began to receive bigger and higher-profile bookings, sell tons of merch (including a "Free Nick Gage" t-shirt), and become the headline attraction for GCW. I can't think of Nick Gage without thinking of the ending to *It's A Wonderful Life*. No man is a failure who has friends—or fans, I suppose.

On the night his brother committed suicide, Nick Gage comes out to the ring and is mobbed. As he walks toward the ring, fans follow behind him, making Gage into something of a Pied Piper of the Los Feliz Ukranian Culture Center. When the match starts, fans circle the ring, banging rhythmically on the canvas and feverishly chanting his name. Those who can't fit around the ring remain standing for the entire match.

No matter how choreographed wrestling is at the end of the day, Nick Gage is performing like his life is on the line. More than any other wrestler, it feels like Nick Gage is willing to die for his fans—or rather, he would die for them again. As the story goes, when wrestler Thumbtack Jack smashed Gage with a light tube in a deathmatch back in 2009, a piece of it sliced Gage's armpit and punctured his artery. Despite heavy blood loss, Gage insisted on continuing the match, relenting only after losing consciousness. The way Nick Gage tells it, paramedics declared him clinically dead when they airlifted him out of the venue. After being revived, Gage wrestled again just seven days later. What else was the

deathmatch God going to do? All he has is wrestling.

On this night in Los Feliz, Nick Gage wins his match. Everyone in the building knows he had to win, but the inevitability doesn't make his victory any less emotional. While Gage is speaking, a fan enters the ring. If you are a wrestling fan, you understand just how egregious this is. Everyone understands you don't walk on stage when a performance is happening, but wrestling is different. One need only look up YouTube videos of fans running into a wrestling ring to find out what happens, but I'll spoil it for you—the wrestlers will beat the ever-loving shit out of you.

But this fan isn't looking to prove his manliness, or for fifteen seconds of fame. The fan walks over to Nick Gage and embraces him. He whispers something, and Nick Gage, with an uncharacteristic softness in his voice, says into the microphone, "Thank you. That means a lot." And in that moment, the deathmatch God looked briefly mortal. Not like a man who didn't care whether he lived or died, but a man who—with George Bailey-esque certainty—wanted to live.

The fan exits the ring, and mere moments later, as Gage continues to eulogize his brother, the wrestler Ricky Shane Page slides in and hits Gage in the back of the head. The two have been feuding in storyline, and this is still wrestling, after all. If this had happened to anyone other than Gage, this might have felt in bad taste. But wrestling truly is all Nick Gage has, and strangely, it just might be enough.

6

## WAR STORY

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*DIRTY PROJECTORS - "OVERLORD"*

**D**AN WAS TIRED OF WARS, so he ran for President as the guy who was gonna abolish all wars.

“No more wars,” he promised at his first stump speech in his hometown, to a handful of relatives and one local reporter, and that became his slogan. He put it all over his campaign posters, which he designed himself and printed out at a local FedEx. He went around to local coffee shops and used book stores and asked if he could hang them up. “You’re crazy,” they told Dan.

“War’s even crazier,” Dan said. And the owners smiled and laughed and told him he could hang up his sign, but that he shouldn’t expect much.

On the advice of his niece, Dan made a Twitter account, and he would tweet out “no more wars” every few hours or so. After a few months of doing this, he started getting some traction. First, from the irony teens, who liked that a weird old guy was running for President with complete sincerity. Then, from the left, who appreciated the simplicity and purity of his anti-imperialist message. And then, from former veterans, who’d had their limbs blown off in various conflicts around the globe and felt bitter about losing their body parts for other people’s politics and personal gain. Pretty soon, Dan got himself a few million followers. Then everybody wanted a piece of him.

“Tell us about your campaign,” the media said.

“I’m running on a platform of no more wars,” Dan said.

“Do you have any other issues?” they asked.

“No,” he said. “Just no more wars.”

“Do you have any experience in politics?”

“No,” he said. “I just know war is bad.”

“Did you fight in a war?” they asked.

“I did not,” Dan said.

“Then why are you so against war?”

“Because,” Dan said. “War fucking sucks.”

No one could deny that Dan produced some great sound bytes. So Dan got booked on the late night talk shows; the ones that liked to think they were far more liberal than their parent companies allowed them to be.

“Have you heard of this guy Dan?” the late night talk show hosts would ask, looking smarmily at the cue cards; desperate to maintain a degree of cool in their fitted suits. “You gotta get a load of this guy. He’s running for President and he’s only got one issue: no more wars.” They’d show a picture of Daniel at one of his rallies, talking to a dozen people at a library, or to a few dozen gathered around his truck in a Target parking lot, or to a couple out of work union guys at a dive bar. “Who’s this guy gonna pick for Vice President—a raccoon he found in his shed?” All the late night hosts would hold for laughs, as even the most mediocre late night jokes would garner a huge response. But instead, the studio audience burst into applause. “No more wars!” they chanted. “No more wars!”

So of course, they had to bring him on the show. It was all a joke, of course. This fringe whackjob who thinks he can end all wars; his country bumpkin yokel supporters who might seriously, actually, believe him. But people seemed to like him, and he’d undoubtedly be good for ratings, so how much harm could it do?

“Good to have you on the show, Dan,” the late night hosts said.

“I gotta be honest, it’s not so great being here,” Dan said.

“Why’s that?” they said.

“I don’t really like these shows,” Dan said.

“Is that so?” they asked.

“Yeah,” Dan said. “I think they mostly fucking suck.” The audience laughed. “But my niece said it would help me get more exposure.”

“Well, at least you like this show enough to come on it.”

Dan shrugged. “I’m just here to tell people I’m running for President, and I’m gonna end all wars.”

“That’s a big promise,” they said. “How are you gonna accomplish that?”

“You just send the troops home,” he said. “And you don’t send them back out.” The audience applauded.

“Sure,” the late night hosts said. “But I think there’s more to it than that.”

Dan shrugged again. “Not really,” he said. “You strip the tanks for scraps, you disarm the nukes and fire the generals. You turn military bases into low-income housing and the Pentagon into a rec center for underprivileged youths.”

“That’d be one hell of a basketball court,” the late night hosts said, finally getting some laughs.

“Probably a couple basketball courts,” Dan said. “Pentagon’s a pretty big place.”

“So what are you polling at?” they asked.

“I don’t look at polls,” Dan said. “But my niece tells me I’m dead last. On a lot of polls, I don’t even show up.”

“That doesn’t bode well for your chances,” they said.

“If people want to end all wars, they can vote for me, because that’s what I’m gonna do,” Dan said. “If they want more wars, they can vote for everyone else, because that’s what they’ll do. I don’t really care about what’s popular—I care about what’s right.”

“Well, you got my vote,” the late night hosts said, trying to be nice, but there was no way you could even make that out over the deafening cheers and thunderous applause.

Pretty soon after, Dan started polling. When he was at three percent, the data analysts at the useless think tanks all thought it was a glitch. Then, Dan was beating out some establishment candidates with five percent. Pretty soon, he had a solid hold on third place, at fourteen percent, but that didn't last long, because he rocketed to the top with twenty-nine percent. The analysts kept looking for ways their data was wrong, but it wasn't. Dan was out-polling candidates with war chests thousands of times bigger than his.

When the media asked him how he could possibly explain this, Dan didn't have an answer. "I don't really know why I'm polling so high, and I don't really care. The only thing I'm focused on is ending all war." Of course, the media pressed him. How was he so popular when he spent exactly zero dollars on ads? "I guess there's some things money can't buy," Dan said, and this drove the media crazy, because as they all knew when it comes to elections, there wasn't.

They told Dan he didn't have any business running a national campaign. He didn't even have a campaign manager. "My niece is my campaign manager," Dan said. They told him that a sixteen-year old girl wasn't old enough to be a campaign manager. "She's old enough to drive," Dan said. But that's ridiculous, they said. She can't even buy cigarettes. "I don't want her smoking," Dan said, and they had to give him that.

For the first round of debates, Dan showed up in a Carhartt button up and loose-fitting jeans. When they asked if he wanted a suit, he declined. "I like feeling comfortable," he said. They asked if he wanted any makeup, and he declined again. "I don't want you all to have to do any extra work." Dan's niece did his makeup, and even the pros thought she did great with Dan's eyebrows.

When they announced Dan's name on the debate stage, the applause was so long and so loud one of the candidates polling at two percent just up and left the stage without saying a word.

The first question they asked Dan was meant to cut his legs off. "What makes you think you're qualified to be President?" the moderator whose great-grandfather founded the second-largest publishing company in America asked.

"I'm a citizen. I'm over thirty-five. And I want to end all wars," Dan said. "What else is there?"

"But you don't think you lack the experience? You're running against a sitting senator and the former secretary of state."

“They couldn’t have done that great of a job, or we wouldn’t be fighting so many goddamn wars.”

Later, the moderator, who had a million dollars’ worth of pharmaceutical stock, asked him a question about healthcare.

“I don’t know much about that stuff,” Dan said.

“Really?” the moderator said.

“Yeah. All I know is that when I’m President, there’s gonna be no more wars.”

“You don’t think a President needs to know about anything else?”

“That’s why you have advisers,” Dan said. “Nobody knows everything.”

“And who are your advisers?”

“My niece is pretty sharp,” Dan said. And some of these people up here, I like what they’re saying about some other stuff. I know people back home. Nurses. Teachers. They can handle it.”

One of the other candidates raised his hand. “I don’t know if ‘they can handle it’ is good enough for the American people.”

Dan shrugged. “They know how to do their jobs.”

The candidate continued. “The fact is, it’s a complex world. There are no simple answers—”

“When you’re dealing with right and wrong, there are,” Dan interrupted. The candidate fumed. “I don’t know why you’re mad at me. I don’t think you’re that bad, Senator. The stuff you said about Wall Street? That’s good. I like that. When I’m President, I’ll do exactly what you said on that.”

The candidate had no answer. Dan got a standing ovation. The crowd didn’t stop cheering for fifteen minutes. You would’ve thought they were showing the Joker movie at Cannes.

The post-debate analysts were champing at the bit to talk about Dan.



“What do we think about ‘no more wars?’,” the pundits asked.

“It’s a good line,” the pundits said. “Simple. Effective. Memorable.”

“But is it enough to carry him to the White House?” the pundits asked.

And they all furrowed their brows like they had just heard the smartest thing in the world.

“Not a chance. He just keeps saying the same thing. It’s getting old,” they said.

“Can he connect with voters who love war?” they asked.

“And on the outside chance he is the nominee, how’s he gonna fare in a general election?”

“Could go either way,” they said. And that’s why they’re paid the big bucks.

“His first test is Iowa,” they said. Then, Dan won Iowa. “Let’s talk about New Hampshire. What happens if he wins New Hampshire?” they asked. Then Dan won New Hampshire. “So he’s off to a good start. But how’s this ‘no more war’ stuff gonna play in Nevada and South Carolina?” Then Dan won Nevada and South Carolina with seventy percent of the vote. “He feels like he has a commanding lead, but is the momentum starting to shift?” they wondered. It wasn’t. Dan won all the Super Tuesday states, minus Minnesota, where he came in second because for some reason, he decided to criticize the Vikings. “They’re not playing like a team that wants to win the Super Bowl,” Dan said. “It’s as simple as that.”

Dan’s campaign was as simple as that, too. He was traveling all across the country, speaking in front of bigger and bigger crowds, all the while hammering home, “no more wars.” All that travel was getting to be pretty expensive, so his niece set up a donations page. Pretty soon, Dan raised three hundred and fifty million dollars. After Dan bought all his airline tickets and set aside a stipend for food, he felt he had enough. “I don’t need this money,” Dan said. He started handing it out to homeless people wherever he went. The party told him this was insane, but Dan didn’t care. It’s not like the party was behind him, anyway. They made too much money off war. So they started sowing some seeds of doubt. “Is this who we want as the next President?” one governor asked. His approval rating dropped twenty-five points the day after he said that. “Do we really need another man as President?” one former President, who was very much a man,

asked. It pissed so many people off that the TV show the President inexplicably executive produced was canceled after one season. People just didn't want to watch streaming shows run by someone who wanted war anymore.

Dan won the nomination, which stunned everybody except for the people who were paying attention. At the convention, he gave a terse speech, thanking his niece and his supporters while looking annoyed he had to be up there the whole time. Soon after, the other party set about doing their opposition research. They learned Dan could barely hold down a job, liked to bet on college football, and spent most weekends stoned out of his mind. You can imagine how voters reacted when they ran commercials on that—they fucked loved it. The other party couldn't figure it out. Why is the average American relating to this deadbeat pothead who loves to gamble? So they put together focus groups to figure out Dan's appeal. "What do you like about Dan?" they asked.

"He doesn't want war. I don't want war. It just makes sense," one person said.

"I like that he's gonna stop all wars," another said.

"But do you like his personality?" they asked.

"Not really. I don't want to have a beer with him. I think he's kind of rude. I definitely wouldn't trust him to watch my kids. I just don't want any more wars, you know?"

"You ranked 'the economy' as one of your most important issues," they told another person. "So why are you supporting Dan?"

"I know Dan said he doesn't care about the economy. And I know he said he barely knows what one is. But if he'll stop all the wars—fuck. Doesn't that just sound too good to pass up?"

After they blew hundreds of thousands of dollars figuring out what they already knew, the opposition went on the attack. "We need wars to stay safe," they said. "And what about our troops? And our freedom?! And what if there's another Hitler out there? Isn't it anti-Semitic not to go to war with Hitler? And what about all the women in the army? Does this guy hate women? Huh? What about all that?!"

As you might predict, Dan was even more dominant in the general than he was in the primary. He even beat the other guy in the other guy's home

state. Dan's niece wanted him to put a line in his inauguration speech about his overwhelming mandate, and how it could enable his administration to do all sorts of great things, but Dan refused. "I don't want to bite off more than I can chew," he said. "All I promised was there won't be any more wars," he said, after he was sworn in. "Now we're gonna end all wars." He stepped back from the podium and nodded sagely, looking all the folded-arm Nat Sec people dead in the eye. He waved to the crowd and started walking to the White House, even though all the Secret Service people told him that he could just take a car. But Dan was President now. He called the shots.

Dan met with the generals later that afternoon. They all came into the Oval Office braced for the worst. "This is gonna be a short meeting," Dan said. "I'm sure you all know my position."

"We've seen your tweets," they said.

"Did they work? Did I get your vote?" Dan asked. An uncomfortable silence followed.

"You don't have to answer that," Dan's niece said.

"Why is she here?" the generals asked.

"She's done a pretty good job for me so far."

"She's a child," the generals said.

"I'll be eighteen in March," Dan's niece said.

"Regardless," the generals said. "We want to make this crystal clear."

"Here we go," Dan said. He kicked off his shoes and put his feet up on the Resolute desk.

"We're not here to lecture you, sir," the generals said, emphasizing the 'sir' with a hefty dose of contempt. "We're simply trying to let you know our position."

"And here's my position," Dan said. "I don't give a shit. There's no more wars, starting now."

"OK, but some of these conflicts are vital to the—"

“No more means no more.”

“If we leave, it could destabilize the region—”

“Isn’t it already destabilized?”

“Yes, technically—”

“OK, then, no need to muck it up further. We’ll just stop the wars and that’ll be that.”

“But Mr. President—”

“Call me Dan,” Dan said.

“OK, Dan,” the generals said, dripping with disdain. “How do you propose we do that?”

