

Patrimony

"Open your eyes *without* opening them.
Discorporate. Amass a paucity of
apotheoses. Eigengrau verstandes...."

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Tweed Jefferson, Patrimonious
Fiction, Thriller | Fiction, Psychological
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This is all a true story. Especially the part where I create a god particle that destroys the universe. But then the Big Bang happens again and here we are, billions of years later, not in a different universe, but not the same universe as the universe in the story which may or may not be this universe, but at a different time or in a different rendering. No, grow up. I'm making all this shit up as I go along, just like this disclaimer. Like any writer, I use my life as sad inspiration, but names, dates, places, events, fried cheese curds, diplodocuses, raw human emotions, periods of delirium, the way I take my coffee, and air-guitar solos have been changed for dramatic effect, satire, protection of the doggos, to get less-sued, to move along the painfully-slow pace of real life at a speed worth reading, due to poor research, because I was really baked that day, or any other reason real or imaginary. Fuck off and get a life, Susan. Also, I don't make any real money on these books, so do us a favor and don't steal them, love, m'kay? I'd probably send it to you if you asked nicely.

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Dedication

To Chuck-

Inhale.

Take in as much air as you can.

This dedication should last about as long as you can hold your breath, and then just a little bit longer. So read as fast as you can.

It was a Friday in October. Late in the last millennium. There I was, in the crowded theater. Opening night. On a date. I didn't want to go. Action movies weren't my thing – still aren't – and the previews mostly showed a bunch of fucking and fighting. My date was excited to go. She hated the film; I loved it. Though, eighteen-year-old me didn't 'get it' yet. Maybe I still don't. Nevertheless, I was a bibliophile – still am, but I used to be, also. I picked up **Fight Club** in paperback and began my decades-long fascination with the writing of Chuck Palahniuk.

A question of my favorite band or song will be met with a perplexed stare. Favorite at *what*? Steely Dan and Jimi Hendrix and all the other bands listed in the back of this book have their merits. They're the best at doing what they do. Few cross genres naturally. Zappa. Chuck is like Zappa, transitioning seamlessly and with style across genres. Not shouting, "Look what I can do!" but making each movement and passage his own. What I'm getting at is, if someone were to ask my preference for books, I can say that *Haunted* is my 'favorite' novel. I must have bought it seven or eight times now. I keep giving it away to semi-interested readers. I can't find my most recent copy, so it's probably time to order another. One day, I will finish turning it into a campy, whimsical musical. Guys and Dolls, but rich people slumming it. Annie, but for murderous foot-sluts. Like all of Chuck's work, this novel finds humor in cynicism and violence and the darkest parts of what make us human. *Haunted* is a prime example of this, but *Invisible Monsters*, *Rant*, *Choke*, and so many others give us a glimpse at the person we might be, if put in the right (or wrong) situation.

Chuck is Soul music. Having played the role of some of his protagonists in real life, Chuck's stories have revealed my own struggle to prove Locke wrong, and our ultimate failure as a species to do so. In true Gonzo-fashion, he lives the lives of his protagonists – or

antagonists. I truly admire his commitment to putting himself into these people and experiences. From support-group meetings to steroids to testicle festivals, he personifies “Write what you know”.

Chuck is Big Band. As a writer, Chuck leads a beautiful dance with words. Then takes them home and fucks them in the kitchen. Descriptions that even an aphantastic, neurodeviant like myself can be drawn into. Characters don’t ‘say’ this or ‘exclaim’ that. As he writes in *Consider This*, “Your characters have arms and legs and faces. Use them.” I’ve made my attempt with this novel to heed this advice. To use the countless-thousands of Chuck’s words that I’ve read as inspiration – not for my stories, but for my writing style. The sincerest form of flattery. Like an erection.

Chuck is Punk Rock. I’m not saying I started writing because of him. I wrote my first book because I was bored at work and there were no good guides on how to do what I did at the time, which was 911 dispatch. Turns out, I liked writing, but was only an expert in so many fields, which led me to fiction. What I will say is that I write what I now write because of Chuck’s unfiltered fearlessness as an artist. Most wouldn’t expose themselves to the world, they’d worry their commercial appeal might fall off or that they might be letting people in on their deepest secrets and traumas. That’s what I’d call integrity. What I’ve learned most from your writing, Chuck, is I can do whatever the fuck I want, in what is possibly the last (mostly) uncensored art-form, the written word. Writing is jazz, if you want it to be.

And with that, I’ll get off your porch.

Gratefully Influenced,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be 'Zuf' or similar, written in a cursive, stylized font.

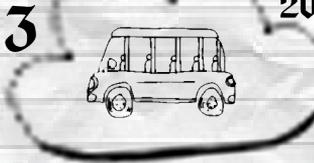
P.S. It’s been nearly two decades and I still won’t drive with the window half-down or let a pool inlet toss my salad while I jerk off (usually). Thank you for NOT sharing.

DISCORPORATE

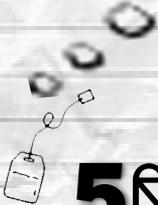
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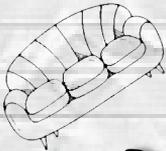
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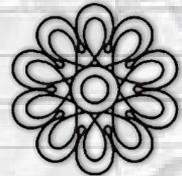
4 Duplicitous₃₇



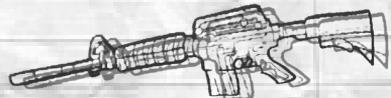
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6 SPURIOUS₆₈



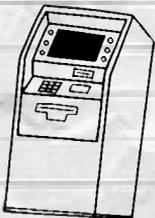
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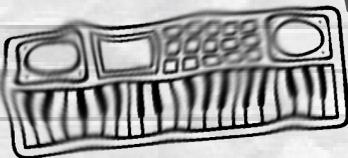


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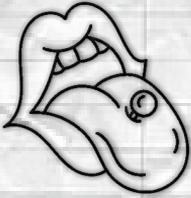
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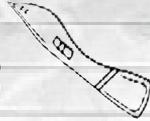
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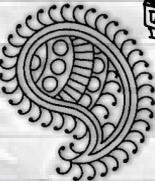
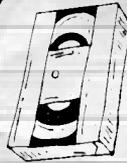
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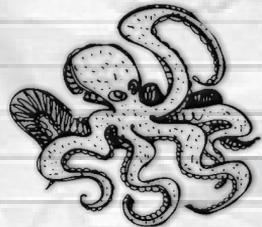
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patrimois

a novel by
tweed yiffans

Act One:

Geriatricities

Chapter One

Discorporate

“I’m not old enough for this shit,” the old man grumbles into his plate of eggs and oatmeal. No salt or seasoning of any kind. The lowest-common denominator of food. If bland was a color, this would be it.

“What’s that?” His son asks.

“I said I’m not old enough to be here,” the old man rephrases, looking up without making eye contact.

The younger man is almost forty now. They’ve never been close, he and the old man. He’s in town for a couple more days to help his dad get moved into *Sunrise*, the assisted-living home in the city. After a decade alone in the mountains, the old man was none-too-pleased to share a hallway with a bunch of crazy old kooks. He’s far too young to be locked up in one of these hell-holes. Funny thing, the boy’s mom worked at this kind of place – the same company, even – back when she was pregnant with him. She’d come home every night with horror stories. Of dirty old men, sure, but mostly of staff abusing patients, leaving them in their own shit. Stealing from, and then gaslighting, the residents. They were horror stories to him, the old man, the younger old man. His ex found it funny.

Shitting himself had always been one of his worst fears. Of course, in his younger days, he’d had a few leaks after a night of heavy drinking, but fortunately, he’s not here because he can’t

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control his bowels. No, the old man's other worst fear had come true. Something was going on with his brain and he'd begun losing his memory and having 'episodes' of dissociation. The doctors haven't been able to determine what's going on, exactly, but for the time being, he's gotta stay here. He'd hoped to die at his little sanctuary – preferably outside, where the coyotes and birds could get to him.

“I know, Dad. It's just for a few months. When I get back from this schedule, we'll find some hot nurse to come live with you. What's the big deal? Look at all the action here. I hear the ratio is six-to-one.” He sounds like the old man when he was that age, despite their lack of time together over the years, delivering the line with a straight face that made you unsure if he was serious or joking.

Continuing to prod at the lifeless mound on his plate, he doesn't look up in response to his son's comments. The old man wasn't too interested in playing the field in the dementia ward. Nevermind the syphilis and gonorrhea outbreaks, he was feeling anxious just being in this dining room, eating – or attempting to eat – while surrounded by shriveled lips slurping at runny oatmeal and yogurt being sucked from shaking spoons. Misophonia, it's called. You know when you've been in a shitty relationship for a too-long time and everything the other person does annoys you? The way they breathe, the sound of them eating. Now imagine that, but instead of it being that cheating son-of-a-bitch ex, it's everybody. Regular people. It's not that the old man specifically hated *all* people. It's something that's happened for most of his life and he couldn't control it. Certain noises were 'nails on a chalkboard' to him. Though, not actual nails on a chalkboard, that didn't bother him. After years of living alone, the sounds felt amplified by a

Discorporate

thousand decibels. He's already dreading the attendants badgering him to participate in the inane daily activities while he attempts to wait out the next few months in silence, in his room. It wouldn't be the first time he's counted out the days until he dies.

That's depression for you, though. The old man had never bothered to figure out the number of days and months he'd spent in bed, staring at the wall, watching but not-watching TV. Weeks, every year – for decades. Smoking weed and putzing around his garden managed to stave those feelings off except during the hottest months. Here, he won't be able to do either. The garden is a dirt patch of tomatoes and he didn't bring any weed. His plants are going to die without anyone to water them.

“How was your first night?” The girl in the blue scrubs asks, leaning across the plate he's refraining from eating from to clear empty dishes from the table. Her unflattering top dips into his mash of eggy-oats, rendering them even more inedible, as far as the old man is concerned. He pushes the plate toward the center of the table for her to take. She leaves the uneaten blobs in front of him.

“It was fine, thank you,” his son answers. “We're going to pick up some more of his stuff today and finish moving in.”

“Sounds great, we're looking forward to having you with us,” she says, patting the old man on the hand, a combination of insincerity and patronization in her voice. Surely a line she's said countless times before. The revolving door here must spin faster than the residents can hobble through it.

“I won't be here very long. Once my son here gets back from his trip, I'll be moving back home.” He pulls his hand into his lap.

“Mhmm,” she nods. She gets the same story from all new

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residents. It's only temporary and the like. The young man doesn't expect his father to make any kind of recovery. If anything, his memory problems and dementia will probably get worse. Same as it was for the old man's parents and their parents before them. In this family, you either drop dead at sixty from a heart attack or live forever and lose your mind. The old man had hoped for the former.

Once they've loaded the last of his stuff into the tiny apartment, the two men give each other a half-hug, the most affection they ever show each other. The old man grew up being forced to hug everybody his parents knew and, as he aged, he grew more and more uncomfortable with being touched. The old man never imposed any physical affection on his son or his nieces and nephews, as the rest of the adults in his family believed they had the authority and right to do with children.

The old man never bought into the toxic 'Father Knows Best' mentality that was commonplace in his family. Growing up being told how to think and feel and being beaten and degraded if he didn't comply (and also, when he did), the old man went the opposite direction. He spoke openly and in earnest with children. He treated them with respect and humanity, instead of as subservient miniatures to be oppressed and molded into good little capitalist robots.

They treated animals with even less respect, his predecessors. Nevermind their proclivity for using them to make up ninety-percent of their diets and most of their wardrobe, but killing animals for sport. Not even deer-hunting or whatever, but shooting at squirrels or gophers who were only in search of water or their next meal. They didn't have a garden or anything that the critters would damage; shooting them was a perk of living in the mountains. Treating an animal with humanity was out of the

question.

Coming from a long line of merchants and resellers, the old man found the thickness of hypocrisy in his family hilarious. Typical white, Christian ‘mericans. Trump-lovers. ‘Dubya’ before him. Generations of idiots, spending their entire lives in the pursuit of money so they can buy more stuff. Literally no contribution to society. The old man was proud to take a different path, dedicating his life to art and nature. Music and animals. His family always told him that he was a failure and a fool because he spent his time and money helping others, but rejected the need for a new genuine-leather sofa or granite countertops every few years – or in his case, ever. His family *hated* his spartan lifestyle.

That’s a gross exaggeration, the way his family perceived the way he lived – not their resentment. He had a house. It had furniture and dishes – more than one of each, even. The old man had never felt the need for validation through conspicuous consumerism. He built his own furniture to suit his needs. Basic carpentry skills made up for his lack of disposable income. He’d buy cheap pots and pans and tools because they fulfilled their purpose adequately. They, the old man’s family, always told him, “You’re so smart, you’re so talented, you can be anything!” Except who he wanted to be, apparently. Shit, none of his family, except one brother, even bothered to come to any of his art shows. Never publicly praised or privately supported any of the community organizations or arts-and-music events he’d put together.

“Excuse me, sir?” An aide half-knocks before poking her head into the door of his cluttered one-bedroom apartment. The one redeeming factor of this room is the view. It looks down on the city from above. *What floor is this, anyway? Ninth or tenth, maybe.* Instead of numbering the rooms based on their floor, like

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in a hotel, like any sane person would do, they've given each floor some cutesy name. The Busy Beehive, Darling and Dapper, Fairytale Friends. Stupid shit like that. Despite the alliterations, the letters don't correspond numerically to their position in the alphabet when it came to naming each floor. *That would have made a lot more sense*, the old man thinks before being reminded of the young woman in the doorway.

"We're getting ready to have art time downstairs. You should come join us."

"No, thank you. I'd like to settle in here." He waves at the stack of boxes.

The blue-and-pink-floral scrubbed girl takes his reply as an invitation to enter. The old man turns his gaze from the window, watching her all-white sneakers make their way across the room.

"Your son told us you used to be an artist. You really should come down. It'll be a great opportunity to meet your neighbors." *Used to be an artist?* Still an artist, as far as the old man is concerned. He just doesn't need to prove it to anybody. A few of his pieces lean against the wall in the bedroom closet, waiting to be hung, but he may just leave them there. Put something else up on the walls. Tasteful nudes, maybe. Or some old gangsta-rap posters. Whatever it is, it should be something he'd never have put up before. There was always somebody who thought his taste in art was offensive. It would be okay to put that sort of thing up around his house now, but he'd never gotten around to decorating the place. Function over form.

"No, thank you. I'm tired now."

Despite twice being rejected, Harper C. takes his elbow and starts guiding the old man to the door. "Harper C." That's what her name tag says. The old man wonders if her last name

Discorporate

is Collins. He doesn't put up a fight and allows her to escort him down the hall and into the elevator. While still facing the old man, making awkward small talk, she hits a button on the elevator labeled with a 'C'.

H, D, K, F, B, I, G, E, L, A, C. The old man repeats over and over in his mind. He tries to find a mnemonic device or initialism to help. High Definition Killing Fields Bigelac. Honda Driver, Kite Flyer. The Bigelac part was easy, at least. It would be a lot easier to work it over without Harper C. asking, "Where did you grow up?" and "Do you have any other family around here?" The old man has always hated small-talk. So insincere. Not a good way to get to know somebody at all, even if you do keep asking questions about them. That's all they really want you to do, anyway. Then they can give their rehearsed speech about, "Well, I grew up in New Mexico, but my family moved out here when I was..." and "My art is really an expression of myself and my life. It's infused with my connection to [choose: god/nature/trauma]..." Anyway, what's the point in memorizing the floors if he's going to leave in a few weeks.

The elevator doors crawl open and the old man shoots into the hallway, attempting to get ahead of the next asinine question and to whatever "art" thing they're doing. Perhaps he's a bit more spry than Harper C. is used to with the residents here. She races to catch up to the old man to 'direct' him to the community room, like he can't follow the signs and giant arrows on the walls. And floor. And ceiling.

"Here. You sit here, next to Miss Pammy and Miss Julie," Harper C. says loud enough for every hearing aid in the room to pick up. The women on either side of the empty easel-station smile widely at the old man, fluffing their thinning gray-purple

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hair and sending a cloud of Chanel No. 5 or Yves Saint Laurent or L'Air du Âgée at the old man. Whatever scent it is, it's the same his grandma wore.

“Have fun, you guys!” Harper C. calls to the room, but aims her voice at the old man and his two new acquaintances. Her walkie-talkie squawks and she unclips it from her elastic waistband, saying something incoherent into the black-plastic box before rushing out of the room.

Without taking a seat at the prepared art station, the old man treks back into the hallway, certain Harper C. is fast on her way somewhere across the building. A balding, thirty-something man in horn-rimmed glasses calls out a few ‘excuse me, sir’s at the old man’s back. *The old Irish exit*, he thinks as the elevator doors open, seemingly slower than before. The row of letters come alive with their orange backlights illuminating black sans-serif letters.

H, D, K, F, B, I, G, E, L, A, C.

Okay, this is the bottom floor, C. What floor was I on? Fuck! The old man curses himself for not remembering the stupid painting on the wall across from the elevator. An attempt at a mural by some pandering artist, stenciled in bright colors in post-children’s-book-meets-hotel-art fashion. A crudely drawn animal holding a sign with the name of the floor. *A koala*, the old man thinks, vaguely remembering some pointed-leaf, definitely-not-eucalyptus trees painted in an unflattering three-color green-brown-tan scheme.

He presses and holds the ‘**K**’ button until the doors begin to close and the orange lights give way to semi-transparent plastic under each number except the one his finger is holding. In the hallway, he goes about as far as he recalls his room being from the elevator and begins opening doors on the side of the hall he

Discorporate

thinks is south, the direction of his view. Seniors, gaze fixed on a phone or TV screen, don't look up as the old man glances around each room. For emergency reasons or whatever, the doors to the cramped apartments don't lock. The third door he opens reveals some shabby, hand-made furniture and boxes of basic dishware and art supplies.

“Fuck!” The old man yells at the wall as the auto-closing door clicks shut behind him. He grabs a box of office supplies – pens and notebooks and the like – from the laminated kitchenette counter and hurls it across the room, spilling loose pages and about a hundred of the exact-same model pen, the only one that he likes to write with, over the folding sofa-bed-desk that the old man had built years ago so he could work when he felt ill. When his stomach or the nerve pain got to be too much for an office chair. Or when he was trying to ease in or out of a depression spell. He'd felt this kind of frustration over and over again. Stuck. No way out. What the *fuck* was he going to do?

The old man gathers up the papers and pens and stuffs them back into the cardboard box with little ceremony or organization. He gently returns the box to its same place in the corner of the room that serves as kitchen and dining room and plops down on his trusty sofa-desk.

The alarms on the doors would be easy to beat. Even if they go off, he can still make a break for it. And if he gets caught, just feign dementia – pretend like he thinks it's time to go to work or something. The problem is: Then what? Take the bus around town? There aren't any buses that run all the way up to his house in the mountains. No, he'd have to get a car. Temporarily. Once he gets home, he could figure out a way to return it. The old man isn't sure how to work that one. It's like the old fox, rabbit, cabbage

puzzle. How does one guy move two cars fifty miles without getting caught? He figures it could work to stay on the back roads, off the highways, drive one car a mile, walk back, drive the next for two miles, walk back, and so on. The amount of walking would be the same as if the old man were to start walking home from here right now. If he escapes, they'll find him on foot on the route back to his house. He can't hide from the cops or whoever they'd send to look for him unless he has a car. *Fuck!*

Chapter Two

Prejudicial

Shaun pulled up to his gate, getting out to put the combination in the dial-lock so he could undo the chain. Stuffed in the oxidized chain-link section of the gate was a letter from someone claiming to be Samantha's lawyer. It claimed that in three days, she was going to take custody of the house, as well as Shaun's befurred companions. *Fucking bitch!* Not only did she never make any contributions to the house, financially or otherwise, in the few months she lived there, but she never gave a shit about anyone else. Not any more than she cares about any person or animal, which is as long as they are useful to her. If selling them or neglecting them or 'putting them down' whenever they're inconvenient is the criteria, then I guess you'd call her an animal lover. What she really loves is manipulation and control, which is why she's using the kids against him.

Closing the gate behind him, but not bothering to refasten the chain or lock, Shaun raced up the dirt-and-gravel driveway to the house. After checking that the children were there and everything was in order, he sat down in the office chair he keeps next to an old desk outside, smoked a bowl, smoked another bowl, then smoked another bowl, waiting for his heart rate to get back to somewhere under one-hundred bpm. Knowing what he had to do next, it took a while to level out. Phone calls would make him anxious enough, but there are few calls that are worse to make

Chapter Two

than to the courthouse.

How is this even possible? He'd signed the divorce papers over a year ago. They agreed to part ways semi-amicably. He'd keep the house – she couldn't afford it anyway, and she'd get the RV and horses and other 'things'. That should have been that. Somehow she'd made some kind of change or amendment without him knowing.

The woman on the legal self-help line was surprisingly self-helpful. She told Shaun where to find the forms online for an emergency hearing. Obviously, it couldn't have gotten this far without several court appearances. Court appearances Shaun had never heard about.

Samantha's mom, Susan, was the guru of narcissistic gaslighting to her daughter's postulancy. Without even having the clerk look it up, Shaun knew Susan was the mastermind behind this. The archaic court system still requires papers be served in person or via US Post. Like, it's too easy for people to lie about not receiving digital communication in the era of servers and PATRIOT Acts, but a signature on a piece of paper is *proof* of mailing or serving documents. People have to be doing this every day in every county, but the courts don't catch on. Or more likely, they encourage it. That's the problem with allowing scumbag divorce lawyers and criminal prosecutors to become judges; they project all of their political bullshit on everything. Nobody can be guaranteed a fair trial when you have the most corrupt, double-dealing, braindead, charlatan, capitalist-puppet, fucktoads on the bench. *No time to dwell on that now*, Shaun thought, thanking the woman politely for her kind help before hanging up the phone.

While on the phone with the courthouse, Shaun was texting to make arrangements for the family to stay somewhere far away,

Prejudicial

with someone Samantha had never heard of, for a couple of weeks while this all played out. House or no house, the kids were staying. Not just for Shaun's sake, but for each other. They'd been a pack through several moves and life-changes. The fact that Samantha wanted to split them up from each other after abandoning them for a year should tell you all you need to know about her.

Whatever plans Shaun had for the weekend were shot. The next day, Friday, he got up early. Well, he always got up early, but usually he'd enjoy the sunrise over the Sierras with a coffee, sketchpad, and morning wake-n-bake. This time, it was straight to the shower, then a suit. No tie. After taking the pack eighty miles in one direction, he had to head fifty miles in another direction to get to the courthouse relatively close to opening.

"Oh, I remember you, sweetie," the middle-aged clerk said, looking at the notes on her screen about their phone conversation yesterday. "Go find an open computer station and I'll be over shortly to help you."

Shaun tried to find a cubicle as far away from everybody else as possible. Flashes of judgment went through his mind. His parents telling him all of these people were dirtbags. Mostly because they're brown, but also because they're poor. No self-respecting American would *dare* go to court without a conniving attorney. Shaun reminded himself that all of these people, like him, were there to help rectify some problem in their life. Some problem caused by another person, likely someone they once trusted. Some problem that was, no doubt, exacerbated by the whole legal system.

Before Shaun could dive too deep into his Freudian analysis of the racism instilled in him at a young age, the clerk came over to show him which forms to print and what to do with

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them. You know the drill. Open the online query, put your personal information into little boxes, print it, sign it, take it to the counter to be recorded and stamped. Rinse, repeat.

Once all of the paperwork was complete, Shaun had to have someone serve Samantha with the notice to appear in court for the emergency hearing the following week. For a moment, he considered making up a fake person and signing the paperwork himself. Though, in the end, he had the papers served and the documents completed the ‘right’ way. The legal way, at least. It’s neither ethically right, nor the most efficient and consistent way to do things, but what do you expect? Judges around here would probably still be wearing syphilis wigs if it were approved by their sponsors.

When all of the bureaucracy was in order, six hours later, Shaun found his way back to the parking garage and sat in his idling car, wondering what to do with his weekend *now*. It was a waiting game – until the court-date on Tuesday morning. Go home and protect the property by himself? He considered packing. If he was going to get evicted from his own house – the house he owned and made the payments on – he’d better be prepared to move out if things went sour on Tuesday. It wouldn’t be the shortest amount of time he’d had to pack and move before, but it was certainly the most stuff he’d ever owned. Furniture and appliances. Things that don’t pack into a suitcase or a couple of old Amazon boxes.

Turning the corner from the courthouse parking garage, Shaun stopped at the overpriced Mediterranean chain and ordered a falafel and hummus wrap. He didn’t eat it, he had no appetite. It was something he’d bought in a nugatory attempt at maintaining his health.

Prejudicial

He headed south on the freeway twenty miles and pulled off to get gas at the super-cheap station on the outskirts of the next major city. After filling the tank, Shaun went inside and got two-for-one Red Bulls and a pack of cigarettes. These were strange purchases for him. He'd quit smoking several months ago. As far as the Red Bull, that had to be at least a decade. Maybe two. Shaun never liked the energy drink buzz. Too methy, too tweaky. Coffee, as long as he didn't overdo it, was his drink of choice. Those days he'd spent drinking three or four pots of coffee and smoking copious amounts of weed, creating art all day, were some of his favorite days. But his body always paid for it later. *That's age*, Shaun thought. He used to be able to go out drinking all night. Now he got a hangover from having too much ice cream before bed.

Sitting in his car behind the gas station, Shaun chugged the Red Bull with one hand while packing the cigarettes against his leg with the other in a rhythmic waltz-like pattern. He tore the cellophane wrapper from the box and pulled out the little fake-aluminum flap that covered the cigarettes. After taking a deep drag, Shaun repositioned the cigarette to between his pinky and ring fingers. He lifted a glass pipe with some fresh purple indica to his mouth and lit it, the cigarette hanging below the bowl in his outer fingers. It was a struggle to get a good flame. Despite a thick callus on his thumb pad from years of lighting pipes and bong, it hurt to press the flint roller on the Bic lighter. *I've probably been smoking too much lately*, he thought.

Finally breaking from his tunnel-vision, Shaun looked up to see an employee on their break in the car next to his. It was obvious they'd seen this last transaction that he had had with himself, but they didn't seem to care, turning back to their phone

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while taking hits from their own resin vape.

Having sufficiently steadied his nerves, Shaun slowly edged out of the parking stall and directed his car back to the freeway on-ramp. One might think, given the situation, Shaun would be speeding and driving aggressively, but no. He'd never been a risky driver. Always letting others merge, never flipping off assholes or blaring his horn. Just a genuinely nice guy. Not a "Nice Guy"[™], though. Maybe when he was younger, he'd get upset. Like the world *owed* him something. Relationships are hard at that age. You're not sure what you want out of life yet – though, you're certain you've got it all figured out. You get into a relationship because you have these infatuation feelings, but when you see that person for who they are, how they don't fit into your plan, chaos ensues. Your mind reminds you of who they *used* to be. You're sure they can be that person again. Nevermind the investment of however many months or years. The time and energy that *you've* put into the relationship. So instead of doing the logical thing and being alone, people persist. They get angry that the person they're with isn't the person they dreamed up in their mind and then expected them to magically become. It all took too much energy and was counterproductive to his own peacefulness, so Shaun preferred to let people have their egos and their anger. His goal, upon leaving the house, was to get back to his pack and his solitude. Or solitude, as it were, with the pack stashed two counties away.

Back home, Shaun changed the combination on the gate lock and added another lock – one that required a key. He stashed it behind the near-fossilized fencepost – where it would be difficult to cut without getting an armpitful of barbed wire. He found the motion light and camera that he'd ordered when he bought the

house, but never installed, in the back of a cabinet. Removing one of the patio light-fixtures, Shaun wired the camera in and spent several minutes struggling with the mounting bracket, which was designed in the 1980s, without the foresight to see that anything besides a lamp might ever need to go there.

Maybe I should just let her have the house, he thought. The equity isn't *that* much. Was it worth his sanity? No, it's not *fair*, but it's life. When they say, "Life's not fair," what they really mean is you're gonna get screwed, let's see you do something about it. Sunk costs. That's what they call it in economics class. Colloquially, it might be referred to as crying over spilt milk. Once you take a loss and there's nothing you can do about it – nothing legal, at least – you may as well divert your energy toward future endeavors.