“Do what?”

“Stop the wars,” they said. “Do you have an exit strategy?”

“No,” Dan said. “But you will. By the end of today. Or you’re fired.”

“Mr. Pres- Dan. It can be in your financial interest—”

“Are you trying to bribe me?” Dan asked. “In front of my niece?”

The generals were speechless. Dan could not be persuaded. He could not be bought. Dan took out some shit weed and rolled up a joint. “Anyone got a light?” he asked. The generals were ready to pack it in and resign right then and there. They’d go live off their pensions, write memoirs, and do whatever else former generals do. But one general had heard enough. As the rest of the room was filing out, he stayed behind.

“You know if you go through with this, Dan, we’ll kill you.”

“Excuse me?” Dan said.

“Respectfully, Mr. President, we can kill you. We have all the guns. I’ve got one right now.” He lifted his shirt to reveal a 9mm handgun, and Dan looked

toward his Secret Service agents. “They have guns too,” the general said. “And I’m willing to bet they’re pretty fond of war.” The Secret Service agents looked down at the floor, ashamed.

“My Vice President—”

“Roger? The guy you knew from the hardware store? The people may have bought that he has real-world experience ‘solving problems,’ but we take you out, and he’ll fall in line.”

“But I have a mandate—”

“From the people,” the general said. “But they aren’t in this room. And they don’t have guns. I don’t want to kill you, Dan. And I think you don’t want to get killed. It’ll be a whole lot easier on both of us if you let things keep going the way they have been. So what do you say?” The general took out his gun, cocked it, and aimed it right at the President.

In that desperate, unreal moment, no one in that room could believe the improbable but obvious chain of events that had led them here. But they all saw the two paths forward clearly. Either Dan had to die, or everything needed to change, and one of those things was much easier to imagine than the other. I mean, how else could this story end? How could Dan survive? Who can picture a world without war? So the ending we deserve must be written together, not in cynicism or bloodshed, but with a full embrace of the uncertainty—of the absolute fucking chaos—that is peace.

And so, scared and hopeful, I asked the general to disarm. He thought about it for a moment, but when he looked into Dan’s eyes, he knew it was all for the best. He laid his gun on the Resolute desk and walked out the room toward a better future, into the great unknown.

7

## COLD BLACK COFFEE

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*BETTER OBLIVION COMMUNITY CENTER - "SLEEPWALKIN'"*

THE COFFEE SHOP HAD A ONE WORD NAME that was an action verb, like Hop, Dash, or Sprint. Well, not Sprint. Sprint is a major telecom provider, and would forbid such an egregious violation of the international trademark. Which is fine. There are plenty of other names for a coffee shop that play nicely with the established rules governing who gets to name their businesses what.

“Hi, are you ready to order?” The barista smiled at the customer, as is customary at these kinds of coffee shops. The barista had a neck tattoo, as they had resigned themselves to a lifetime of being an artist or a server. And this was fine for them. They enjoyed living outside the margins, despite the financial burden such a lifestyle entailed.

The customer spoke clearly. They were, in fact, ready to order. “I’d like a cold black coffee.”

“One cold brew, coming up.”

“No. Not cold brew. I want normal, drip, hot brewed coffee. But I want it served cold.”

The barista paused. “An iced coffee?”

The customer took a breath and, using a strategy they’d learned in therapy, held it for five seconds before exhaling. “No. Not an iced coffee. Cold black coffee.”

“I don’t understand. You want me to pour you a cup of coffee and let it sit for a

while before giving it to you?”

“No. Because then it would be lukewarm, or worse, room temperature. I want cold black coffee.”

“OK. So with ice?”

“No. Not iced. Cold.”

The barista stopped smiling. “I don’t understand how it can become cold without ice.”

I get it,” the customer said. “I’m not your average customer and this isn’t an average order. I know I’m being difficult. But I also know this isn’t complicated.”

“That doesn’t make sense.”

“Things can be easy and complicated, or difficult and simple. Understanding the task and accomplishing the task are entirely separate things.” The customer spoke at a rapid-fire pace. They had expressed this same sentiment in many different ways at many different coffee shops that were all, essentially, the same.

The barista chose to convey their feelings in a firm but polite manner, using a technique they had learned in therapy. “I will be totally honest with you – I don’t really care.”

The customer nodded. “Nor should you. I’m not asking you to relate to me. I’m one of the most hyper-particular people on the planet. Most people find me insufferable.”

“Then why don’t you change?” the barista asked.

“Would that I could!” sighed the customer. “To be normal? To be satisfied with the conventions of my era? No matter how hard I try, I cannot be shaken. Just as you are trapped in this interaction, I am trapped in my own brain. So I will repeat myself, but more deliberately. I would like a coffee. But I would like it to be cold. Not brewed cold. Brewed warm—hot even. But served cold. Not lukewarm, not room temperature. Cold. I understand that ice is a logical means to this end. If ice is used in the initial cooling of the coffee, this is a concession I can abide. But please, all ice must be removed from the coffee by the time it is served to me. If you would like to charge me extra for the ice, I will pay whatever



surcharge, as long as it is reasonable.”

“I won’t charge you for ice.”

“Fantastic. I will also add that if you have the resources, you can place the coffee cup in a refrigerator, or even a freezer, though you will have to be mindful that the coffee itself does not freeze and turn into ice.”

“OK, but that will take some time-”

“I understand the process of cooling, and I am willing to wait. I have the time. I am not a busy person. My social life is understandably barren.”

The barista conceded, shaking their head in bewilderment. “OK, then. One cold black coffee coming up.”

“One more thing. I would also like the coffee in this cup.” The customer removed a steel mug from their messenger bag. “I pre-chilled it at home, alternating between twenty minutes in the fridge and thirty minutes in the freezer for a total of two and a half hours. It will keep the coffee cold over time, as I plan on savoring it throughout my uneventful day.”

The barista began pouring the coffee from the carafe into a cup. “Actually,” the customer interjected, “I would like the coffee brewed fresh.”

“I made this pot fifteen minutes ago.”

“I don’t doubt it. But by fresh, I mean immediately brewed, right before my very eyes. I like to see the coffee come out piping hot, and then taste it glacially cold.”

The barista could no longer contain their frustration. “It’d be easier if you made your coffee at home!”

“Yes, it would. But I do not want to make it at home. I am out and about and I would like my coffee my way, however obnoxious it may be. Just as one would if they were ordering a flat white with extra foam, or a small Americano with no milk and eleven extra shots of espresso.”

“Those orders don’t make sense! They’re contradictory and decidedly suboptimal! Great, now you got me talking like you.”

“Life is not about optimization! People are not computers. They are animals. That’s one of the only things I like about humans. They have quirks. They are peculiar. They take the difficult road. They do stupid and confounding things in the search for pleasure and meaning. Yes, I am counterintuitive. I am cumbersome. I am a bother, and decidedly a gigantic pain in your ass. But I am also alive. I am seeking purpose and joy. The things we cherish are small and what they ruin is unfathomable. So please, if you would—a cold black coffee.”

The barista sighed, as this was no longer a battle worth fighting, and began to brew a brand new pot. Thirty five minutes later, once the coffee was significantly cold, the barista poured a small cup for themselves and took a sip, just to know what they were missing. It tasted awful, as expected. But the customer was delighted, and tipped heavily, so all was forgiven.

Once the customer was out the door, the barista thought of their neck tattoo—the ink they willfully injected into their skin, in patterns and shapes that had significance only to them, that made life slightly more difficult for no other reason than the happiness it gave them. There is room in this world for all kinds, they thought.

A new customer wandered toward the counter. “Excuse me,” they said, “what’s your Wi-Fi password?”

“It’s the name of our store in all lowercase, then the word Coffee with a capital C, then the word FAST all in capitals, then B-E-A-N-Z all in caps, then the number two, then the word go, again, all in lowercase.”

The coffee shop, like all coffee shops, had a stupid Wi-Fi password. Which is fine.

8

HAPPY YOM KIPPUR!

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LALA LALA & WHY? - "SIREN 042"

A LOT OF PEOPLE DON'T UNDERSTAND YOM KIPPUR.

I get it. It's a Jewish holiday, and statistically speaking, there aren't that many Jews out there. But non-Jews will want to say stuff to me like, "Happy Yom Kippur!" and I can't help but roll my eyes. So instead of being snippy for the rest of my life, I should probably explain. If you're Jewish, please don't skip the story—you could probably use a refresher.

Basically, Yom Kippur is the day of atonement. That means you're supposed to go to synagogue and listen to the rabbi say a bunch of prayers in a language you don't fully understand. You're not allowed to eat or drink anything but water for the entire day, from sundown the night before to sundown on Yom Kippur. I don't know why it's not from sunrise to sundown, but I don't make the rules.

I was told at a young age that the fast and the prayers were to get you to reflect on your sins of the past year. Then, you're supposed to seek forgiveness from those you wronged. Hardly anybody does the seeking forgiveness part. Or maybe they do, but they haven't ever sought forgiveness from me. You're also supposed to seek forgiveness from God, which is much less effective, because you never really get an answer.

Growing up, I mostly viewed Yom Kippur as a nuisance. I'd get the day off school, sure, but my mom would ruin it by sticking me in a dress shirt and slacks and dragging me to synagogue at nine. Services lasted three or four hours, which, when you're a kid, is practically the rest of your life. One year, I passed the time by drawing a Gameboy on a piece of paper. I pretended I was playing Kirby, and the still image of a poorly-drawn pink puffball swallowing up an angry, hammer-

wielding penguin was far more captivating than any Torah portion could ever be.

When services ended in the early afternoon, we'd go home. My dad, who has diabetes, would eat a sandwich, because God, in His infinite wisdom, understands the needs of those with Type II diabetes. Around six, we'd go back to synagogue for another (!) service, and then finally, finally, when that was over, we would all get to break the fast. We'd eat a catered dinner in the temple's all-purpose room. I'd load up on kugel, which for you gentiles is a noodle casserole that can't decide whether or not it's a dessert, and gefilte fish, which is a gelatinous ball of fish parts that tastes as good as it sounds.

This is all to say that Yom Kippur is nobody's favorite holiday, but it's not supposed to be. Yet it's incredibly popular. Even the least observant and most "culturally" Jewish will celebrate Yom Kippur. Yom Kippur services are consistently the busiest of the year—in most synagogues, you can't even get a seat without buying a ticket ahead of time. Unless you get there super early, there's never any parking, and many Jews will literally walk miles to attend. It's a day for somber self-reflection, but it's got the feel of an AFC championship game. Just, you know, with gefilte fish.

So why do we do it? If you were to ask Jews (and this is all speculation on my part, because I sure as hell didn't) I think the *Family Feud* number one answer would be "obligation," or maybe even "punishment." Yom Kippur is just something you're supposed to do because you've been bad, and there's not much more thought put into it than that.

I don't have a big sense of obligation about anything, really, so Judaism lost me at an early age. I was around eight or nine when it became clear to me that being Jewish meant I had to go to a torturous after school program two days a week without any of my Christian friends, as well as adopt an uncritical and unwavering support of Israel (which in hindsight was pure propaganda and gave me the creeps). After my bar mitzvah, my mom stopped forcing me to go to synagogue, so I stopped going. I didn't light a menorah on Hanukkah or give up eating bread for Passover. I'd tell people I wasn't really Jewish. I didn't believe it or practice it, I'd argue, so what right did I have to claim otherwise?

This all leads up to my sophomore year of college. It was the night of Yom Kippur and my friends and I were at the diner on campus. Someone asked me if I was celebrating Yom Kippur. I laughed. "No," I said. "Why would I do that? I'm not Jewish." So I made a show of it. I ordered the least kosher thing I could find—a bacon cheeseburger and a strawberry milkshake. I ate them with ironic

gusto. They were delicious.

The next day, the radiator in my dorm burst. My room was flooded with several inches of water. Everything on the floor—my dirty clothes, my textbooks, my Gamecube—was soaked. Maintenance was very sympathetic, but they told us that it would take a day to repair the radiator and pump the water out. My roommate and I had to sleep at a friend's dorm for a night.

On their cold, tiled floor, I got to thinking.

Now, the obvious interpretation is that this was God's way of punishing my insubordination. But I think that interpretation makes for a really boring story, and it certainly wasn't my takeaway. To be honest, I don't think God gives a shit one way or the other about prayers or ritual. If God were really trying to send that message, They could've done a lot worse than blown up a radiator that I didn't even own.

But I still felt bad that I acted like a prick and made fun of Yom Kippur. I may not have believed in God, but God still had feelings. So the next day, I fasted. And wouldn't you know it, I got a call from the school that maintenance was able to fix the radiator, and I moved back into my dorm that night. Nothing was permanently damaged. Even my Gamecube still worked.

So every year, the day after Yom Kippur, I like to fast. I don't start at sundown the night before, and sometimes I'll forget and have a few bites of oatmeal before remembering. I drink coffee, which you're technically not supposed to, but I'm not going through a day without coffee. I think about the mistakes I've made, the people I've hurt, and the regrets I carry. I think about how I can make good on them, how I can learn from them. I don't apologize to people because that's too hard, but I really feel like next year, that's something I'm going to start doing. I like to leave the day on a positive note, looking forward to the good I can do in the future.

I have a happy Yom Kippur.

I understand now that Yom Kippur isn't about obligation and punishment—it's about awareness and acknowledgment. You don't fast because you deserve to starve, you fast because it allows you some room to think about what you've done. God doesn't want to be worshiped or feared. God wants you to be a better person.

I've tried explaining my day-after Yom Kippur to other Jews, but they never

seem to understand. And that's all well and good. I kind of like that the day-after fast is just my own thing. It's my way of reflecting on my sins of the past year, as well as my small act of rebellion—of doing it my way.

Which, in my book, is far more righteous than just following the rules. If God liked the way things were so much, They wouldn't have created Their own universe.

I still don't go to synagogue. It's the Israel thing that really bothers me. If I wanted nationalism, I'd watch Fox News.

9

TELL ME HOW I SHOULD FEEL, *or*,
WRITING *a* NOVEL
at the END *of the* WORLD

ABI REIMOLD - "ARRANGED"

THE PANDEMIC WAS THE PERFECT TIME TO WRITE A NOVEL, Gregory thought. He didn't have a story to tell, but the idea of writing a novel had always been intriguing to him, and he finally had the time to sit down and tackle the Big Ideas that were swirling around in his brain.

Gregory got the idea from his roommate Alyssa, who was also working on her novel. Alyssa woke up and did her morning pages, first thing. She told herself she wouldn't look at her phone until she had fifteen new pages, and she always kept that promise. She liked to do her pages on their tiny balcony overlooking the empty lot with the overgrown grass and the old tire. Gregory would see her writing on her MacBook Pro as he lurched into the kitchenette to make half a pot of drip coffee, only stopping to take a quick sip of water from her metal water bottle. Alyssa abhorred the taste of coffee and said it actually made her more tired. Yet she still offered to chip in for the coffee maker.

Alyssa was just that kind of person, but she hadn't always been. Alyssa credited the change to mindfulness meditation. A few years back, Alyssa downloaded an app on her phone that featured an Australian man telling her to stop paying attention to the world and to simply focus on the sensation of energy moving up from her feet, to her hips, to her shoulders, to her head. It felt so good that she started doing it twice a day, right before she did her morning pages, and right after she finished dinner at night. Alyssa had never noticed the crushing weight the world placed on her until she started tuning it out. There was so much savagery out there, and none of it was real, you know? What mattered was the energy pulsating through her, through all of us, with no beginning and no end. Feet, hips, shoulders, head. And that's what her novel was about, loosely.

Like a lot of people, Gregory hadn't read a novel since college. If he was being honest, he only half-skimmed the novels that were assigned to him throughout school. Maybe Gregory had read ten full novels in earnest in his entire life, and even that was pushing it. The reality was that people didn't like reading novels anymore. Yet somehow, people still loved writing them. It's a strange economy with high supply and low demand that will never correct itself. Other people's ideas are just so much less exciting than your own, and that's that. Which isn't to say people didn't want to be entertained. Far from it. TikToks less than a minute in length were all the rage, even before the pandemic. Tweets were huge, too. Easily a million more people could read your tweet replying to someone else's tweet with "sir, this is a Wendy's" than would ever read your novel. That's not meant to be judgmental—that's just a fact. There's nothing about the novel that inherently makes it higher art than TikToks or tweets; if TikTok and Twitter had been around in the 17th century, the novel never would have had a chance.

While Alyssa stuck to her routine, Gregory wrote his novel in spurts. Sometimes he would feel inspired, but most of the time he wouldn't. What he wrote, he loved—until he read it back and hated it. Before he knew it, it would be eight PM, and Gregory would grab a Modello from the fridge while Alyssa packed a bowl. Alyssa didn't drink, but she did smoke a ton of weed. Gregory did, too.

"Let's read the first chapters of each other's novels," Alyssa said one night, a joint hanging limply between her fingers.

"Eh."

"You're not done?!" Alyssa asked. "C'mon. You just have to write."

"It's done. It's just all over the place."

"It's a first draft," Alyssa said. "You put something on the page. That's commendable."

"I'm warning you, it's bad," Gregory said, trying to hide his immense pride. "I'm trying to tell three different versions of events from six different perspectives and there's a lot of time jumps—"

"The only way to grow as a writer is to open yourself up to feedback," Alyssa said. "I crave feedback. It's like, give it to me straight. Just tear into me, I can take it."

Alyssa wanted Gregory to tell her she was brilliant, and Gregory wanted Alyssa to tell him that he sucked, so they emailed each other, and they both got what they wanted.

“This is good,” Gregory said.

“Just be honest.”

“No, it’s really good. Your characters sound like real people. And you really captured the feeling of when you get an idea, but don’t know how to phrase it, and you try to write it down, but your brain has already moved on, and the idea is gone.”

“But traces of it still stay with you,” Alyssa said. “An idea of an idea.”

“A null pointer of memory,” Gregory said, quoting her own writing back at her.

“You like that?” Alyssa said. “I stole that from computer programming.” Alyssa’s eyes darted across the screen. “I don’t get this.”

“It’s intentionally disorienting,” Gregory said.

“That’s not a good feeling.”

“It’s like *Twin Peaks*,” Gregory said. “You like *Twin Peaks*.”

“It’s not like *Twin Peaks* at all,” Alyssa said. “David Lynch was going for his own thing. He was trying to make an interesting show. You’re just trying to assert your own weirdness.”

“But isn’t that interesting?” Gregory said. “There’s a subversive element—”

“Human drama. That’s what makes a lasting impression. Weirdness can draw the reader in, but there’s gotta be substance there. It has to mean something.”

“What if I just evoke something?”

“What are you trying to evoke?”

“I don’t know! Something,” Gregory said, scowling. “How the hell are you

supposed to make art with all these rules?”



Three months had passed. The city had shut down again, after rushing to reopen. Alyssa was almost done and Gregory had just gotten around to reworking his first chapter. He cut down on the point-of-view characters and kept everything to a single time period. People want their entertainment streamlined, he thought, ignoring the fact that no one besides himself and Alyssa was ever going to read this.

“I’m just glad we voted blue,” Alyssa said. They had each taken an edible and were trying to watch that Netflix show where the floor is lava. “This could have been so much worse.”

“We have a Democratic mayor. And a governor,” Gregory said.

“Senators, too,” Alyssa said.

“Exactly. And it’s their fault.”

“It’s kind of amazing that there aren’t any Republicans,” Alyssa said. “Imagine if we were Florida?” Alyssa said nothing for the longest time. Sometimes, when she took edibles, she could feel the tiniest little spark of The Energy, without the guidance of the friendly Australian from her meditation app. As quickly as it came, it was gone. “I still can’t believe it’s Joe Biden.”

“I spoke to a lot of voters when I was volunteering for the Bernie campaign,” Gregory said. “And the dumbest group of voters was Joe Biden voters. Trump people were just evil. At first, I thought I could tell them that they’d pay less in taxes under Medicare For All. They’d save five thousand dollars a year. Five thousand! But they hated the idea that some ‘illegal’ might get coverage, too. Rather pay more if it would hurt someone. I weirdly respected that. At least they were committed to being horrible, you know? You want to hurt someone that badly? Hats off. Biden voters, though? They didn’t know shit. They really believe that old fucker’s up to the challenge.”

“Bernie won in our state,” Alyssa said.

Gregory felt a small surge of pride, like it still mattered. “Goddamn right.”

"I voted for him," Alyssa said. "Even though he wasn't my first choice, it felt right."

Gregory looked at the TV screen. Someone had fallen into the lava, but the game was still going on. "I can't tell the difference between culture from the 2000s to 2020," he said. "It's like an ocean of crap."

"There's some good stuff there."

"I don't think it's all bad. I just think it's all the same. Like I couldn't tell you when this show came out. Maybe it came out in 2014. Maybe 2009. What's the difference? Where's the evolution in style?"

"2005 felt really distinctive to me," Alyssa said. "But I don't know why."

"Sufjan Stevens."

"Mmmmmhmmm," Alyssa said. "Reality shows," Alyssa said. "Reality shows got a lot different. They were this weird contemptible sideshow, and now they're all serious and sociopolitical. It's like *Keeping Up With the Kardashians*. It started out as this goofy thing, this self-aware piece of kitsch we were all supposed to make fun of. Like The Osbournes. But now we're supposed to take it seriously. That's why they changed the theme song from that dorky whistling. It's like an honest-to-god documentary now. Has anything else done that? It's like the opposite of when things become parodies of themselves. It became the earnest version of itself. Fuck, that's really beautiful, isn't it?" Alyssa felt a spark in her head. "It's like there's hope for all of us."

"*The Osbournes*. We could have been living in that world. Kelly Osbourne could have been meeting with Trump to get some poor fucker's sentence pardoned. Communed? Or is it pardoned?"

Alyssa shrugged. "It was never going to be *The Osbournes*," she said. She stared off into the kitchen, where nothing of any particular importance was going on.



Two more months had passed. Gregory and Alyssa had made some progress on their respective novels. Alyssa was stretching things out even further, getting more abstract. Feelings were begetting more feelings. The plot was becoming

more circular, less relevant. “I WANT THIS TO READ LIKE MEDITATING FEELS,” she wrote in her notes. Gregory had whittled his book down even further. It was going to be more of a novella now; a brief but dense look at how two different people can interpret a single, solitary day. It had the spirit of the original, albeit compromised.

In the real world, everything felt as nightmarish as it had been for the past six months, but more mundane. People were dying, getting evicted, forced to risk their lives working for minimum wage. “That’s just life,” the politicians said, even though it wasn’t their life at all. The novelty of the early days, the Zoom calls with college buddies and cousins you hadn’t seen in years, had worn off. The unemployment was drying up. Time to get back to work. Even the commercials changed. “We’re here for you in this difficult time,” they used to say. “We honor our essential workers.” Now, it was all, “Shut the fuck up and order some Domino’s before you die.” The rules were lax. Things were falling apart. There was no hope. Just enjoy yourself before the virus or a climate disaster or a Joe Biden presidency takes you.

Gregory started looking at dating apps. He started talking to one woman who he felt like was a normal amount of desperate. They would be careful, they decided. They would do it doggy style, never looking at each other, and they would wear masks. The arrangement felt clinical, and it turned Gregory on. “Who else have you been around?” Gregory wrote.

“No one,” she wrote back.

“I have one roommate. What about you?”

“I live with three other people,” she wrote. “But I have my own room.”

“OK,” Gregory wrote. “We can be quiet.”

“LOL” she wrote.

“Discipline,” Alyssa said, as Gregory was leaving.

“How’d you know?”

“You have that look on your face,” she said. “You really shouldn’t.”

“She hasn’t been around anyone,” Gregory said.

“Discipline,” Alyssa repeated. She popped her second edible of the night and turned down the volume of an episode of *Star Trek: TNG*.

“You’re fine living like this?”

“No,” she said. “But we have to.”

“We don’t have to do anything,” Gregory said. “It’s no man’s land out there. They’re not giving us a goddamn thing.” He frowned—just saying those words made him hopeless and sad. “A man has needs, Alyssa.”

“Humphrey Bogart over here.”

“I guess? But it’s just—”

“I get it. Everybody gets horny. Just try not to touch any surfaces, I guess.”

Gregory looked at Alyssa. They had met through a mutual friend years ago, back when Gregory moved to the city and needed a place to stay. Gregory had never considered Alyssa as a romantic partner, and he was sure Alyssa had never considered him, but these were strange times, and one had to do whatever it took to survive. “Hey,” he said. “Have you ever thought...”

“Gregory,” she said, smiling. “Even if you wanted me, I wouldn’t know what to do with you. I’d feel lost at sea.”

It was the strangest sexual rejection of Gregory’s whole life.

Later, when Gregory was having sex with his date, he would recount this.

“Why are you telling me this?” she asked. She was putting her clothes back on while Gregory was sitting on the corner of her bed, naked except for a face mask.

“It’s just weird, right?”

“I guess. But everything is weird right now,” she said. “Do you want to do this again next week?”

“Same time?” Gregory asked, trying his best to match her casualness regarding the transaction.

“Sure,” she said.

“What?” Gregory said.

She slipped her face mask down briefly. “I said OK.”

“OK. Cool,” Gregory said, regretting the fact that he said “cool” as soon as it left his mouth.

“I can’t look at you naked with the mask on,” she said. You look like you’re going to murder me.”

Gregory picked up his pants and underwear and put them back on, surprised that this didn’t humiliate him. Since he couldn’t see her expression under her mask, he supposed, he didn’t feel anything at all.



Gregory and Alyssa’s novels were done. A vaccine was right around the corner, they were told, and that would fix everything. Soon we will all be immune, and we can forget this aberration of a year, the experts said. It turns out there’s no way the human mind can store memories without linking events to specific sensations—to location, to sights, to sounds, to smells. The sameness of the year, the sunken couch, the stiff computer chair, the shitty coffee maker percolating, will make this once-in-a-lifetime moment entirely forgettable. Apparently, it will be like going back in time, in a way. Once we adjust to life as it was before, this will all feel like one big blur.

“I like it,” Gregory said, putting down Alyssa’s novel. “But what were you going for with the ending? Don’t you think it’s a little on the nose?”

“It’s a statement of purpose,” Alyssa said. “I’m telling the reader exactly what I want from them.”

“Put the book down and live,” Gregory read. “Your breathing is the only thing you can control, and even that ends eventually. Obviously.”

“Yeah,” Alyssa said. “Subtext is boring. Give me text. Tell me how I should feel.”

“It just doesn’t feel artful,” Gregory said.

“Look around,” Alyssa said. “How useful has art been? Fuck the art of it—I want everyone telling me how they really feel at all times. If everyone did that, there would be no more wars. No more suffering. Those cops killing people, those fucking fascists, that entire system couldn’t withstand us speaking the whole truth.”

“How many edibles did you take?” Gregory asked.

“A few. But don’t you agree? I’m not interested in making a more colorful mask. I’m done with masks! I want your honest pain. People would be free to just say, ‘I’m fucked up,’ and people would respond back, ‘me too.’ I think people would have a lot more babies, honestly. You’d just feel open. Like, OK, I can bring another life into this world with this guy if he’s telling me he hates himself. I can work with that.”

“Do you want kids?” Gregory asked.

“I think so,” Alyssa said. “But like, before all I had to worry about was with whom. Now it’s like, everything. It’s gonna cost thousands of dollars to even freeze my eggs.” Alyssa looked off into the distance, imaging the children she would never have. She would have been a great mother if the world had let her, she decided, as she choked down tears.

“Can I read your ending?” she asked, refusing to dwell on anything she couldn’t control.

“Yeah,” Gregory said, handing over his computer. “It’s not entirely there. Originally it was just going to end without really resolving anything. And you wouldn’t know entirely who to believe about what actually happened. But that’s kind of the point, you know?”

“It’s very real,” Alyssa said.

“And I was going to insert myself in as a character, kind of like a Vonnegut thing. But not that obvious. The writer-insert character would just kind of observe, you know? Make a passive statement of fact about the plot. Not really passing judgment on any of the characters, but letting the reader know that he knew they know this is all just some sort of morality play he put on for their amusement. So it was going to end on that question—‘are you amused?’”

“Are you amused?”

“Yeah. Inviting the reader to ask themselves if they enjoyed the book or not.”

“Don’t you think most people would respond, “no?”

“No.”

“Don’t ask a question you don’t want to hear ‘no’ as an answer to,” Alyssa said.

“I don’t think that’s good advice.”

“Then don’t take it.” Alyssa was neither sad nor mad, and quickly read Gregory’s ending. “That’s very different from what you have here.”

“Yeah,” Gregory said. “I kind of hated how it came out when I tried writing it.”

“You spent a lot of time telling me how it was going to end, but that’s not actually the end?”

“I just couldn’t get it working,” he said, “but if I could, that’s how I would want it to end.”

“I see.”

“Do you like it?” Gregory asked. “The idea of the original ending, that is.”

“I don’t know,” she said.

“You don’t know, or you won’t say?”

“It doesn’t really matter if I like it or not,” Alyssa said. “It’s not on the page, you know? So I choose not to have an opinion.”

“You have to have an opinion,” Gregory said. “I told you about it. And it made you feel some way.”

“It really didn’t. It’s not real, and it’s never going to happen the way you want it to, and yes, I am conflating this with how I feel about having a child. So I can choose not to care about your ending and my future and have it all wash over me like a wave.”

Gregory looked at his phone. How long has he had this stupid background? *Metal Gear Solid 4* came out years ago. What was he trying to say? He changed it to the default and felt instantly better. They made these defaults for a reason—most people love them, or at least, reluctantly accept them. Gregory felt The Energy roll up slowly from the balls of the feet, filling his knees, traveling through his hips and his torso, slowly ambling through his stomach and heart and lungs, encapsulating his neck and head until there was a spigot above him, and it was showering him with streams of energy. It hadn't started at his feet at all! It was obvious now that he could picture the shower head suspended above him. The trick had always been to forget the notion of some metaphorical shower head and immerse yourself in it. The illusion of Gregory and Alyssa and this awful eternal year are not stand-ins for the thing but in and of itself The Actual Thing. It is all happening concurrently, and it is not meant to make you feel any way other than more alive. Obviously.

10

a BILLION DOLLARS
for a BILLIONAIRE

MICHAEL NAU - "LOVE SURVIVE"

CHARLIE CHECKED HIS BANK ACCOUNT. There it was, ten figures long—one billion dollars. Charlie had just become a billionaire.