On a usual day, when everyone was home, there were plenty of quiet periods. Or so he thought. Sometimes, they'd chase a squirrel into a hole up on the hill or bark at the neighbor's horses if they got too close to the fence. Most of the time, everyone just chilled. The shepherds roamed the property. The littles hung out on their couch downstairs. Nevertheless, the house felt eerily silent when Shaun finally settled into the chair in his office. He really didn't want to spend his time doing it, but he had to search his archives for anything he could use in court. For one, records of all of the house payments coming out of his personal bank account. Receipts for all of the improvements he'd made to the property. If those weren't enough, he pulled up Samantha's taxes from the couple of years they were together. Where she didn't claim cash payments and wrote off a bunch of stuff that was definitely *not* a business expense. Unsure what else he had that would be of any use, Shaun copied all of the files to a flash drive to have printed when

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he went to visit the kids that weekend. Aside from the multitude of books and notepads around his house, he'd been paperless for fifteen years. The courts still operated in the seventeenth century, though, so he'd have to bring a folder of actual paper to 'prove' something or the other. You'd think those dumbshits would have heard of Photoshop by now.

After a quiet weekend, hiding out with his family, Shaun was up before the sun and on the road to the courthouse in Samantha's county. The work he'd put into compiling the financial paperwork was for naught. The judge refused to look at them or give him a chance to speak in his defense when Samantha made up lies about his character. This was exactly what Shaun had expected. He'd only been to court a couple of times in his life and the experience was always the same. Misandry from egotistical, geriatric fools dressed in black tablecloths who thought they knew everything. Shaun agreed to sell the house and give Samantha half if he got to keep the "family dogs", as the People-Versus-Larry-Flint-looking judge would accentuate. Whatever. He just wanted to get as far away from those toxic people as soon as possible. From the moment you walk into a courthouse, you can feel it. It's palpable. If radioactive green sludge were an aura, you'd be drowning in it. It's like an old monster B-movie. Once you're in the sludge you can feel yourself transforming. If you don't escape, you're going to become part of it. The Thing.

Shaun escaped from the parking garage, determined not to let Samantha see him. Luckily, he'd got a new car since they'd last seen each other, so unless she was looking for him, she wouldn't have noticed. She was never very observant, unless she was going through his phone.

Prejudicial

Once he was out on the main road, Shaun stopped worrying about it. Given their history, he'd more-than-half-expected her to jump out in front of him and accuse him of hitting her on purpose. Planning on taking the rest of the week off from work, Shaun got on the long, featureless freeway. A couple of hours in one direction to get the kids, then back up the hill to start packing. For real this time.

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Absent

The old man has never cared much for breakfast. Coffee and weed, that's how he prefers to wake up. The coffee here tastes old and burnt. He could probably sneak off somewhere in one of the fenced-in tomato gardens to smoke a joint, but first he'd have to get one. Without a car, there is no way to get to a dispensary, and they probably wouldn't take too kindly to an Uber Weeds delivery at the front desk.

Even if the plate they'd set in front of him weren't dry wheat toast and the same slopped eggs and oatmeal they serve every morning, he wouldn't be hungry. He figures they carry it over from the previous day, scraping the half-eaten bowls back into an industrial-sized stainless steel pot in the back of the kitchen somewhere. The old man waits for Harper C. to go back through the swinging double-doors to prepare identical plates for the next table. He gets up, taking the shatterproof off-white plate with him and dumps it, and its contents, into the gray plastic trash bin in the lobby. Now that he's unpacked most of his belongings, he has time to settle in with a book and wait out the clock.

The old man has barely made it back to his room when Harper C. is half-knocking and sticking her head through the door. Maybe he should sit around naked, he thinks, to discourage her intrusiveness.

“Good morning,” she sing-songs at him. “We're getting

ready to take some of the residents to go shopping. You really *must* go with us. We can get some things to make your room feel more like home.”

“No, thank you. I have everything I need.” He waves her away and looks out over the city.

“Now now, come on. You can’t sit in here all day.”

I really can, he thinks. Aside from not having anywhere nice outside – somewhere quiet with plants – he has no problem with keeping himself company. What is it with these constant activities and social interactions for seniors, anyway? People spend their whole lives constantly trying to be busy and *doing things*. They kinda do things. Work, shopping, kids. The old man never bought into the glamorization of the hustle culture. The idea that you have to be always busy. Nevermind the claims from these people that they are supposedly working their asses off so they can have relaxing 'golden' years. Regardless of the lives that the residents of this institution lived before, he’s sure they couldn’t possibly have aspired to spending every waking hour moving around the semi-sterile hallways and talking to no end about grandkids and the half-off sales they used to have at Robinson’s or Montgomery-Ward. Completing mundane tasks like they’re huge accomplishments. It could be possible, though unlikely, that they go along with it so they don’t have to deal with the confrontation, which has been the old man’s approach since arriving.

He neatly folds a \$100 bill from the envelope his son brought from the bank and sticks it in his pocket. What he’d ‘budgeted’ for the old man for the month. Like he should get to decide how the old man spends his money. Harper C. holds the door for him and leads him to the elevator with generic questions about his past and family. Colloquy du jour.

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Outside, a line of four-footed canes and walkers with tennis balls on their feet wait in the unshaded heat of the brick driveway while wheelchairs are loaded, one at a time, into the white minibus with the hydraulic lift. The old man paces at the end of the queue, in no hurry to get on the bus, but not a fan of standing outside in the pre-summer sun, either.

The nylon stretch covers on the two-by-two rows of bucket seats are done up in an orange-and-brown stripe over faded blue. There are little white stars across the pattern, like you'd see on an Amtrak train or charter bus thirty years ago. They probably bought these seat covers to make the residents feel like they're going on a trip. But it could have been because they got a thousand of them at a surplus sale somewhere. No telling how many times they have to replace these seat covers. You know, because of the diaper leaks. *Turista doméstica*.

The bus only travels about a mile before its first stop, the Dollar General parking lot. That's fine with the old man. The fortyish seats on the bus are filled with old ladies, flipping through *People* magazines and attempting to work their crochet on the three-minute ride. Another twenty minutes is spent loudly unloading all of the wheelchairs and walkers, after which, the old man is finally able to open his book. Harper C. and the other two employees are too busy funneling their charges into the automatic doors of the store to notice or care that he isn't tagging along.

Toothpaste and deodorant and adult diapers. Little mass-produced wooden signs of cartoon angels that say "Blessed" or "Believe" or some shit. The old man's memory has gone to hell lately. He'd always been one of those people who could memorize thousands of pieces of esoteric information, the details of conversations he'd had. Books and art and poems. Words. Despite

his newfound inability to remember where he'd set something down, or what he was *just* working on, he'd always been a list-maker. Since he was a young man, notebooks and sticky notes and index cards littered his house. They were some of the first things he'd unpacked at his recent internment facility. So, no, he doesn't need any clearance Crest or off-brand Old Spice or discount Depends. Not only does he have a shopping list already started back at the penitentiary, but he buys necessities three-or-four at a time to prevent running out. Seems like a basic life-skill to him, but these septu/octogenarians haven't seemed to have mastered it – or even practiced it at a beginner's level.

An hour later and the bus is reloaded and unloaded again. This time at the local shopping mall. Not the hip, new mall with the corporate-chain boutiques selling overpriced dungarees and engagement-ring showpalaces. This is the mall that *used* to host those stores, but now it has screen-print "Your Image Here!" t-shirt shops and nothing-over-five-bucks costume jewelry stores. The second floor has been converted to office-suites. Department of Transportation, a job-assistance program, the local inner-city city council guy's reelection headquarters. Even the once-teeming food court has been reduced to a Dairy Queen and a single rice-bowl place – not even a chain, a mom-and-pop. Literally. An elderly Asian man and his wife watch the erratic visitors wistfully from across the empty cafeteria. Their hand-made posters advertise a half-off 'healthy' lunch alternative to the soft-serve, blend-in, high-fructose-and-caffeine-laden fare of their only competitor.

Old women tighten the laces on their specially-designed Nike *walking* shoes. The kind with the big, curved soles that have holes in them to help with osteoarthritis or plantar fasciitis or Morton's neuroma. Dr. Sholl's arch-support insoles and knee-

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high compression socks. They tap digital watches on their wrists to start fitness trackers.

The ladies race to beat their fellow hens to the mall entrance, pounding on the handicapped button and waiting for the door to swing toward them at a snail's-pace instead of opening it themselves. Miss Julie from yesterday, wearing fluorescent-green-holes-in-yellow-foam-soled walking shoes with her brown slacks, shoulderpadded blouse, and layers of pearls, hurries to the opposite side of the cavernous entrance bay and vigorously punches at the silver dinner-plate with the blue wheelchair imprint on it. The grandmother hops in a quasi-holding-in-a-peepee dance, disappointed that this door opens no faster than the other side, where the first gaggle has already disappeared into the vast emptiness of what surely was *the* spot to be on the weekends when she was young and hot – a real looker. She hops from one foot to another at a tempo somewhere between vivace and presto. A piteous version of a Bojangles routine.

Although he doesn't need to do any shopping, the old man wants to get up and move around. He's suffered lower back pain for years now. Sitting makes it worse. It was *from* sitting. So many years in a desk chair, pounding away at a keyboard, had taken their toll on his knees and wrists. The doctors wanted to cut him open to repair the nerve damage. But those medical mountebanks couldn't figure out what was going on with his brain – and couldn't treat his stomach pain all those years ago. With that track record, there was no way he'd let them slice at his body. No way he'd get anywhere near an anesthetist, or a hospital, for that matter. That's why he had to build himself the sofa-desk. One of the few pieces of furniture he was able to bring with him. He'd rather be sitting there right now, even if it wasn't home. These stiff bucket-seats with their

itchy, washed-a-hundred-times covers weren't doing him any favors.

Once the mass of the exodus has finished pouring through any of the six doors under the gaudy twenty-foot-by-fifty-foot marquee, the old man climbs down the steps and walks along the sidewalk in front of the mall. He's looking for a more subtle entrance. Malls always have them, past the loading docks and security parking. Usually it's a lone glass doorway that pops in somewhere near one of the anchor stores.

The tall plaster-over-cinderblock walls that serve as aesthetic dividers to hide the trucks and mock-police cruisers give way in large sections where the sidewalk drops on one side to serve as a driveway. The old man pauses to watch people going about their day. A fakin'-bacon mall cop gets into his sedan with the yellow light bar and pulls out a few feet in front of the old man, seeming to look through him as the Interceptor turns out to patrol the lot. An employee carries a clear plastic bag, full of styrofoam take out containers and Dairy Queen cups with polyethylene terephthalate lids, to the dumpster. She races back to the handleless staff door before it latches and she has to walk around to the entrance the old man is likely trying to find, himself. A UPS driver in his Steve Irwin uniform stacks boxes from the back of his matching-brown step truck. With a mound of also-brown cardboard as tall as himself, the courier jumps on the back rail of the hand truck to tilt it back, then weaves it toward a receiving portal, struggling to see where he's going.

Casually, like he's meant to be there, the old man approaches the idling parcel vehicle. The back door gapes open, its mouth filled with teeth of umber cardboard and transparent packaging tape enamel. He closes one side, then the other, cranking the heavy,

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L-shaped handle to latch the panels shut. As he walks around the front of the truck (how's that for getting his steps in?), he bends and reaches underneath, almost as if he's picking up something he'd dropped, and checks for a GPS tracker. Satisfied that there's nothing conspicuous, he launches himself into the elevated driver's seat, like he's mounting a horse sidesaddle.

The old man grabs the gear handle that sticks out from the right of the steering column with one trembling hand and pulls it down one click. It's not nerves, it's this fucking brain thing. Gives him tremors. So, technically, nerves. He's feeling pretty mellow right now. *It's like riding a bike*, he thinks. He drove one of these big-ass trucks for work decades ago. A menial labor job where he had to haul equipment from one jobsite to another. Lots of miles in one of these. Lots of cigarettes. Lots of back pain. The Big-Ass Truck creeps back, the old man watching the giant dome mirror outside his window, foot off the gas, hovering over the brake.

Finding enough room to turn the truck around in the little alcove, he progresses through the gears and he's on his way down the main thoroughfare, on his way to freedom. *Free at last, Free at last*, he repeats in his head along with the rumble of the road. The driver's door is slid back in the open position and he enjoys the breeze whipping through the cab, despite the heat.

On the dash area, an electronic tablet lights up, directing him to his next delivery. The old man wonders how he got here. *When did I get this job?* The voice on the box tells him to turn right at the next intersection, so he does. The red line that highlights the street is punctuated with slightly-larger red dots, showing him the deliveries on his route and how to get to them most efficiently. As he accelerates, the feel of the truck becomes more familiar. The old man starts to remember the techniques for checking his blind

spot and delaying his turns to clear the rear axle.

Ahead, a carved-granite sign advertises Torigian and Torigian Law. The tablet screen scrolls automatically to show the same sign in a street-view photo. The right tires thud over the curb as the van turns into the parking lot. *Maybe I haven't got the hang of it yet*, he thinks as he pulls into a handicap space next to a smaller stone sign, identical to the one on the street.

Shifting the transmission into its uppermost position, the old man climbs from his seat into the back of the truck and easily finds the packages with the black-and-white labels that say 'Torigian'. He doesn't remember loading the truck this morning, but he must have – it's exactly the way he does it. Logical. The old man wonders why he's having a hard time remembering things today, but can't get stuck on it for long, he has to get these packages out.

"Where's the fucking scanner!" The old man shouts to himself in the back of the truck, not loud enough for anyone outside to hear if they were there. Wouldn't want some Karen to file a complaint for swearing. Some busybody with nothing better to do than harass retail employees or call the cops on people for being Black in public. He searches around the back of the truck for a bit without finding the scanner. Finally, he decides, *Fuck it*, and takes the packages into the marble-festooned lawfirm, dropping them off at the reception desk. The young woman in the three-piece skirt-suit asks about their regular driver. The old man says he doesn't know. He really doesn't. *Is this not my regular route? Is that why I don't remember loading the truck?*

Back in the driver's chair and following the red line on the map to the next red dot, the old man starts to think about this morning. The flaccid eggs and toast. *I'm not a UPS driver. What*

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the fuck am I doing? He grabs the tablet from the dash and hurls it through the open door. It bounces away from the convex mirror in its protective case, cartwheeling corner-to-corner before landing flat on its face and disappearing behind the truck. The old man flicks the narrow lever opposite the gear-shift and makes a left turn at the next intersection. He checks for cross traffic before blowing past the stop sign and stomping on the gas pedal.

Pulling up in front of his house, the old man puts the combination into the lock and yanks the chain, but it doesn't unlatch. He tries a few other combinations that he's used for other things, in case he'd changed it again. Every six months or so, he changes the combination. Just in case. It's not like he had many visitors, but you never know who might remember the combo if you leave it open. It's not one of those dial Master locks like you'd have in high school. It's a four-digit rotating number. He got it because he could remember how the combinations felt in the dark.

Shit. He thinks for a minute, then climbs up on the fence pipes and steps precariously over the barbed wire to slide the toe of his shoe into the chain-link on the inside of the fence. Throwing his left leg over, his knees seize up and dislodge his footing. The old man tumbles gracelessly onto the dusty driveway. Brushing himself off, he remembers the lessons on learning how to fall from his sporting days. Two-inch foam mats rolled out all over the gym floor, they taught him to never reach out to break his fall. They showed him how to make his body round to disperse the force. He always knew it would come in handy.

At the top of the driveway, his first priority is to find a way to deal with the gate. Then pack a few things and get as far away from there as possible. By now, Harper C. has noticed he's

gone missing. This will be the first place they come looking for him. Next to the house, where his old Subaru Outback and little rechargeable Fiat are normally parked, there's a monstrosity of a Ford F-350 diesel. *What the hell?*

Around back, where he keeps his toolbox, he instead finds cheap plastic patio furniture. No hacksaws or screwdrivers. Nothing but molded polypropylene and faux-carved wooden signs that say "Happiness" and "Love" and other solitary nouns that are supposed to mean something poetic. A substitution for real poetry. Real art replaced by meaningless, subjective phrases on display for all to judge you by. It's gaslighting through art – well, not art, because there's no soul in it, but you know what I mean. Kitchlighting. The shit they line the entrances of Target or Hobby Lobby with. These words and phrases that are supposed to show the world what a kind, caring, devout person you are. It's too much work to exemplify these words and phrases so people, they hang them on a wall. They choose these subjective words on purpose, the wall-noun people. So when they aren't loving, or happy, or kind, or whatever the wall is telling people they are, they can say that you just don't understand the meaning of "family", or everyone thinks of "kindness" as a different thing or some bullshit. They'd rather argue with you than spend that energy on something productive. e.g. kindness. What even the fuck is "To the Moon"?

The old man checks under the propane tank, where he keeps his extra house key. Still there. That's why you *never* tell people where your backup key is. Have a second key if you need people to check on your house or whatever, but keep one for yourself. Seeing as they took away his cars and tools and changed the gate code, he doesn't expect the key to work in the back door. It doesn't. He tosses it in the weeds behind the railroad ties that are

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stacked to contain the propane tank and paces around for a minute, thinking. Always pacing, always thinking.

In the cab of the unlocked horror-of-a-truck are a set of keys. Just sitting there, on the passenger seat, asking the old man to take them. He's not sure how they moved his stuff out in just the couple of days he has been at the Sunrise Assisted Prison. Though, when he moved into this house, it was done all in one day with a stock trailer. And using a truck like this. This exact model and everything. It could be the same truck if the floorboards were full of crushed road apples and spent Ding-Dong wrappers. His ex's family were slob. Their truck would be considered restaurant-clean compared to their house. The old man cringes and shivers thinking about opening the pantry to find old cans covered in mouse feces. Boxes of instant potatoes and Pasta-Roni with holes gnawed in the side, their logoed cardboard discolored with months of soaked-through rodent excretion. They'd still eat them, too, the in-laws. I guess when your floors are covered with your own and your pets' shit and piss, a little mouse urine won't do you no harm. Seriously, though, they were disgusting slovens.

For a moment, the old man considers racing the truck through the locked gate, blasting it open like in the movies. Common sense gets the best of him, he knows that the gate opens *in*. He backs the truck up to the gate and grabs a length of rope from under the dried alfalfa crumbles that litter the Dynatect-lined bed. It's no winch or pull-chain, but the old man knows enough about knots to loop it around the trailer hitch and wrap it so the energy is going into the *whole* rope and not just the sections looped over the chrome ball. He took physics long ago, so could probably figure out and explain exactly what's going on with the rope, but this is more of a practical technique that he'd learned over the

years. Trial and error. Situations like this that required a makeshift pull-chain or lock. Dumbfuck okies getting their ATVs stuck in culverts or in the mud.

He locks the hubs before returning to the cab and turns the dial to 4WL. The old man pulls the gear level into drive and floors it. The neighbors stand in front of their mobile home, Natural Lights in hand, watching as the Ford diesel spins its tires, casting an arc of sharp pebbles before gaining traction. The truck goes nowhere for a moment and the old man is sure the rope is going to fray out. They break away and race several feet up the driveway before jerking to an abrupt halt, being stopped simultaneously by his foot on the brake pedal and the gate swinging into open position, still attached to rope and hitch.

The old man twists the loops he made in his knot to release the tension, a shortcut he learned way back, and lifts the rope from the trailer ball. Leaving the rope dangling from the fence in a neat, two-foot loop, the old man turns the truck around in the flat, dry grass area next to the well. He stops to undo the hubs and puts it back into two-wheel-drive mode before inching around the UPS truck parked between the fence and his access to the street. The neighbors are on their cell phones when he scrapes the trucks past each other, folding back his passenger mirror and painting a diarrhea-brown stripe above the plastic side-molding on the right side of the otherwise white pickup. The finger-paintings of a meth addict on detox. *Creatus retrahere.*

Racing down the hill, unsure of where he's headed, the old man follows the highway until it becomes freeway and then highway again. Feeling his hands shaking, he pulls into a Taco Bell drive-thru, again thudding over the curb as he steers the behemoth off the roadway. The **MAXIMUM CLEARANCE: 9' 6"** bar scrapes on the

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top of the lifted pickup. The old man continues forward, missing the concrete canopy by inches. He evens the window portal of the truck with the boxed glass displaying “Limited Time” stickers that juts out as the only feature in the dijon plaster.

The cashier sticks his head out the window to look at the plastered roof and the top of the truck.

I should have taken my meds with me. They’re back at the detention facility. He didn’t exactly plan on stealing a truck and going on a hundred-mile joy ride, so he didn’t pack accordingly. He could turn around and head over there – it’s only a few miles. But even if he could get in. If they weren’t already searching for him. He’d have no way to get out without doing something risky and visible, like stealing a security card or taking a nurse hostage. No, he’ll have to figure something else out. The burritos should keep him relatively alert and functional until he can get to his destination. It’s not like he takes anything that will make him flop over, dead, if he doesn’t eat them every twelve hours. Anti-depressants and a bunch of off-label-use medications. Gabapentin and Atarax and a couple others like that.

The lights of the service stations and fast-food marques fade to flat pasture, fenced in with barbed-wire along the roadway. The teetering hand-milled fence posts disappear in a blur out his side windows, reminding him of that old Commander Cody and His Lost Planet Airmen song. He tries to remember the lyrics, but can only remember the bit about the guy beside him being white as a ghost.

After passing a few thousand cows and **PRIVATE PROPERTY: NO TRESPASSING** signs, the old man turns off on an unmarked road. Probably marked at one point, but they don’t maintain the signs out here any better than they do the roads. Suffice it to say, it’s

one of those county roads where they don't come up with original street names, so they're just called Avenue Five and Road Thirty-Nine. No worse than Main Street or Maple Drive, I suppose.

Coming into the little one-horse town, he stops at the off-brand gas station with bars covering its windows and doors to fill the tank before returning the truck. The plastic can in the back is full, so he doesn't bother with it. His wife never had that kind of courtesy. Filling up and washing a car that's loaned to you, for example. She didn't even take gifts to weddings, which the old man felt was incredibly strange, since she was all about gift registry when they got married. He didn't buy many wedding presents, but that's because he didn't usually go to weddings. Anyway, it's late now, so he won't be washing the truck tonight. The hundred-bucks-minus-the-burritos in diesel fuel will have to do. The old man folds the mirror out on the right side and rubs at the brown stain and dented door panel with a squeegee, producing few results.

A few blocks up the road – if you can call them blocks – the intersections out here only occur once per mile – he turns into a little subdevelopment. Two-acre plots for people who want to live in the country but also want to have neighbors twenty feet away. Ridiculous. It's like building a mansion in a deteriorating city. If you have that kind of money, what are you doing there? They want to have the shiniest turd at the poop-factory, I guess.

The truck rumbles into the driveway behind the ranch-style house. His wife and mother-in-law and grandma-in-law and aunt-in-law are home, judging by the crowded parking area, but everything is dark inside. He shuts off the engine and waits, but there's no chorus of barking. Usually, the kids would run out through the flap in the glass door to greet him.

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The old man climbs down from the truck just as Shenzi, a shaggy-coated catahoula, comes outside, the back half of her body being wagged by her long, quill-feather tail. The old man has barely unlatched the gate when she's jumping up on him, tongue searching fervently for an exposed area of skin to lick. He catches her paws and they dance briefly in the driveway.

No idea what he's doing here, or why he has the in-laws truck, the old man decides not to proceed inside. He loads Shenzi into the back seat of the pickup and reverses out the driveway, lights off. Once he's parked in front of the house, he grabs the five-gallon jug of extra diesel and trudges up the walkway.

He pours the fuel in front of each of the doorways and windows. They have a brick half-facade on the front of the house. The old man makes sure to pour above that so the petrol will wick into the walls. He walks back to the truck and searches around in the back seat for a crumpled pack of cigarettes and some matches, but finds none. Returning up the driveway to the back of the house, but on foot this time, he finds an old coffee can being used as an ashtray and, sure enough, right next to it is a matchbook.

Now-empty gas can still in hand, the old man figures the diesel has had enough time to seep into the pores in the wood and plaster around the house. He stops at the front door, the fastest route of egress to the street, and lights a match without pulling it from its little cardboard packaging. That one match lights the rest and, soon, the entire matchbook is ablaze. A shimmering saffron-orange porchlight in the otherwise unlit sub-country neighborhood.

The old man bends over the saturated welcome mat and holds the flickering paper to the cotton-esque mat. *The worn natural fibers, whatever they are, will make good kindling*, he thinks. Before he can touch the two tinders together, he's blown

back in a blinding explosion. Again remembering not to break his fall, the old man escapes relatively unscathed. *Two falls in one day, I really must be getting old.* He'll have to check his eyebrows in the rearview mirror. Looking at his hand, clutching the red plastic handle in a death-grip, the old man notices "**50.1**" written on the side in faded Sharpie. Dumbasses left their chainsaw gas in the truck without their chainsaw. *I wonder if their diesel reserves are in the shed somewhere.*

He chucks the container at the front door, now alive with six-foot-high flames, reaching their tentacles out horizontally along the half-bricks to create a curtain of fire, blocking out the windows. The old man jogs back to the truck and starts the motor. Patio and front-door lights are powering on around the neighborhood like a poorly-timed stage effect. Headlights still dark, he rolls the windows down and drives north on Avenue Whateverthefuck. Shenzi sticks her head out the window, tongue flapping in the wind. The old man watches her in the passenger mirror. She stays the same size while the flames behind them grow larger, then smaller as he speeds out of the neighborhood.



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Duplicitous

“You’re such a fucking asshole,” Samantha screeched, throwing a mug of coffee across the room. Shaun ducked out of the way and the ceramic shattered behind him, splattering his neck and shoulders with hot liquid. She was pissed off *again*. This time it was because Shaun doesn’t want to visit his mom. He’d managed to excuse himself from family gatherings for over a year now. The way he saw it, they refused to celebrate Obon or the Equinox with him. Earth Day. Arbor Day. All went unnoticed in favor of pseudo-religious and faux-patriotic celebrations. He’d blocked his mom from calling, texting, emailing, and commenting on social media, but she still found a way to keep track of him. Calling from his dad’s phone. Getting updates from his brother. He even changed his number once, but that only lasted a few days until she badgered someone gave her the new one.

After years of struggling with depression, anxiety, and a boatload of other mental-health conditions. Medicating himself with this and that. Prescription or street pharmacy. After years of that, Shaun realized what he really needed was to cut these toxic people out of his life. So he did. Slowly. He wasn’t sure of the best way to do it. Cold turkey seemed to make it worse, creating panic for his mother, so he decided to just stop responding to any inane messages or comments. Never answering his phone. Not that anybody ever called him except his mom and Samantha. Everyone

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else knew that if they wanted a response, it was text or nothing.

Pale coffee-cream dripped down the drywall, staining and drying as it went. Another mess of hers he'd have to clean up. It wasn't enough that he'd bought her a house and paid her bills, Shaun was expected to be at her beck-and-call on a whim. She might disappear for a few days, but when she got back, the expectation was he'd drop whatever he was doing and bathe her in affection and attention. So many moments of inspiration – uncreated pieces of art – interrupted.

Samantha began punching him. Over and over. On the part of his arm where the biceps brachii and triceps brachii and deltoid all come together with the brachialis. The spot where if she hit it just right, she'd feel Shaun's humerus. There might be a name for it. He didn't care enough to look it up. Same as he didn't care much about the hitting. It was nothing new with her, or in his life. Though, the rage emanating from her eyes caused him to retreat. It's like a snake striking – the hinged-open jaw, dead-focused eyes. Even if it was a little baby snake and you knew the bite wouldn't hurt, you'd still flinch.

Exhausting herself, she began sobbing. Going on about how she only wants this *one* thing. She'd always dreamed of having a big family, and she wanted his, so why wouldn't he let things go and forget about the past with his family. For *her*. This was nothing new, either. Standard narcissistic abuse. When it wasn't the extended family thing, it was getting married. When they were married, it was a house. When they had a house, it was a baby. Actually, the baby thing had been going on since day one, but Shaun had always told her that he wanted to have a house, an actual home, before bringing children into it. Then she was in a rush to get married – a courthouse wedding in thirty-minutes-or-

less. This would be her path to a house and to a baby. Shaun went along with it. He didn't care what was going on in his life usually, so long as he got to keep creating.