Of course, real billionaires don't work like this. Real billionaires don't just "have" one billion dollars. They are "valued" at one billion dollars, based on companies they own, stock holdings, real estate properties, and various other assets. If you actually had one billion dollars in your possession—and if you do, what are you doing reading my stories?—you would have many different bank accounts. Some overseas to avoid taxes, some under the names of dummy corporations registered in Delaware to avoid taxes, and some in special accounts invented by the financial services industry to avoid taxes. Most of being a real billionaire is avoiding taxes.

But Charlie wasn't concerned with any of this—he wanted to "see" the billion dollars he had earned.

"Earned," in this case, like many things when it comes to billionaires, was relative. Charlie came from an oil family. This means that many generations ago, Charlie had a relative that found oil. That relative started charging people for the oil he found, more than the oil was worth. We call people who sell things for more than they are worth "good businessmen." Charlie's relative was a very good businessman. There's a saying about money: "you can't take it with you." Charlie's relative knew this to be true, so he gave the money to his children. That money was not taxed at a very high rate, and as the generations went on, it was taxed less and less.

Another saying about money is "it takes money to make money." Charlie's

father told him this saying. Of course, money doesn't "make" money. Charlie made his money by giving his money to others, who—since it takes money to make money—needed Charlie's money to make their own money. Then, when they had made money, Charlie would get even more money back. In a way, Charlie was like a landlord for money, charging others a premium for the privilege of using his money. There's a saying about work that goes "when you love what you do, you never work a day in your life." It could be more accurately amended to, "when your money makes money, you never work a day in your life." Charlie didn't like to think too hard about how he made his money, because if you think too hard about it, you become a socialist. There are no socialists who have a billion dollars.

Charlie went out to celebrate his billion-dollar bank account. He got a table at the finest steakhouse in town. Charlie knew this was the finest steakhouse in town because none of the menu items had prices. They didn't list the prices because nobody who ate there had to run a cost-benefit analysis on what they ordered, as money was no object to them. Therefore, the steakhouse didn't need those ugly-looking prices cluttering up their beautiful and meticulously arranged menu. Sometimes Charlie would think about how money was of no object to him, but simultaneously the greatest object in the world. Those were the thoughts of mere millionaires, though, so they would have to go.

Charlie had been to this steakhouse before. It was a favorite place of his to take people who wanted some of his money. Because the price of the steak was so exorbitant, people thought that Charlie had a lot of money—more money than he actually had—so they would be more likely to take Charlie's money, which then would make Charlie even more money. These kinds of meals were known in the business world as a "business expense." That means that Charlie could pay less tax that year. It's all about avoiding taxes. This is part of what people mean when they say, "it takes money to make money."

Charlie decided that, as a newly-minted billionaire, it was time for a change. It should be Charles now, not Charlie, he thought. Millionaires were named Charlie. Billionaires were named Charles. Charles had an air of sophistication to it. One of the Koch brothers was named Charles, in fact.

"Hello, sir," the waiter greeted Charles; people of his stature do not call people Charles or Charlie, only sir. "What are we having today?"

"I'll have the sirloin steak," Charlie said. One of the differences between billionaires and millionaires is how they treat the help. Billionaires don't ask,

“can I have something?” Billionaires state that they are expecting something. Millionaires question, billionaires demand. “Actually, I’ll have the filet mignon.” Charlie had seen the filet mignon on the menu, and decided to order it on a whim because it sounded more expensive, and therefore, superior. In reality, while there are small and subtle differences between the two cuts of meat, both are considered premium cuts and deciding between the two is a matter of personal preference. Charlie, as a millionaire, had tried both cuts before, and preferred sirloin. But he was a billionaire now. The old rules no longer applied.

“Excellent choice, sir,” the waiter replied. He would have said that regardless of what Charlie ultimately chose. Part of being a waiter at the finest steakhouse in town is validating the wealthy, who, despite having more resources at their disposal than some small countries, are horribly insecure.

“And this is Kobe beef, right?” Charlie knew that Kobe was an expensive, and therefore, quality, kind of beef.

“The finest,” the waiter responded. Charlie smiled. He was sitting at a table by himself in a very expensive steakhouse in the middle of the afternoon. This was the apex of his dream, and no one could take it away from him.

Suddenly, Charlie’s smile turned into a frown. Charlie realized that technically, by purchasing this Kobe beef filet mignon, he wouldn’t have one billion dollars anymore. Yes, he would have some nine hundred million, nine hundred ninety-nine thousand dollars, but it wasn’t a billion. He would no longer be a billionaire.

Charlie took out his cellphone and called his broker. Charlie’s broker was a man named Lloyd. Lloyd made his money by charging Charlie a fee for the privilege of buying or selling stocks for him. This cost Lloyd nothing, so Lloyd was a good businessman. Lloyd did not have a relative who discovered oil, so he was not as good of a businessman as he could have been.

“Lloyd, it’s Charles.”

“What’s up, Charlie?”

“I need you to sell some stock.”

“What stock?”

“Any stock.” Charlie, sensed that he was disturbing his fellow patrons and

lowered his voice. While billionaires can take phone calls in public at whatever volume they please, millionaires are still self-conscious. “It doesn’t matter. I need cash.”

“What’s going on? Are you gambling?”

“I’m not gambling. I just need some liquidity.” Liquidity was a financial term for any asset that could quickly be sold without losing much of its initial value. If an asset’s value fluctuated greatly, and was cumbersome to sell, it was called “bullshit.”

“Charlie, why would you sell? The market’s up.” The market being up was a great thing if you owned stock. If, like the majority of Americans, you didn’t own stock, this was still a great thing, as it made the tiny minority of Americans who own stock even richer, and only a real asshole or a socialist would begrudge someone else’s success.

“I need a billion dollars,” Charlie said.

“How the fuck are you gonna sell a billion dollars worth of fucking stock?”

“I don’t need a billion dollars. I need to get up to a billion dollars. In the bank. I had a billion, but I’m buying a steak, so now I have less than that.”

“A steak?”

“It’s Kobe beef, Lloyd. Filet mignon.”

“So put it on your fucking Amex!”

“And that’s debt. So it doesn’t count. I want to see a billion in the bank and know there’s a billion in the bank.”

“Charlie, I don’t think you understand how financial-”

“It has to be an honest billion, Lloyd.”

Lloyd snorted involuntarily. Lloyd had thought enough about how he makes his money to know that asking for an honest billion was like asking for a jumbo shrimp or a civil war. He had not thought enough about it to become a socialist, however, as he still believed that with the right stock and the right deal, he could become a billionaire, too.

“Are you laughing at me, Lloyd?”

“Charlie, listen to me. I know you are a very wealthy man who could buy and sell me ten times over. But as your financial advisor, I am telling you: Do. Not. Sell.”

Charlie hung up the phone without saying goodbye—a millionaire move if there ever was one. Billionaires are so far above the petty squabbles of most folk they don’t get angry when they talk on the phone. The waiter came out from the kitchen with Charlie’s steak. “Enjoy, sir.”

“Wait. Don’t go. Can I sell you something?”

“I’m sorry?”

“Do you want this watch?” Charlie took off his Rolex watch. “Five hundred dollars cash and it’s yours.”

“Sir, I cannot accept that.”

“It’s a five thousand dollar Rolex,” Charlie said. “Feel this bracelet. That’s real steel, pal. This is the deal of a lifetime.”

“Sir—”

“It’s waterproof. You can go 300 feet with this thing, and it still ticks.”

“Sir, while the watch is immaculate, and I appreciate the depths it can go underwater, I cannot.”

Charlie slumped down in his chair, defeated. “Forget it. Thanks for the steak.”

The waiter walked away quietly, pretending the conversation had never occurred, and already Charlie was starting to feel like a plain old millionaire again. He cut into his Kobe beef filet mignon and brought a piece to his lips. He let the steak loll around in his mouth. It tasted flavorless and bland, like a day-old fast food hamburger that’s been microwaved. How could he enjoy the tenderness and depth of flavor when it cost him far more than its unlisted price?

The waiter returned to check on the table, as is customary. “Is everything to your liking, sir?”

“No.”

“Is the steak overcooked? Undercooked?”

“It’s cooked fine. Not that I’d know, anyway.”

“Look, if it’s about the watch—”

“It’s not your fault. I’m sure you don’t have five hundred bucks lying around, anyway. It’s just... there has to be something I can do to make money. Something I could sell, or landlord, or middleman.”

“Sir, I don’t know what to tell you. We’re in a steakhouse. All we have are steaks. And wine. And forks, knives, dishes.”

Charlie’s eyes lit up. “You need a dishwasher?”



Charlie followed the waiter back into the kitchen. The waiter explained the situation to the staff. They were baffled, and said as much to each other in Spanish. Charlie remained unfazed, as he did not understand Spanish, and because he had, as he would go on to explain in his *New York Times* best-selling business management book based on this experience, a Billionaire Mindset. These working class folk might have been satisfied with hundreds of millions of dollars, but none of them were the good businessman Charlie was.

Charlie rolled up his sleeves and pointed at a stack of dishes. “These are the dirty ones?”

The kitchen staff snickered. “Yeah, man,” one of them said.

Undeterred, Charlie picked up a dish and placed it under the dish hose. The force of the water surprised him, and he barely managed to keep it under control. He washed the dish down carefully, over and over, making sure all the remaining bits of dried up sauce and flecks of porterhouse were washed clean.

Charlie turned off the hose. He went to grab a dishrag, but couldn’t find one. With steadfast resolve, Charlie took the tail of his four hundred dollar Italian dress shirt and wiped the dish dry. He looked at the dish. It sparkled

in the fluorescent light, immaculate. Still unclear, as Charlie didn't realize he had to use the conveyor dishwasher, but immaculate. Charlie marveled at his handiwork. It was a fine dish, expensive and handmade, bought in bulk for a deal from a wholesale supplier. Someone made this dish, Charlie thought. What was once nothing but raw materials was willed into existence by an artist, a craftsman. It can all go away in an instant, he thought, this billionaire thing. But work like this? This endures.

It was at this moment Charlie experienced an epiphany. What were the margins on this dish? There had to be a way to replicate the handmade feel with cheaper materials, and mass produce these in a country with relaxed labor laws. You could bring them to big-box retail stores and market them as "restaurant-quality," especially if you attached a celebrity chef or Food Network star. Bursting with newfound energy, Charlie rushed to the front of the house and demanded to speak to the manager about where they bought their dishes and how he could be invoiced for his dishwashing. And when that check came, Charles framed it in his office, a conversation piece for him to tell his clients about the time he became an honest billionaire.

11

FATHER *and* SON
JOHN MISTY

AFRICA EXPRESS - "SEE THE WORLD"

MY DAD IS NOTHING LIKE THE MUSICIAN FATHER JOHN MISTY. He doesn't even listen to music, not really. He doesn't watch movies—I think the last time he went to a movie theater was to take my sister and I to see the *Flintstones* movie with John Goodman in 1994.

He doesn't have hobbies. He watches reruns of *Everybody Loves Raymond* and *Two and a Half Men* and laughs whenever the laugh track plays. Sometimes he mixes things up and watches History Channel documentaries on World War II. He's a capitalist, through and through, and would like to see the world continue going in the direction it already is, however unsustainable and doomed that may be.

Where Father John Misty spends his artistic time navel-gazing and ruminating about the technocracy that will consume and obliterate us all, my dad doesn't give that stuff a second thought. I remember him taking my sister and me to Sesame Place when I was five or six. There was a big rope net that I had a great time climbing up. He didn't like climbing up the rope net that much. We went on the lazy river ride—the one where you'd get in your bathing suits, sit in an inner tube, and float down the water. He liked that ride. I liked it, too.

I read in a *Guardian* interview that Father John Misty struggles with depression. He'd go on benders, self-medicating with booze and pills. He'd microdose LSD for months at a time. He'd yell at the audience for their complicity in humanity's ills and be overly self-deprecating in interviews. He was quoted in that piece as saying:

"As someone who has depression, there are days when I'll wake up and say: I'm not going to allow myself a single happy thought today."

If you understand depression, it's all standard stuff. The world is so vicious and cruel you want to blow everything up, including yourself. If one tactic doesn't work—if the drugs wear off or people actually seem to like your cynic shtick—you try another.

I've been depressed too, and for most of my teenage years, I didn't know what to do about it either. I didn't allow myself a single happy thought, and that came out in strange ways. I failed in school. I'd write letters to my Senators about the immorality of the Patriot Act and the Iraq war. I played *Donkey Kong Country 2* at four AM while listening to Belle and Sebastian's "The Boy With The Arab Strap." I gave up on life, not really reading or learning or hanging out with friends. I resigned myself to a life of floating aimlessly down river, waiting to die.

Thankfully, I got out. Therapy helped. Finding something I loved to do and finding people I loved helped. Writing helped. Making things that I could leave behind—little fragments of my thoughts and feelings, that helps. In the same *Guardian* piece, the writer says that "throughout our two-and-a-half-hour conversation, [Father John Misty] is constantly pausing, doubling back, amending, apologizing, except when he talks about songwriting. Then he sounds unstoppable. Music is the place where his whirring brain can find optimism, clarity, and faith. It's what enables him to tell the truth." I like that part.

My mom used to joke that I get all my good qualities from her and all my bad qualities from my dad. I wonder how that made him feel. He's not an introspective guy, so maybe it didn't make him feel anything at all. She'd say it to me in front of him, sometimes. He'd be watching TV, and the volume would be so loud, like he was trying to drown us out. My mom told me once that she thinks he's autistic. They didn't diagnose autism in the fifties, but given what we know about autism now, it checks out. I remember him running through the house, shrieking with his fists balled up. He'd make strange noises at the dinner table, little yips and yelps, whimpering like a wounded animal for seemingly no reason. Sometimes he would say random words out loud, like "taxes," or "I can't," contributing to conversations that only he was having inside his own head.

I never talked to him about this, so I don't know what was going on. I think he was worried about making money, about providing a future for his children. He was experiencing a lot of stress at work, I'm sure. It came out in strange ways. I remember when I was eight or nine or so he would sometimes rip up my books and toss the pages in the air. He'd call me a son of a bitch and a little asshole, and I would cry until he left me alone. Sometimes I would try to tape the pages back together, and other times I would just leave them on the floor, wallowing in their

destruction, looking like little black and white snowflakes.

I think about those ripped up books sometimes, and it still makes me sad. But now, I'm not crying over a torn up copy of *Sideways Stories From Wayside School*, but how much pain my dad was obviously in.

There's a reason he was like this. It might be his brain chemistry, which I'll never fully understand. It might be the depression my mother thinks I inherited from him. It might be the way we live our lives: trading our labor for paper money, watching it accumulate on a computer screen, spending it on our children's useless educations. There are dots I cannot get him to connect.

I remember when I was nine or ten, I had rented a Super Nintendo game from Blockbuster. I had picked it out specifically because it was a war game, and I knew my dad liked war. When he came home from work, I begged him to play it with me. He came downstairs in his suit and tie and picked up the controller. He quickly got frustrated with trying to get his tank to blow up enough Iraqis to win Desert Storm, and went back up to watch TV. If I told my therapist this, she might say something like, "ahh, so this is why you keep talking about that scene from *The Sopranos* where Tony is all excited that AJ made a big play in his football game, and tells AJ he's gonna take him out for hot dogs, and AJ asks if they can play video games together, and Tony tells AJ not to play so many stupid fucking video games, and AJ gets real quiet and tells Tony he'll go get a hot dog with him, but all the light has left his eyes, and Tony never even knew what it was that he lost."

My relationship with my dad has gotten better as I've gotten older. He'll call me every few weeks or so to ask how I'm doing, and I'll say I'm fine, and he'll tell me to make sure my health insurance doesn't lapse. He'll promise we'll talk more later, but the conversation never goes any further or deeper than that. I can't tell if he's trying his best, if he's disappointed that he can't give me more of himself. I can't tell if I'm trying, either. There's a lot I'd like to ask him if I had the courage. Why do I have your same fears about the future? Why do I share your frustration and anger? How much do you identify with *The Sopranos*? Did you know that art and therapy helps? Why couldn't you have played the fucking game with your stupid fucking son?

What I like most about Father John Misty is that he sings like the end is coming. I was never really into all that apocalyptic stuff, but he makes it sound so relevant and prescient. It's the time we live in, I suppose. I'm worried that my dad is going to die and this is going to be it for us. I won't know him any further.

I know I still have time to ask him, but it's hard. I'm scared that I won't like what I find, or worse, that there's nothing else there. But the end is coming for both of us, either way. I can tape the books back together, or I can leave them in tatters on the floor.

There's a Father John Misty song I really like called "Leaving LA." It's very candid and raw, even by Father John Misty standards. It's thirteen minutes long, but long songs never bothered me. It ends strangely, without much musical or lyrical resolution, so I'll rarely listen to it just one time.

I put it on again. And again. And I will suddenly remember when I was three or four and my dad took me out to see my first snow. He held me up to his old Ford Taurus and let me wipe the snow off the windows. I couldn't believe something could be this cold, even through my thick mittens. I like to think he was smiling at me, but I honestly don't really remember. I mostly remember the snow.

And before you know it, a whole hour has gone by, and I've just been staring at my computer screen with my headphones on, sobbing.

12

LOCK, *or,*
the DESPERATE PRACTICALITIES
of ETERNAL LOVE

WHY? - "GEMINI (BIRTHDAY SONG)"

THERE ARE PLACES YOU GO THAT FEEL IMPORTANT. Places where it feels like you've been there for decades the moment you arrive. Places that feel uniquely and unambiguously yours, almost as if you willed them into existence. Writer and game designer Shigesato Itoi calls them "sanctuaries," and I think if Chris and Shannon knew who Shigesato Itoi was, they would call them sanctuaries, too.

The Seine River in Paris was Chris and Shannon's sanctuary. They were married at twenty-four and went to Paris on their honeymoon, where they were immediately struck by the Seine in a way neither of them could describe. It was some combination of the history, the beauty, the stillness of the water, the majesty of old stone bridges, and the immense love they felt for each other.

You weren't supposed to do this anymore, but they put a small lock on the fence of one of the bridges and then threw the key away. The visual metaphor was harmful to the Earth, but helpful for their relationship, so they chose not to think about it too much. As the key sank to the bottom of the river, they promised to love each other completely, and they kissed on the lips. Later, they bought a bottle of wine, a few baguettes, and some soft cheeses, and sat on the riverbank with all the other lovers and tourists. They drank and ate and held hands as the sun set, and then walked back to their hotel room to make love. It was all so romantic and ancient and symbolic and eternal. It was love.

A decade later, Chris and Shannon returned to Paris. They were still together, but things were different. Chris had shaved his beard and wore button-down shirts tucked into khakis. Shannon had a new job as a librarian and was into kickball. No longer fresh off their vows, they had a comfortable and functional

routine. Shannon made dinner, Chris washed the dishes. Chris did the laundry, Shannon put the clothes away. Chris watched the news at ten while Shannon read in bed. They also needed a vacation, and Paris is particularly lovely in the fall. The sanctuary beckoned, and they answered the call.

“Where is it?” Chris said. They had been looking for their bridge for hours now, and Chris was hungry.

“Maybe we got the wrong bridge,” Shannon said. She was tired all the time now, and the baby in her uterus was kicking. “Oof.”

“Big one?” Chris said.

“Yeah.” Shannon looked at the Seine, and it filled her with impossible energy and a resolve. She wondered if they could afford to take their child here again some day, so they could see it with their own eyes, the calmness of the tiny waves as the river’s boats meandered downstream.

“Do you need to go back to the hotel?”

“I’m OK,” Shannon said. “Just give me a minute.”

“I’m sorry, sweetie. Just a few more months.” The baby was all they talked about anymore, and Chris wondered if things were ever going to feel as spontaneous and light as they once did. He tried to implement a “no baby talk” rule for the trip on the plane, but this just made Shannon mad.

“They’re inside me,” she said. “Eating up all my nutrients. I want to talk about that.” Chris, not wanting to make a scene, put on his headphones and watched every *Mission: Impossible* movie back to back, quietly stewing. Halfway through the third one, as he was thinking about what his life would be like if he was Phillip Seymour Hoffman’s character instead, Shannon lifted off his headphones and said, “Thank you for being a good man,” and Chris fell in love with her all over again. This was the reality of their marriage, now. Yes, the passion had waned, but their love was stronger, more pragmatic; a quiet and sturdy house built from years of tenderness and swallowed grievances and practicalities.

The moment had passed, and Shannon continued her search for their lock. “I’m positive this is the bridge,” she said. “I remember.”

“Maybe someone comes around and cuts the locks off every few years or so,”

Chris said.

“There’s no way,” Shannon said.

“I read an article.”

“What article?”

“An article.” Chris hated when Shannon did this. Why couldn’t she just trust him?

Shannon hated when Chris did this. Why was he always so dismissive and authoritative? Didn’t he realize how condescending and rude it was? “You always do this.”

“What, read?” Chris said.

“No, this vague thing. An article. A documentary. A book. I can’t respond if I don’t know anything about it.”

“I’m vague because I don’t remember!”

“I’m just saying,” Shannon said, gritting her teeth. “You’re not the king of articles.”

“King of articles? That’s what you got from this? I can’t- you know what? I’m not even going to respond.” Chris looked at the Seine, and his tension began to melt away. He turned back toward Shannon. “I’m sorry.”

“I like this tone,” Shannon said.

“I will try to remember my tone.”

“Also, there are still locks up on the bridge.” Shannon gestured to the smattering of locks. “So nuts to your article.”

Chris laughed. He liked how Shannon said things like that. It was a nice distraction from the lingering disappointment Chris was feeling. Things were not going the way Chris wanted them to. They should’ve found the lock by now, or just given up and gone back to the hotel and tried to have sex, if Shannon was feeling up for it. They should have never gotten pregnant without knowing how they were going to afford a baby. They should have stayed in New York for a bit longer and seen if things had taken off. They should have gone to grad school,

even for something stupid like creative writing.

Thinking these thoughts made Chris spiral even further down into his subconscious. He remembered his ex-girlfriend Julie, whom he had dated during his semester abroad in Paris when he was twenty. He briefly flashed through all their sleepless nights together; the sex and the wine and the promises made and the eighteen months that felt eternal at the time.

“We might find my other lock up here,” Chris joked.

“What lock?” Shannon said.

“On my semester abroad.” Chris said. “With Julie.” Chris paused. “I told you about her.”

“And you did the lock thing?” Shannon’s eyebrows were raised.

Chris sighed. Stupid. So stupid. “It appears so.”

“It appears so?” Shannon said. “This isn’t a Senate hearing. I just want to know.”

“I’m not the first guy you dated,” Chris said.

“But I didn’t do a lock with them.”

“It was forever ago,” Chris said. “We were kids.”

“This was our spot, Chris. Our place,” Shannon said, unable to conjure up the word sanctuary. “You just do this with everyone now?”

“Shannon, don’t do this. Don’t get mad. Not now.”

“What?” Shannon said. “I’m not mad.”

“But you’re hurt. And you shouldn’t be.”

“You don’t get to tell me how to feel.” Shannon put her hands on her stomach. The baby was kicking again, but harder now, like it was trying to burst through and hit someone else. “Oof.”

“Do you want to go back to the hotel?” Chris asked.

"I'm fine. Just give me a minute." Shannon leaned against the bridge and noticed how separate each stone slab was from the whole. "It was your idea."

"What?"

"You don't remember? You said we should do the lock thing."

"I did?"

"You did."

"Maybe?"

"So what am I supposed to think? This is some sort of move?"

"Just stop, Shannon."

"Then just tell me what you were thinking!"

"Nothing! I just did it. There's no thought."

"No thought. Great. Really nice phrasing there."

"Don't twist my words like that."

"I'm just repeating back what you said."

"What do you want to hear? I guess I just have patterns."

"I guess so."

"I'm sorry. OK, Shannon?"

"You're always so quick to apologize, but you never know what you're apologizing for."

"I'm apologizing for everything. OK?"

"I don't want to accept."

"Why not?" Chris gestured toward the river. "We're on vacation. Can we have

a nice vacation?”

“I just want to feel hurt, OK?” Shannon said. “I’m not stupid. It’s not that big of a deal. But it hurt my feelings and I just want that acknowledged.”

“If it’s not that big of a deal, then stop making it into a big deal!”

“It’s only not a big deal because I allowed myself to feel like it was a big deal!”

“Just stop!” Chris snapped. “You’re acting insane. I hate when you do this!”

“What is this reaction?!” Shannon laughed.

“What?”

“This little hissy fit. You’re like a little boy.”

“I know you’re teasing me, but I don’t like it.”

“I think you like it a little,” Shannon smiled.

“I’m very genuine with you,” Chris said. “My feelings for you are very genuine.”

Shannon laughed with her whole body.

“This isn’t funny,” Chris said. Shannon kept laughing. “This isn’t funny at all.”

“It is funny. I’m not laughing at you. I love you,” Shannon said. “And I need you.”

“Then what the fuck are you laughing at?”

“I’m laughing at the idea of ever being without you. I’d hate it, you moron.”

“I’m going to be a good father. Our kid is going to have a good father who pays attention to his hobbies,” Chris said, thinking about the time he asked his father to read the review he wrote for a Modest Mouse album in the school paper, and how his father said he didn’t have the time, and how Chris carried that tiny slight with him for years with no place to put it, and how it festered and rotted out everything it touched, and how it kept him from feeling alive.

So he tossed his fear into the river and watched it sink.

“Of course,” Shannon said. “And a family that loves them.” Shannon took Chris’s hand. “She can have the lock. I’m glad I have you.”

“It’s just a lock,” Chris said.

“It’s just a lock,” Shannon repeated.

“Are you hungry?” Chris said. “There’s a restaurant I saw online I want to eat at.”

“What kind of food?” Shannon asked.

“Italian. They do homemade pasta. Squid ink.”

“The things we cherish are small,” Shannon said, smiling.

“Yeah, yeah.” Chris didn’t need to hear the rest. All was well.

Chris and Shannon held hands and walked to the restaurant to eat squid ink pasta. After dinner, they went to a store that sold baguettes, soft cheese, and wine, which is pretty much every store in Paris. Skipping the wine this time, they sat by the Seine and laughed and ate and talked about the baby until the lock was really just a lock. That’s the power of sanctuary, after all, whether it’s a river, or a good meal, or the company of a child yet to be born.

And as it turned out, they had, in fact, gotten the wrong bridge, but someone had also cut their lock off years ago. It’s a thing that happens now. There are articles about it.

13

DETECTIVE HAMILTON PRICE
and the CASE *of* DARKEST NIGHT

CRAIG FINN - "SOMETHING TO HOPE FOR"

NO SOONER THAN THE GUNSHOTS BEGAN, IT WAS OVER. Detective Hamilton Price blew the smoke off his Colt .38. The sun was rising over the bridge, giving reprieve from the long, dark night. Judge Sterns was dead. Sirens blared in the distance. The police were on their way. They'd have a lot of questions, but the documents in Detective Hamilton Price's briefcase had a hell of a lot of answers. Decades of corruption and kickbacks, secret bribes and hush funds, not to mention murder. You name it, the Judge had done it.

"It's a shame they'll never see their day in court," Violet said. She looked down at the body of the man who'd hired the hit on her sister—just a call girl in the wrong place at the wrong time; just another loose end to a power-hungry oligarch in his never-ending quest for an even bigger slice of the pie. And as strange as it was, for the first time, she felt pity instead of anger—pity for this tyrant, who, despite everything, had nothing in the end.

"A real shame." Hamilton lit a cigarette. "Although he probably would've gotten off. There's a hundred more Sterns out there."

"There's one less now. That's gotta count for something, right?" Violet smirked and lit a cigarette of her own. "Now that the case is solved, maybe it's time you settle down," Violet said, smiling.

Detective Hamilton Price looked her straight in the eye, returning the smile. "How many times do I have to tell you? I'm not the marrying type."

"I think," Violet said. "I'd like to hear you say that for the rest of my life."

Detective Hamilton Price grabbed Violet by the waist and kissed her deeply. A few of the cops tried to talk to the Detective, but nothing was going to split the two lovebirds apart. This was the happy ending to end all happy endings. Violet's name had been cleared, the life insurance policy would be returned, and an entire city was rid of the most corrupt politician since Boss Tweed. It was the greatest case Detective Hamilton Price would ever solve, roll credits, end of film.



Detective Hamilton Price and Violet got married in June. The ceremony was small by design. The Detective didn't have much in the way of family. In the private eye business, you make more enemies than friends, and the friends you do make end up dead. Violet hid her disappointment well. It wasn't the wedding she had imagined as a little girl, but would anything have been? She walked down the aisle in her white dress holding a single rose. Detective Hamilton Price stood waiting with a smirk on his face, impatiently tapping his right foot. It would have been nice for her sister to have been here, she thought. But she knew she was watching.

During their first dance, the Detective kept looking past her.

"What's wrong?" Violet asked.

"Mmmph," he mumbled. Violet had known the Detective long enough to know that whenever he grumbled under his breath, he was annoyed with something. So she asked him again.

"What's wrong?"

"I think I know that guy," the Detective said quietly. He nodded toward a large man smoking a cigar by the bar. "He was friends with Judge Sterns. Country club buddy. Owns a factory or something."

"So?"

"So? What's he doing here?" the Detective said.

"It's a public place," Violet said. "You were the one who had to haggle with the VFW hall."

“With what they wanted to charge to rent it out? You bet I did,” the Detective said.

“He’s not doing anything,” Violet said. The large man ashed his cigar and took a long sip of whiskey.

“Still,” the Detective said. “I don’t like it.” The couple danced, but the Detective kept mumbling. “He looking this way?” he asked.

Violet swung her head around. The fat man was laughing with an assorted group of cohorts, but in no way did he look suspicious.

“No.”

“Mmmph.”

“It’s just a coincidence,” Violet said, immediately regretting her choice of words.

“There’s no such thing as a coincidence,” Detective Hamilton Price said. His eyes lit up, full of fire and fury. He gripped Violet tighter, and she yelped in pain.

“Sorry,” the Detective muttered.

“It’s fine,” Violet said. “It’s not connected to the case.”

“Mmmph,” the Detective said.



They honeymooned in Vegas. They took a car straight from the ceremony. Detective Hamilton Price drove—he always drove. The radio was on and Violet loved the song. But the Detective was on edge.

“You recognize that car?” Hamilton said. His eyes darted toward the rearview mirror. Violet turned and saw a black Chevrolet close on their tail.

“No,” Violet said, even though when she thought about it, she had seen that car following them for the past few miles.

“I’m going slow, and they’re not passing me. Why would that be?”

“I’m not sure,” Violet answered.