The wedding that was supposed to be alone, with a desk clerk, turned into a imbecilic last-minute outdoor ceremony with Party City garlands draped over the backs of white folding chairs that were borrowed from the church next door. How it managed to get that far, Shaun had no idea. It started with inviting Samantha's mom, Susan, to be their witness, sign the papers or whatever. Then Samantha decided that they'd have to invite Shaun's parents, too, it was only fair. She was right in one respect, if his parents found out that he got married without telling them, he'd never hear the end of it.

So they got married in Shaun's brother's backyard. Becky – that's his mom – told everyone in the family to call out sick from work on Monday so they could come to the wedding. Shaun was the oldest in the family. The oldest in his generation. But the last to get married. The same was true about Samantha being the oldest of her generation, but she was a decade younger than Shaun.

Nick, that's Shaun's brother, he was a pastor. At the church next door – imagine that. He asked Shaun and Samantha what they wanted their vows to be. Samantha wanted something lovey-dovey. Shaun asked for the Spaceballs⁹ special. The one thing they agreed on was they didn't want a religious ceremony, her being non-practicing Jewish, and he an atheist.

Dressed in shiny cowboy boots, never worn in a pasture or paddock, and black western-style shirt buttoned to the collar to accommodate his bolo tie, Nick took his place in front of the couple, facing the twentyish onlookers. Shaun and Samantha turned at a quarter-angle so it was like they were simultaneously

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facing each other and facing the brother-pastor. Shaun was glad he didn't have to make eye contact with anyone out in the 'audience'.

His brother read from an iPad, having Shaun repeat each line after him.

"I, Shaun, take you, Samantha,"

"I, Shaun, take you, Samantha,"

"to be my lawfully wedded wife,"

"to be my lawfully wedded wife,"

"to have and to hold,"

"to have and to hold,"

"for better,"

"for better,"

"or for worse,"

"or for worse,"

"for richer,"

"for richer,"

"or for poorer,"

"or for poorer,"

"in sickness,"

"in sickness,"

"and in health,"

"and in health,"

"to love and to cherish,"

"to love and to cherish,"

"from this day forward,"

"from this day forward,"

"for as long as we both shall live."

"for as long as we both shall live."

"This is my solemn vow."

"This is my solemn vow."

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“In front of God,”

“In front of god,”

“and these witnesses.”

“and these witnesses.”

“I pledge that I will love you,” *Oh shit*, Shaun had stopped listening, thinking they were done.

“I pledge that I will love you,”

“and tenderly care for you,”

“and tenderly care for you,”

“in sickness,”

“in sickness,”

“and in health,” *Didn't we hear this part already?*

“and in health,”

“when life is peaceful,”

“when life is peaceful,”

“and when it is difficult.”

“and when it is difficult.”

“I will honor your goals,”

“I will honor your goals,”

“and your dreams,”

“and your dreams,”

“and I vow,”

“and I vow,”

“to share my life with you,”

“to share my life with you,”

“through the best,”

“through the best,”

“and worst,”

“and worst,”

“of what is to come.”

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“of what is to come.”

Lots of stuff about the worsser times in there. Maybe that's a sign. Shaun wished Pastor Nick would hurry it up. He's more than capable of remembering and repeating more than three words at a time.

“I give you my promise,”

“What the fuck?!” Shaun didn't say out loud.

“I give you my promise,”

“that from this day forward,”

“that from this day forward,”

“you shall not walk alone.”

“you shall not walk alone.”

“I have no greater gift to give.”

“I have no greater gift to give.”

“May my heart”

“May my heart”

“be your shelter”

“be your shelter”

“and my arms,” *Fuck man, at least complete the sentence.*

“and my arms”

“be your home.”

“be your home.”

“May we walk together”

“May we walk together”

“through all things.”

“through all things.”

“In God's grace,”

“In god's grace”, Shaun rolled his eyes.

“May you feel deeply loved,”

“May you feel deeply loved,”

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“Today I give myself to you,”
“Today I give myself to you,”
“in marriage.”
“in marriage.”
“I promise to encourage,”
“I promise to encourage,”
“and inspire you,”
“and inspire you,”
“to laugh with you,”
“to laugh with you,”
“and to comfort you”
“and to comfort you”
“in times of sorrow,”
“in times of sorrow,”
“and struggle.”
“and struggle.”
“I promise to love you,”
“I promise to love you,”
“in good times,”
“in good times,”
“and in bad,”
“and in bad,”
“when life seems easy,”
“when life seems easy,”
“and when it seems hard,”
“and when it seems hard,”
“when our love is simple,”
“when our love is simple,”
“and when it is an effort.”
“and when it is an effort.”

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“I promise to cherish you,”

“I promise to cherish you,”

“and to always hold you,”

“and to always hold you,”

“in highest regard.”

“in highest regard.”

“These things I give to you today,”

“These things I give to you today,”

“and all the days of our life.”

“and all the days of our life.”

“Love is patient,”

“Love is patient.” Shaun sighed, shifting his weight impatiently from foot to foot.

“love is kind.”

“love is kind.”

“It does not envy,”

“It does not envy,”

“it does not boast,”

“it does not boast,”

“it is not proud.”

“it is not proud.”

“It does not dishonor others,”

“It does not dishonor others,”

“it is not self-seeking,”

“it is not self-seeking,”

“it is not easily angered,”

“it is not easily angered,”

“it keeps no record of wrongs.”

“it keeps no record of wrongs,” Shaun chuckled to himself, thinking about how Samantha can’t seem to ever remember

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anything except all of the reasons she had for being mad at him a year ago. All the things *he'd* done wrong. The tantrums she'd have over comments left by other girls on his Facebook photos – five years before they'd met! Like he didn't have a life before her.

“Love does not delight in evil,”
“Love does not delight in evil,”
“but rejoices with the truth.”
“but rejoices with the truth.” *Ha!*
“It always protects,”
“It always protects,”
“always trusts,”
“always trusts,”
“always hopes,”
“always hopes,”
“always perseveres.”
“always perseveres.”
“Amen.”

Brother-Pastor Nick waited for Shaun to repeat the last line, then pivoted to his right as it became evident to his simple mind that he wasn't going to receive a response.

“Samantha, please repeat after me.
“I, Samantha, take you, Shaun,”
“I, Samantha, take you, Shaun,”
“to be my lawfully wedded wife,”
“to be my lawfully wedded wife,”
“to have and to hold,”
“to have and to hold,”
“for better,”
“for better,”
“or for worse,”

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“or for worse,”

Shaun started to laugh, thinking of Samantha repeating the Gettysburg Address of wedding vows. She was all smiles, though – same as when Shaun was doing his. Hanging on every word. Shaun tuned out the rest of the ceremony. He wondered if it would be rude to check his phone. Not that he has any messages, but to see how long this was taking. As the conclusion of the epic sequel came to a close, Nick got to the “I now pronounce you” part and Shaun snapped back to reality.

Roll credits. Espousal insipidus.

It cost about a thousand dollars to take everyone to lunch at the local lakeside restaurant. Shaun sat silently while family members gave impromptu speeches. He asked the waiter to bring cocktails for his not-pastor brother. A glass of wine for his grandma. Some vegetarian appetizers for his sister. Dirty looks when he slipped off to smoke during a gap in the commencement addresses.

They hadn't been on the road five minutes before Samantha had her phone out, scrolling real estate listings. She held the screen in front of Shaun's face while he was driving, so he could share in the little preview images. He told her he couldn't make anything out with the glare, but what he wanted was for her to stop obstructing his view.

Since the wedding, if you'd call it that, Shaun had managed to avoid his family all but once. His grandmother's funeral, which he was unsure about going to anyway. His grandma wasn't a psycho like the rest of his blood relatives, but she wouldn't know if he was there or not. In the end, he went solely to avoid harassment from his sadly-living relations for not attending.

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So when his mom messaged Samantha to say she had cancer, Shaun was in no hurry to go visit. Samantha continued to press the issue, flying into rage after irascible rage. He held fast, but she persisted. She'd threaten to leave him if he didn't do as she wanted. Still, nothing new. She threatened divorce at least twice a day. He was about ready to call her bluff.

Becky kept calling and texting Shaun – every few days. He didn't answer or reply. The way he saw it, nobody, no matter who they were, had the right to ask him to spend even one minute with his abuser. The more Samantha told him to “get over it,” the more he dwelled on things. He'd spent his entire adult lifetime blocking out the memories. Diluting them in a solution of Sour Diesel haze and mid-grade vodka. Lately, in his sobriety, these blackened recollections had become visible again. It could have been his new antidepressants, but more likely, it was Samantha triggering old memories. They say you marry your mother. Shaun had always mocked the abstraction. He'd gone against the grain, dating outside his race, artists, musicians, tattooed and pierced, the kind of girls his parents would never approve of. The kind of girls who were everything his family wasn't. Someone with purpose and empathy. Someone real. In this case, though, he actually did marry his mother. He didn't try, it just happened.

The irony was completely lost on Samantha when, only a couple of months later, Shaun started having some health problems of his own. It was bound to happen. “On a long enough timeline,” and all that. He was officially ‘Over the Hill’ now and had spent a lifetime abusing his body.

“I'm not going to be your caretaker,” Samantha told him when he'd asked her to go to the grocery store. Normally, he was the one who did all of the shopping, but whatever mysterious thing

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that was happening was causing his vision to white-out in one eye. He'd become disoriented, but thankful he had so many years of experience drunkenly stumbling around nameless neighborhoods.

"It's all in your head.

"You're delusional.

"You don't appreciate me.

"Stop being so lazy," Samantha would repeat when he couldn't get out of bed. The sudden loss of coordination was maddeningly frustrating for Shaun. His depression was exacerbated by the uncertainty of it all. He didn't want to do anything. Didn't want to move forward with life. If he was going to die soon, what was the point? Samantha's harassment didn't help, either.

After a couple months of refusing to go grocery shopping, refusing to do the dishes or wash the laundry, Samantha packed her stuff. She didn't have much. Shaun had bought all of the furniture. The dishes and linens, he had from before they were together. All she owned of her own were some plaid shirts and blue jeans. Her mom, Susan, came to help her pack, toting a .40-caliber pistol with extra magazines on her colossal waist. Shaun hid in his art studio – the downstairs bedroom that he'd converted. He found his own pistol, a 1911-model 9mm. It's not that he was a gun nut, he actually didn't like them at all, but when you live in the mountains, you never know. There could be predators coming after your pets. Random tweakers looking for something to steal. Even if the cops *could* get out there in less than a half-hour, what were they going to do? We all know that the police don't rescue anybody, they're there to *enforce* the law. There's no profit to be made in protecting and serving.

Shaun put the pistol on his desk, leaving the studio door closed while Samantha bitched about something or other to Susan

in the stairwell. They made a few more trips up and down the stairs. Shaun didn't care at this point if she *was* stealing his stuff. She could take whatever she wants if it gets her gone. He still wasn't sure what he was going to do about groceries.

The rumble of the diesel pickup in the driveway alerted Shaun that it was safe to reemerge into the rest of his home. What he'd hoped would be a home. So far, it had just been a house. Now that he had some space – some quiet, free of abuse – he could begin to work on himself. He needed to process all of these new memories.

“Hi, Son!” Becky had called and, in a moment of weakness, Shaun answered. He'd been alone in the house for a over a week and hadn't had any human contact. This was not a valid substitute.

“Hello.”

“Did you hear Libby ended up in the ER? They think she was high.” *Straight away with the gossip. And who the fuck is Libby?*

Shaun told his mother about the recent issues he'd been having with his health. He remembered a story from his childhood about when he was a baby, his parents had set him on the hood of his dad's Camaro and he slid off, hitting his head on a steel I-beam on the floor of the garage.

“Oh, that was nothing. You just cried a little,” Becky lied when he asked her about it. Shaun had been trying to get into a neurologist since this all started, but his insurance was shit, so he was getting the run-around. When he did finally get to see one, he wanted to be able to give them his medical history, including any possible traumatic brain injuries. He should have the right to know about his childhood injuries and possible hereditary conditions. Though, his parents had lied about how his grandfather died,

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keeping it a secret until Shaun did some research on his own. They'd lied about who his biological grandfather was, so he'd always believed he was one ethnicity, when in fact, he was another. There was nothing about his family, or anything they said about their past, that could be trusted.

His family had always hidden away mental health issues, too. Never talking about them. Never acknowledging their existence. The more interesting cousins disappeared as they reached adulthood, having been made pariahs in their own homes due to depression or anxiety that was never to be talked about, lest it make the parents feel inadequate or embarrassed. It's like the moms of autistic kids always posting online how hard their lives are – bitch, you're not the one who lives in a society, and a family, that tortures you every day with orders on how to think and behave. Degradation and vilification for having a mind that works in a different way. People fear what they don't understand and they destroy what they fear. Shaun had stopped attending gatherings the last few years; he'd long-since lost touch with his only family that had anything thoughtful to say. Anything to discuss except money and expensive purchases. One-upmanship. Destroying one another for the sake of their egos. Familia gratuitous.

When Shaun began suffering from depression as a teen, he'd tell his parents about how he was feeling. Like Samantha, they'd say things like, "It's all in your head," and, "You need to change your attitude." Anyway, Becky was being deceitful with her story about his falling off the Camaro. Shaun only had three scars on his body – one being this line on the side of his head, across his right temple and disappearing above his sideburn. The other cicatrix had been caused by major injuries. The kind that required hospitalization. The way Shaun figured it, if this was one

of three scars and the other two were from life-threatening trauma, the scar on his scalp had to be a similar level of injury.

“How’s your treatment going?” Shaun changed the subject, not wanting to open the door for more of her lies about his childhood.

“Oh, you know. Some days I feel okay, but other days I just want to stay in bed and watch TV.”

“Which oncologist are you seeing now?”

“I had to change ainch...onth...I had to get a new one of those.”

“You’re still with Kaiser?”

“Oh yeah, love Kaiser. You should get Kaiser. Kaiser is the best.”

“You know I can’t afford that. I know some folks who work there, who’s your new doctor?”

“You should really come visit me,” she avoided the question. “I might not be around very much longer.”

“Okay, I will,” Shaun hovered the phone away from his good ear to dampen her voice on the other end. It always sounded like she was yelling into the phone.

“When should I expect you? We can make lunch for you and Samantha.”

He didn’t tell her that Samantha moved out. His mom had a habit of insisting he bring her everywhere. Becky had done this with all of his girlfriends. Part of it may be that he tended to date the friendly, extroverted type, in sharp contrast to himself. They would actually participate in the stupid little games and ‘traditions’ his family had for every holiday. The main reason, Shaun had discovered over the years, is because Becky liked to manipulate the girlfriends into manipulating him. She would tell them how

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Shaun *should* live his life. Then the girlfriends would go home and start an argument with Shaun because he wasn't doing whatever it was that his mother thought he should be doing with himself. Shaun was prosopagnostic. Instead of remembering people's hair styles and other features that might be different next time he'd see them, he learned to pick up on nuances in patterns of speech and the way they'd walk or stand. He figured these things were less likely to change and they allowed him to recognize people from a distance – and up close. So when the girlfriend would start telling him that he needs to do this or that, he'd recognize the words and their arrangement as his mother's.

Shaun trudged his way through a few more minutes of single-syllable responses to Becky's tidbits of gossip about his siblings and cousins and people he didn't know. "I love you, my first-born," she signed off. He pressed the red button and leaned back in his chair and reached for the glass dispensary jar, waiting for his heartrate to return to normal. Soon, he'd *finally* be able to get back to work. He didn't want to work after that. The call had disrupted his creative energy. Even though his mom was mostly friendly to him now, hearing her voice reminded him of the countless times she screamed at him while beating him senseless. This is why he never answered the phone. Seeing her name on the caller ID was enough to disrupt his mojo for an afternoon. He even hated hearing his name, because it resurrected memories of her shrill caterwaul.

Shaun turned on his computer monitor and shifted forward in his seat. He set down the smoldering pipe and reached slowly for the keyboard and mouse. Then, with much conscious attention paid to his trembling hands, he typed in the URL of the Verizon website. Looking from the contact info on the little screen in his

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hand to the big screen on his desk, he typed his mom's number into the blocked callers list.

Chapter Five

Requital

Shenzi hangs her head out the window, paws on the armrest, reaching with her nose for as many scents as possible. The led-green speedometer needle points north-by-northeast as the diesel engine downshifts to accelerate to freeway speed. The old man tells her to get back in the cab, but she ignores him, straining to get every smell as the electric window slides closed.

The freeway curves to highway, redirecting the headlights in a north-by-northeastern direction. The glowing green point holds its position over the red “70”, backlit by strips of LEDs that are silicone-welded behind a pitch-black fascia that is meant to block out extra light from the instruments and indicators at night. People tend to think that there’s a special light for each of those numbers or dials, but it’s actually just a piece of black cardboard or plastic with holes die-cut in it to look like some high-tech lighting scheme. At least in the older models. The old man hasn’t driven anything new or exotic lately. His Fiat is no-frills. Utilitarian. They’re probably all LCD screens now.

Once again, the blue-yellow glow of intersections and gas station fueling bays fade in the mirrors and barbed-wire fence posts curve past the windshield and disappear out the side windows like dots in his periphery. Dark shadows of angus cows, Rorschach blotches over the moonless pasture. This may be a different highway than the one he took to pick up Shenzi, but they

all look the same. Vast expanses set aside for ranchers to profit on the lives of animals. Meanwhile, millions of people starve in the streets. People who have passion in them. People who want to make a difference. People who could take a small parcel of land and make a life for themselves. That's not immediately profitable, though, so fuck them, right?

Every fifteen or twenty miles, massive canopies of light pollute the night sky. Convenience stores are closed, but gas pumps are available for those who choose to, or are able to, use the banking system. Massive, blinding, halogen bulbs wash out the blackness, blinding the old man as he drives past, squinting against them to see the lines on the asphalt.

Between these monuments to profit and pollution are nearly identical subdivisions. Don't say that to the residents, though. In this third development, the one the old man turns into, they have private security and a golf course and, gag me, an HOA. How dare you compare them to the next neighborhood, who don't have, nor do they deserve, these amenities. There's a defunct guard shack a mile down the road, a boom barrier on either side, permanently fixed in the upright position. Probably for the best. Word around the gossip mill is that the security guards here are former cops who were busted for being pedophiles. They still let them patrol around in fake Sheriff's cars. This is supposedly where the development actually starts, at the former gate. So the people who live fifty feet on the other side are dirty slobs or something. Going into the politics and cattiness of homeowners associations is not worth my time to write, nor your time to read.

At the stop sign after the forever-empty rent-a-pedo hovel, the old man turns right and rolls down the back windows so Shenzi can take in the night air for the last bit of the trip. The

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roads narrow, wide enough for two cars, cars of regular size, but without lines to command the drivers to one side. The old man remembers driving these roads as a teenager, racing over the hills so his stomach would drop. Taking the corners wide and inside at high speeds, hoping another driver wouldn't be coming from the other direction. His friend from high school and he had a running contest to break the speed record '*over the bridge*' – a double-wide, concrete platform that sat only inches above a creek in the rainy season. It had been washed out more than a couple of times that the old man can remember.

Cresting the double-undulation ahead, the old man steps on the accelerator, launching the automatic transmission into lower gear. He experiences the intended reeling, plunging feeling. The same feeling you'd get falling from a skyscraper. In the truck, it only lasts for a millisecond. That familiar experience that lurches the old man's organs into his throat and diaphragm, that feeling that makes him fear death, shoots through his body. He's always had a love-hate relationship with this particular sensation. It was exciting. And it scared him. Roller coasters were no problem. He could sit stoically through the most intense loops and corkscrews. But those freeride rides – the ones with the cages that a group of people stand in, with no safety equipment except corroded boxes of human-welded steel. Those, and the modern type, where a dozen or so people are strapped in chairs on the outside of some glistening blue-and-silver tube with officially licensed cartoon characters on it. Either type. Those were the ones that got to the old man. He didn't find them "scary" in the conventional way – the way he thought other people felt on thrill rides. The way his ex-wife would refuse to go on them. Not fear or anticipation, but a dark, almost sinister, feeling of foreboding would wash over

him. Like how he'd always said the reason some animals freak out in response to sirens or fireworks is because they know what the end of the world is going to sound like. The old man wondered if they got the same feeling of imminent doom, the kind that he got when he went over these hills. Shenzi hangs out the opposite side, seemingly oblivious.

He hugs the outer shoulder, then noses inward to hit a perfect racing line through the apex. The motor revs and downshifts again. He stomps the pedal and hits the outside of the opposite turn. If someone came around this corner going the opposite way, he'd be a goner. He knew people this had happened to. Used to know.

The hills and trees take reprieve around the waterway overpass. Clutching the wheel with both hands at ten-and-two, he watches the green-ooze syringe count its way up the factitious numerals. The beastmobileometer slows its climb, pausing the needle as the giant tractor-tires hug the pavement. He looks up to correct the turn and evens out on the 'right' side of the road.

"Eighty-five!" the old man exclaims to himself. Supposedly, Rob hit ninety-one. There were no witnesses. But the old man had no reason not to believe it. He'd seen Rob do eighty-seven in his old '71 Charger. Though, he claimed he broke the record in his mom's Volvo. It didn't have the torque like his muscle car or this truck did, but it handled the curves infinitely better. And Rob was a walking stereotype of the energy-drinking, risk-taking, adrenaline-junkie.

I wonder what Rob's up to tonight, the old man thinks and decides he should go find out. Rob liked to stay up all night writing code, so if he's at home, he'll probably want to hang.

At the next stop sign, the old man turns left, back to the

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main road that he came in on. Deeper into this suburban hellhole that's been implanted into a pristine mountain ecosystem. The thoroughfare directs him around the algae-fied, man-made pond that they call a lake. As a child, he'd swim in the slimy mud, despite the public (for residents only) pool being only feet away from the edge of the water. Some of his friends' parents weren't members of the exclusive house club, so they were barred from the chlorinated concrete hole. Now, the smell of pond sludge fills the cab of the truck and sickens him. Shenzi is loving it, though.

Rob's house is not far from the lake-puddle. A couple more turns. Left one way, right the next, until the sign made of recycled barn-wood that used to spell out the family's last name. Before several rounds of vandalization by the neighborhood teens. They have a steep driveway and the diesel engine roars as it makes the climb. The old man hopes he doesn't wake Rob's family, who sleep the prescribed amount of hours per night, at the recommended time each evening. The upstairs bedroom is dark and neither the Charger nor the Volvo are in the driveway. Instead of attempting to turn the giant truck around in the miniaturized cul-de-sac that serves as parking next to the house, the old man puts the transmission in reverse and lets the truck roll back down the driveway until the right tires stomp over the crumbling asphalt curb. He cranks the wheel and redirects the vehicle the way it came. If Rob isn't around, he may as well go home.

"What are you doing?" The old man's mother is standing on the hand-paved concrete in front of the house, watching him climb from the elevated cockpit. His dad's Dodge Ram TurboDiesel is backed up to one of the many RV trailers, like they're getting ready for a trip. Shenzi leaps down and runs to her, leaping up, tongue flailing.

Requital

“Shenz, get down, baby.” The old man calls after her.

“What do you mean? I was coming home from...I don’t remember, but I was at Rob’s house. Before that, I probably had work.”

“Have you been drinking?” She walks up to stare into his eyes. Squinting. Searching for miosis or mydriasis.

“What? No. I had to go pick up Shenzi. You know I quit drinking years ago.”

“Why?”

“Huh?”

“Why did you have to get the dog?”

“Um, I don’t remember. I must be getting tired. I can’t keep track of things right now.”

The old man follows his mother into the house. Her long, silken robe paints a wake of painted-pink feather boa for him to follow. Lipstick Lesbian Donnie Darko.

She turns on the automatic coffee machine and lets it warm up. It dispenses two hot mugs of plain water, one of which she places on the linen placemat in front of the old man, along with a myriad of herbal teas. He wonders why she’s never had coasters.

The boxes of teabags are fragrant and floral, most of them turn the old man’s stomach. Not finding a suitable evening alternative, he selects the Earl Grey and gently places it on top of the steaming water. After allowing it to naturally steep for three minutes, without any help in the form of dunking the teabag, he lifts the string to remove the saturated leaf-carrier. He then wraps the tiny cotton cord around the bag several times and pulls to squeeze the remaining liquid back into his mug. Aside from Matcha or Gongfu, this was the way he understood to make tea. Anyone who lets the satchel sit in the water for the entirety of

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their tea-drinking experience is sure to miss the subtle tones of the particular blend and, before long, run into bitterness as the tannins, or flowers, or herbs, take a nice, long soak, like they'd just pulled a double at the local steel mill.

“So did you hear? Cheryl got divorced and her husband, Cody, you remember him? The pastor at the church. Anyway, he was telling members of the congregation that his family had some medical emergency that he couldn't or didn't want to talk about and he told them that he needed money or they were going to lose their house.” This was one of those megachurches so, of course, the pastor had some garish mansion up on the highest hill in their HOA subdevelopment. “Turns out, and Cheryl never knew this, of course, turns out that he was stealing all that money. He even bought a boat.”

What the fuck kind of idiot buys a boat? The old man thinks. He'd given serious thought to money laundering in the past. He thought that the ways they showed laundry fronts on those streaming drama shows were not only glaringly obvious, but they were spending too much money operating the front business. Damn, you'd expect TV writers, with their mandatory ivy-league degrees, could come up with something even slightly clever. If he'd had the contacts, he would have gotten into the business – money laundering, not TV writing – and made sure most of the profits funneled back to the client. It's pretty simple, really. You start a fake business that is entirely – or mostly – service oriented. But it has to be an invisible service. Something that you can't measure in cash-register receipts. This is why car washes and dry cleaners and Italian restaurants are witless tropes. The catch, of course, is you have to be able to provide the service you advertise. Not to the public, mind you, and you don't have to be good at it, but you

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have to have some kind of inventory or portfolio or something that shows that you're not just creating fake invoices and receipts – which you are. The old man considered graphic design, website design, art gallery, and recording studio as good options. The two former can be done from a home office, the latter would require only a small rental space somewhere. Open by appointment only, of course. It'll help if you have friends who are artists or musicians because then they'll do the 'work' for you and you get to pay your friends to do what they're passionate about. See, the thing about all these services is the prices charged in their industries vary wildly. Sure, my buddy might be able to do a logo design for \$50, but how would the IRS know he's not some in-demand pro who charges \$400 an hour? It doesn't matter anyway, you don't have to hire either of these guys. You can, though – support the local artists. You will need some content, however you choose to source it. So once someone has a little portfolio of art or music or websites (They're practically self-designing now), they can create a bunch of fake paperwork. They'd have to make sure that the total for each 'client' or 'vendor' is under the IRS minimum to require the creation of tax forms. Unless it's the actual clients who want to show revenue – for the buying of boats and such. So this person with the "front" business, they basically make a small investment in something to support the arts community – allowing friends and creators to use the space or make the 'products'. It's about as low-overhead as one can get, the old man considers. Art galleries are even better – those prices can be inflated and reinflated exponentially. The same can be done with licensing intellectual property if a battery of physical art isn't available.

“And then there's the thing with Trisha and Carl. Have you heard about them?” *How the hell would I?* These are her

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friends, people he'd met once or twice, decades ago. Aside from the periodic gossip updates from his mom, he wouldn't even know they still existed. She's kept him up to date over the years of who has died from his graduating class. People he'd never looked up online. People he hadn't thought about since high school. She would mention that this-person or that-person had died, filling him in on the details of an accident or suicide with a sparkle in her eye.

“Hold on, let me get something I've been saving for you.”

The old woman gets up from her wobbly oak dining chair. They've had this dining room set, his parents, for as long as he can remember. It's one of those tables stained in a dark walnut to show off the wood grain. It can be round or slide open to have a table leaf added to seat six. The chairs are stained to match. Six chairs with identically-lathed back slats. Six chairs with identically-routed gothic or angelic patterns above eight identically-turned dowels. In all the years the old man can remember staring at the backs of these chairs, tracing the patterns with his finger, he still doesn't know if it's supposed to be plants carved into the backrests or something else. When he was a child, he liked to imagine the gouges in the wood were poison ivy with little barbs at the end. Maybe they were trumpets. Or talking flowers, like in that Rick Moranis musical. Though, he hadn't seen that movie at the time. The old man wondered, with the countless times that they've changed the floors in this house, with the new cabinets and countertops, with the wall-sized TVs and top-grain three-piece leather sofa sets, with the luxury wallpaper and accent-wall repaints and custom wood chair rails, why did they keep this old dining table? And why the hell didn't they have coasters?