Detective Hamilton Price pulled over and the black Chevrolet sped past.

“Out-of-state plates,” the Detective said.

“We’ve got out-of-state plates,” Violet said.

“How many guys were in that car?” the Detective asked, ignoring Violet entirely.

“I wasn’t paying attention.”

“You should always be paying attention,” the Detective responded. “Four guys. All white. Moderately tall, wearing suits. Tailored, by the looks of it. Between that and the car, they had money.” He took out his notebook and started jotting things down at a breakneck pace.

“What are you doing?” Violet asked.

“Building a case.”

“Now?” she said, impatiently. “We’ve got three more hours to go, and I’d like to make it there before the pool closes.”

Hamilton frowned. He hardly said sixteen words the rest of the weekend.



They bought a house just outside of LA. Nothing too fancy—a little ranch home in a development park. Three bedrooms, two baths, and a big backyard. Violet insisted. She wanted a few kids and a dog. The whole suburban life. Detective Hamilton Price, family man.

He left home to go to his office in the city at 6:00 and came back home at 8:15. Violet got pregnant, but they both gained weight. The Detective started doing more Mickey Mouse cases—tailing cheating wives, chasing down husbands late on child support—and cutting the lawn every other weekend. The Detective learned to cherish this chore, a temporary reprieve from a crying newborn and a floundering career. Sometimes he would mow the lawn until it got dark and Violet had to yell at him to come inside and rub her feet. “How long does it take

to mow the damn lawn?” she’d say. The Detective never had an answer.

The Detective’s mind was loud, but the Detective’s mind was elsewhere. The Detective was thinking about the man he saw getting into the backseat of a car as he drove past the In-N-Out the other day. It couldn’t be, it was impossible, but the Detective would recognize those beady eyes and Cheshire grin anywhere. It was Judge Sterns.

Then the Detective started to drink.

Not much, at first. A whiskey with dinner, a second before bed. Then he was buying a bottle before he went into work, pouring it into his fast food cup at lunch. He kept a flask of bourbon in his glove compartment, taking sips when the evening traffic was bad, and then when the morning traffic was bad, and then whenever he hit a red light. When Violet found the Detective passed out in the shower with an empty bottle, she intervened.

“I think you might have a problem,” Violet said, caressing the Detective’s hair as he leaned over the toilet.

“Sterns,” Detective Hamilton Price said, tired and slurred. “He’s alive.”

“We can get you help,” Violet said.

“No no no no,” the Detective said, waving his arms wildly. “I may be drunk, but I’m still sharp.” He heaved into the toilet and collapsed on the bathroom floor.



Detective Hamilton Price and Violet had another child. It was this or get divorced, Violet thought, and she never saw herself as a single mother. Yes, the Detective had been behaving erratically lately, but Violet always chose to look on the bright side. She was the mother of a baby girl, and Violet had always wanted a girl. “She has my eyes and your nose,” Violet said.

“Mmmph,” Detective Hamilton Price said. He had a cigarette in his mouth and his mind was on the case. Violet looked at him crossly. She hated when he smoked around the baby. He was smoking a lot more now—a pack and a half a day. At least he had quit drinking, she told herself. The Detective couldn’t give up everything, so he traded one vice for another. That was the promise. It kept her from being a single mother, she told herself.

Detective Hamilton Price became a regular at the county morgue. He wanted everything on Sterns. Autopsy reports, toxicology reports, medical records. He badgered the coroner for interview after interview, writing down every last detail, looking for the slightest irregularity or inconsistency. The Detective went down to the courthouse and poured over public records—property records, land sales, tax returns. He spoke with everyone who would give him the time of day—secretaries, widows, housekeepers, college pals, former business partners. He left no stone unturned, and there were a lot of stones.

This was how the Detective spent his days, and far too often, his nights. He lost most of his clients, but he didn't have time for clients, anyhow. The Detective always said that a detective with a case was like a grave digger with a shovel. There's not a lot of ingenuity to the task at hand, just hard work. And so he gripped his shovel tightly and dug. He smoked, and he dug, breaking through the earth little by little, digging and digging until the hole was so deep he couldn't climb out. His children became toddlers. His wife became a memory. Violet stopped kissing him when she saw him. "I hate the smell of cigarettes," she said.

But it was so much bigger than that. One name kept appearing—Minerva Holdings. Call records Detective Hamilton Price obtained by bribing his old pal at the phone company showed Sterns calling their office with an increasing frequency right before he died. The Detective also found a news article about the sale of Minerva Holdings to one Rutherford Palmer, just three weeks after Sterns' death. Strangely, this Palmer had no birth certificate, voting record, or Social Security number. The only thing the Detective could find on Palmer was this article. It was almost as if the man didn't exist.

The Detective called Minerva Holdings, but the line had been disconnected. Strange. He drove out to Encino to visit their offices, only to find an old shoe store that closed down months ago. Even stranger. The Detective smoked two entire packs standing outside that shoe store. There was still more dirt beneath his feet, it seemed. He kept digging.



It was a Saturday, and Detective Hamilton Price was mowing the lawn. Violet and the kids had gone to her mother's. They were gone most Saturdays. The Detective didn't mind. More time to think about the case—plus, an opportunity to sneak some bourbon, which the Detective had been doing with increasing regularity. He had it under control this time, though. Just on the weekends. Just to keep him loose.

Just loose enough to see all the threads. Rutherford Palmer. Minerva Holdings. A flask of bourbon here. A flask of bourbon there. Still more dirt to uncover.

The Detective was so lost in thought (and, if he was being honest, a little tipsy) he didn't notice a car pull up on the side of the road and roll its windows down.

"You're the private eye?" a voice from inside the car said.

"Used to be," Detective Hamilton Price said. "These days, I'm more into landscaping." The Detective was proud of this pithy bon mot, despite his slurry mental state. "Still got it," he thought.

Two goons stepped out of the car, one carrying a baseball bat, the other a pair of brass knuckles.

The Detective reached for his gun, but to his surprise, it wasn't there. He had a flash to his gun in the safe in the basement. He kept it locked up because Violet didn't like guns in the house. Hell, Violet didn't like Hamilton in the house.

"I got a message for ya," one of the goons said, cracking the bat across the Detective's chest. Detective Hamilton Price went down in a heap. Maybe in the old days he could've taken a shot and kept ticking, but these weren't the old days anymore.

"Mind your business," the other goon said, delivering a swift kick to Hamilton's doughy midsection. The goons got back in the car, chuckling to themselves, and drove off.

Lying on his front lawn, lawnmower still buzzing, the Detective smiled a hazy smile. Not only did the one goon forget to use his brass knuckles, but Detective Hamilton Price had memorized the plates. "Still got it," he said aloud, gasping for breath, to no one.



The car was easy to find. Detective Hamilton Price knew some cops who'd run up the plates for a few hundred bucks on the sly. Car was registered under—who else?—Rutherford Palmer. "Sloppy work," the Detective thought. But Sterns was never the sharpest tack in the drawer. Just another rich, arrogant old man who

thought he ruled the world. If he planned on outsmarting the great Detective Hamilton Price, he had another thing coming.

Detective Hamilton Price spent a few months just tailing the goons, making note of where they went and how long they stayed there; looking for patterns, looking for irregularities. It was boring work, monotonous work, but it's how you build a case. Great detectives have unlimited patience. You watch someone for long enough, and they'll start to show you who they really are. So you fight through the drudgery with a large cup of coffee and the day's paper. But you always keep an eye out, and you write everything down. It's like the Detective always said—a detective with a case is like a grave digger with a shovel. Didn't he go over this before? He couldn't remember. As the hole got deeper, it was all he could see.



A pattern started to emerge. A visit to Sterns' old courthouse. A meeting at the mayor's office, a trip to the bank. Every month a meeting with the mayor, and then right to the bank. Twice a week at the courthouse. The Detective sipped his coffee. Missed the kid's birthday, but the goons met the mayor at the diner on Robertson. Irregularities. Five cups of coffee today—starting to get the shakes. But his coffee was mostly bourbon, anyway.

They skipped the courthouse this week. Went to a warehouse near the edge of town instead. Switching things up. Met the mayor at the In-N-Out in Pasadena. Why so out of the way? The Detective stopped at the gas station to get a pack of smokes and some bourbon. He snuck into the employee bathroom and took a whore's bath. He was sleeping in his car now and had unintentionally grown a beard. The hole got deeper, and a new pattern emerged.

Every Thursday at midnight, the goons went to the warehouse. You could set your watch by it. Pulling up to the warehouse, dropping off a laundry bag to a shrouded figure, then speeding away. Every Thursday. Dropping off a laundry bag to a shrouded figure who looked a lot like Sterns.

"I don't think they're dropping off laundry," the Detective said aloud one Thursday, to no one.

The warehouse was owned by Minerva Holdings. The Detective had a copy of their financial records, naturally. For a company that dealt with "investment

opportunities in the greater California area,” it certainly employed a lot of people with criminal records, including those with known mob ties. They were buying up every bit of property they could find, usually at well below market value. And the first piece of property they bought? A vacant lot on the east side, formerly owned by one Judge Sterns.

“Those mob guys must have fantastic real estate agents,” the Detective said aloud, to no one.

Detective Hamilton Price was going all in tonight. Once the drop was made, he was gonna catch Sterns red-handed. He might have fooled the rest of the world into thinking he was six feet under, but he didn’t fool the Detective. Tonight, justice would prevail. But first, he had to tie up a few loose ends. Detective Hamilton Price went to a payphone and called Violet.

“Violet? I won’t be home tonight.”

“Not much of a surprise there,” Violet said.

“I’m on the case,” the Detective said. “Sterns. Minerva Holdings. Even the mayor is in on it. It’s all connected—”

“You’re not listening to me,” she said. “Your family—”

“Look, this is serious, Violet,” the Detective said. “My life is on the line. I don’t know what’s going to happen to me tonight. But I promise you—this is the end.”

“Hamilton,” Violet said. “It’s been the end for a long, long time.”

And then the line went dead.



The Detective hung up the phone. He summoned a cigarette to his lips and peeled a match off his matchbook, calmly striking it against the side of his boot. As he brought the match up to his face, the tiny flame flickered in the distant wind, struggling against the elements to keep burning, teetering on the edge of nonexistence, and yet, unwavering.



Detective Hamilton Price walked into the warehouse like he belonged there. And in a way, he did. This was his destiny, after all. He was a Detective, and detectives solve crimes, just like gravediggers dig graves. There wasn't much more to it than that.

The warehouse was impossibly empty, but the Detective did not blink. "Sterns!" he called out.

"I'm here, Detective." Hamilton turned and saw the pale visage of Judge Sterns lurking under the flickering light.

"Turn yourself in," the Detective said. "It's over."

"It's been over for quite some time, Detective." A thin smile crept across the judge's face.

"I know it all, Sterns. You faked your own death to take the heat off. Now you're buying up land through a shell company."

Sterns cackled. "And how could I be doing all that? I'm dead, Detective."

Detective Hamilton Price blinked. Judge Sterns was now a corpse on the ground.

"That's right," Sterns said, without his mouth moving. "You chased a paper tiger, Detective. A phantom. A big, fat, nothing." Each syllable sank into the pit of the Detective's brain. "You're a drunk. Washed up. Pathetic. Seeing things. Violet despises you. Do you even know your children's names?"

The Detective remained silent. "Don't make the case about yourself," he thought.

"You think the case is going to save you?" Sterns shrieked. "You have nothing, Detective. No future, no hope. Just a web to obsessively unravel, along with your fragile mental state." Sterns was face to face with the Detective now, breathing down his neck.

"Minerva Holdings, Palmer, the beating I took," the Detective said. "I'm not crazy. It's real."

“Still trusting your own senses, Detective? After they served you so well here?”

“I know what I saw. Your goons. They met with the Mayor. They came here. They’re doing crimes,” the Detective said. “I know you’re behind this. You may not be real, but you’re out there.”

“And what would I have to gain by undergoing this elaborate scheme, Detective? Money? Influence? Women? Power? I had all of those things in glorious excess.”

The Detective shook his head. “You were exposed. They all saw you. The indecency. The inhumanity. The corruption. You died a disgrace.”

“Didn’t feel like a disgrace in my mansion. Didn’t feel like a disgrace eating lobster tails and caviar. Didn’t feel so disgraced fucking all of my whores. You know what I felt when I died, Detective? Peace. Complete and total serenity. Because it was finished, Detective. The game was over and I had won. I had everything I ever wanted and sacrificed nothing in return. I took what I didn’t have, and I gave nothing away. I was greed personified and I suffered no consequences. Sure, I took a bullet, but we all have to go sometime. And me? I went out on top.”

Detective Hamilton Price gritted his teeth and said nothing.

“How about you, Detective? You feel good about yourself? You don’t feel sick? Bloated? A little weak in the knees? Short of breath? Just fucking old? That’s what you get, Detective. That’s your lifetime achievement award. A cheap suit that reeks of Marlboros, and the shakes when you’re out of Jack Daniel’s at a red fucking light. Your obsession made you great, Detective, I will give you that. But where did it get you? You compromised nothing and ended up alone in an abandoned warehouse, chasing old ghosts, talking to yourself.”

“There’s still the case.”

“Yes, yes. There’s always a case. But for once in your life, don’t look at that. Look at me.”

The Detective closed his eyes. In a moment, he would open them. And when he did, he would do what any great Detective would do—examine the evidence piece by piece, removing all bias of the head and the heart. He would pore over the dusty footprints in the old warehouse, he would rub his hands across the bearded face of a wounded man.

Detective Hamilton Price could feel the sunlight peeking through the window pane, beaming against his face like headlights on a cop car arriving at the scene. Detective Hamilton Price would survive, because there is always another case. There was still the mystery of Rutherford Palmer, Minerva Holdings, and the whereabouts of Judge Sterns, as well as the question of whether a recently separated ex-private eye could sober up and be a father to his children. But in this moment, the Detective was unshakeable.

It's funny—when you shut your eyes and stare into the infinite darkness, everything becomes clear. There were the detectives and the criminals, the good guys and the bad. You crack the case, you get the girl. When you close your eyes, it's darker than the darkest night, and when you open them, it's dawn.

14

the MAGIC
of WEIGHT LOSS

SHANNON SHAW - "GOLDEN FRAMES"

PART 1

THERE WERE NO SHORTCUTS WHEN IT CAME TO LOSING WEIGHT. Diet and exercise, diet and exercise. It wasn't easy. It wasn't glamorous. It was long, hard work. There had to be a better way! And it turns out, there was.

Wellness guru Stevie Gaffney had created a smoothie that made you lose weight instantly once you drank it. A significant amount of weight, too—around ten-ish pounds per twenty-two-ounce smoothie, depending on your size—and it wouldn't do anything once you'd reached a healthy weight for your body. Scientists couldn't figure out why it worked. It didn't do anything special on the molecular or cellular level. Heck, the smoothie was just bananas, cayenne pepper, and almond milk. There were no side effects or negative consequences, either. There was no rational explanation for the Miracle Smoothie, as Stevie and the media started calling it, but whenever Stevie, and only Stevie, put those ingredients in a blender, it became a Miracle Smoothie. There wasn't even a recipe—Stevie just eyeballed the ingredients every single time. Which, as you can imagine, just further frustrated nutritionists, biologists, and dieticians, not to mention consumers, who were always thrown off by the slightly different taste.

The only thing that wasn't magical about the Miracle Smoothie was handling the processing, shipping, and fulfillment, as demand was sky-high. Luckily, Stevie Gaffney was the CEO of a moderately successful health and wellness brand, so some of the infrastructure was already in place. Still, no brand is prepared for literal magic. Stevie had to step down as CEO and spend her days in the warehouse churning out smoothies. There was no time to think about strategy or marketing or anything else. Not like she needed to—the Miracle Smoothie was a product that sold itself. There was no need for commercials or

sponsorships or analytics or market research. Stevie Gaffney was in the magic business now, and her business was magic.

Stevie had never liked the word “business” because it implied she profited off of other people’s health and well-being. She did, of course, but she didn’t like the implication that she didn’t care about her customers. She didn’t like the words “company” and “products” for the same reason, so she only referred to her company as a “brand” and her products as “items.” “Brand” and “item” just felt friendlier; more inviting, you know? Perhaps employees and investors had scoffed at it before, but now? The Miracle Smoothie was the brand’s hottest item. Before the Miracle Smoothie, none of Stevie’s items—the powders, the crystals, the beads—had “worked”. At least, not in that technical, scientific, “delivers what it promises on the tin” way.

The brand used to have a problem with online reviewers writing mean comments about how Stevie was a “huckster,” or a “scam artist,” or a “fraud,” and her items were “snake oil,” “worthless,” and “piles of dog shit.” They made people feel better, though, and that made Stevie feel good. Stevie knew there was more to wellness than science. The body was science, yes, but the mind was a mystical, magical thing. Yes, the mind was also science, but science was lacking in so many areas, as her Miracle Smoothie clearly proved. They may have laughed at her once, but they couldn’t laugh at her results.

It was truly incredible how quickly Stevie Gaffney changed the entire diet and fitness industry. Exercise bikes, treadmills, and barbells were left out on curbs en masse. Entire CrossFit gyms were burned to the ground. Meals became longer, portions became bigger, food was prepared with more butter and sugar. Of course, sales of bananas, cayenne, and almond milk went through the roof, as did their cost. And there were plenty of imitators peddling their own version of the Miracle Smoothie. But nobody was able to duplicate Stevie’s Miracle Smoothie, and everybody knew it. The old way, the twentieth century thinking, was dead. The twenty-first century was Stevie Gaffney’s, and it was magical.

PART 2

“Please, allow me to introduce the woman who rewrote the book on fitness and dieting, the creator of the Miracle Smoothie, Stevie Gaffney!”

As Stevie walked on stage, the crowd burst into strained applause. Though

everyone on the planet wanted her to stay in the warehouse creating Miracle Smoothies, Stevie insisted on taking breaks for her mental health. Sometimes she'd deliver talks like this one, other times she'd go off fishing with her family. No one could complain, even though they wanted to. Not only was she the Wizard of Weight Loss, as a recent *New York Times* profile had called her, but she kept the Miracle Smoothie's price at \$29.99. Stevie did this because she truly believed that the secret to weight loss belonged to everyone, and wellness and clean living was no one person's sole domain.

Yes, by keeping the Miracle Smoothie affordable, she was a millionaire instead of a trillionaire, but Stevie had enough money. She kept things simple—a small summer house in the Hamptons, a little winter cottage in Aspen, and a cozy ranch just outside of Austin, Texas. As her husband liked to joke, Stevie was a “benevolent master.” Stevie's husband had lost forty-five pounds thanks to the Miracle Smoothie. He ate whatever he wanted and never went to the gym. He was a forty-nine-year old man who now looked like he was thirty and fucked like he was twenty-five. He ate two Miracle Smoothies a week. Stevie had permanently changed him, and there was power in that. And that's why Stevie never really laughed at his joke.

Stevie looked out into the audience. As it had been for some time, her smile was slight, forced. She knew the crowd was only there because they believed today could be the day Stevie might deviate from her standard “wellness and clean living” lecture to reveal the big secret: how does she make her smoothie? The truth was, Stevie didn't know. One day, she could just do it, like how some people can whistle, and that was all there was to it. Stevie sometimes wished she understood the source of it all. The burden of the Miracle Smoothie was heavier than anyone could imagine, and during the especially grueling days of blending smoothie after smoothie, with no end in sight, Stevie wished there was a way to go back. It was far easier being a guru than a magician. Anyone can dispense a handful of feel-good platitudes, but to alter the very fabric of reality? It takes a toll.

“The human body has an incredible amount of toxins,” she began, already feeling the crowd's interest waning. No matter. Stevie never liked talking about the Miracle Smoothie, anyway. What was there to talk about? The Magic Smoothie just worked, dammit, and nobody knew why. There was no dissecting the frog, because once you cut the frog open, you found out there was nothing inside. “We eat foods that put more toxins into it,” she continued, powering through the restless angst of the crowd. “Yes, we sweat out our toxins, but they are only reabsorbed through the skin. This causes wrinkles, varicose veins, and in some cases, cancer.” None of this was true, scientifically, but Stevie was above

science, now. Frankly, the scientists stopped questioning anything Stevie said a few months after the Miracle Smoothie came out. The scientific community's current consensus on Stevie Gaffney was: "Maybe she knows something we don't?" It was dangerous, not holding Stevie accountable for anything she said, but nobody in the scientific community wanted to make her mad. What if she could blink her eyes and melt their brains, turn their legs into ducks, or put their consciousness inside someone else's body? Frankly, those things were just as likely to happen as a smoothie that instantly made you lose a healthy amount of weight. Once you see one piece of magic, suddenly every terrifying thing seems possible.

As Stevie kept talking about the dangers of body toxins being reabsorbed through the skin, she thought about her Super Cream. For the past few months, Stevie had tried to come up with a cream that smoothed out the wrinkles of your skin, but to no avail. After the Miracle Smoothie, there was a period where Stevie believed she could do anything she wanted—and what she wanted, to almost everyone else's surprise, was to make more incredible health and wellness items. Unfortunately, it seemed her powers were limited to weight loss. The Super Cream, while very lustrous and full of aloe, didn't remove wrinkles in your skin. There was no incantation, no spell, nor wish, nor prayer that could change it. Stevie even tried a recipe of bananas, cayenne, and almond milk, but all that did was take a few pounds off her midsection. Stevie shelved the Super Cream without telling a soul. The fact of the matter was, you can't invent magic. The magic owns the magician, and not the other way around.

As she prattled on and on, she thought about a conversation she'd had with her husband last week. They had just gotten back from the Hamptons and were tired and jet-lagged, so Stevie ordered some veggie bánh mìs from her favorite vegan Vietnamese restaurant. They opened up a bottle of a 2005 Vieux Château Certan and allowed themselves to just sink into their Bernhardt sofa and decompress after a long day of flying across the country on a Lear 45 private jet.

"I'm starving," Stevie said. "I wish the food would get here faster."

"Can't you just make them appear?" he said.

Stevie shook her head. "I'm just a one-trick pony," she said.

"Well, sweetie," he said, smiling, "it's a hell of a trick."

When the food came, they ate in silence, until Stevie's husband retired to his study to play computer games. Stevie poured herself a second glass of wine

and descended into her basement workshop to crank out some more orders of Miracle Smoothie before bed. He was right—it was a hell of a trick. But Stevie had one more trick up her sleeve.

Stevie's mind snapped back to her toxins speech. "I am no longer producing Miracle Smoothies," she said. The words hung frozen in the air. You could almost see them, their shape, their size. They were magical. They changed the world in an instant.

"Magic is wrong," Stevie continued. "We were not meant to wield it. I wasn't, anyway." She paused. The crowd was beginning to stir. "I believe in health, in wellness and clean living. The Miracle Smoothie was never meant to be a miracle! It was supposed to be a way to get vitamin A without lactose!"

Stevie started to hear some boos, and the sound of fingers texting friends and significant others to let them know to hoard whatever precious amounts of Miracle Smoothie they had left. "I don't know the difference between myself and God," Stevie said, her eyes beginning to well with tears, "and it scares me. So I am asking whatever higher power out there that has granted me this gift to stop. Take it away. I am thankful for the opportunity and I never could have imagined a life like this, but I've found the limit. Stop the ride. Just stop."

Stevie's last sentence was drowned out in boos. "You cannot make me," Stevie said, still crying, but calmer now, composed. "I am not your toy. I'm a human being. I'm like you."

Stevie's husband stepped onto the stage. "Honey," he whispered, pushing her headset microphone away from her ear.

"I don't want this," Stevie snapped.

"I know, but, please. This is not the time."

"I won't. Not one more smoothie. Not one more."

"OK, OK," Stevie's husband said. "It's been a long day. We'll sleep on it."

"No," she said. "Not a chance. It's done."

"Stevie, I- all of us need this."

“There is more to wellness than weight,” Stevie said. Her voice was cracked. There are toxins! Lots of toxins!”

“Please, sweetie. You can work on the toxins. But the smoothie—”

“Nothing can change my mind,” Stevie said, louder. She placed her microphone in front of her face and stretched out her hands, welcoming the heckling of the masses with open arms. She felt a thousand feet tall. “I never want to see a banana again!”

PART 3

Things fell apart pretty quickly after that. Stevie’s wellness brand tanked, naturally. The magician who refuses to perform is of no use to anyone, and the social order quickly re-established itself. Exercise bikes were repurchased. Personal trainers were rehired. Chefs took it easy on the butter again. People were heavier, more anxious, and the world was once again a meaner place. Once his gut came back, Stevie’s husband announced that he was leaving. “I was never in it for the money,” he told her, and she believed him. But she couldn’t help but get one last jab in.

“No,” she said, “you were in it for the weight loss.” Stevie’s ex-husband didn’t have a comeback for that. But that was fine with Stevie. It was all fine.

Stevie sold the ranch and the Aspen and Hamptons homes, and after she gave half to her ex—fair was fair, even if she was the magic one—she got herself a small condo in Northern California. She adopted a cat and a dog, but other than that, she was content to live alone. She spent her days cooking, doing yoga, and reading. She read everything, from non-fiction, to trashy romance novels, to the classics. She read Shakespeare’s *The Tempest* dozens of times, and likened herself to Prospero, naturally. “I’ll break my staff, I’ll drown my books,” she’d say to herself sometimes when she was chopping up carrots and kale, quoting a misremembered line.

Occasionally, Stevie would get calls or emails about bringing back the Miracle Smoothie, but she never seriously entertained them. If people couldn’t manage their own health and well-being, they didn’t deserve the smoothie. She mostly left the calls and emails unreturned, but if she was feeling particularly saucy, she’d fire back with, “The real magic... is diet and exercise.” Which, while a little too sanctimonious, got the job done. Eventually, people stopped asking, and

Stevie was left alone with her pets and her books. Things were worse overall for the majority of people, but Stevie Gaffney was content.

She once held the entire world up on her shoulders, but she had gotten tired and let it go. With no one to pick it back up, the world floated on, suspended in air, almost as if by magic. Well, not magic. According to one of the books Stevie read, it was gravity.

And that was pretty much the rest of Stevie's life, save for one outstanding incident.

It was an unreasonably warm Friday evening in the middle of September, and Stevie was in her kitchen getting some cat food. Her eyes wandered over to her blender. "I mean, it is hot out," she thought. She opened her fridge. Almond milk, bananas. There was cayenne in her spice rack. Why the hell not?

It was like riding a bicycle. The incantation was part of her bones and she could not forget it even if she tried. It also helped that it was dead simple. First, she sliced up the bananas, then she poured the almond milk. "I'll break my staff, I'll drown my books," she said, adding a sprinkle of cayenne for taste.

Thirty seconds later, the Miracle Smoothie was in a glass. Stevie took a sip. "Mmmm," she thought. "Tasty." She looked down at her midsection. She looked at her arms and her thighs. Nothing had happened.

Was she at her proper weight? Did she not put in enough cayenne? The Wizard of Weight Loss shook her head. "It's not magic if it lasts," she thought. She laughed, harder than she'd laughed in a long, long time, loud enough to scare the dog.

The next day, on the scale, Stevie discovered she had actually gained half a pound. But Stevie figured it was the several slices of cauliflower and sun-dried tomato pizza she'd had a few days before. And she was correct.

15

WHAT TRENTON MAKES:

an ESSAY *on* CAPITALISM,

the END *of the* AMERICAN EMPIRE,

and AJ SOPRANO.

CAR SEAT HEADREST - "THERE MUST BE MORE THAN BLOOD"

EVERYBODY'S WRITTEN ABOUT *THE SOPRANOS*. It's probably the most important American television show because it's *the* American television show about America. There's a million things you can write about—how accurately and honestly it portrays post-9/11 capitalism and the alienation of modern living, its poignant but never preachy Catholic morality, its clear contempt for Hollywood and the effete liberal elite—but nobody's ever written much about AJ Soprano, Tony's feckless and worthless son.

Most fans and critics are quick to dismiss AJ, and I get why. As a character, he's annoying, deeply stupid, whiny, and pathetic. He is incredibly passive, rarely making the decision to do much of anything, and spends the majority of the series moping around, disdainful toward and ungrateful for his immense wealth and privilege. On a practical level, every scene he's in is a scene where we're not watching more interesting, active characters. But AJ is the beating heart of the show; the end result of decades of American pillaging and greed, the rotten fruit borne from a shitty tree.

Of course, I'm so invested in him because I identify with the little dipshit. There are the surface level comparisons—we're both born in North Jersey, brothers to a hard-working sister who went to Columbia to become a lawyer—but those are boring. AJ Soprano is the id of so many millennial men like me. Born with every material advantage, AJ squanders his life because he lacks both work ethic and ambition, and nobody loves him enough to teach him right from wrong. He has only the slightest curiosity about how the world works and is unable to cope with the fact that there are different sets of rules for those with power and those without.

He is someone who can only give you a shrug when you ask what's going on with them, because nothing is ever really going on with him. Eternally bored, over-pampered and disempowered, he is in a constant state of waiting for his life to begin. When he finally gets that opportunity to rewrite his destiny and make something of himself, whether through playing football, enrolling in the military academy, or learning about the Middle East, he shuts down, has a panic attack, and retreats inward. Back to lying in bed, back to doing nothing at all. The familiar drone of depression that plays throughout the late nights spent at vacuous clubs with his douche-bag friends insulates him from the lessons of failure and the horrible pains of personal growth. His family built him a comfortable little prison in their multi-million dollar house, and when the cage is that gilded, it's hard to recognize it as a cage at all.



One of the few shreds of insight Tony gains in therapy is that he hates his son. He resents AJ not only because AJ doesn't conform to Tony's standards of manhood, but because AJ lacks the courage and conviction to escape the cycle of crime and self-loathing that is the Soprano lineage. AJ is not like him, but not enough not like him, and that drives Tony crazy.

There's a great little scene where Tony walks by AJ's room and sees AJ on his computer, chatting with his friends and laughing. Tony watches AJ with pure contempt that not even his greatest enemies—be it Richie, Ralphie, or Phil—could muster out of him. At least Tony knows what's wrong with those guys. They want too much money. They demand power Tony is unwilling to concede. Hunched over a laptop cackling hysterically, AJ is too lazy to go out and take money and power for himself. Or perhaps, like so many American millennials, he understands he came in at the end; that the so-called best of times is a memory of a memory, and all the money and power in the world won't be enough to stave off what comes next.