Centered on the lazy susan, which was centered on the ever-present table-leaf, was a wooden box full of semi-transparent

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plastic bottles with matching white caps. It's one of those boxes that's supposed to look like bamboo, the sides joined together in that special Japanese notching style. In reality, it's laminated pine.

The old man lifts the bottles out, one at a time, turning them so the label faces him. Lipitor. Omeprazole. Ergocalciferol. Fluticasone, expired, written to his father. Pantoprazole. Prescription ibuprofen. Tamsulosin, also for his dad, also expired. Potassium. Estradiol, expired. Zolpidem, two bottles. Lavender DoTerra. ArtNaturals patchouli. Miracle-brand sage oil.

Tucked in the corner of the pretend-hand-crafted box, not tall enough to peek over the top, is a blue bottle with a pointed white cap. The label has a red circle with dozens of red lines pointing decisively away from it. Like a distorted sun in a childhood drawing. The kind you'd hang on the fridge if the teacher didn't want to, "talk to you about what's been going on with little Jimmy lately." The old man twists the white cone away from its bulbous base. He inverts the bottle and puts a few drops into his mother's tea. Thinking for a moment, he empties what's left of the six-milliliter squeeze-vial. The chamomile and valerian pickles the water as it cools.

His mom returns to the dining room, wearing the same sheer-and-feather robe, but in black. She plops a worn, pleather-bound binder in front of him. The old man recognizes it instantly. He used to look through this book often as an adolescent. Maybe it made him feel like he was safe. Inside were ninety-six four-by-six glossy photos. The kind that you used to get from a one-hour photo shop when you took in a roll of 35mm or 110 film. Two photos per page, in chronological order. The old man doesn't need to open the cover, despite his mother hovering expectantly over his shoulder. He knows exactly what's inside. It starts with some pictures of

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his mom in a hospital bed, wearing a sky-blue sanitary apron with white trim. She's sucking on a lollipop. Then there are pictures of him as a bloated, purple, dead-on-a-toiletseat extraterrestrial-in-diapers-and-a-onesie. Then some photos of him in a high chair with chocolate cake smeared all over his face. They're all bordered by hand-drawn sunbursts and thought-bubbles that say shit like, "Look who's one!" and "Havin' fun with Grammie." It goes on like that for a while. Childhood old man in a school play, dressed as a fly wearing a tie. Staged photos of his friends around a table covered in gifts as he blows out candles. The book comes to an end sometime around when he's eight. By that time, his parents had three other kids to shower attention on. They're more adorable at that age or whatever. The book cuts off around the same time as his memories started to disappear. Not his memories *as* a child, but his memories of *being* a child. He could remember these photos and the accompanying home videos, but he couldn't remember anything else. Like these memories-for-show are all that are left of his growing up. He'd looked at the photos and watched the videos so many times as a child, they'd implanted themselves into his brain. Now, though, the haze was becoming clear. He was remembering all the stuff that gets edited out of "Family Times" VHS tapes. The stuff that doesn't get a second print made when the film comes back from the photo lab.

Before everyone held one in their hand at all times, a camera was ever-present. You always knew it were there. Even if you tried to ignore the photographer so they could take a 'candid' shot, you were subtly adjusting your posture or turning for a more flattering angle. Video cameras were something else entirely. When someone's dad pulled out the Magnavox or Panasonic, everyone was expected to smile and wave. "Hi, Mom," was a

standard response. The rubber eyepiece smashed to the right side of his face as he tried to support the weight with his shoulder, the dad would follow people around asking, “What are you doing?” and “Are you having fun?” Like, fuck, man, you have a camera, what does it *look* like I’m doing.

“What is this for?” The old man questions his mother as she retakes her seat. The wood chairs were all identical except for the two that had arm rests. Only mom and dad were allowed to sit in those.

“I thought you might want it.”

“Er, not really, you know I don’t keep stuff like this around.”

“Well, your dad already moved them to the computer, so I don’t need them any more.” She pointed to a digital LCD screen on the wall. Reflecting back a blackened void, it was obvious this is where she stored and displayed her horde of fantasy remembrances.

“Hang on, I’ll turn it on for you.” The old woman starts to rise.

“No, that’s okay, I know how they work.”

“Well, you should really take that album. Cherish those memories.” The old man has memories. Most of them are ones that he made himself. In the time after the missing pre-and-intra-pubescent period – the period that he was beginning to remember for himself again. The period not preserved on film and tape. But his most-cherished memories were preserved for posterity in his art.

“Okay, sure, whatever.” He left the unopened binder on the tablecloth, fully intending for it to remain there when he leaves.

“*Okay, sure, whatever;*” his mother mocks in her best

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patronizing voice. She returns to her tea, inhaling the putrid valerian aroma before taking a loud slurp. The old man recoils in a misophonic cringe.

“This sleepy-time tea is making me sleepy-time,” the mother pretends to yawn, finishing off the last of the tea-scum left in the bottom of her “*Only the Best Moms are promoted to Grandma*” mug. The saturated bag swats her in the face. Her press-on-nail finger holds the tampon-string against the rim of the mug as she tongues eagerly at the remaining drops.

“Are you going to stay tonight?”

“No, I need to take Shenzi back.” The old man isn’t sure why he came all the way up here in the first place.

“I thought you *just* picked him up.”

“Her. And I did, but I don’t know. I can’t remember right now. Maybe I’ll go home instead.”

“Okay, my son, I love you to the moon.” She kisses him on the top of the head and retreats down the darkened aggregate-floored hallway to the master bedroom.

“Alright, sweet girl, wanna go home?” Shenzi gets up excitedly from the spot in the living room where she’s been curled on the fresh cut-berber carpet.

“Let’s load up, baby.”

Shenzi races from the front of the house to the side of the towering Ford F-350 diesel extended cab. She sits patiently, staring at the white pull-handle on the side of the door, UPS what-can-brown-do-for-you paint slashed below. The old man opens the door and she leaps into the back seat and sits on the cushion, urging him to close the door so they can get going. More roads, more windows, more smells.



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Spurious

LOU STANDIFER, *PRESIDENT*. The man beamed at his own name on the glass panel in his office door. He'd paid someone five-hundred bucks to hand-paint it on there like you'd see in old detective films. A *'business expense'*, he thought for about the thousandth time since he'd had his assistant, or 'his girl', as he liked to refer to her, call around to find the painter. He was specific about it, too, telling her, "I don't want any artsy-fartsy bullshit, get someone who makes signs for a living."

Lou had 'founded' this non-profit with his friend, Shaun. Not really a friend, despite what Shaun thought. Lou had his own mission – get money and get seen. He never made it as a singer. Never even recorded an album, he told Shaun, lamenting one day about lost dreams. Shaun had an idea for an organization that connected autistic kids and children with other disabilities with service-animals-in-training. Between a slew of local investors and a grant from the city, they'd raised ten-million dollars for this project. *Ten-fucking-million*, Lou thought, dreaming of what he would be able to buy with all that dough. A new 'company' BMW or Porsche SUV. And some 'work clothes' from the Men's Warehouse. And a new pair of shoes for every day of the month.

Shaun's eagerness to get to work, to start hiring (and paying) trainers got on Lou's nerves. "We need to present a good image first," Lou would remind him. "Make people think we're

legit.” *Think we’re legit.* That’s what he meant, too. There was no need to truly be legit so long as you portrayed the image of legitimacy. Shaun had fought against expensive sofas and real-wood desks. Thousand-dollar office chairs, the eighteen-camera security system. Even putting real art on the walls – that is, not prints – was an unnecessary luxury, he’d say. Lou knew that Shaun was a people-pleaser. It didn’t take much hammering on the issue before Shaun would give up and give in. His desire to work overcame his desire to argue and Lou intended to take full advantage of that.

“My brother,” Lou had noticed that people took to him better when he called them some familiar term of endearment. When he used this soft, pompous tone. “We have ten million. What’s twenty or thirty grand? Nothing. But think about it, some investor comes in here and they see IKEA furniture and motivational posters on the wall. What are they going to think? They’ll probably think that we don’t know what the hell we’re doing. There goes our next ten mil.” Dichotomy worked best in these situations. Shaun was smart enough to see through it, but not assertive, nor dense enough to try to explain the middle-ground in that scenario to someone who was pretending not to get it. Someone who argued in hyperbole. Not that Shaun and Lou hadn’t had “deep” conversations before. Shaun liked to wax philosophical and Lou liked to find ammo for subtly manipulating people later.

Once they were all ‘settled in’, as far as Lou was concerned, he would start his *job*. He had the easiest job in the company, which was the way he liked it. Shaun did all of the logistical work, the running of the company. Lou was supposed to be the ‘face’ of the company. He was *supposed* to be making promo materials for the company and connecting with people in the industry online, but that kind of thing bored him. Lou would prefer to go out for drinks

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with investors and clients. He liked to show off his collection of Stacy Adams oxfords and wingtips and spring for expensive bottles of aged scotch, even though he hated the taste. It did taste slightly better when coming out of the expense account, though. Fuck the straight-to-business approach. The best deals were made once he'd gotten someone good and sloshed first. When their decision-making capacity was at the lowest. That's when he'd bring out the contracts.

Shannon, Lou's portly wife, a propane tank on toothpicks, spent most mornings milling around the black-and-white, contrived-minimalist, six-room office suite that was situated in a posh, rent-by-the-month edifice on the white-flight side of town. They'd recently converted to digital signboards in the lobby and by the elevator on each floor. Too hard to keep up with the ever-changing rosters of this tech startup or that crypto-trader. Aside from Shaun, Shannon was the only one who ever did anything in line with the company's mission. It was work that Lou's 'girl', his assistant, if you will, should have been doing. Responding to Lou's emails, making calls, scheduling appointments.

After going to a nearby overpriced, don't-call-us-fast-food chain, Shannon would sit at the desk, across from Lou, and fill him in on any important interactions that she'd had on his behalf. Anything he might need to know about if they came up in conversation later. Lou grunted in response to each item as he shoveled a salad, slathered in shredded cheddar cheese, bacon crumbles, and ranch dressing into his mouth. He didn't bother trying to remember any of this. He'd just ask her later, or pretend that he knew what the person was talking about. That's what he usually did. He'd only ever been called out on it once.

This was part of the daily routine. She talked, he ate. He

liked to have a routine, even if it was the couple of hours he got to spend each morning at his sprawling rosewood desk, scrolling Facebook and 4chan, while chugging down his venti caramel frap, extra whip, followed by a one-liter bottle of Diet Coke. The mini-fridge in his office was crammed full of them. Another business expense.

After lunch, Shannon would leave to pick up her son, Lou's step-son, Jaxxon, from school. Jaxxon was visually-impaired and autistic. He was the catalyst for Lou to meet Shaun. It was how Lou met a lot of people. Compassionate people. The kind who wanted to make a difference. The kind who Lou had always managed to coast on the coattails of. Shaun had just finished training his first proof-of-concept companion. She wasn't a guide-dog for the blind, but did a variety of services for people with comorbid *behavioral* conditions. Lou liked to use that word. Mostly because Shaun hated it – and it was one of the few things that would bait him into an argument. Aside from regular obedience, Shaun's dog could fetch meds, do seizure support, lay on the handler to offer anxiety compression, gently bite the arm to help with PTSD and dissociation, maintain social boundaries on behalf of her handler. She also had some police-style K9 training, she could attack on command or even disarm a weapon from an assailant. Shaun maintained that this wasn't something he had done for practical purposes. Tesbaj had a non-stop play-drive, so he did it to help her get out her zoomies. They also practiced jumping hurdles and other agility events when the weather was nice.

Lou had been looking for a way to get a service animal “donated” to Jaxxon. His plan was to write it off as if he'd paid for it himself, then sell the mongrel a few months later for cash and write the creature off a second time as a loss. Shaun was trying

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to find support for his new training program, certain it would be successful on rescues just as well as a purebred goldendoodle. After all, Tsebaj was a rescue mix. Almost everyone Shaun had ever lived with were of the Heinz-57 variety. The plan for “*Psychiatric Therapy Service Dogs*”, the non-profit, would be to simultaneously rescue unwanted animals and provide a valuable service to struggling young people. None of this twenty-grand for a purebred-a-doodle. That wasn’t accessible to the people who needed it most. Once the training regimen had been worked out, all Shaun had to do was find some trainers and administrative people to make it happen. Lou could see immediately that this idea had the potential for a profusion of grants, tax-deductions, and donations.

Shaun had expressed an open distaste for working booths at community events, going to meetings, generally interacting with the public-at-large in that sense. A demonstration with Tsebaj now and again was fine, but they had videos online that showed each of her abilities. Shaun even shared in these recordings how he trained each command. Anyone could do it at home with their own critters (fur or skin) if they had the patience and consistency. That’s what people don’t have, which is probably why he didn’t like working with them. No, a few qualified trainers and some general staff was enough human interaction for him.

Part of Lou’s regular routine, after his wife left to get ‘their’ son, was to have Danielle, his assistant – some roly-poly little batfaced girl – a nineteen-year-old version of Shannon, come into his office to clean the mess from his lunch. She’d then close the aspenwood vertical blinds and climb under his desk. Lou would undo his distressed snakeskin belt, letting his hairy, distended belly hang into his lap. He’d search ‘BRCC’ or

‘DVDAO’ or ‘hairless teens’ on Porntube and lean back in his overstuffed leather ‘*executive*’ desk chair while she would spend the next fifteen or twenty minutes servicing him.

The hi-res security system and dedicated servers that Lou had insisted on buying during his inaugural shopping spree would end up being his undoing, in part. The problem with having all of this equipment is, if you don’t know how to use it better than everyone else who has access, they’ll be able to see your every move. Every email. Every shady liaison. In this case, Lou was about as tech-savvy as a one-legged porcupine. That’s the problem with having a man behind the curtain. They can make the Oz great and powerful, but they also have the ability to take it away. To reveal the man pulling the levers and turning the knobs.

Danielle would finish *her* job, then open the blinds. Each time, she would come out of the office backwards, pretending to write on a yellow legal pad and saying, “Yes, Mr. Standifer,” or, “I’ll get right on that, sir.” Then she would go back to her desk near the entrance of their suite and proceed to scroll Pinterest or Instagram for the rest of the day while the emails piled up for Shannon to take care of the next morning.

In the afternoon, Lou would hang around the cocktail bars in the recently gentrified midtown neighborhood. This was where all the big players hung out. City council members, car dealership owners, real-estate agents. The bars sucked, but he had to chase the cash.

The neighborhood was seated on the demarcation between haves and have-nots. The line that a homeless person or drug addict or psychiatric-episode sufferer should only dare cross if they’d like to have a ‘friendly’ interaction with the local police. There were hip music clubs south of here, in the neighborhoods where the

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cops and well-heeled drove the city's destitute and unpalatable. He could find an open-mic night or cover band that might let him sit in for a few. Instead, he sat around tiny tables with paunchy old men, taking turns buying rounds.

Shaun was starting to get sick of Lou. He was burning through their capital on frivolous material items. It had been months since they'd moved into the completely unnecessary office space – all of the work could be done from home or on the road – and Lou hadn't made a single useful connection or contributed any content for their website and advertising projects. He'd take his friends out for steaks and whiskey on the company dime, then would act surprised and disappointed when their investment 'fell through'.

It only took a couple of clicks for Shaun to switch his browser window over to the security platform. He never used it – didn't like to *spy* on his staff – but in this case, he had to get some solid evidence. To a flash drive, and then another, he copied hours of footage, hundreds of emails, thousands of lurid texts. Lou had set his iPhone to sync with his desktop computer. Possibly the one thing he was able to use a computer for besides his regular social media channels. They were all in the server, too, Lou's 4chan posts and alternate Facebook account. Shaun didn't bother with those, he wouldn't be needing them for his plan.

When business hours officially ended, and everyone had left for the weekend, Shaun would put the first part of his impromptu *Ocean's One* mission into action. It was the norm for him to be the first one at work in the morning and the last one to leave the office, so no suspicion was aroused when he sat at his desk that Friday night, furiously typing and clicking away in

the otherwise-darkened bank of glass cells that surrounded their ‘conference room’. The last employee said, “Goodnight, Shaun,” into his doorway as she headed to the two-inch-thick glass doors with polished stainless-steel handles that marked the entrance to the rented suite.

On another duo of flash drives, Shaun copied all of the essential business documents, the designs and licenses, Lou’s version of ‘the books’. These, he put in his pocket, exchanging them for the otherwise identical pair. With the videos that he’d saved earlier, he created a picture-in-picture highlight reel of Lou and Danielle in the office, blinds closed. In the other picture, the one that’s in the first picture, Shaun put an over-the-shoulder shot of Lou’s desk and computer screen. Lou had insisted he have two cameras in his office to keep an eye on his curio cabinets of autographed footballs and baseballs. His collections of vintage rock’n’roll memorabilia. Broken dreams that he lived vicariously through, Shaun imagined. His sporting career had been cut short with a back or a knee injury, he claimed. It changed based on the situation. That was when he took up singing. Granted, he was ‘that guy’ at karaoke night who blew everyone out of the water. But when it came to being able to make it as a singer with a band, he’d failed time and again. None of the memorabilia in Lou’s office was anything of his own. Nothing that he’d created or accomplished, that is. Gold records from his favorite bands. A Heisman trophy. Every square-inch of wall-space filled with conversation pieces and consumerist glory. A stark contrast to Shaun’s office, which, aside from a few pieces of art on the wall to match the aesthetic of the suite, contained a U-shaped sit-stand desk bearing four displays that he’d brought from home. In the alcove of the pod was a single gaming chair. There was one other, moderately

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comfortable, but not stay-all-day comfortable, green-cotton chair on the outside of the only side of the desk that wasn't burdened with monitors and peripherals and dozens of multi-colored sticky notes. He'd put a couple of his own memorabilia items up on the wall behind him. A magazine article about a gallery opening, a couple of 6"x9" prints of his own work that he'd sold or donated the originals of, autographed 8x10 glossies that he'd got when he met Tommy Wiseau and Pete Best. Shaun was never a starfucker, nor paid much attention to celebrity, but in both of these cases, they were there, signing at a convention that he was also appearing at, so he figured, why not? Pete wasn't interested in swapping merch, saying he had no idea who Shaun was and calling him a "chocker", whatever that meant.

Now that the office was abandoned and Shaun had the data he needed, he rounded the superfluous eighteen-seat table in the center of the room and walked to Lou's office. He wasn't worried about being caught. The security system had remote door-locks that he was able to activate from the same console that he'd copied the videos from. The same system that was, for the moment, not writing to the cloud or server drives.

In the bottom drawer of Lou's desk, next to a mostly-empty, delftware-looking bottle of Clase Azul Añejo, was the bottle of bacon-flavored lube that Danielle hated so much. Lou said it "brings out" his natural aromas, according to the video. The drawer above was full of ketchup and mayonnaise packets. Kraft and Hidden Valley. Buried in the sea of oils and vinegars was the tiny bottle that had been designed to look like radioactive waste that Shaun had been searching for. The rear of the black-and-yellow pill bottle of Mad Dog 357 read:

Spurious

I agree, as indicated by my opening this bottle, as follows in connection with my purchase of this product:

1. Due to the extreme hot nature of this product, this product shall be used as a food additive. This product can cause serious injury if directly consumed, ingested or applied to the body.

2. Due to the extreme hot nature of this product, this product shall be used with extreme care in very small amounts only.

3. This product is to be used at my own risk, and I fully understand the potential danger if used or handled improperly.

4. If I give this product as a gift, I will make the recipient fully aware of the potential danger if used or handled improperly.

5. I hereby disclaim, release and relinquish any and all claims, actions and lawsuits that I, or any of my dependents, heirs, family members or legal representatives, may have against any party relating to any damage or injury that may Result, or is alleged to have resulted, from the use, consumption, ingestion, contact or other use of or from the product.

6. I am not inebriated or otherwise not of a sound mind, and I am fully able to make a sound decision about the purchase of this product.

Shaun alleviated the hot sauce of a few drops, adding them to the bacon lube. Not enough to change the taste too much. Who knows, maybe it would bring out Lou's natural aromas better. He gave the transparent anal-torpedo tube of flavored water and glycerin a few vigorous shakes and returned it to the drawer, careful to put it, and the hot sauce, back in the exact positions he took them from. Not like Lou would notice. If it were his desk, Shaun would notice. But if it were his desk, it wouldn't be full of condiments and pork-flavored cock-grease.

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Back at his own desk, Shaun typed out an email and scheduled it to send at 3:18 am on Tuesday:

“D– You’re great and all, but S is getting suspicious. We’d better cool it for a while. I swear, once this company takes off, I’ll dump her and marry you like I promised. In the meantime, keep your distance, okay? PS - I might have herpes again or something.”

Most Mondays, Lou would want anal with his caramel frap. That was the day that his wife volunteered at Jaxxon’s school. After all weekend with Shannon, he’d tell Danielle as she wiped barbecue sauce or macaroni salad from the polished wood around his keyboard, he needed a real release. He wouldn’t bother to wash up before his post-lunch fellatio. If she was lucky, he’d let her wipe him down with one of the organic, unscented baby-wipes she kept in her desk. In that way, the bacon flavor had to be at least a scintilla of an improvement.

At 7:15 am that same morning, two other emails would go out:

“Shan, Shaun says something is up with the servers, so don’t worry about coming in today, k? Love you xoxox.” It was one thing to tear Lou down. Shannon would face enough collateral damage as it was, no need to subject her to any additional humiliation.

And, *“Re: [No Subject]*

“What do you mean again? I was waiting to tell you, but I’m pregnant and I don’t want our baby to come out with herpes sores all over its mouth. I’m going to Planned Parenthood this morning to get tested. I’ll be in after however long it takes, then we’re going to figure out how you’re going to deal with this.”

Next, Shaun hid his crudely-edited home movies in a folder buried eight layers into the Program Files directory of each

computer on the network. They're named `jspqnyt_dmd.tmp`, but really they're mp4 files. Shaun typed up a crude script to rename the file to *Lou-and-Dani.mp4* and move it to the desktop of every console at a designated time. 2:55 pm, Tuesday. An extra buffer in case Shannon brought lunch that day. Shaun wanted to make sure she was nowhere near this place when his objective began to come to fruition.

After formatting and shutting down his computer, Shaun stacked his collection of framed photos and painting reproductions atop one another and turned off the lights. In the darkness, he used his key to unlatch one side of the hefty glass doors. The electronic sensors clicked and hummed – the cycle of the digital security cameras and their night-vision, as they came invisibly to life to capture the events happening in their sensor paths. Silhouetted by the light of the community hallway, a light that was never turned off, Shaun locked the door behind him. When the sensors had stopped their chorus, he pressed hard against one side of the key to break it off in the lock.

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Divested

The old man tries to make out the graffiti on the mile-long freight train as it rumbles past – slow enough for the tagging to be somewhat legible, as coherent as paint-can scribbles can be – but fast enough that trying to read the layers-upon-layers of colors starts to make him dizzy. Smearred stamps of three-dollar, gang-colored spray paint decorate the royal cavalcade of company-branded aluminum-and-steel. Shenzi eagerly sniffs at their cargo of livestock, formerly-towering pine trees, and mysterious shipping containers. An enigma to the old man, but perhaps she is able to smell what was inside. Perhaps she’s trying to decipher the corporate logos and spray-can pissing contest.

Flashing lights at the railroad crossing, fueling-bay pergolas, hundreds-of-thousands of streetlamps, the rumble of the train, and the clanging of the bells that accompany the closing of the barber-striped delineator that currently impedes the old man’s path all come together to drown out any thoughts he might have otherwise been able to hold onto for a fleeting moment.

They’re back in the city. Heading north. The rising sun flares in through Shenzi’s open window as the truck emerges from the obtrusive walls of neon and LED advertisements. The old man presses the button on his armrest to roll down the window behind him, to give her a reprieve from the dawnlight, but she maintains her position on the passenger-side.

As they progress through town, the buildings get shorter and wider, not unlike their occupants. Parking lots spill from the entrances of attorney's offices and mixed-use medical facilities. An occasional corner shopping-center with a liquor store, hair salon, payday loan place, and tattoo parlor. They pass the old double-decker shopping mall, its parking lot vacant, like the others up and down this street. The old man wonders what happened to that poor UPS driver and hopes he didn't get fired. Or hopes he did, if the driver could get a good payout from the deal. Mental distress or whatever. His mind drifts to the four-screen, non-stadium-seating movie theater that the mall used to have. Its glass-fronted box office boarded up and marred with bullet holes. *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* and *Jurassic Park*. The carousel at the bottom of the escalator that his grandfather would take him on. They would sit on one of the benches with curled armrests on the rotating platform. They never wanted to ride the horses.

Further north. Miles north from the train crossing and the anachronistic mall, Teslas and SUVs form fifteen-long queues in the drive-thrus of Starbucks or Dutch Brothers. Ford Expeditions and Cadillac Escalades fight for parking spots closest to twenty-four-hour fitness centers. Costco and Home Depot and Walgreens edge one side of the street like a civil-war infantry, divided by this battlefield, these eight lanes of pavement, from their sworn enemies: Sam's Club, Lowes, and CVS. Still, the old man keeps driving. He drives until the lanes merge in each direction from four to two, providing entrance and exit routes to the freeway. The last exit before you're out of town. Or entrance, depending on your predilection. Before the elevated freeway descends to street-level, the old man turns right, into the underpass and at the next intersection, and after waiting an eternity for the timed light to

change, makes a left.

The parking lot of their destination sits as empty as the roads. Typical for his morning routine. Not having a lead or harness for Shenzi, the old man considers tying a length of rope around her neck, but even *he* thinks that looks trashy. She hangs close as they walk from the truck to the polished lobby, empty except a security guard/receptionist/receiver sitting at the Star-Trek console that he can monitor the hallways and exterior of the building with. Instead, the old man can see from the reflection in the hall-monitor's glasses that he is scrolling Reddit. The old man nods in that direction. The guy in the mock Sheriff's shirt nods without taking his eyes from the screen. The badge on his chest is a sewn-on cloth star embroidered across its full width with "B&R". This guy is clean-shaven. Jeremy, the usual guy, has a long biker beard. Even if he'd shaved, the old man knew this wasn't the same person. Jeremy sat with his shoulders pulled back and leaned in his chair. This guy, the new guy, is hunched over the keyboard.

The old man calls Shenzi to the elevator and she joins him – after some trepidation. He presses the white button with the calligraphic '7' and it lights up. The lack of stupid-themed floor names comforts him.

At the second-from-the-top floor, the doors slide open and Shenzi runs out ahead of the old man. He follows her to the end of the hall. Without his keys or his phone, he'll have to rely on the override. At the front door to his office, the old man punches his code into the pad next to the roll-down security grate. The keypad buzzes and the LED light on its right side glows red. When it stops, the old man tries his code again, but receives the same buzz and flash as before. He tries a few other variations – those he would have used in his gate back home, common master passwords – but

each time, buzz, red pulse, whirr of security equipment coming to life.

Riding the lift back to the lobby, the old man stops at the desk and asks the cosplay copper at the desk if he can open the doors.

“Do you have ID?”

“No, that’s the problem, no keys, no phone, no wallet. But if I could get into my office, please? I have some things I need in there.”

“I’m sorry, sir, but without ID, I’m not permitted to let anyone into the private spaces on the property.”

“You can make an exception this time, though? Please? For special circumstances? I can give you any of the other information on the account for verification – date of birth, social security, home address?”

“I apologize, sir, but if you lease a space here, you’re aware of the conditions for entry.”

The old man sighs and leads Shenzi back to the brown-on-white monstrosity. He opens the back door to let her in before opening the door around the other side for himself and starting the engine so he can put her window down. He idles in the uninhabited lot for a while, considering how he’s going to get into the office and comes to the conclusion that either he’s, A) not, or B) going to have to find someone who works with him to open the doors.

The old man turns on the radio and turns the dial through a few AM talk stations, hoping some jabberwocky will announce the *day of the week*. Not the date and time. Without a phone or a calendar or any other way to mark the days, he wasn’t sure if this was a day that they’d show up to the office or not. Unable to get the answers he’s looking for, he presses the volume knob to

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turn off the stereo. Not wanting to wait around to find out it's the weekend, the old man reverses the truck into the empty row of stalls behind him and makes an uncontrolled left turn across the empty four lanes to head south. Back into the part of the city with the wide, flat buildings, surrounded on all sides with even wider, even flatter expanses of asphalt and concrete.

When he arrives at the Elbow Room, the old man decides it must be Saturday or Sunday. The patio is full and abuzz. An acoustic jazz trio of vaguely familiar-looking musicians is crammed against one brick half-wall, banging away on standards. Leaving the truck idling and Shenzi inside, the old man takes a lap of the patio on foot, dodging drunk realtors and local politicians waving cigars and glasses of brown liquor. There are some familiar faces, but nobody who can help him with his current predicament. Not wanting to get caught up in any inane conversation, he ducks out to the parking lot and returns to his waiting companion.

They visit some other establishments his colleagues are known to frequent. The Limelite, The Standard, The Manhattan. All full of the same people, wearing the same clothes, drinking the same drinks, telling the same stories. Day-drinkers cutting business deals with neighbors and fellow Foursquare or Church of Christ congregants. Mistresses sipping champagne-heavy mimosas. The lingering malodors of the previous night's spilled and retched Jäger and Patrón shots.

The morning commuters have emerged from their cocoons, filling the onramps and surface streets with rubber and aluminum, sun-faded and cracked, blocking out the pavement like a zillion ants who've just discovered a feast of roadkill possum. It takes nearly a half-hour to travel the same distance he would have gone in five minutes only a little while ago. Nevertheless, the old man

eventually pulls into the parking lot of the next parados of bars and restaurants. These aren't as swank, but are in a nicer part of town. The part of town that all those blowhards at the historic bars live in, but don't drink in. Southsiders frequented these north-end emporiums of bad decisions after dark. Never shit where you eat. This particular bank of capitalist establishments represented one quadrant of what was, a decade ago, hundreds of acres of orchards. Almost overnight, it seems, they've all been replaced with drugstores and fast-casual dining and row after row of identical apartment buildings, standing in lines as if to represent the trees they'd replaced.

There are several options here, so the old man sets out on foot, Shenzi close behind. He pokes his head in The Five, but doesn't proceed, seeing that the bar is empty in anticipation of the lunch crowd. Campagnia hasn't unlocked their doors yet. Neither has AquaShi.

As the old man is passing the Sequoia Brewing Company, he contemplates going inside. It's one of those local microbrew places where the 'artisan' beers have melodies of hops, sweat, piss, and vomit. On the weekends, they'll pay a shitty cover band in bitter drafts and overcooked burgers to blast the neighborhood with mediocre renditions of Lynyrd Skynyrd and Van Halen. Fifty-and-sixty-somethings will Elaine-dance and drink swill to a 'Tribute to Fleetwood Mac' or 'The Unauthorized Foreigner'. Otherwise, nobody he knew would be caught dead there. That extends beyond the bureaucrats and corporate parasites that he'd witnessed day-drinking around town so far. Not even the broke-ass musicians who play there would drink the beer if it weren't 'free'.

Deciding to take a look anyway, he approaches the

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entrance and takes a deep breath – an aspiration he’ll hold as he takes a speed-lap through the bar. As the old man reaches for the spiral-brass door handle, he’s stopped by a, “Hey nice dog,” emitting from somewhere between the sidewalk and the back alley – concealed by a cinder block structure topped with chain link. Modern-designed homes for enormous rolling dumpsters. More extravagant housing than the average minimum-wage families in this city can afford.

“Huh?” The old man turns.

“I said that’s a nice dog, friend. I used to train dogs for blind kids.” The old man peers around the side of the Villa de Basura and squints to look into the ragged wool beanie and matted beard of the man who’s speaking to him.

“Did you?”

“Yeah, brother. I’m a vet, too.” Obviously not a veterinarian, the old man deduces. “You seem like a good guy. Can you help a down-on-his-luck animal lover out?”

The beggar extends a crumpled Moscow Mule tumbler, something he’d surely found discarded in one of these hideaways. The old man plunges his hands into his pockets, but finds nothing. He shrugs to the shabby fellow and turns to the brewery and its equally-putrid scents.

From under layers of dilapidated wool and stained cotton, the fetid, bearded man pulls a rusted steak knife. “What else ya’ got? Watch? Phone?” The old man has none of these things. The transient inches nearer, aiming the terra-cotta-brown crusted tip at the old man’s face. Shinzi growls. The derelict barks aggressively at her, keeping the blade pointed at the old man with one quivering hand. When the vagrant’s eyes are on the quadruped, the old man snatches the knife away from the disgusting fool, reversing the

point so it's now trained on its previous owner.

"I swear, man. I wasn't gonna do nothin'. I'm just hungry and need to eat, homie." The mugger didn't look so hungry. A giant beer-belly protruded from under a filthy baja hoodie, a fur-coat made from a disgusting concretion of mats to match his facial hair.

"I'm telling you, brotha. I was just messing around.

"I'm just going to get out of here okay?" The mendicant doesn't move, waiting for some kind of response from the old man, who doesn't take his eyes off of him for a second. Doesn't breathe or blink, it seems to the human-parasite.

"All right, get the fuck out of here," the old man says after a timeless minute. The wastrel reaches his filthy hand out to retrieve the corroded cutlery. The old man didn't believe what he was seeing. *This dumb fuck thinks that, after that, he's getting the knife back? Hell no!*

With a quick thrust, the old man pierces the sclera of the foul creature. He rotates the tarnished steel in a circular motion, separating the optic nerve and sending a slurry of aqueous and vitreous humor down the cretin's tousled beard, saturating his matted belly fur. With a similar movement, the old man sends the repugnant bum's eyeballs rolling one at a time like loose marbles into the puddles of piss, dumpster leakage, and human feces that mar the concrete floor under the castered trash bins. Shenzi eagerly laps them up and runs back to the old man, awaiting the next morsel.

The greasy thug lays screaming and cursing, rolling around on the mucky, polluted flagstone. The old man pitches the knife so it lands gently atop a pile of soiled thrift-store sweatshirts and feculent ski jackets. He escorts Shenzi back to the parking lot and,

assuaged that he isn't going to find any of his associates, squeezes the giant Ford into an open space in the dense traffic, continuing their journey.

Chapter Eight

Delusory

“That’s good humor,” Brad chuckled to himself when he received the latest invoice from his subcontractor in Arizona. He had no intention of paying it, like so many other debts before. For all of his life, Brad had wanted to feel important. So he started businesses that sounded prominent and exclusive. An ATM company, an appliance distributor, and, most recently, a “Do-It-Yourself” auto-repair shop. Paying people wasn’t his thing. Daily three-hundred-dollar steak dinners were no problem. Leases on trucks and sports cars. Rent on a mansionette when he lost his house to creditors. Keeping up the appearance of success was more important than actually being successful. And *definitely* more important than paying the people who actually made him all of his money.

Since Brad’s trophy-wife left him, he’d been desperately trying to cling on to some semblance of youth. A meager 4’10” with a protuberant nose that gave away his Armenian heritage, Brad was never attractive to the ladies. In his younger days, his two-hundred-pound frame may have passed for ‘stout’. With the weight he’d gained the past several years, he looked more like a balding schnoz sitting atop an overinflated water-balloon. Even after the rhinoplasty and electrolysis, he still felt insecure with his looks and tiny penis. Baby dick, teeny-weenie, nanochoad – he’d heard them all. Money, however, made him feel better.

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Everybody was attracted to money. With his family's shysterous history, he had done all he could to drop the 'Marsoobian' moniker. Aside from actually changing his name, that is, which would be unmentionable in his culture. Brad liked it when people called him, "Soob". The license plates on his collection of conspicuous vehicles were customized SOOB 1, SOOB 2, etc. His email address would be 'soob@whatevercompanyhemadeup.com'. It didn't help his reputation around town when his wife started telling everybody that he was abusive and would rape her. But he knew that you can't rape your wife.

His father, Arsen, had taught him that *most* people wouldn't come after you for a negligible amount of money, especially if it meant putting their reputation on the line. The trick was finding that sweet-spot between someone taking a loss and finding an attorney. Brad preferred working with independent contractors. Service-people starting their own small businesses. Not only did he not have to pay for things like insurance, payroll, workers comp, tax services – but they, and the labor boards, were less likely to come after him when he didn't pay. The sweet-spot, at least in California, where Brad did business, was around ten-or-fifteen grand. He lauded the marvelous day that the state raised the small-claims limit from five to ten-thousand dollars. He'd virtually doubled his profits overnight. Before that, he'd considered leaving the state, since they were making it harder for him to get rifle components and debit-card skimmers. It was just so damn *easy* for him to launder money and evade taxes there.

"Sup, Soob?" Miller came through the bay doors of 'The Garage', packing a fresh box of reds against the hip of his dirty blue-jeans. He stuck a smoke in the slit of his douche-goatee™ and grumbled with a timbre that can only be produced with help from

the tar of a million full-flavored cigarettes, “You ready for this shit, brah? Want Dave to pull into this one?” He meant the service bay he was standing in, flicking ashes into puddles of oil and cat litter.

“What’s up, my dude?” Dave McColm, leaned out of the open “SUPERIOR APPLIANCE SPECIALISTS” van as he backed it through the gaping roll-up entrance.

“Matthew! Stop!” Brad shouted across the warehouse. His son, who was autistic, liked to open one door to the office, go through it, close it behind him, go to the other door, open it, go into the garage, and so forth. “Motherfather! Go play with your iPad!” He roared at the boy when the door slammed again. Matthew retreated into the office and closed the door a final time. When Brad’s wife left him, she didn’t take anything with her. Not even the kids. Brad had managed to ship his oldest son, Nicholas, off to a military boarding school somewhere on the east coast. His daughter, Sydney, was sixteen and he’d parentified her into Matthew’s primary caregiver. She still had to go to school for another year. Then maybe he’d leave Matthew with Sydney and start a new life and a new business somewhere his name wouldn’t follow him.

Brad held the button to lower the corrugated-steel door while Dave Miller, the first Dave, plugged impact wrenches into hoses that hung from the thirty-foot ceilings. Dave McColm, the second Dave, stepped from the van, leaving the stereo on full-blast to Bon Jovi. Not even the good stuff, but 2000’s Bon Jovi, when he couldn’t decide if he was pandering to pop-country or country-pop audiences.

McColm pulled the oversized remote-control-on-a-cord from the lift-bay and pressed the arcade-style button to raise the

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van skyward. Ceilingward.

Miller moved in a circle under the Ford Econoline, unfastening the bolts that held a second gas tank. The van came equipped with two tanks, but they'd emptied and disabled one to give access to the underside of a tool chest in what would have otherwise been the passenger compartment of the stripped-down interior of the service vehicle. Brad and the other Dave lowered the empty fuel reservoir to the ground and resumed their positions as members of The Village People, holding their arms spread overhead to support the weight of the false-welded panel. Dave was now unfastening with loud whirrs followed by gentle clangs as the ten-millimeter bolts fell to the concrete.

They would only be traveling in-state, not crossing any borders, but had decided it would be best to be cautious. Clever, they thought. There was extra investor money available after buying this old repair shop. Inside the van were stacks of bolted-in metal tool cabinets. Most of them were the standard fare you'd expect to see for appliance-repair: wrenches, screwdrivers, power drills. A couple of them, however, drawers permanently 'stuck' closed from the cargo section of the van, had a rectangle of sheet metal bolted to the the bottom.

It was below these sheets of aluminum that Brad and McColem squatted to support the weight that had been released by Miller's air-wrenching. They slowly eased the plate to the ground before dropping it from about six-inches above the floor, uncertain who would set it down first to avoid smashed fingers. The deconstructed weapons and ATM parts spilled from each side, into the automotive fluids.

"Watch it, fuckers!" Miller jumped out from under the lifted van. "You don't think you could have swept up before we

got here?”

They each three loaded up armfuls of manufactured metals and plastics and hobbled across the shop space, stepping over lowered hydraulic lifts and around industrial-size waste barrels of used motor oil. The false-bottom of the van unloaded and bolted into place, Brad and the two Daves returned to the tables where their bounty had been dumped haphazardly. They plunged their meaty hands into the piles, emerging with a carbine barrel or collapsible shoulder stock. False fronts for keypads and MAG-stripe readers. Each of these, they wiped with white terrycloth towels to remove grease and oil and kitty litter. They laid the items out into neat columns and rows as space cleared on the tables. The trio stepped back to admire their harvest. Brad took a photo with his latest-model-of-iPhone.

“Text that to me.” Dave #2

“No, dumbass. You shouldn’t even be taking pictures of this shit.” Dave #1

“Fuck you. If he doesn’t text it to me, I’ll take a picture myself.” Dave #2, searching his pockets for the device he’d left in the elevated van.

“Whatever. Get one with me in it.” Dave #1 handed his phone to Brad and held his pants up as he jogged the eight feet to the table. Brad fiddled with the camera phone, trying to figure out how to open the app. Dave pulled an American-flag bandanna from his back pocket and tied it over his bald-yet-shaved head. He picked up some AR-15 components and held them in both hands like a crude rifle with an invisible magazine and receiver section. If the gun-makers could only patent that technology. Coming soon from GunCo: It’s the Mr. Invisible Assault Rifle. Make all of your finger-gun dreams come true with the future of school shooter technology! Also

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comes in officially-licensed Hello Kitty pink, desert camo, jungle camo, woodland camo, Arctic Tundra camo, and new Urban Eagle Patriot's Elite[®] urban camouflage! Those pansy-ass, woke, crybaby, hippies won't see it coming!

Brad and Dave and Dave had all met through the SUPERIOR ATM company that Brad started almost a decade ago. His longest-running scam. The company didn't actually *do* anything. Brad, or Brad's assistant, really, would find service-people around the country who would do some occasional ATM repair work. Computer and appliance techs, mostly. ATMs are simple machines that only use a handful of parts. Aside from the keys, these technicians likely had all of the tools they'd need already. Brad had hundreds of copies of the keys that he'd mail out to anybody who asked. It only takes about four keys to get into every type of terminal – the ones that aren't attached to a bank, that is. They didn't get involved with those, or the second part of the scheme would never have worked.

The first part of the stratagem, though, was more egocentric. Even before having any relationships built with remote technicians, Brad began marketing himself, always Mr. Big, as the guy who owned the company with technicians around the country. Impossible-to-find ATM service-people whose labor he could charge an exorbitant markup on. The ubiquitous terminal owners, the CardTronics and the Solvports and the NationalLinks would have Brad's phone ringing off the hook, willing to pay hundreds in expedited-service and fuel-surcharge markups to get their machines repaired. Little did they know that the majority of his "staff" were part-time computer techs who saturated the area. The *specialist* he'd told to drop everything and drive three hours to get to their location – usually some tourist waypoint or stripclub

with eight-dollar service-fees – lived eight blocks away and was taking a nap when Brad’s assistant called.

This might sound bad enough as it is, marking up other’s labor to maintain a lifestyle significantly better than that of those earners. And lying about the extra time and labor that went into completing the job. But that’s what American capitalism is built on. As far as Brad was concerned, what he was doing was ‘shrewd business’. He didn’t know what that first word meant, but it sounded cool and was in movies.

His family was one of the cornerstones of the local Armenians-only church. They’d been in this city since all there was was downtown. Since the miles of mixed-use offices and mini-storages and fast-food standalones with their exhaustive white-line-over-asphalt yards were figs and oranges. Brad had been raised in the church. But what he was doing wasn’t *stealing*. If someone is dumb enough to get tricked out of their money, that was their problem. Buyer beware. The Marsoobian Mantra. Even if it was theft, it’s not wrong to steal if you need to feed your family. And *he* had a family.

This, dear brain narrator, is where you might start to think that even *if* taking a little off the top while making no contribution to society is okay, the next section isn’t so okay. Or maybe you do, I don’t know what you think is right or wrong. I’m not going to make that distinction on your behalf. While I allegedly might – theoretically – condone tax fraud or certain types of corporate espionage, people like Brad are truly bottom-of-the-barrel and would better serve the world as carrion.

What would happen after the mythological specialist would fix the ATM – which was usually just a receipt printer jam or someone stuffed a gum wrapper in the card reader – was that Brad

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would invoice the company that owned the ATM but would fail to pay the invoice of the service technician. For a couple of months, it would work. He'd tell the contractor it takes sixty days for him to get paid and he couldn't afford to pay them immediately. Plus, he'd add, it's the industry standard. All the while, they'd be doing more and more service jobs for Brad while he represented them to his clients as employees – hand-selected experts. Like he was busy around the country around the clock. When the technician would eventually ask again about their unpaid invoices, Brad would make up a story about how the client was being difficult. They didn't get the photos of the ATM they wanted or the test-receipts were cut off. He'd go so far as to send the tech *back* to the service locations to get the information if he knew the terminal was out-of-order again. He'd finagle his way into getting them to fix it for free while they were out there. Or at least, he would tell them, he couldn't pay their mileage. Not that Brad was going to pay any of it. If he could time it right, he could bill the client an extra \$150 for an 'express' response.

Most of the time, after a few months and a couple-dozen unpaid service tickets, the tech would refuse to take any work from Brad until he made good on at least *some* of the invoices. If it was a particularly busy area, Brad would pay a token amount to stay in their good graces and get another month or two out of them. Gotta spend money to make money. He dragged this on for years with a few of them. Those who caught wise made threats, but since they'd never met in real life, didn't even know if Brad Marsoobian was a real person, there wasn't much they could do. Payment of four-to-five and later, when the small-claims limit was increased, ten-to-fifteen-thousand dollars wasn't worth any out-of-state legal action. The technician would spend half of that in

travel and expenses. That is, if they could ever collect. Otherwise, it would amplify their losses. In the end, they'd have to bend over and take it. Hours of their work. Miles traveled on their own dime. There was nothing reasonable that they could do about it.

So that's the *first* part of the ATM company scam.

The second part, that's where Dave and Dave come in. They started out as service guys. Unfortunately for Brad, they lived in California, so they could come knocking for their money. And knock they did. At the time, Brad had a little one-room office in one of those single-story "executive suites" places where rows of buildings surround the parking lot. The "suites", which are stark two-hundred-square-foot rooms with no amenities, look into the nearest parking stall. Commercial-grade, unpadded carpet and a couple of electrical outlets. There was a solitary unisex restroom facing the driveway that was shared by a score of other tenants. This was the official business address of SUPERIOR ATM. The address that the checks from the processors were sent to. The address he'd printed on business cards and invoice headers. Brad liked this place because the suite numbers had a letter *and* a three-digit number, which made it sound to his clients in Houston and Chicago and Seattle like he was in a towering office that dwarfed the surrounding buildings.

This diminutive one-room office was bordered by two other identical rooms on either side, other fly-by-night businesses. The door and window, like a slummy apartment, faced the inner-donut that was the parking lot, separated by only four feet of sidewalk and a dying boxwood. The back of the building lacked a window, but if it were there, it would have looked out at street-level onto the four-lane boulevard that was proprietated by similar rent-by-the-month, cash-preferred landlords.

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So the Daves, they find Brad, a real person, not a made up name. It was pinheadedly surprising. They didn't look him up at the same time. Separate Daves, separate days. Dave met Dave through Brad. They weren't brought in on the first part of the operation. No, with three of them, they could carry out a heist that would go unnoticed – or unreported – except as a minor loss on his client's taxes.

When a service call came in near where the Daves and the Brad were colluding, one of them would act as the technician. He'd go out there and fix whatever problem was going on with the ATM. You remember how all of the keys were the same for those stand-alone machines? Well, as it turns out, most of the safe combinations and programming passwords were nearly as universal. The big corporate competitors, the ATMLinks and FirstNationals and ATMMachines [sic], used the same combos and codes for all of their hundreds, even thousands, of terminals. Those who were smart enough to randomize their passwords kept a list. When Dave or Dave went out to repair the machine, the client would provide the safe code and master passwords. He or he would need them to carry out their business. Soon, Dave and Brad and Dave had a list, too.

After the first Dave would go do what he did, the second Dave would return to the location a few days later. That is, if the first Dave scoped it out and made sure there weren't any cameras on or around the terminal. Most of the machines in liquor stores and dive bars had no cameras facing them. And those mirror-disks stuck to the front, those are for you to see behind you. Virtually no ATMs had cameras in them unless they were at a bank.

The second Dave, he would be at this gas station or smoke shop or in the front lobby of a Target, pretending to be browsing

or whatever. Meanwhile, Brad was back at his computer in the one-room office. The first Dave would be leaned over his shoulder, watching him dial the terminal that the second Dave was milling around near. See, those ATMs with the four-inch screen and the plastic shell over a steel safe, they process your transaction – verify there is money in your account and then tell your bank to transfer the amount to the processor – using an old-timey modem. The kind that go beep-boop-boop-boop-beep-bzzzz-king-gggggggggg-bong-pprrrr-kabee-kabee-pssssshhhh. That’s why it takes so long to get your cash. Those modems, as you may remember from history books, worked both ways. What Brad would be doing in his office, Dave One over his shoulder while Dave Two pretended to shop, he’d call into those machines and reprogram them to think they had one-dollar bills in them instead of twenties. Then Dave Two would take out his card – the debit card for his special account that he kept \$105 in just for this, they each had one – and he’d make a withdrawal. The ATM, thinking it had ones in it, would spit out two-thousand dollars in crisp portraits of ~~Alan~~ Andrew Jackson. Brad would set the bill denomination back to the proper amount and delete the logs. Dave would buy a Pepsi and a pack of smokes for other Dave.

It was an extra six-or-eight grand in their pockets each week. If and when the owners of the machines noticed anything amiss in their counts, they’d call Brad to have a technician (Dave) go pull the logs from the machine manually, because they couldn’t find the discrepancy from their workstations in Nashville or Minneapolis or Dallas. Of course, the technician never was able to find anything. Even if they were to check security footage. Even if it existed. Even if it took hours to go through because they didn’t know *when* the dispenser 'error' happened, they wouldn’t find

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anything except regular customers, regular transactions.

This went on for a while. They moved from the street-side shed of an office to a space with private offices for Brad, his assistant and his assistant's assistant. A thousand-square-foot warehouse gave them room for plenty of parts – dispensers and keypads and dip-readers – that they kept on hand for any of the mysterious problems that clients might have. They'd rotate the parts out for a 'new' one from their stock, charge the client for the part, take the 'defective' part for disposal, then add it to their stock for the next customer. Possibly the same customer with a different machine. There was nothing wrong with these parts. A torn bill jamming the cash chute could be fixed in under an hour. Sure, it was more complicated than unjamming a copy machine, but nothing Dave or Dave couldn't easily do in the field. If they wanted to wait for Brinks or Loomis to show up, they'd be able to swap a good part for another good part and make an easy five-hundred bucks. Card readers and keypads were an easier fix, but were only worth about a buck-fifty apiece. Sometimes Brad would string a customer along for weeks. "It was working when we left, maybe it's the card reader?" or "If that didn't fix it, it *has* to be the mainboard".

It didn't take long for them to go from trading regular keypads and unfaulty card readers out for interfaces that recorded PINs. Stripe-readers that copied account numbers from magnetic tape to a micro SD card. With this information, the master passwords for the terminals, and the dial-in programming software on Brad's computer, they were able to make transactions at terminals without even using the physical machine. A hundred from this account, forty from this account. The bills would spit out of the lower slot in the ATM just in time for a Dave to walk by and

snatch them. A regular Dave on his way for a Diet Pepsi or to the restroom to relieve himself of the same. Dave One or Dave Two would drive down the highway, stopping at a convenience station every few miles to snatch the waiting bills from the mouth of the cash dispenser.

This went well. The ATM repair company, with its overcharged customers and unpaid staff, went well. Brad and the Daves were living well. Eating well. This is where The Garage comes in. That's really the name. They needed a front for their increased income. Brad already knew, from the two-million he was making annually from the repair technicians, that as long as you wrote everything off, until it looked like you made regular-people wages, the IRS wouldn't come snooping around. Brad bought The Garage, a six-bay automotive repair shop, at foreclosure. A write-off for the ATM company as a warehouse to store parts and machines for repair. And a write-off again when they started 'The Garage' on paper and he sold it to himself. The point of The Garage, as far as the public was concerned, was a "do-it-yourself" repair shop. They'd charge a bit less than if you had a mechanic do the work for you but you 'got to' do the work yourself. In their shop, using their tools and lifts. Cool in concept, but a flop in practice. Who wants to pay sixty-dollars-an-hour to work on their own car? It didn't matter. On the spreadsheet that represented each of the six bays in a column and each hour of the day in a row, they'd put made-up customer names where there were no bookings. Those made-up customers paid them sixty-bucks an hour in clean money. Plus, there were always additional fees. "Mechanic" consultations. Waste and part disposals. It wasn't hard to get Jim Smith or Tony Martin to spend four-hundred bucks on an hour-long visit to The Garage.

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It was in The Garage, on a Sunday, with the bay doors rolled shut and the front-office lights dark that Dave and Dave and Brad were sorting their loot of components across two eight-foot-long folding tables. Dave hands Dave a stack of keypads with red numbers and blue auxiliary buttons to stack in the metal cabinets at the rear of the warehouse.

What about the guns?! You're probably wondering. Those have nothing to do with any of this. Brad and Dave – I don't remember which fucking Dave, probably both of them – were into guns. Second-amendment proselytizers who had never read the constitution. They would buy these assault rifle parts and then assemble them into final products. AR-15s, HK-91s, IMI Uzis. They'd sell the weapons to friends and family. In the parking lots of local political events. They had no difficulty finding buyers amongst the congregations of their respective churches.

Shaun had been Brad's assistant since almost the beginning. When it was *just* an ATM repair company in a single-room executive suite with no plumbing. When the customers needed their machines fixed, Shaun was the guy who found the technicians. He'd call around to find someone who could fulfill Brad's empty promises to the clients.

They were running over two-hundred calls a day, and it was all because of him. When Shaun joined, Brad was barely making thirty-grand a year. Still sending faxes. Paper versions of everything shoved into filing cabinets and manila envelopes. No organization. Within a year, Shaun had converted not only Brad's office to a digital world, but the entire industry. His ideas for technicians using smart-devices to record their service calls and to upload the required signatures and reports changed the business

nationwide. This was before iPhone and Android. In the flip-phone days. Shaun had to order two dozen specialty handhelds from Motorola and set them up for their full-time *non*-employee technicians.

Within two years, Brad was making millions. The ATM service industry had become fast. Too fast. While Shaun had nearly automated the technical part of his own job – the scheduling of technicians and compiling of reports – he’d created an even worse enterprise for himself. By the third year, most of his time was spent reassuring clients who hadn’t received their paperwork *immediately* after the job was completed that yes, the job had been completed. Like, relax. Just a few years ago, it took weeks for it to be *mailed* to you, if it was sent at all. Clients had become such douchecanoes that Shaun had suggested to Brad on more than one occasion that they fire a few of the particularly bitchy ones. Brad, of course, would insist that they take every job that came through. It didn’t matter if the clients were asscrackers, they paid the bills.

The technicians would reach out to Shaun about their unpaid invoices. Each time, he would put them on hold and walk into Brad’s office, telling him Michael or Kelly or John or Sean or Dave #3 was on the phone. They’d called Brad’s cell countless times before calling Shaun. Brad would say something about the client being behind on paying their invoices or another client waiting to get photos of the ATM from the technician for the *second* trip. No, the same pictures of the same ATM doing the same thing in the same place from the week before wouldn’t work. Shaun would usually photoshop these pictures to make them look just slightly different and resubmit them on the technician’s behalf. It still didn’t get the worker paid.

Shaun wasn’t dumb, but it did take him a while to catch

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on. How Brad would come to him every few months and say, “I need you to find a new tech for San Diego,” or, “We need a backup guy in Phoenix.” Despite his personal extravagance, Brad always seemed to have money problems. Okay, that’s not unusual. People living above their means. But the more revenue Shaun brought into the business, the more replacement technicians they had to ‘hire’, the more Brad seemed to be in debt. Shaun had known Brad since childhood. Brad was his brother’s godfather. Of course he was going to give him the benefit of the doubt. Brad was always the ‘fun uncle’ type. When Shaun was a boy, Brad showed him the trick to solving a Rubik’s Cube – by prying out the pieces and reassembling them on the winning sides.