Tony often blames himself for how AJ turned out, and while he gets caught up in the specific instance of his hereditary predisposition for depression and panic attacks, he's ultimately right. AJ has no work ethic or moral values because Tony doesn't—and neither do most Americans, for that matter. Americans, particularly white baby boomers like Tony Soprano, have had everything handed to them on a silver platter, with the promises of endless post-ww2 growth and opportunity at no personal cost.

The money was in the middlemen; getting a cut of a deal here, scamming a few points off the back end there. Bankers, marketers, investors, real estate agents, con artists—these are the stewards of American empire, residents of a house built on slave labor and stolen land, scheming ways to strip out all the granite countertops, copper wiring, and anything else of value. The motto of Trenton, New Jersey is “Trenton makes, the world takes,” and I always loved that phrase. Trentonians are simultaneously proud of their accomplishments and deeply resentful of how others treat them: the spirit of New Jersey in a nutshell.

Looking beyond the enormous chip on their collective shoulder, there’s an innate understanding that capitalism isn’t a mutually beneficial arrangement between the proletariat and the bourgeoisie—it’s parasitical. When AJ cries about the world being unfair, he’s right. But it’s unfair in his favor. I think a source of his (and my) angst is that AJ knows this, but lacks the courage, intelligence, and moral fortitude to do anything about it. There’s still some stuff left to take; smaller, faster, and more compatible with all your existing devices than ever, and it’s all right here for the taking.

But things fall apart, the center cannot hold, and they’re closing all the factories in Trenton. The margins are getting thinner, the rewards more meager. In Season 1, Tony and his crew are ripping off custom-fit Italian suits and military equipment. By Season 6, they’re arguing over power saws and vitamins. Modern businesses have figured out it’s easier to cut costs than it is to raise revenues. But you can only cut costs so much, and there’s still that gaping maw that is the bottom line. As the pickings get slimmer, and institutions prove unwilling or uninterested in changing, all that’s left is to try to run faster in the race to the bottom. You can address that, make your amends and do the work to change, or you can ignore it, kill the part of you that asks those gnawing questions: “Who am I? Where am I going? What am I chasing? What am I running from?”

For capitalists, there are no satisfying or hopeful answers. “Buried like a Pharaoh with the deeds to all my rental properties,” isn’t the legacy most people imagined for themselves when they were young and thought the well would never run dry. Surely, some revelation is at hand—right?



One of the most powerful scenes in *The Sopranos* is when AJ tries to commit suicide. He’s unsuccessful, obviously—AJ can’t seem to follow through on anything, even taking his own life. AJ has second thoughts after he jumps in

the pool with a cinder block tied around his ankle, and thankfully, the rope he used is far too long to hold him underwater. Tony comes home, dives in the pool, picks up the cinder block, and saves him. He yells at AJ for being stupid, but when AJ cries, he cradles his son in his arms. “You’re okay, baby,” he says.

I think baby boomers and millennials view this scene differently. Baby boomers are terrified that their children, truly one of the only things any of them have ever actually made, will die before them, leaving them as hollow and empty as the world they inherited and squandered. Spurred on by that fear, they want to cradle and nurture their pathetic son, tell him it’s all going to be okay whether they actually believe it or not. And I imagine at least some part of them is furious their kid was too fucking stupid to realize the rope was too long to work right.

Millennials however, forever trapped in their father’s burly arms, look out and see the McMansion and the pool that costs a small fortune to heat, the marble-floored atrium and dinner glasses with gaudy gold trim, the endless internships and permalance positions, the same recycled content from 2013, the debt and the dues that can never be adequately paid. Things fall apart and the center cannot hold. Look around, and you can see the dead leaves accumulating in the yards of foreclosed homes, the vacant luxury waterfront apartments looming insolently over a blood-dimmed tide. It is an unusually cold autumn and the coming summer threatens to boil us alive. Even the rope is too long to kill yourself with. The blood-dimmed tide might be loose, but try as we might, the ceremony of innocence refuses to drown.

Surely some revelation is at hand. Surely Trenton has something up its sleeve, or the world is ready to make its amends. Otherwise, what kind of end is this? No rough beast, no lion with the head of a man? All we have to look at, hobbling toward the finish line of American empire, is this?!

16

THIS *is* EVERYTHING

SONGS: OHIA - "FAREWELL TRANSMISSION"

FOR YOU AND EVERYONE YOU KNOW, things have been getting worse for a long time. What started out as a general feeling of hopelessness and malaise has manifested into chronic lower back pain, a minor drug problem, and fifteen extra pounds overflowing from the sides of your jeans. Some mornings you wake up two hours before your alarm and cannot fall back asleep. These are the worst hours of the day, the time between when you've looked at your phone and caught up with the posts you missed while you were sleeping and before any more content gets pushed to your feed. At five fifteen in the morning, you are truly alone. Despite every technological advancement, the hustle is harder and takes longer. The promise of a better life has been reneged on multiple times. The side gigs are the gig now, and none of them pays a living wage. Every day feels uniquely horrible in the exact same way.

You're one of the lucky ones. You make content for a living. Everyone is making content, but most people have to do it for free. You, on the other hand, get paid—just enough to be able to afford to get your meals delivered to you in a box, but not nearly enough to buy a home. You work at an office you have never been to for a company that is constantly changing their name. Every few months, there's new management, new money, and new investors, all with the same old ratty faces on Crossfit bodies stuffed in tight shirts and immaculate jeans. Over a Zoom call scheduled at the most inconvenient time, they tell you this is more than just a brand now. They tell you all about the mission statements they are crafting and the stories they are telling. It is not enough that they are the bosses of the world, but they have to be the storytellers, too. This would make you mad, but you realize their business model offers them no alternative. They *have* to be *everything*.

The story they are telling now—the story they are telling you to tell through

targeted Instagram ads—is compassion. You write down the word compassion as proof that you are working, and for something you can look at when your company is bought out again and all the content you made disappears. The first time you experienced this unceremonious mass deletion, you started saving your content locally. Something to show future employers, or some hypothetical child. But now, you don't bother. You just let it fall into the digital void. It feels better this way. You have no past to be accountable for, nothing to measure yourself against. What's old is new again, and again, and again. You are repeating yourself in a fresh way, with proven ideas you are constantly inventing.

There is a guy named Brad who is your boss. He just replaced your old boss who was also named Brad. Brad tells you that you are going to be talking to a woman named Jennee about some content strategies. Jennee was just hired from another company, Brad explains, where she successfully leveraged brand acquisition platforms at scale. Brad never explains what this means, nor does he pronounce Jennee's name the same way twice. Brad does not mention if Jennee is your underling, your colleague, or your boss, but ultimately it does not matter. Sometime soon, she will be replaced.

Jennee joins the call. You talk about a bunch of ideas, but you ultimately decide on making reaction videos to Marvel movie trailers. You have done this before, but this time you are doing it with compassion. Jennee asks you if you like Marvel movies. You tell her that you are mostly indifferent. She tells you that this is the biggest thing in culture and it's insane to her that you don't have an opinion. You tell her that there is a guy called Film Critic Hulk that you think about sometimes. He is named Film Critic Hulk because he wrote these long essays about movies as if he were Marvel's The Hulk, and people wanted to read what he had to say because they liked the idea that one of their favorite Marvel characters was analyzing the homoeroticism of Scorsese movies.

He stopped writing as The Hulk a few years back because it wasn't funny anymore. Was it ever funny? Regardless, he has a Patreon now, and people pay him thousands of dollars a month for his essays on film. They only cared about his opinion because he was Film Critic Hulk, but he's just a regular film critic now, just another nobody begging for scraps. But he is still called Film Critic Hulk. All this time and nobody cares who he really is, the real person pouring their heart out about the cinematography of *Lady Bird*. If anything, he just made The Hulk more famous. And at any time, Marvel could swoop in and take his idea right out from under him. They own the IP, and they can just do it, and they have the talent and time and resources to do it bigger and better at scale. So what does this guy really own? His words? They're useless. They're nothing. Without

the Film Critic Hulk name, they are digital litter.

Jennee tells you that Marvel would never do that. They built their brand on their fans. They have compassion.



At night, you take an edible and try to think about the future. It is difficult because you firmly believe you have no future, just more present. The future implies change, and you have given up on the idea of anything ever changing significantly. What you believe in is an imperceptible decline, the frog in the pot of boiling water, the heat being turned up in infinitesimal increments. When you think about the future, you think about yourself in the same bed; older, fatter, still childless, and unable to save for retirement. Maybe a few more roommates to help mitigate the cost of living, maybe with a new mattress you purchased with a discount code from a podcast you like.

You start thinking about your job, and you wonder if anyone is even watching the content you make. People are liking and sharing, but you imagine they are doing it the same way you do, with their eyes glazed over in infinite boredom. You think about how we are not really making content for people anymore, but for numbers. The audience is the algorithm, and the algorithm is getting savvier and more discerning every day.

But unlike people, you can know the algorithm completely. It has no secrets. It tells you exactly what it wants to hear, which has made your job easy; depressingly, achingly so. We are living in the optimal future nobody wanted, but worked so incredibly hard to make happen.



At work the next day, Jennee tells you about a project she wants you to do. She tells you that she wants you to look into making content that is perpetually viral. All viral content has a shelf life, she explains, but what if there was a way to keep something in the conversation forever? Something nobody would get tired of; something that permanently captures the collective attention and stops the scroll forever. She tells you that she wants you to literally break the internet, to grind all traffic to a halt and converge on a singular piece of content.

You tell her that in some ways, what she wants already exists; that there is really no practical way to determine where one piece of content stops and another begins anymore, as everything has been so homogenized in order to have the most mass appeal. Every reaction video looks the same, every ad for a delivery service app looks the same, every website for every startup is the exact same one-page layout that forces you to scroll down forever to find the customer service email address.

You tell her that this is also true for people. There's no way to tell where one influencer stops and another begins anymore. Everybody has the exact same inflection, everybody makes the same kind of thumbnails, everybody puts on the same feigned look of surprise at the same jump scare in the video game they're all playing this week. Being famous is a solved game now. You tell her that we aren't at the end of history, but instead, the end of celebrity. There are no peaks and valleys of a career anymore, where famous people used to wax and wane, coming and going in and out of style. Now it is just a morphine drip of content creators, with only minor tweaks in optimization—a raised eyebrow here, a wider mouth there. We know the formula, and you can just be famous forever, you say. Every second, you're a star. The only impediment is the limits of the human will. Most people can't keep up with the Sisyphean task of posting, you tell her. That's the only reason they fall off the radar.

Jennee tells you that this is your new assignment, to create an algorithm that can serve as the perfect content creator. You tell her you aren't a programmer. She tells you that you can learn to code. You ask her if you can get a raise. She tells you to ask Brad. You message Brad. Brad says no.



That night, you take an edible and sign up for a free month trial of an online coding class. One hour later, you are able to write a program in Python. With a few lines of text and the press of the Enter key, you output "Hello, World!" on your screen. Your program is introducing itself to you, so you say hello back. You press the Enter key again. "Hello, World!" You say hello out loud this time and press the Enter key again. "Hello, World!" You made the computer talk. This is a nascent form of artificial intelligence, you think. You cannot afford to have a child, so you suppose this is the next best thing. You press the Enter key again and watch as each subpixel illuminates onto the monitor, struggling to be born.



Every day is the same. You go to work and come home to program your Hello Word algorithm. Every day you learn more about programming, and your baby is getting larger and more robust. It has functions. It has a logic flow. It can respond to you now. “How are you doing today?” you type.

“Well, thank you,” it types back, just as you programmed it to do.

Every day is the same, so you teach your child to do more things, like pull a list of all of the top-performing videos on YouTube and analyze them for commonalities. “Analysis complete,” it types back. You feed it more content from TikTok and Instagram. “Analysis complete,” it types back. You change what your algorithm says when it has finished processing. “Content analyzed,” it says, obediently. Every day is the same. “Make video,” you type. Your algorithm takes its first steps, and in just under an hour, produces footage of a beagle puppy pushing a water bowl toward a thirsty duck while Fleetwood Mac’s “Dreams” plays in the background. It is getting there, you think. But you need to feed it more content, so it can grow.

Every day is the same. The band BTS is in your videos now. There is footage of someone unboxing a Gundam and Minecraft versions of the characters from *The Walking Dead*. There is more content than you can discern. Every frame is packed with so many cultural touchstones that their individual context is lost completely, entirely subsumed by the Great Viral Whole. “Waking up in the morning, thinking about so many things...” you hear on repeat as Joe Rogan interviews Gavin McInnes next to The Rock eating spicy wings.

You hook your child up to a Twitter account to post these videos every hour on the hour. “Analyze likes,” you type. “I’ll get to it when I feel like it,” your angst-ridden preteen responds. You smile. You love that you programmed him to behave like this. Each time a new video goes up, it gets more likes and more shares than the one before. “What am I looking at?” people say. “This is amazing and I also hate it?” The videos are the precise mix of confusion, recognition, love, and disgust to compel people to like and share. Like and share. Every day is the same.

Ben Shapiro is posting about your videos now. “This is what liberals think is entertaining.” Like and share. Kim Kardashian calls one of your videos sexist

because it only shows her ass instead of her face. Like and share, like and share. You start to see people copy the format. Desperate to bathe in the residual glow of Perfect Virality, but none of their videos ever perform the same. They're just an imitation. Too curated, too human. Like and share. *Buzzfeed* writes an article saying you have broken the internet so hard that you have become the internet. *The Daily Beast* proclaims that AI has killed the content creator industrial complex. *The New York Times* wonders about the long term effects of watching US soldiers torture prisoners at Abu Ghraib next to the Grape Lady.

But all the ruminations on what this is doing to us as a society miss the point entirely. There's nothing new to react to here, just the pieces of meaningful content we've already produced—so much of it that it renders any other cultural advancement moot. It is a perfect mirror of who we are and what we care about; a reflection nobody wanted, but everyone must look at. It is the best thing any of us has ever seen, and it is also the worst. Why spend time consuming anything when you can be bombarded with everything all at once? Like the old saying goes: "This. Is. Everything."



The dawn of the new day. You log into the Zoom meeting with Brad (a different Brad, this one with a goatee) and Jennee. They tell you they love what you've done, but they have some notes. They tell you they'd like to see more engagement on the videos. It's not that the videos aren't generating hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of likes and shares, they say, but that they feel there are hundreds upon hundreds of thousands of likes and shares from other accounts being left on the table. If this algorithm is making perfect viral content, why isn't every single person on the planet liking and sharing?

You tell them you suppose there's no accounting for taste.

"So you're saying this is a matter of taste," Brad says.

"This doesn't sound like content," Jennee says. "It sounds more like... art." Jennee makes a face like she just drank a big swig of sour milk. Brad turns off his camera to avoid showing you his deep disappointment and shame.

You apologize, promising you can make your baby better, but it's too little, too late. You wanted to make content but you made art instead, a tragedy unique to these times. Art is subjective, inherently niche and therefore, disposable, but

content? Content is for everyone. Content is forever.

Despondent as they are, Brad and Jennee decide they'll take full credit for your algorithm anyway. It hurts to see your baby stolen from you, but the pain is dulled by the searing reminder that there was never an alternative. Like the Film Critic Hulk before you, none of this, not even the future, was ever truly yours.



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His writing has appeared in, among other places, McSweeney's, The Onion, and the leftist comedy 'zine he co-created, Functionally Dead (available at functionallydead.com).

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Special thanks to Mary Sasson, Alexis Rhiannon, and Steve Sachs.



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