Brad would show up at the office occasionally with a new, top-of-the-line computer for Shaun, or would have a bed delivered to his house. These minor gestures helped to convince Shaun that Brad was a good guy. When times were good, Brad would take care of Shaun. Even if it was only a fraction of the millions Shaun was bringing in. As such, Shaun figured, he should help Brad when times were lean. When the technicians would call about their invoices, Shaun would tell them, with all sincerity, that he was working on it. He was convinced it was the clients, not Brad, who were causing these problems. He stayed in his office late into the night, filling in the blanks on service-call paperwork. Brad would tell him to “go home” when he’d leave at two or three in the afternoon. Shaun liked to work when it was quiet. When the phones weren’t ringing. When Brad wasn’t belly-laughing into his bluetooth earpiece. When his assistant and her assistant weren’t coming into his office to ask questions about routing technicians or scheduling – things that they should have been able to extrapolate from the hundreds of similar conversations by now.

Brad had hired Stephanie for Shaun without telling him. She was *not* attractive, so don't start thinking that's why she was hired. No, Brad hired her as a genuine assistant for the semi-genuine ATM business. Over a dozen girls came in and out of Brad's office that day before he decided on Stephanie. She was a single mom with roughly the same smushed-playdoh physique as Brad. A pair of melty snowmen (snowwomen? snowpeople? Big fucking balls of anthropomorphic frozen water) came out of Brad's office to meet Shaun. The reason Brad hired Stephanie – and I shit you not – was because she could turn on his computer. That's not a euphemism. Brad had just bought PCs for the office that were housed in sleek, blue-lit cases. The kind where the CD drive and spare USB ports were covered by flaps that blend in when not in use. The power buttons on these towers were on the side, hidden behind one of the hinged plastic doors. That's a stupid-ass job qualification, but if she was the only one who could do it, what does that say about the other candidates?

Anyway, Shaun thought Stephanie was as dense as osmium. It shouldn't have been *that* hard to look up how many miles a job was from a particular technician's route for one day or the next, and compare it to the *only other fucking technician in that state*. He would do it in his head every time she barged into his office. She spent most of her time in the office on Facebook. Shaun didn't care what his staff did, so long as the work got done, and it wasn't getting done. The status was not quo. He'd tried to get Brad to fire Stephanie and replace her with someone more competent. A former freight dispatcher or someone who doesn't look at a map and a calendar like a yokel being abducted by extraterrestrials. Stephanie worked for minimum wage. An experienced worker might cost upwards of ten-bucks an hour. Instead, Brad hired

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another inept assistant for the front office. Then there were two people bulldozing into Shaun's office, interrupting him with dumbass queries. Between that and the phone and the hundreds of daily emails and Matthew coming from the back hallway, into Shaun's office, closing the door, going into the lobby, closing the door, then back again, it was no wonder Shaun couldn't get any actual work done during the day. Brad would yell at Matthew from his office, muting his headset between chuckles and lying to clients about how well they are doing with the latest conversion project. The one to convert the keypads to the kind that encrypt the PIN on the ATM side so it can't be stolen over the unsecured phone lines. Shaun would sit in his corner office, listening to Blood, Sweat, and Tears or the O'Jays or Rose Royce on vinyl while he sent emails to clients. He talked on the phone to a dispatcher from one of the major processors while he messaged another and hoped to finish at least one task before the questions and shouting and belly laughs would disrupt him again.

When Brad and Dave and Dave decided to start The Garage, they'd asked Shaun to join them. Shaun had learned by now that this had to be another devious plot by Brad. Another get-rich-quick Arbonne, Herbalife hustle. For the last many years, Brad had paid Shaun fairly regularly. He'd fall behind, catch up, fall behind. By this time, Brad owed Shaun about fifteen thousand. It wasn't an all-at-once thing. When Brad would 'catch up' he'd be a few hundred dollars short. Over the years this, "Sorry, I didn't have it all on me this month," had added up. So when they came to Shaun and asked him to get involved in The Garage, he held out, wanting to get paid for the ATM company work before starting another project with Brad. Since Shaun had been wanting to spend more time with his art, he designed the logos and shirts and all of

the branding and marketing materials for The Garage. Something he could do without committing himself to the business. It took him about four months of all of his free time outside of running SUPERIOR ATM which, by this time, was a shell of its former eminence.

Shaun had converted to working from home. There was no need for him to be in the office. There never was a need for an office, ever – all of their business was conducted on the phone or computer. A wasted expense. When Shaun stopped going to the office, Brad finally let Stephanie and Bobby and whatever-the-other's-name-was go. He probably got sick of them barging into his office. The process of scheduling and dispatching had become even more efficient, thanks to some database software Shaun had designed, but the number of service calls had dropped to nearly three-quarters. A combination of the reliable, competent technicians in major areas refusing to do business with Brad and the clients hiring the local service-people directly, eliminating any need to pay a middleman. Still, the company petered along, with Shaun checking in several times a day to respond to emails and ensure the dispatching software was working properly.

Even though Shaun wasn't working full-time for Brad anymore, he wasn't exactly free to do as he pleased with his day. With the pockets of time he found between work, he'd do layouts and designs for The Garage. Whatever you might think an artist's time and skill might be worth, it's worth more than the four-thousand dollars Shaun billed Brad and Dave and Dave for the four months of work. The giant, lighted marquee above the bay doors or the one on the road, directing traffic in, both cost more than the amount Shaun was asking. He was amused, bemused, and a bit bitter that the semi-transparent fiberglass that his art was

printed on cost more than the art itself.

“Well, we never talked about a price,” Brad would balk after receiving Shaun’s fourth monthly thousand-dollar invoice. It’s true, they didn’t talk about it, but that would be something to talk about after the first invoice if you disagreed with it. Shaun was billing by the piece. A hundred bucks for this design, fifty for that. Brad would get the designs and send a message back saying how much he loved them. He’d have them printed on anything that could be printed on. If he broke it down hourly, Shaun would have been charging less than half of minimum wage. And what about the Marsoobian Motto?

Finally, it was Shaun’s turn to cut Brad off in the way so many hundreds of ATM technicians had done before. He stopped responding to messages asking for new designs. Stopped communicating at all with the exception of a certified cease-and-desist letter that was sent to Brad and his partners % The Garage. Brad wrote an essay of an email trying to play on Shaun’s sympathies. Never apologizing. Telling Shaun that he thought they were friends and what about all they’d been through together and all that. Asking him if it’s worth letting a few thousand dollars come between them. What they’d been through was Brad making millions on Shaun’s hard work. It was Brad that was letting a few thousand dollars come between them.

Shaun went out the following week and visited some of those wannabe-high-rise office buildings on the north side of town. Big crayfish in a little puddle. The attorneys that occupied these glass-shelled rooms told Shaun that it wasn’t worth their time to go after someone for twenty-thousand dollars. Again and again, Shaun rode an elevator up to one of those offices with the magazines spread over coffee tables in their waiting rooms. Wooden plaques

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with local ‘Best of’ awards and framed newspaper fluff-piece clippings on the walls. Again and again, the attorney, in his or her overpriced suit, would sit Shaun down in a conference room big enough to house an after-hours rave and listen to him give the story of Brad and his business practices. Again and again, the attorneys told Shaun that there’s no money in going after someone for moral reasons. They wanted concrete dollars-and-cents. Shaun’s unpaid invoices weren’t enough. They’d need three, four, five times that amount to make it worth their [paralegal’s] effort. Again and again, markup middlemen told him that he had no recourse.

Back home, Shaun called the State Bar Association for help, but they basically told him the same thing – twenty-thousand wouldn’t be worth anybody’s time. Maybe try the local discount law school for recent graduates. His options were to go to small claims for only a portion of his losses or nothing. Shaun called and emailed other agencies. ATF, ASE, IRS, FTC. Anyone who might be interested in the goings on of The Garage and SUPERIOR ATM and APPLIANCE. Of course, Shaun wasn’t privy to *all* of the goings on, but he suspected that where there was smoke, there was fire. Financial regulatory agencies, ombudsmen, city, county, and state politicians, local cops – none of them did anything. None of them had a clue about intellectual-property theft. Shaun already knew the courts were lazier and more corrupt than any of the agencies that he’d already reached out to. In the end, he ended his quest to help karma find Brad and started packing his stuff. There was no way he’d be able to afford the rent on his house now.



Chapter Nine

Posterity

Finally, we're moving again! It's hot outside and I like how the wind feels in my hair. And the scents of the restaurants and looking at the people passing by with their shopping carts full of interesting treasures. It's lunch time, so the smell of flame-grilled burgers and hot, greasy pizza are filling my nose holes. It makes my mouth water, remembering the last time I had one of those delicious meals. I try to get my dad to pull over at a drive-thru, but he ignores me and keeps driving. I never can tell, when we go out, if we're going to get to stop for takeout. Dad says he doesn't want me eating all that "processed crap". That it's not good for me. He eats it sometimes, so it can't be that bad for you. Whenever he gets some for himself, he always gets me some, too. So maybe that's the amount of processed crap someone is supposed to eat? We had a little bit last night – not enough, if you ask me. We almost never get food in the car twice in a row, but sometimes on a road trip, we eat strange stuff. I'll tell you about that in a second.

Dad always drives and I always have to ride in the back seat. Not that I'd be able to drive, even if he'd let me. He hasn't taught me and I don't think my feet would reach the pedals, anyway. Maybe someday. When we're on the dirt roads, Dad will let me sit on his lap, but when we're on the black roads, he makes me stay in the back seat.

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Dad is tall and is losing his hair, which he doesn't like. The part in the back that he still has, the part I can see from the back seat, the fuzzy bit that tickles my face when we roughhouse, it's gray with a little bit of brown. He has a beard, too, it's gray like his hair, but not as short and the hairs are crinkly, so it's not as scratchy. Today he smells bad. We've been traveling for a day and a night and now it's the next day. I slept in the back, but my dad drove while I was asleep. He needs a shower. He has to take one every day or he'll stink that old person stink. I hate baths. I don't smell bad like him.

Me? I'm pretty tall, too. Not as tall as my dad, but I'm big for my age, which is eight-and-a-half. My hair is brown like my dad's used to be in pictures, when it was long. My hair isn't very long, but not as short as my dad's is now. You can't see my skin through my hair or anything. Dad says it's what happens when you get older, but I get older and I keep getting more hair. But in some places, instead of being just brown, it's also a lighter brown. Not yellow. Sometimes people say I look like a leopard, but I've seen pictures of leopards and they have spots. Mine is more like little patches of lighter brown on darker brown. But not stripes, like a tiger. It's not like anyone else's I know.

Anyway, my hair is the least interesting thing about me. I like to run and swim. I'm the fastest of all my friends. One of my favorite things is when we all race to the edge of the lake and jump into the cold water. I can swim almost to the other side and back! When we come out, our legs and feet are all covered with mud and Dad doesn't want to let us back in the car until we've dried enough for our legs to turn to dirt-cakes so he can wipe it off. By that time, I'm ready to go swimming again! I like to wear dark colors, like gray and black, even though most girls wear

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bright colors with bows and things like that. Most of my pals are all boys and I like to get dirty. Dad says it's cool, I can wear whatever colors I want and do whatever I think is fun and I don't have to listen to anybody else but him, but that's only because he cares about me being safe.

We had meatballs for breakfast. Weird. I'm used to cereal in the morning, but when you're on a trip, you'll eat all kinds of crazy stuff! One time, when we stopped at a gas station I'd never been to before, I had to wait in the car while Dad paid for the gas and got us something to drink. But when he came out, he'd brought me ostrich jerky! Another time, somewhere else we'd never been, he got popcorn – one of my favorite snacks – but this popcorn was all yellow and blue and other colors like a rainbow. I'd never seen anything like it before.

I wish we were going to the lake right now. Instead, we're in another town. It's flat and there are lots of stores, so I know we aren't even close to any water I could swim in. Like I said, though, I like the smells and watching the people go about their daily business. I don't like the cars so much – they're loud and the drivers are usually “dumbasses”, which means they're stupid. Sometimes, though, the cars will have kids or dogs in them, which is more fun because they like to wave at me, or the dogs will bark and wag their tails when we go past. Grownups are boring. They like to sit in one place all the time and stare at a screen. Then, when they're done with that, they go sit in another place and stare at another screen. I don't get what's so interesting in there. I like the nature shows about birds or meerkats or fish, but adults only watch words and people talking. Boooooorrrriinnnggg. They could be reading a book in a park if they wanted to look at words, then their kids could play

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outside. Or if they want to watch people talk, they should do it where there's someone for us to talk to, too. They just expect us to sit there and be quiet while they talk and other people talk. And they always talk about the same boring things, too. It's always about money or working. My dad's alright, though, because he doesn't like talking about that stuff. When I'm home with him, he lets me do my own thing when he has to use the screen for the words. I can hang out with him if I want, but I can also play with my toys or go outside. As long as I stay in the yard and don't hurt myself. Sometimes he doesn't have to sit at his desk all day, but he paints instead. He calls both things working. I like the second kind of working better because he lets me help and he doesn't care if I make a mess. When he has a painting he doesn't like, he'll let me finish it. He says art is creative and destructive, so if I want to tear it up into a million pieces, that's up to me. He'll let me do this with my toys, too. If I want to see what's inside, Dad doesn't get mad. He'll show me how they work.

We leave one city and drive on the highway for only a few minutes before we're at the next city. Dad pulls off and drives past the people with their carts and the places with bright signs about salty sausage biscuits and egg burritos. That sounds good right now. The parking lot we stop in next is empty and there aren't any delicious smells. This store smells like gasoline and smog. Dad tells me I can come with him and I climb out of the back seat and follow him into the strange building.

It's dark in the waiting room. They have a row of metal-framed chairs with gray cushions backed against the front window. On the other side of the room is a long counter that's the same color as the chairs. The window has gray blinds that reach from the ceiling to the floor, blocking out the light from

outside. The door has its own metal slats that are also closed. I can see okay to move around and not run into anything, but it's a little bit scary.

My dad opens a door that's behind the tall counter. He goes into the next room and shakes his head in the direction of the door to tell me to follow him. He doesn't talk a lot when we're out. Not like when we're at home. At home he likes to tell me about everything and he'll sing and make silly noises. But when other people are around, or we're in a building like this, he just looks and listens while other people talk.

The other room is big. Really big! It's dark, too, but there are a couple of windows way up on the roof that let the sun come through in little squares on the floor. This room smells gross. I can't tell where the smell is coming from, it's like it's everywhere. This room has hard floors with a big metal grate in the middle. Not like the carpeting in the front.

Way across the other side of this building. Like, forever away, there's a white truck. It's parked between four big, blue pillars that go almost, but not all the way, to the ceiling. The truck doesn't have any tires. Instead, where the tires would be, are shiny silver plates. In front of the truck, the tires are stacked on top of each other. Except the fourth one, that's leaning against the other three.

Dad walks over to the back of the truck, like he's going to get something from it. He tells me to wait, so I stand in the open doorway that we just came through, wondering if he wants me to go sit in the other room. From behind the truck, Dad takes out a box that he has to hold with both hands. It's shiny and silver like the wheels of the truck. While he's holding the box, the truck goes down. Not very far, but where the bottom of the

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truck is on the ground now. Under the truck, there's a man with stripes and stars on his shirt and on his hat that match the banners that are hanging in the office and on the outside of the building. The truck keeps going down and the man disappears except for his hand and arm on one side, holding a turkey and swiss-cheese sandwich. I'm starving. He's yelling mean words at my dad for putting the truck down. It's scary, so I decide to wait until my dad says it's okay.

The star-and-stripe-wearing man stops yelling and I'm about to go over and take the sandwich for myself when the door on the other side of me opens – not the door to the front room and not the door to the outside, another door. It's painted the same gray that everything in here is painted except for the blue towers next to the white truck. This new door that I hadn't noticed before opens and another man comes out. He looks like the man under the truck, except he's wearing all blue. Not as bright blue as the pillars, but a faded gray-blue.

"Nick?!" The new man yells, making my ears ring. He doesn't notice I'm standing right next to him.

"Marffel? Magpo!" The other man is saying from under the truck, but I don't think it's loud enough for the blue man to hear. The man by me notices my dad over there and yells loud again.

"Hey! Stop!"

My dad sees me by the yelling man and runs to save me. The man goes into the room he just came out of and closes the door. Then he opens the door. Then he closes the door again. When he opens the door the next time, my dad is there, by my side, protecting me. He reaches into the room and grabs the man's hair. This man has longer hair, but it's all black and he has

Posterity

a big nose. My dad holds the man's head and opens and closes the door. The man is in the way though, and there is no way that he can close the door while he's holding the man's head!

The man falls down and isn't yelling any more. My dad keeps trying to close the door. I try to tell him that the door won't close with the man's head in the way, but he stands between me and the man and keeps trying to close it a few more times. When he decides that the man isn't going to move out of the way so he can close the door, he goes to the back of the big room, where there are shelves and cabinets. I watch him put some things – I don't know what they are – onto one of those flat wheelie-carts and pull it while walking backward through the glass door with the gray-slatted covering and into the sunlight. Before he can notice I'm not with him, I run over and grab the sandwich from the first yelling-man's hand and try to scarf it all down before I get caught.

"Shenzi, let's go, sweetie." I hear my dad call from outside and I start running. My dad is holding the back door of the truck open. It's a big, white truck like the one inside that strange place, except his truck has tires and doesn't smell like gasoline. Leaping with all of my might, I land in the back seat and watch as he closes the door and circles around to the other side. If he would hurry up, we could get these windows down and get back on the road!

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Reprobated

Tim had been bummin' round the tower district since Reagan was prez. In his youth, it wasn't even a big deal. Everyone did it. Smokin' weed, hangin' at the bars. Musicians and actors and artists. Those were *his* people. As he got older, that scene started to look at him as the weird and creepy old man. He didn't see what the big deal was. He wasn't even the oldest person on the scene.

For a while, he tried being a mysterious guru, like Andy Warhol, but that didn't pan out. His singing and guitar playing weren't too good, so he took up keyboards. He didn't have to be the best when he had a couple of expensive synthesizers that could sound like strings, horns, whatever you wanted. Keys players were in short supply, so it was easy for Tim to hook up with a band. When people would ask him who his influences were, he'd respond with something obscure like Mahavishnu Orchestra, Van der Graaf Generator, or Nektar. When they'd look at him, perplexed, Tim would rattle off a bunch of notes on both of his double-decker keyboards with some heavy modulation and delay, then say something like, "You know *that* one." Nobody ever did, because they weren't real songs. The fake-sounding bands he'd listed were real, but Tim couldn't play like those hep cats. He didn't care much for practicing, he just liked being in bands, doing drugs, and chasing tail.

After a gig one night at the Wild Blue, Tim hooked up with

this one broad called Leslie. Pretty soon, she was comin' 'round, sayin' she was pregs and Tim had to marry her. So he did. But he didn't wanna give up being cool. Within months of the first kid comin' along, she was knocked up again. Tim had to start bringin' in some bread.

What he did was he started a telephone psychic line. You know the ones you see on TV with LaToya or Miss Cleo? Those don't go to any one single call-center associated with this personality or that. They're routed to hundreds of folks, answering the phone in their soiled underpants. Tim found it easy to coax people into working for him. They didn't even have to be psychic, he'd tell 'em, they'd just have to talk to lonely people. It was a great gig, he'd say. He sold it as an early work-from-home option that wasn't licking and stamping bulk mail or selling mascara and burp-free lids door-to-door. He'd considered getting into the phone-sex business, but figured those callers expected a little more *acting*. The people he'd hire, he'd pay them ten-bucks for every hour they were on the phone. Meanwhile, he'd charge \$1.99 for the first minute and \$2.99 for each additional minute. "If you can't keep the caller on for at least five minutes," he'd tell the newbies, "I can't pay you for that call. I'd be losing money." Turns out, most people will call those lines and talk for a couple of minutes, then hang up and call back to talk to someone new until they find a psychic they like. And this is why so many of the people who call these lines think their personal psychic really 'knows' them – because they'd called over and over until they found the telemarketer who would tell them what they wanted to hear, how they wanted to hear it.

All Tim had to do was get the phone logs and send the bill to Miss Cleo % Psychic Readers Network % the Federal Trade Commission. And pay the phone-monkeys, of course. He'd

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considered not payin' them, but after all that mess with Psychic Friends Network, he decided he'd better pay them for their over-five-minute calls. It's a good thing they weren't employees, then he'd have to pay for *all* the time they spent on the phone. And some jackass would prob'ly sue him for 'on-call' pay when his phone wasn't ringing or insurance or some shit.

Tim could login to the server and rank his readers – so the ones who did the best got first priority when the phone rang. Even though it was all profit for those early hangups, the callers who stayed on for hours, those were the real money-makers. Stay-at-home moms and the permanently-disabled and recovering alcoholics waited for the phone to ring. They'd hang on every word of other moms asking if their adult children were safe and would tell them that their kids loved them. They'd reassure the disabled old woman that she was doing the right thing by calling so they could see what the cards said to do about her house being foreclosed. They'd tell the addict that it was best for their recovery to call again tomorrow just to check in. They'd call back, day-after-day, too, askin' for the same psychic. Tim would bleed the high-interest credit cards of those lonely suckers dry, one minute at a time. Meanwhile, his payroll philosophy was \$0.00 for the first five minutes, \$0.16 for each additional minute.

What he really lived for was the *scene*. With the ol' ball and chains at home, he needed to get out more than ever. He was gettin' older and scoring with groupies twice his age was getting harder. It was cool in his twenties, but now it was gross. *Epecially since half of them were dead!* He tried for a while to be the guy twice-their-age that the newcomers made an anonymous mistake with. That was his 'move'. Always casual, like he didn't care if they fucked or not. He'd consider himself suave and not-at-all-desperate when he'd

walk over to some sexy, young thang and, instead of introducing himself, he'd say, "If ya ever wanna have somethin' discreet on the side, I won't say nothin' if you don't." If she didn't immediately respond, he'd chuckle and say, "Just fuckin' with ya," and maunder away, but to Tim it was swagger.

Sometime early-on into the new millennium, Tim found an advert posted up at the Guitar Center for a 90's-rock tribute band lookin' for a keyboardist. It wasn't his thang, but they had to be 'bout half his age if they were playin' those tunes. The flier said, "Alanis Morissette, Tori Amos, Sheryl Crow," amongst the list of Seattle grunge bands. That had to mean they had some hot chiquita banana on lead vocals. He tore the flier from the corkboard and took it with him. Out to his *classic* V-dub Dasher. Sure, the paint was faded and chipped and there were a couple of dings where he'd drunkenly backed it into someone else's car behind the Cadillac Club or The Tropicana. Or The Zoo. Or Swanky's. Either way, it still ran like a champ and he could fit his keyboards in the back.

Tim sat in the driver's seat and called up the number on the torn, letter-sized solicitation.

"Hello?" The voice on the other end sounded still-asleep.

"Yo, brotha! How you doin'? I'm callin' 'bout your keyboard band. I mean yer band. I'm keyboard. I'm Tim."

"Oh, hey!" The voice in the handheld speaker perked up. The voice told him about the band. There was two chicks on the mic, Blackup singers, Tim liked to call 'em, regardless of their race. Nobody in the band was dating anybody else in the band. Those sounded like pretty good odds. He always made sure to ask, saying, "I just wanna make sure it ain't a Fleetwood Mac deal," or, "There's no Yoko's in the band, right?" If the singer was dating the guitar player or whatev, he'd act like that was super cool, then never call

'em back.

Tim showed up with his instruments in the early evening to a two-story office building a block up the main drag from all the bars and nightclubs, Tower Street. Seemed like a strange place to rehearse a rock band, but he'd played stranger.

The guy in charge, it looked like – the same dude from the phone – helped Tim get setup and plugged all the line-out cords from his keyboards into the PA system. Tim started wailin' on a mock-ELP riff using one of his loudest synth-organ patches.

"One sec, bro, lemme get you dialed in," Shaun was standin' at the mixer where he'd plugged in Tim's boards. The board was one of two mounted in the lid of one of those rolling road-cases. Below those were rack-mounted preamps and power supplies. Reverbs and delays. Lexicon and Alesis and Roland logos amid LEDs and VU-meters.

"So what chu doing at this space, bruv? There's a rehearsal spot right down the way." Tim pointed south on the street that crossed Tower Street with his clove-cigarette holding hand.

"Well, It's gonna be a gallery soon, I hope." Shaun fumbled to light his own cigarette. His hands always got shaky after playing guitar. Not *while* playing guitar and not before, either. It wasn't nervousness about his own playing or having someone new around, just something that happened.

"Right on, very hep, bruv." Tim lingered on a drag from his black-papered smoke. "I could help you out. I'm in – all the way. You gotta great lil thang goin' here. Very cool, very cool."

"Thanks, man. I hope it goes well. I'd really like to make a contribution to the arts and culture around here. There's some great talent if you can find it. We could be the next Seattle or Portland

or Nashville. Well, not Nashville, but you get what I mean. It just needs to be organized right is all. This is just a start.”

“That’s great, man. *You’re* great.” Tim flicked his spent butt into the gutter and lit a fresh one while the rest of the band waited polite-impatiently to get back to rehearsal. They were glad to have finally found a keyboard player, but shit, the landlord was only cool with them using the space for a few hours a week to rehearse, so as not to piss off the other tenants.

“We should get something going, bruv. I mean it. This band, the gallery, let’s do it!”

The gallery, The Green Room, took off fast. Less than six months after meeting Tim, Shaun was ready to move to a bigger place. Their rental at the office building, even though they had the largest suite, was so crowded on the nights that they were open that the entire upstairs walkway and down both exterior stairwells would be packed with people waiting to go in, or who had just come out, drinking canned beers or cocktails from red cups. It was always after traditional banker’s hours, and they tried to clean up, but the parking lot would be littered with cigarette butts and empty beverage containers on a near-nightly basis. Even when they were technically closed, there was always a parade of fuckhead musicians and actors and singers hanging around, having impromptu karaoke jams on Shaun’s equipment. Snorting coke from his plexiglass picture frames or hand-carved-rosewood Osborne paint box, replete with red and white lead paints. Scratching at them with razor blades and pocket knives and keys. The frames and box, not the paint. That would have been funny, though.

Down Tower Street, out of the main stretch of neon and

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drunks, Shaun found a warehouse space that would work perfectly for the *new* The Green Room. It was a thousand square-feet of emptiness, just waiting to be filled. A tiny office and restroom sat in one corner. It wasn't so far off the beaten path that people wouldn't come from the bars. A drunk could stumble there and back without a problem. He rented it immediately.

After the lease paperwork went through and Shaun gave notice to the landlord at the other space, he packed everything and moved it down the street in several small trips. Bringing the PA speakers and the mixing rack down the stairs by himself was near impossible.

He'd finished setting up the lighting and plugging in all of the DMX cables to the light board that sat above the sound board when the lid of the rack was open. It had taken him hours to build the trusses at the new spot and to wind the cables neatly through the triangle openings. After testing that the lighting was all working on the triggers and manually, Shaun started laying out the sound equipment, imagining where this sculpture or that floating-wall of paintings might go in conjunction with the speakers and lights. He paced out an area on the concrete floor where a band could play and stacked his drums and amps in that corner and drew his imagined floor-plan in a spiral notebook.

Once everything from the move had been rebuilt and tested, Shaun went out to the parking lot and lit a cigarette. The distinctive rumble of Tim's Volkswagen came down the street, racing into a parking stall, then backing up to the open door so its bumper was nearly touching.

"Lookie what I found, brutha!" Tim started pulling shards of used carpet from the back and tossing them on the asphalt. Shaun stared on, astounded. *What the hell was he going to do with*

a shitload of mismatched carpet pieces? And more importantly, why was he unloading them here?

“We can put it down in the main area of the spot!” *What. The. Fuck.*

Before Tim had finished unloading, his friend, Mike, arrived with a carpet seamer and the two of them set to gluing the segments together until they had a twenty-five-foot-square drunken AIDS quilt. They stood outside, smoking the cigarettes and drinking the beers that Shaun had brought, while they waited for the glue-tape to dry. Mike and Tim then each stood at one end and rolled their rug into a misshapen tube before attempting to navigate it through the six-by-ten ‘office’ and around a 90-degree turn to reach the warehouse space.

Inside, they plopped the disgusting mess in the middle of the floor, sending mites and hepatitis dust into the air to settle on the drums and amps and mixing boards. They began rolling it out. All over Shaun’s newly-laid cables. The fiber-bottom of the carpet pressed against his speakers and drums. Shaun kept his mouth shut. This was typical Tim. He’d get some crazy idea in his head and, no matter how ridiculous it was, he’d carry on with it, taking anyone and everyone along for the ride if he could. Shaun tried to stay out of the way while all of this was going on. Played it cool. Had a beer and pretended to be working on setting some equipment up.

What happened next, Shaun was only too late to stop. From outside, Mike and Tim came in with a pair of two-gallon hudson sprayers. Shaun assumed they were going to spray some chemicals on the rug. Pretreat it before using a Rug Doctor on it or something. Within a few sprays in the enclosed space, Shaun could tell it wasn’t cleaning chemicals. They had filled the tanks

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with red clothes-dye concentrate and were walking along the fetid carpet, making sweeping lines of red over the browns and grays of the fibers. By the time he'd noticed, Shaun figured he may as well let them get it over with.

Within the first month, Tim was using The Green Room as his own private rehearsal and hangout space. During the day, while his wife was working as a nurse, and while Tim was supposed to be working, himself, he'd bring some day-drunk from the bar back and fuck her on an air mattress atop the red carpet.

Shaun had given him a key when first moving in. As far as he was concerned, they were partners. Tim had been there cheerleading – and drinking his beer – since opening night at the old The Green Room. The 90's band had fallen apart and Shaun had decided to take a break from music, but Tim was still trying to play with anyone who would have him for a few months. His bands would make a mess during their rehearsals, but Tim would come back the next day, cap-in-hand, apologizing and promising it wouldn't happen again. He'd tried to include Shaun as his newest group's sound and light tech in an obvious ploy to retain access to the room and equipment. He'd have Shaun make art for press kits, promising that as soon as they started gigging, they'd give him an even cut, same as the band members made. One-sixth of nothing.

Still, The Green Room saw its success. The 'art hop' events and other Tower Street street fairs and car shows brought a slew of people through the door. A few of them actually bought pieces from the local artists that Shaun rotated through displaying each month. Some visitors would leave a few bucks in the tip jar by the door that he'd parse out to the artists and musicians at the end of the night, even if it was only thirty-or-forty bucks each. They

made enough to keep the doors open another month.

Tim enjoyed being at the center of the scene. Playing generous host while Shaun fixed a mic or refilled the ice. He kept up his routine up for a couple of years – ditching out from work to bang an old lady, partying late into the night while the “ol’ battle axe” waited for him, tending to his now-teenaged children. Once, Tim drunkenly admitted, he had left the gas running on the stove on purpose. He’d hoped that when he got home after a night of drinking, that he’d “find” his family. What he found was the fire department at his house when he got back that night, but no sign of a fire. Through all of this, the trashing of the studio, the cheating on his wife, the sound equipment that was slowly getting thinner, Shaun looked the other way. He wanted to avoid the confrontation. Tim was a dick behind closed doors. Shaun knew Tim was shit-talking him to others just as much as Tim was shit-talking everybody else to him.

The final straw for Shaun was – actually, there were two final straws. The first final straw was when Tim let his bar-buddy Steve’s adult kid rehearse there unsupervised with his punk band. They were so loud that someone called the cops. Nobody had ever had the cops called on them for noise at The Green Room before. They were using all of Shaun’s gear, so he knew they must have been ruining his equipment if they were that loud. That wouldn’t have been a big deal by itself. Every band gets the cops called on them eventually. What really made Shaun mad was that they broke the window. It was a useless window that went between the little office and the main warehouse. He’d hung a blanket over it to maintain the aesthetic of the space. Well, above the office, in a storage loft, was all of Shaun’s extra equipment. Art supplies, musical instruments. One of the little cumfunguses decided to

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try to climb up to check out what was stored there. There was no ladder. He jumped and grabbed the edge of the office wall, which was only half-as-high as the ceilings in the warehouse. When he did this, he jumped from the couch Shaun had under the concealed window, smashing his legs through the glass. The blanket protected the lucky smegma-brain from any cuts. What was especially shitty of them, though, was that they denied that it happened. The window was fine when they left and all that. Refused to pay for it, or the snare head they broke. And a nice drum throne disappeared that night, too.

But the final final straw was when Shaun caught Tim sending messages to Mike and Mark and the other guys in the new Cue-Tip Band. They thought the name was a clever play on Q-tips cotton swabs because you'd also 'cue' up a record. Like a radio DJ or whatever. The idea that Q-tips could already be some marketing witticism based on *cue* sticks went completely beyond their combined three-hundred years use of the English language when Shaun tried to explain that the name wasn't as brilliant as they thought it was

It's not like Shaun was going through Tim's phone or anything like that. The dumb twit was using the Google Voice number that Shaun had signed up for, but had ported to Tim's phone, for calls about the band. Tim's voicemail said, "You've reached the Gypsy Psychic Network," or some shit, so they needed something for a Cue-Tip line. Or a Cue Tip-Line. He couldn't figure out how to download the app and set it up himself, so Shaun did it for him. And he used a Gmail account that he'd also set up for the band. So when he logged in to check the band email one day and saw dozens of messages between Tim and those guys talking about ousting him from his own business and taking over

in a mutiny, he was more than nonplussed.

Shaun went home agitated and paced around his living room for a couple of hours, trying to figure out his next course of action. He wasn't making any money on Tim and his bands – they just took advantage of him for a rehearsal space or free design work. Okay to burn that bridge. None of the people Tim hung around with were anybody. Old hangers-on from the 'JUST SAY NO' era who only brought problems and stench. The Green Room was a great spot, but it was barely solvent and Shaun spent countless hours every month cleaning, setting up, tearing down, and all of the other behind-the-scenes stuff that goes with making an art gallery and music venue happen. All-in-all, he was taking a loss across the board, both personally and financially, with this project. It was time, he decided, to call it quits.

The next morning, Shaun arrived at The Green Room, half-expecting to see Tim's POS in the parking lot for one of his noontime trysts. The lot was empty. Shaun backed up to the door to save himself from walking a hundred times across the driveway as he moved close to everything he owned from this warehouse into his tiny, one-bedroom apartment.

When he opened the door from the office to the warehouse, the alarm went off. It did this every time. It wasn't one of those alarms that called the cops or anything. It just screamed at you when the door was opened. Shaun punched the four-digit code into the box by feel and turned on the lights to the warehouse.

The halide bulbs flickered dimly as their ballasts warmed up. In the shadowy strobe, Shaun could tell things were different since last night. Probably Tim's geezerfuck friends drinking for five hours after a rehearsal and moving shit around again. But when the white light illuminated the space, Shaun could see it

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was empty. The speakers, the rolling-rack with the two mixing boards and its collection of processors and amps. Drums, guitar amplifiers, paintings. They even took down the lighting trusses that took Shaun half a day to build. They left the abhorrent red carpet.

Outside, Shaun chain-smoked and waited for the police to arrive. He wasn't sure if he should call 911 or not, so he called the non-emergency number and it took them *thirty-five* minutes to answer. Then they told him they'd send someone when they were available. Whenever that would be.

Once the cops did finally arrive, they asked him for a list of what was stolen and if he might know who could have taken it.

"Of course, it was Tim Pugsley," Shaun told them, having the list already prepared. "That dumbass turned the alarm back on when he left!"

"How do you know it was him? Is your alarm monitored? Does it have different codes for each user?" Fucking lazy pig knew it didn't. Shaun had shown it to him first thing when he got there.

"If you guys search his house, you'll find the stuff."

"We have to have probable cause to get a search warrant."

Are you fucking kidding me?! Shaun thought. If Tim having a key and the code and knowing what was in there and Shaun showing the cop his text messages that had been copied to the Gmail account wasn't probable cause, what was?

The lardass in the blue uniform gave Shaun a case number and waddled his gun-toting, waste-of-life self back to his patrol car and peeled out of the parking lot, nearly hitting Shaun's car in the process.

A couple weeks later, after not hearing anything from the police, he called the robbery department with his case-number

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in hand. The angry-sounding man told him they'd looked into it, went and talked to Tim. He told them that anything he has around his house is his. The detective asked Shaun for receipts or proof of ownership, but Shaun had bought most of his equipment second-hand, over a period of years, from random musicians and artists. He always paid in cash. Or weed, sometimes.

“Well, if you find anything, let us know. Otherwise, we're considering this case closed.”

Chapter Eleven

Consonance

“Some sad news this morning for the radio KYNO family. Former on-air personality Art Farkus passed away last night at his home. He was eighty-three.”

I haven't heard that name in forever, the old man thinks. Art used to hang around the local music scene. He played in some of those cover bands that would gig at the Sequoia Brewery and other bars that let old men pretend to live out the dreams of their youth.

The overhead speakers transition to an early-eighties Christopher Cross ballad. The old man pretends to scan a ten-pound bag of dry kibble at the self checkout. In their just-open hours, the store doesn't have an employee stationed to monitor the cashierless registers. He can't remember the last time he stole, even from a faceless billion-dollar retail conglomerate, but he justified it by telling himself that this was truly stealing a loaf of bread to feed his family.

Out at the truck, he tears open the top and sets it on the floorboard in the back seat, letting Shenzi eat her fill.

They travel south on West Street, wind flapping Shenzi's ears back in the mirror. After a few blocks, the old man turns left. This street – across town from the pretentious office blocks and chain restaurants – is lined with crumbling Tiendas Todas and gift shops. Outside of liquor stores and barber shops, groups of men

smoke cigarettes and drink beer from tall-cans.

Before the neighborhood gentrifies and gives way to tightly-packed boutiques and themed bars, the old man turns onto a side street and into the lot in front of a nondescript commercial space. He gets out of the truck, leaving Shenzi behind, windows down. She seems ready to leap from the window to follow, so he tells her to wait. That he'll be right back. She sighs and leans her chin across the rubber window frame. Very moody, very teenageresque. The metal-bar-over-glass door to the building is locked. The old man pulls the truck keys from his pocket and tries the solitary #66 door key in lock, but it doesn't work. *Is it possible they've changed the locks on me? You'd think the landlord would have said something first.* He cups his hands around his eyes and tries to peer into the tinted glass, but is unable to see into the darkened room.

A group of gangbangers are watching him from across the street. They nod to each other and circle out from behind the gold Cutlass Supreme. Shenzi pins her ears nervously at the approaching assemblage. Not wanting to spend any more time here if he's not going to get inside, the old man returns to the truck and routes them back to West Street, heading north, the way they came.

At the intersection before the SaveMart they'd previously visited, he turns right, then left into a neighborhood. The result of the 1950's urban sprawl and first round of white flight. Unlike the homes in the neighborhood immediately south, these houses don't have the uniformity of the Craftsman-style residences from the previous decade. Google, Modernist, Ranch, Southwest. All placed randomly along the sidewalk. Smushed between a Cape Cod and a Neo-Colonial is what the old man remembers from art class as Minimal Traditional, a product of the Great Depression.

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The clapboard exterior of this house is faded green with a brick facade, also painted green.

The old man buzzes the doorbell and waits. He doesn't hear any activity inside the house. After knocking on the door, he walks around to the side and peeks in the windows. Shabby furniture dating back to the seventies, a desktop computer against one wall. The gate to the back yard is unlocked, so the old man lets himself in and walks around the back. The grass is brown and unkempt. On the patio, beside a sliding-glass door, an ancient Weber barbecue overflows with cigarette butts.

The old man pulls the door open to find another old man, long, gray beard draped over his equally-gray chest hair. The shirtless old man looks up at the shadowy figure that's appeared in his doorway, backlit by the morning sun.

"Hey, lemme call ya back," he says into his over-ear headset. "Hey, who is that?"

"It's me."

"Oh, shit, brotha! I didn't recognize you with the beard. How ya been?" The shirtless man struggles to stand up from his desk to embrace the old man in an unreciprocated hug. "C'mon." He urges the old man back through the doorway and onto the patio, where he sits on an Igloo cooler, plug missing, puddle underneath. He motions in the direction of the single frayed-wicker chair that is next to the Weber ashtray. The gray-chested old man offers the old man a cigarette from his pack as he lights one of his own.

"Thanks, quit," the old man waves at him.

"Right on, man. Good for you!" After a long drag, "So what's new?"

"Fuck, man, I don't even know. I feel like I've been driving around all day trying to find my damn keys and phone" Shenzi

comes through the open gate and around the corner, head down, but back end wagging the front. “Shit, sorry.”

“No worries. It’s all good. You need a phone? I got an extra ‘round here somewheres.”

“No. Thanks, man. I need *my* phone because it has all of my passwords and other shit in it.”

“Did you quit this?” Tim pulls a dirty glass bong from behind the cooler and stuffs some fairly shitty, but not brick-pack-shitty, bud into the oversized bowl.

“Nope.” The old man reaches from his chair and takes the resin-stained piece from the other old man and flicks the Zippo cigarette lighter that follows. He passes it back and the old man without the shirt takes a hit. They continue this ritual until the old man, it doesn’t matter which, lights the bowl and black ash is sucked into the water in lieu of smoke.

“Well, fuck. You still making art?” The shirtless old man passes the shirted old man a lukewarm beer from the cooler.

“Yeah, trying. You?”

“I get the guitar out every now an’ again, but that’s about it. Gettin’ too old to play out. Between losing my senses and my knees goin’ to shit. Still got my hearing and my fingers work, but can’t taste beer or smell pussy no more. And I can’t be standin’ at the keyboards all night, neither.”

“Yeah, I feel ya.”

“Well, you still got a few years to catch up,” the older old man chuckles.

“Maybe not. My brain’s gone all to shit. Half the time, I can’t remember what I’m doing or how I got somewhere.”

“Dude, that’s a trip. So you like blackout and wake up later or what?”

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“Nah, I always know what I’m doing, but then I’ll suddenly forget. Early-onset dementia, maybe. You know how it is, trying to get a straight answer from a doctor.”

“Well, fuck. I’m sorry to hear that. I really am. You know that’s what mom had before she passed.”

“Yeah, I remember you had to move in with her for a while. Move in here, I guess.”

“Well, I hope it works out for you. You’ve always been such a good guy. Always taking care of everyone else first. You don’t deserve that, bro.”

“Is what it is, I guess. Sorry to hear about your shit, too.”

“Ah, it’s just getting old. Surprised I made it this far.”

“Yeah, I know what you mean. The way we used to party back in the day. I didn’t think I’d make it past thirty.”

“Two.”

“Thirty-two. Shit, I can’t believe you remember that. I don’t know why it was always thirty-two for me. Like I was cursed to die then. Not at twenty-seven like all the other artists, but thirty-two. Well, as you can see, that didn’t happen.”

“Heard you got married, too.”

“Damn, it has been a long time. Married and divorced. You know me, just going with the flow.”

“Ha! Sounds like my marriage – coming from a bet.”

“Yeah, a bet that turned into two kids and like thirty years together.”

“Best twelve years of my life,” he laughs. Even back when he was married, the bearded old man used this joke. In front of said wife. It didn’t amuse the old man back then and wasn’t funny now.

“What happened there, anyway?” The old man finishes his

beer and reaches for the cigarette pack.

“Can you believe that fuckin’ bitch was cheating on me while I was here taking care of moms?”

“Uh, yeah. Didn’t you cheat on her all the time?”

“I mean, we had an understanding, though. She actually got a boyfriend. Like for dates and shit. He would sleep over in my bed, man.”

“Gotcha. Well, that’ll happen. Kids?”

“Linds is playing bass now. Haven’t heard from Jeremy in a while. Got on the meth.”

“Aw, fuck. Fuckin’ meth, man.”

“You want another beer?” The bearded man stands slowly and shambles inside. The old man follows through the ‘minimalist’ house. From the front, it looks like it couldn’t be more than five-hundred square feet. Inside, it’s twisting corridors. One hallway to the living room, another to the kitchen, another to the bedrooms, and yet *another* to the back office and patio. There are no passages from one to another that would make it easy to get from one part of the other. Decades of add-ons and remodels. Living in this house means really getting your steps in.

The old man goes down the wrong hallway and has to go through the living room and another corridor to get to the kitchen, where the other old man is pulling bottles of Coors Light out of the refrigerator. He passes one to the old man and they clink them together before drinking.

“Good to see you, man,” the old man with the long beard says to the old man with the short beard. They trek back to the patio for more bong rips and catching up. Memories of the old days.

“Well, I guess I better get back to whatever the hell I was

doing before I came here.”

“Oh, man, one more. C’mon. For old times.”

“Okay, one more, I’ll grab them.”

The old man goes back into the house through the glass door and takes some wrong turns, ending up by the back bedrooms. He takes the opportunity to use the guest bathroom to relieve himself of the last couple beers before eventually making his way to the kitchen. Even when he was visiting this house regularly, he never quite figured out the floorplan.

He pulls a couple of cold bottles from the fridge and twists off their caps. As he’s getting ready to follow the hallway out to the back – the one he didn’t enter the kitchen through – he gives one of the knobs on the stove a twist.

“So you still doing business?” The old man asks the older man, handing him a beer.

“Oh yeah, doing good there. Run the whole show from this back bedroom.” He points at the desk, topped with a wide-screen display and surrounded by banks of buttons and flashing lights. The older man shows the old man the rack-mounted interfaces, explaining that he can use them to control phone systems across the country. As much as he likes technology, the old man finds the explanation boring.

“Okay, now I really gotta go.”

“Alright, don’t be a stranger, though.” The older man, still shirtless, hugs the old man again.

“C’mon, Shenz.” She follows the old man through the still-open gate and back to the truck. From his pocket, the old man takes the wallet and gold Zippo lighter that he swiped on his way out and sticks them in the cubby under the stereo. They back out of the driveway and traverse the mismatched neighborhood to the

main thoroughfare.

“Well, now where the hell are we going to go?” The old man asks Shenzi in the back seat. She doesn’t answer.

They’re driving north on West Street. Back to the posh side of town. If you could call anywhere in this rookery posh. Just past the SaveMart, traffic slows to a crawl and, eventually, a stop. Ahead, a construction crew is doing something at the side of the road. A familiar oversized pickup with flashing yellow beacons is parked off to the side, several meters from where the staff is working. A towering man, close to seven-feet tall and rail-thin stands beside the open door of the truck, shouting something into his phone. The old man is used to faces being featureless. But only in his memory. When a person is right in front of him, he can see all of their features. When he closes his eyes, they’re gone. This man, though, the one yelling into the phone, is actually featureless. Like a child’s drawing. Aside from being bright red with anger, there is nothing memorable about this guy’s face. Maybe that’s what makes the old man remember him. Or maybe it’s his gargantuan size.

Pulling his own truck over to the shoulder, the old man tells Shenzi to wait. He gets out and reaches into the bed of the pickup. With a length of rope, he ties a car battery to a two-gallon can of gasoline. It’s sealed, like a can of peaches. A ration in case of emergency. He grabs a few other things and waits, holding on to them without removing his hands from the back of the truck. The angry phone man squints at him, then makes his way to the workers, proceeding to yell at them.

The old man takes his battery and gas-can assembly in one hand and a propane tank in the other and walks casually toward the “Boring Company” branded truck with its flashy amber lights.

Chapter Eleven

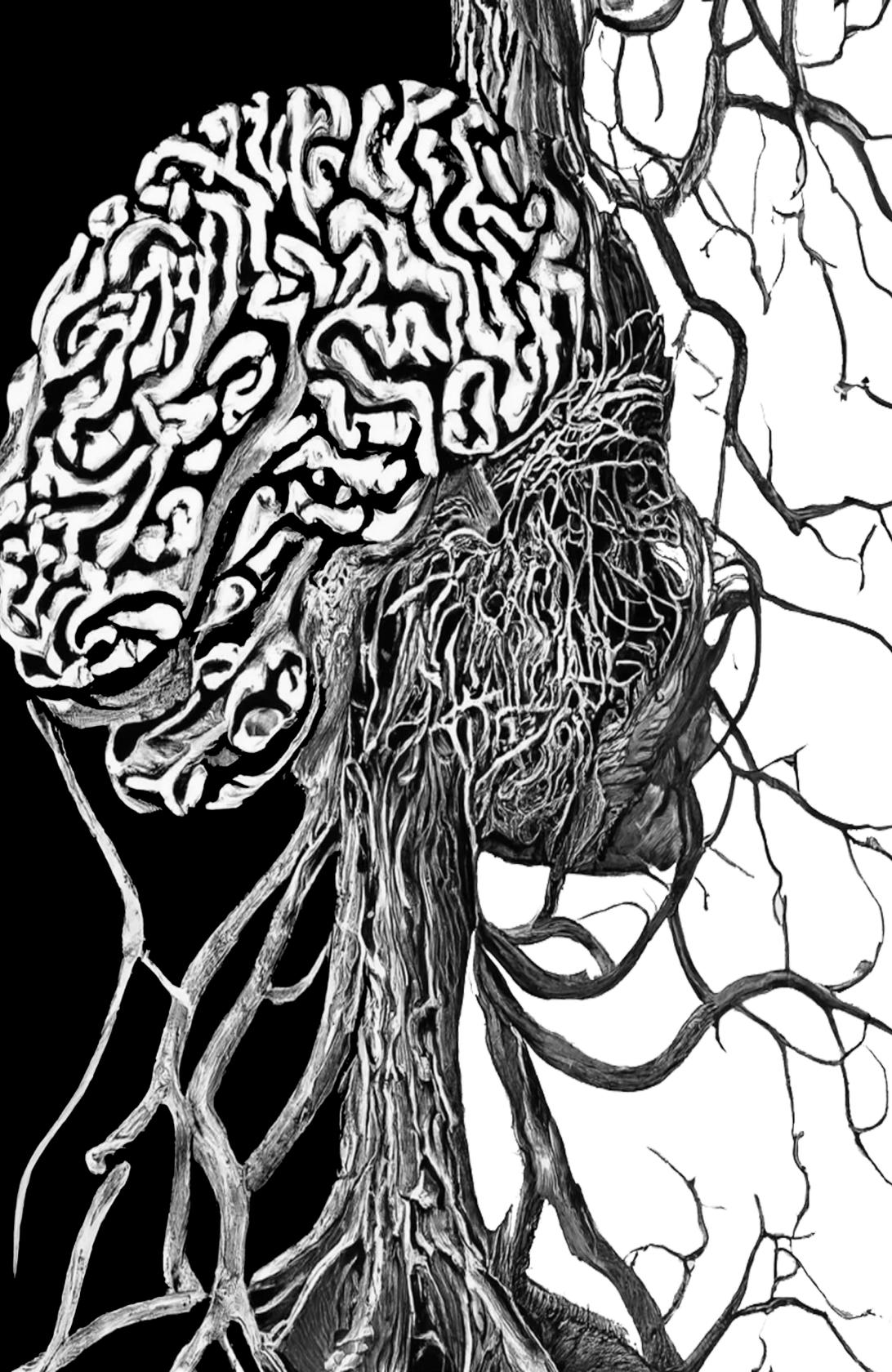
After placing the items in the back of the angry man's truck, he pulls at a short length of bale-wire that he'd wrapped around the top of the propane tank. With one end of the wire, he circles the negative terminal of the battery. With the other, the positive. The battery starts smoking. The old man makes quick for his truck.

Back at the job site, workers are pointing at their boss's truck. The old man can't hear, but he can see their lips moving to say, "smoke".

The giant with no face runs toward the truck. He reaches into the cab through the open door and grabs a fire extinguisher. The old man is backing up along the shoulder, where traffic is stopped. He reverses several hundred feet into the middle of the congested intersection. Cars blare their horns at him, but it's not like they're going anywhere, so they can fuck off.

The gangling man pulls the pin on the fire extinguisher as he circles the built-in toolboxes to gain access to the bed through the tailgate. As he's coming around the corner, blasting the scarlet smoke-trumpet at the back of his truck, an explosion shakes the earth and sends a ball of fire hundreds of feet into the air. The wiry man is blasted backward, where he slams into the windshield of the vehicle three cars behind him. The driver of the damaged silver Camry jumps out, screaming, and runs away from her car.

A second explosion sounds, breaking glass in a fifty-foot radius. The toolbox-and-lights truck splits in half. The force of the blast spins one end around to meet the other, so the front and rear wheels are touching. Fire spews from the truck. Pools of diesel fuel ignite from the heat, creating havoc. Cars attempt to drive through the job site. Workers dive into the drainage ditch. Other drivers abandon their vehicles and run in the opposite direction. The old man shifts into 'D' and heads west from West Street.



Chapter Twelve

Purloin

“He’s a drug addict, your honor.” Amanda batted her eyelashes, mascara, eyeliner, and blue eyeshadow at the judge.

A fucking what? Shaun thought. All he’d ever done, as far as she knew, was smoke pot and she was the one who had introduced him to it.

“What do you mean by that, miss?”

Yeah, bitch, explain.

“Well, Your Honor,” she looked at her attorney, “He’s a loser, he shouldn’t get to see Todd because I can’t trust him.”

I’m the loser? The one who worked fourteen hours a day to support your fatass while you watched TV or fucked a bunch of other dudes. How can a subjective word like that even be allowed in a courtroom?!

“And, in your belief, does he pose a threat of harm to you or your child?” Amanda’s attorney, in her blue skirt-suit, took a step forward.

“Yes, I’m afraid for our safety every day.”

Of what? You’re the one who would hit me. You’re the one who broke my eardrum. You’re the one who made this burn scar.

“Thank you, Mrs. Buresch-Schweitzer-Feurerstein-Schmollinger, you can step down.”

“No more witnesses, your honor.” Amanda and her attorney sat down at the table to the left of the aisle. Stage-right.

“Mr. Torigian?”

“Your honor,” the bald, goateed man with expensive glasses stood up. “I’d like to call my client, Shaun Vetter, to the stand.”

“Objection. Discovery.”

Discovery of what? There’s nothing to know. I literally have nothing.

“Sustained.”

What in the actual goat-fucking hell? Amanda can go up there and make up lies about me with no corroboration and I can’t even defend myself? How is that allowed?

Marcus, Shaun’s attorney, looked over at Amanda’s attorney in what Shaun thought must be some kind of collusion. He didn’t object to her objection. Didn’t ask to approach the bench. Or anything that even Lionel Hutz would know to do. Marcus promised he’d ‘take care of everything’ at the friends-and-family discount. He knew Shaun through the local music scene. It was how he found most of his clients. It was the reason he played saxophone – as a way to meet naive DUI and child-support clients.

“Your honor?”

“Mr. Vetter, do not disrupt my courtroom.” *Honorable* Brian Austin tilted his fat, bald head down to peer over his Bulgari half-glasses, multiplying his chins exponentially.

I’ve never so much as smoked a cigarette in front of Todd. Amanda will drop him off with whoever – her actual drug-addict sister, for one – or her child-molesting grandparents – so she can go have hot-tub orgies with casino coworkers. She literally forged travel documents and took him to Japan to marry the infantry guy she was cheating on me with. My ex-best friend. One of the many who have given her a fertilized egg, their last name, and a shit-ton

of alimony and child support.

“If I could just...”

“Do you know what contempt of court is? Do you want me to hold you in contempt?” The Michelin-Man’s pale face and scalp flushed bright red.

“No. I only...” The judge stood up, kicking his giant top-grain leather throne back. He stormed out of the courtroom through the rear entrance. Shaun sat there, staring. First at the door, then at the faces of the court staff. It must have sucked to work with such a psycho every day. But that’s what they got for choosing to be part of the ~~corruption exploitation extortion~~ legal system.

The judge, the *honorable, venerable* Brian Austin, like a jack-o-lantern in a neck-high Victorian mourning dress, raged into the room, clutching a massive tome. Double the size of your typical bible. He slammed the book on his desk and glared at it as he flipped pages, licking his meaty toe-thumb between turns.

“Except as provided in subdivisions B, C, and D, a person guilty of any of the following contempts of court is guilty of a misdemeanor:

“One: Disorderly, contemptuous, or insolent behavior committed during the sitting of a court of justice, in the immediate view and presence of the court, and directly tending to interrupt its proceedings or to impair the respect due to its authority.”

So, basically, whatever you want.

“Two: Behavior specified in paragraph one that is committed in the presence of a referee, while actually engaged in a trial or hearing, pursuant to the order of a court, or in the presence of a jury while actually sitting for the trial of a cause, or upon an inquest or other proceeding authorized by law.

Didn't you just say that?

“Three: A breach of the peace, noise, or other disturbance directly tending to interrupt the proceedings of the court.”

Gotta love how the laws in the US are written. Find the most general terms possible to hold the citizens to. Meanwhile, make the most complicated laws possible when it comes to judicial accountability.

“Four: Willful disobedience of the terms, as written, of a process or court order or out-of-state court order, lawfully issued by a court, including orders pending trial.

Like when Amanda took Todd to Japan, despite a custody order giving me weekly visitation? The one that says he can't leave this or the neighboring county. Or the one that says I have to pay her, despite her violations of the standing visitation order?

“Five: Resistance willfully offered by a person to the lawful order or process of a court.

Fucking fascists.

“Six: The contumacious and unlawful refusal of a person to be sworn as a witness or, when so sworn, the like refusal to answer a material question.

These assholes are out of control. Everyone should refuse to testify all the time if it suits them.

“Seven: The publication of a false or grossly inaccurate report of the proceedings of a court.

Like all of the lies Amanda has told today? Or the lies she'll tell later?

“Eight: Presenting to a court having power to pass sentence upon a prisoner under conviction, or to a member of the court, an affidavit, testimony, or representation of any kind, verbal or written, in aggravation or mitigation of the punishment to be imposed upon the prisoner, except as provided in this code.

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What? Come again? Habeas dictarkratia.

“Nine: Willful disobedience of the terms of an injunction that restrains the activities of a criminal street gang or any of its members, lawfully issued by a court, including an order pending trial.”

The *honorable, venerable, benevolent* Brian Austin finished his rant and closed the proceedings. Deciding that Amanda could basically do whatever the hell she wanted. Move wherever she wants. She hits her kids all the time, according to them. Her second son cowers at the sight of a wooden spoon. Terrible things spew from her mouth behind closed doors, battering and breaking the spirits of her children like the splintering of wooden spoons on their backsides.

Amanda came back to California when Todd was four. Her marriage wasn't working out – big surprise. Though, apparently she didn't tell her husband. She told him she missed her family, blah, blah, blah. When she got back to California, she showed up one day at Shaun's place with Todd and the other kid. She confessed her undying love and said she wanted to have a family with Shaun, not her husband. So then what happened, this slimy bitch, she had this affair with Shaun, all the while he's thinking it's the real deal. She copied all of the messages of her affairs with him and other dudes she knew in her hometown and sent them all to the soldier-husband while he was somewhere on the other side of the world doing the robber baron's bidding. All the evidence, the dirty pictures, everything. Then she blocked him. She straight-up Dear-Johned him. Then she told Shaun about all of this and broke up with him, just about the time he and the kids had started bonding.

After that, she got knocked up and married a couple more

times and was living on thousands per month in child support. She'd randomly make her platoon of semen demons go vegan, or Catholic, or on the paleo diet, or Jehovah's Witness. Todd eventually got out. But not without receiving a firm white-republican stamp first, despite Shaun's best efforts in the little time they spent together. Amanda moved them around the country at a whim. Not that they'd have been much better off with the 'stability' of a traditional nuclear family, Shaun knew.

When Shaun left the courthouse that afternoon, he drove straight to the Sheriff's Department. He showed the 'community service' officer the custody order and explained how Amanda had left the country with his son, in direct violation thereof. They had Shaun fill out an eight-page report and said they'd have someone call. They didn't. When he finally called back, they told him the court order was "pretty old". There was no expiration date on it, he was sure of that. Still, the Sheriff's office told Shaun they weren't going to pursue it. Too bad, so sad.

Shaun's lawyer, Marcus had done a shit job, but promised, for another five-grand, he'd have his best people get on it and they'd reestablish custody. For several weeks, whenever Shaun would call for a progress report, Marcus would tell him they're working on it or somebody was supposed to call to interview him. They didn't, either. Marcus never reopened the case or had any specialists do anything. Shaun called the bar association, but since Marcus had been regularly billing for hours over the weeks – especially Shaun's calls for updates – they'd determined the retainer wasn't significant enough for them to investigate any malpractice.

And that was that. Shaun went on with his life. He did his art and design. He took regular verbal abuse from his parents for

not getting a “real job” and spending that money to get custody of his son. Like he was a terrible person for not making it his life’s mission. In all honesty, Shaun was exhausted. Todd was probably exhausted from having like five dads and twelve uncles. Shaun had seen the abuses of authority and lack of due process since he was a child. His entire life had been one person after another trying to exert their power over him. And for what? He didn’t have anything to take. His life was already miserable. People are perverse and sadistic.

Chapter Thirteen

Peregrination

The giant fucking diesel engine idles at the expired parking meter. The old man sits with one arm hanging out of the open window, wishing he'd bummed another cigarette. Shenzi has her head out the passenger side. She sniffs at pedestrians. Passersby admire her coat.

The old man got out earlier, when they stopped here, and locked the front wheels. He now turns the knob to 4WL and pulls the gear lever into its lowest position on the column.

Marcus, in his plaid-flannel jacket, is standing in front of the courthouse with Amanda's skirt-suited lawyer. They're laughing, gesticulating as they gossip. Groups in expensive brand-name clothes emerge from the front of the building, making lunch plans. Behind them, men in black dockers and cheap ties over short-sleeve button-shirts over undershirts keep their distance from women holding babies.

The truck roars to life. Nobody looks up. In this neighborhood – in this city – diesel trucks and used Nissans without mufflers and Harley Davidsons with hundred-watt stereos mixed seamlessly with the regular noise pollution of the city. The sirens and leaf blowers and cargo trains. Within seconds, Marcus and his abettor are pinned to the front bumper, desperately trying to claw their way onto the hood or off to the side as the concrete steps rake at their heels.

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Before they can make any upward or outward progress, the truck smashes into the glass doors of the courthouse, plowing through metal detectors and x-ray machines. People leap out of the way in the same fashion as they did at the construction site. The muffled sounds of crushing ribs in bulletproof vests come from either side as the wheels roll over the unsuspecting Sheriff's deputies.

The truck rattles to a stop at the Great Seal of The Great State of California of The Great Oligarchy of The Great United States of Great America. A star-and-stripe banner leans on one fender, a banner depicting a hunted-to-extinction bear leans on the other.

The old man opens his door and Shenzi, interested in checking out the action, jumps from the back seat and out the driver's side. While cops and men in overpriced suits peek around the corner to see if a bomb went off, the old man and Shenzi escape through the collapsed entrance amidst the panicked exodus.

Shenzi runs ahead and climbs into the passenger seat of a battered early-nineties Geo Metro. The old man gives chase to remove her from somebody else's car and finds the keys dangling from the ignition. Both of the vehicle's two doors are hanging open. The occupants, instead of driving away from the chaos, left on foot, it seems.

The old man closes the passenger door. Shenzi looks into the minuscule back seat, as this is normally her cue to evacuate the front, but the old man reassures her she can stay as he closes the door on his side. Sirens are approaching, drowning out the sounds of lawnmowers and the horns of impatient drivers trying to merge. He starts the motor and shifts the manual transmission into first gear. It's been a while since he's driven a stick, but after

a rough start and some chirped tires, they're speeding off in the direction opposite the nearing brigade of red-and-blue lights. On the highway, he reaches across the cabin and cranks the handle to roll down Shenzi's window.

Tyson stood across the street from the courthouse. He'd pulled his Jeep Wagoneer in cockeyed in front of the same expired meter that the old man had been parked at less than a half-hour earlier. While firefighters and paramedics ran in and out of the destroyed building, Tyson watched. He breathed hot steam at the seven-point star on his chest before polishing it with his sleeve. He followed the burnishment of the big star with the four five-point stars on either side of his collar in anticipation of the press. *Youngest Sheriff in County History*, he hyped himself.

"Good Evening," Tyson looked to the side of the ABC Action News camera, hoping he'd come across as casual and confident. "The suspect allegedly drove the vehicle you see behind me into the county courthouse building. Paramedics and rescue crews are currently assessing the situation. So far, five have been confirmed deceased, including two of our own deputies." The sheriff scowled into the camera and pulled the windscreened microphone closer to his face, forcing the cameraman to zoom in. Tyson admired himself out of the corner of his eye in the camera lens. He controlled the contour of his grin with the same affectation that he used to speak to the camera. Like an authority figure. *The* authority figure. *Not* a teenager stuck in a sixty-year-old body and stuffed into a bulletproof vest, his pockmarked face being broadcast live and in HD.

Tyson thought he'd found the perfect job. They paid him a hefty six figures to sit in a corner office and boss around cops.

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He was mad at the world and it made him feel good to take it out on people who would take it out on others. When a deputy would bring in a beaten and battered suspect, the sheriff would imagine that his employee had pictured his face on the bad guy and remembered the unprompted ass-chewing earlier in the day. He didn't care what his officers thought of him. As far as the voters were concerned, his stance was 'tough on crime'.

Like most of his deputies, Tyson was a "reformed" criminal. Basically, that means going from being a petty thief and/or bully and/or domestic batterer to someone who gets paid to do those things *legally*. Shit, he'd been a felon since junior-high and chalked-up his first kill as a teenager. Criminals don't report crime. If they do, an "internal investigation" takes place, finding that the officer acted according to regulations or in fear of their life.

In this redneck county, the Sheriff was the law. Eighty percent white and republican. The rest, immigrant farm labor. They didn't vote anyway. Tyson made sure of that. It was a small county with podunk towns spread out over hundreds of miles. Polling places were hard to come by. Of course, there *were* Sheriff's substations spread around. He'd convinced the board of supervisors that having his officers on-site at all locations on voting day would, "Help reduce voter intimidation in these uncertain times." His loyal retainers would stand near the entrance with their assault rifles. Brown people saw this and didn't even bother parking their cars.

"Our initial investigation indicates the Ford F-350 pickup truck was reported stolen from a neighboring county yesterday. The suspect is believed to be male of unknown race, ages fifty-to-sixty-five. He is balding with gray hair and beard. The owners

of the pickup are not believed to be involved in this incident.”

The grainy security footage showed the incident in ten-FPS black-and-white. Clouds of plaster and debris made the recording even harder to decipher. *Fucking cheap-ass county*, Tyson thought. The old man on the screen kept his eyes on the ground as he navigated the toppled security gates and broken cinder blocks, giving a view of the top of his head from three angles. Still, the sheriff knew this old man from somewhere. If he could get a closeup of his face or without the beard, he'd be able to place it. Someone he'd arrested before; has to be. Who else would drive through a courthouse?

“Rich.” Tyson turned, revealing the right side of his face to the camera – his bad side. Craters and cavities were beamed in high definition to surrounding homes. The late-arriving newspaper reporter's handheld flash flared as the photogreporter circled around for the best angle to capture the sheriff and the mayhem. A shaved-headed deputy leaned into the frame and the Sheriff held his hand between his mouth and the lackey's ear and whispered something before turning to face off-camera with his ‘good side’.

“The suspect is currently at-large in a stolen Geo Metro, green with black hood and drivers-side quarter-panel. He's believed to be traveling with an American Leopard Dog.”

The reporter holding the branded microphone stepped in front of the camera. The cameraman zoomed out.

“Thank you, Sheriff Pogue. We'll show images of the suspect just as soon as they're available. If you see this vehicle or have any information, please contact the Sheriff's Department by calling 911. This individual is believed to be armed and dangerous, so please do not attempt to approach or apprehend the suspect.

This is Melinda Armstrong from the County Courthouse, back to you in the studio.”

The deputy who had leaned into the frame called the sheriff over to the converted RV trailer that had been brought out with the SWAT team to serve as a mobile command post.

Inside, the sheriff sat at one of the bench seats, the tattered brown-and-orange knit covers being one of the few components of the original architecture, along with the adjoining table, that wasn't removed to make way for two-way radio chargers and gas masks. The former bedroom had been redone in two-inch steel to act as a portable armory. Tyson got the county to buy a special truck just to pull it. He'd take the tow vehicle out four-wheeling on the weekends on the taxpayer's dime, calling it “search and rescue training”.

“Sheriff, I have the list you asked for. Former detainees matching the age and description of the suspect.” Deputy Rich held onto the documents.

“Well?” The sheriff held out his hand for the printouts.

“Well...I found this.” The deputy passed Tyson the top page from his heap. “Silver alert. Sunrise Assisted Living. Two days ago.”

“I can read, Rich.”

That's how I know this bastard! Tyson's face lit up. They were kids together. His younger brother's friend from middle school or something. Some punkass nerd.

The deputy peeled the next few pages from the stack and set them on the table in front of the sheriff.

“No record, sir. Just a couple civil matters. But check this out.” Rich pointed to the attorney's name next to the suspect's name at the top of the court order. “Isn't that one of our victims?”

“Yep. Adult male, found deceased under the disabled vehicle.” Tyson circled the other name on the petition. “Send a car to this address. See if he still has any family in the area. Known associates?”

“Just the usual. Former roommates, shared bills, girlfriends maybe. Nobody we know.” The sheriff knocked the mound of paper from the deputy’s hands and onto the table.

“Hey, numbnuts, how about this one? And this one?”

“Er, well, they’re not criminals or anything.”

“Does anything strike you as *unusual* with this list?”

The deputy stared blankly at the list of names, focusing on the two his boss had pointed out. “No, sir. I don’t see anything.”

“Dumbass, Google it. Don’t you read the news?” His lieutenant wasn’t the brightest, but when it came to dirty cops, Rich was about the only one he could trust. The sheriff had bailed him out of some allegations from junior-cadets a couple of times, but he kept the evidence as collateral.

“Ooooooh! Shit, Sheriff!”

“Yeah, ‘Oh shit, Sheriff’. Why don’t you and Tweedle-Dumber over there compare that list and find out where he *hasn’t* been yet. Move, fuckface!”

The deputy retreated to the former kitchen of the trailer. He pointed at the papers while the other guy in pressed green trousers and tan shirt nodded. Sheriff Pogue adjusted his tie for the cameras and stepped down from the RV. The door slammed against the aluminum siding and stayed hanging open.

Tyson waved to the news crews that were setting up camp with their broadcast vans. Cameras clicked on and microphones eagerly vied for best visibility in the shot.

“We have additional information on the alleged suspect.

We believe this is the persons named by CHP in the Silver Alert two days ago as a missing or escaped persons from a care facility. The suspect is known to have a history of mental or psychological problems. Thus far, our investigation has led us to believe this individual is connected to a string of..."

The old man clicked off the radio. He pulled the gear stick into neutral and let the car coast down the hill from the highway exit.

Chapter Fourteen

Denouement

The odometer read 245,380 when the old man navigated the Metro into the Bank of America parking lot and let the three-cylinder engine idle and knock. He pulled the parking-brake lever up and left the keys in the ignition. The air conditioner came back to life once he stopped putting pressure on the motor.

Behind the bank, sharing the wide, asphalt expanse, the patio of Stone's Bar and Grill sat empty. The old man let himself in through the wrought-iron half-gate and found a seat at the back table. Moments later, Jason, the long-time waiter, opened the door and poked his head out onto the patio. Noticing the old man in the corner, he approached and spun a black cocktail napkin from his black apron and onto the table.

“What're we havin'?”

“Oh, shit, I didn't recognize you! What's up, man? Fat Tire?”

“Jason, how you been? Ketel soda, please.”

“Good, man. Same ol', same ol', as you can tell. Lemon, no lime, right?”

“You got it. Good memory.”

“Well, I've only served you about a million of these over the years. I'll be right back. You eating?”

“Just this right now. Thank you.”

Shenzi watched through the window of the Geo from the

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parking lot. The old man sipped on his rubbing-alcohol cocktail. He forgot – again – about the heavy-handed ‘Stones Pour’ – all liquor, no mixer. The beer would have been a better choice. Predictable.

In a wave, the patio started to fill with a late-lunch crowd. This neighborhood, the Tower, the same place the old man had found himself over and over again the past couple of days, operated in a different time zone than the rest of the city. Around here, people didn’t come out until after two in the afternoon and they didn’t go to bed until after last call.

The usual crowd of fifty-and-sixty-something alcoholics seated themselves at the steel-mesh tables and waited impatiently for Jason to come with the next tray of drinks. The old man kept his head down, not wanting to be noticed by his former acquaintances. This was one of his regular haunts when he lived in the area. The table he was sitting at may as well have been reserved with his name on it every weeknight. That was before he moved out to the sticks. When he was still part of the *scene*, as they like to refer to themselves around here. It was probably the same in niche neighborhoods everywhere. This bar was one of three or four in the neighborhood where people on the scene went to get seen. From the looks of it, still was. There weren’t many younger, fresh faces in the rabble. Nearly everyone at Stone’s was from the old gang. If you could call it that. Five-hundredish drinkers who frequented the same half-dozen establishments on a given night. Most would end up being in bands together, starting businesses together, fucking each other, or fucking each other over over the years. It’s not like they were actual friends. Friendships of utility for most, pleasure for others, an Aristotelian might say. The old man knew from experience that the majority were your best buddy

as long as you kept feeding them drugs and alcohol or worked for free on their projects.

The fivesome who were pulling their chairs out at the table next to the old man were this type. He'd worked with them decades ago. He couldn't have been thirty yet. They'd raid his studio for beer or weed. They'd find him here at Stone's or one of his other known hangouts and invite themselves to join him, knowing he was always good for a round or two. They'd convince him to spend months devoted to their projects, claiming they had the support to take it beyond the local level. This, for the most part, was the quintet at the neighboring table. Three Chrises, a Regan, and a Nate.

Nate wasn't so bad, the old man remembered. He was the beggarly type, always promising to pay back a debt of scotch and greenbud. Always on the ask for the borrowing of sound equipment for a gig or a ride to the venue. As far as the old man knew, Nate never paid anybody back. What pittance he would make as a musician went right back into his addictions. Not a *bad* guy, so much as irresponsible and selfish. Still, the company he kept said a lot about him.

The Chrises have traveled in a pack since the old man's tenure in the neighborhood. "The Unholy Trinity," they'd refer to themselves. The first Chris, they called him "CJ", was more a condoning observer than an accomplice to the buffoonery and chicanery of his partners. Your classic party-all-the-time mentality. He'd get drunk and run his mouth like a pretentious dick sometimes, but compared to the other two, he was a saint.

The second Chris, they called him "Spiderman" or "Spidey". Presumably because of the black spiderwebs tattooed on both of his elbows. He was an abusive drunk and liked to

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secretly set people at odds with each other. Most of his nights were spent at the local pubs, searching for a girl who was too drunk to resist. Between rape sessions, he'd join up with a local band as a singer. It never lasted long. For one, he wasn't good. He expected the groups – both cover bands and original artists – to accommodate his wanting to sing every song in a Johnny-Cash baritone. He had about five notes he could hit, so they'd have to tune their instruments flat and play all of the songs in 'E' as well. In the weeks he'd be with a group, he'd work on buddying up to each of the members individually. Spidey would pry for gossip about their comrades. Then he'd make passive-aggressive comments to another. Or just straight-out tell them that their friend of ten years was talking shit behind their backs. Having sewn the seeds of discontent, he could leave the band having accomplished *something*.

The third Chris, they called him "Pino", was the real piece of shit. The old man knew him well. This was the Chris that he'd gone to the bar expecting to find. The old man had devoted a year of his life to this Chris. To Pino. He suffered through countless meetings while Pino told the same stories ad nauseam. In truth, the old man didn't anticipate the whole group of them would show up together before he'd finished his drink.

The old man brushed past Pino on his way into the restaurant. Pino was shouting and telling a story, flailing his arms around. If he noticed the nudge, it didn't interrupt his recital. After using the restroom, the old man stopped by the expo station to tell Jason to close him out. When the waiter left to print his ticket at the bar, the old man grabbed a couple of rolled napkins from the gray-plastic tub. When Jason returned, the old man dropped a twenty that he'd procured from Tim's wallet on the plastic tray

without looking at the bill and said that he didn't need any change.

“You sure, man? It was only seven bucks.”

“Yeah, no worries. I'll catch up with you next time I'm in town.” Back in his twenties, the old man tended bar part-time on the weekend for a few seasons. At the time, Jason lived up north and he'd stop by the dive where the old man was working. Years later, the old man had given up bartending in-favor of bar-attending. Jason picked up this gig and they were regular acquaintances for a few years. Unlike most of the crowd that surrounded them on the daily, the old man and Jason enjoyed finding a quiet table on the outskirts of a post-last-call house party and raiding the board game cabinet. Chess, Go, and Othello were all go-tos, but in absence of those, they could usually find an outdated version of Trivial Pursuit. As life goes, the old man moved out of the 'hood. Away from the *scene*. A couple times a year, for the first few years, he'd find himself in town and would swing by for a drink in the mid-afternoon, when the rest of the neighborhood chuckleheads were disco-napping-off their six-G&T lunch. Eventually, the radius of his travel got smaller and smaller and the old man stopped visiting the city altogether, opting to do his shopping in an outlying town where he was less likely to run into people.

Jason opened the door for the old man and they left together from the dark restaurant to the bright patio. The Unholy Trinity Plus Two had taken up residence at the table in the back corner, not waiting to see if the old man would be returning to his drink. They'd taken it upon themselves to move his mostly-melted-ice cocktail to the table they were previously seated at. As the old man was going through the gate, he thought he heard his name being whispered from his former table.

He waved to Shenzi, who was watching with a broad,

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tongue-hanging smile from the idling hatchback. The old man walked around the corner, to the rear entrances of the kitchen and neighboring Strumliners nightclub. It was too late for delivery of booze and sundries, but too early for DJs and promoters to load in speakers and lights. Perfect.

Obstructing the disagreeable view of the back parking – but not the monstrous lot that the bar shared with BofA and the sports lounge – were camellia hedges, trained up the metal posts that supported the patio cover. The old man hid behind the second bush. He unraveled the first of his two napkin rolls, slipping the contents into his back pocket. He held the burgundy cloth by its opposite corners and flicked his hands forward to create a twisted strand of mouth-towel.

“AAYYOO!” Just as the old man suspected, one of those drunk fucks would come to confirm the rumor that had been promulgating around their table. It was Spiderman. “AAYYOOOO!!”

The old man stepped from behind his concealment as Spidey rounded the corner, searching.

“What the fuck?!” Spidey – Chris II – jumped back in response to coming face-to-face with the bearded man.

“Ha! I knew it was you! What is up, my brother!”

“Hey, dude. I thought that sounded like your holler.”

“So what the fuck? You still avoiding Pino after all these years?” Spidey stepped in to hug the old man.

“Yeah, fuck that guy. I’m not holding a grudge or anything, but he’s poison.”

“Naw. Lav’s cool. He feels bad, man. Bygones, my dude.”

“Fuck that. He burned that bridge, played the victim.”

“Well, damn. I missed you, bro.” Spidey kept his hand on

the old man's shoulder the whole time they spoke. "Let's go next door and get a drink, just the two of us."

"Yeah, okay, man. I came back here to take a leak, so gimme a sec." Sure, there was a restroom inside. And the old man had used it. To regulars like Chris II, this wasn't unusual at all. There was only one urinal inside and in their heyday, they'd pissed and puked just about everywhere in this neighborhood. Though, it was usually after closing time.

"Well, shit. As long as you're draining your lizard, I may as well milk my hangdown."

Spidey stepped between two of the towering pillars of camellia, the old man moved to the far end, leaving a one-hedge buffer. Customary protocol. When he heard the clattering of an unfastening belt-buckle, the old man backed out from his stall, unwinding the napkin from around one hand. He reached up – Spidey was a good head (heh) taller – and pulled the cloth cord tight around Spidey's neck with both hands. At that moment, Chris II let loose with his stream, spraying urine vertically as the old man yanked him back.

"HEY!" A voice from the patio screeched in response to the abrupt change in atmospheric conditions where they were sitting.

Spidey started to go limp and the old man eased him to the crumbled asphalt. Pulling a spoon from his pocket, the old man tied it between a knot in the scarf he'd bestowed on Spidey. He gave the spoon a couple of twists and squeezed one end between the cloth necklace and back of the taller man's neck. Spidey's face had gone from a dark red to cyanotic with that.

A face hidden behind woven-straw fedora, giant celebrity sunglasses, and an unkempt black beard poked out from between the bushes that Chris II had been peeing up/through.

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The old man stood and reached into his back pocket for another piece of cutlery. He jabbed a fork under the black beard, embedding it in Pino's neck. Reflexively, Pino grabbed at the water-spotted silver. He yanked at the fork, sending it clattering to the ground. His carotid spit and spattered across Spidey's Fred Perry bomber jacket and swirled with the piss under the camellia bushes. In a rage, Pino – Chris III – began climbing over the four-foot wrought-iron fence, clawing through the bushes at the old man, who by that time had taken several steps back.

Regan came around the corner. He was the biggest of the bunch. A former juicehead bodybuilder who'd gone to flab. He outweighed the old man by more than double. In an instant, the old man had retrieved the serrated steak-knife by its thick plastic handle. Regan raced at the old man, arms spread Godzilla-wide in preparation for a tackle or bear-hug.

Wait. Time-out. When I say he "raced" in, let's recall that these are all old guys. Back in the day, when he ran with these guys, he was the youngest of the bunch by five-to-ten years. Nate was almost twenty years older than the old man when they met. If the laws of space-time apply, he'd still be about twenty years older. This isn't some Steven Seagal five-on-one-in-a-subway fight scene here. The old man could easily speed-walk away from the fight, if he had the mind to. After all, he was about the only one of them who could stand up mostly-straight anymore. Despite his size and build, it's important to picture Regan less as a peak-performance sumo wrestler coming in for the grapple and more like Gwyneth Paltrow in a fat suit running to hug Jack Black. I want you to picture ear hair and nose hair and hairy, saggy balls beneath tighty-whities and adult diapers. That distinct old-man

smell exuding from their pores as they sweat from even the most basic of activities, like staggering around the corner of the patio. Sure, maybe twenty or thirty years ago, they could have held their own in a brawl at this very tavern. With the exception of the old man, who might be a bit tipsy due to his decreased tolerance, those decades of abusing their lungs and livers had rendered them slow to react and unable to maintain spatial awareness. When you get old, your body starts to suck. You can keep acting like you're in your twenties for the rest of your life, or you can start taking care of yourself. I'm not going to tell you what to do. Though, if you're planning on getting into any geriatric brawls in your golden years, or want to be able to climb a flight of stairs without asphyxiation, it might be worth dialing it down a bit. Maybe give up the cigarettes and stick to weed. Memory loss is a big deal as people get older. Which is worse, short-term memory loss from smoking a bowl or losing entire days from blackout drunkenness?

The first rule about old-guy fight club is you don't remember old-guy fight club.

Anyway, where were we...

Regan charged at the old man like a rotund crucified zombie. Greasy flaps where triceps once were pendulated with each plodding step. Unlike his body, the confidence of the old man's foe hadn't faded with age. Regan's mind attacked the old man faster than his arms and legs could keep up with. So when the old man ducked under one meaty appendage, Regan stumbled and fell to his hands and knees. As the old man passed through, he reached across his body and shielded his left shoulder with the steak knife. The blade cut raggedly into Regan's armpit as he reached blindly for the old man before hitting the pavement.

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Regan stood and turned. He revved up for a double-leg takedown. There was no ducking out of that one! The old man watched the color drain from his opponent's face. Regan poked at the slit in his suede jacket. Blood poured from under the weather-lined coat and saturated the leg of his Anthropologie jeans. He took a step forward, reaching blindly through dilated pupils for the old man before collapsing again. The old man watched as Regan tried for a moment to hold himself up. The distended blob fell face-first with a loud crack, blocking the driveway between the bar and the bank.

By this time, the bar patrons had started looking up from their Jack-and-Diets and Bombay-and-Tonics to see what the fuss was all about. The brawl had migrated from the cover of the hedges to the main parking lot. The old man walked to the still-running car and told Shenzi to "scoot over" to the passenger seat. Sirens called out from across the neighborhood. The exit to the side street was blocked by Regan's bleeding-out carcass, so the old man backed out of the parking stall, preparing to exit onto the one-way street that bordered the bank and nearby sports bar. In the rearview mirror, he saw Nate leaned against a cane, standing over Regan.

The Geo wound up like a toy car when the old man floored it in reverse. The rear window shattered as Nate bounced off the back of the Metro and tumbled over the half-fence. Drinks and cigarette butts exploded like shrapnel as he rolled over the table that The Unholy Trinity +2 were previously sitting at. CJ, or Chris I, was leaned back in his chair, lighting a joint, taking in the scene, when Nate's short, heavy frame crashed into his lap, sending them both into the brick wall of the building.

The old man put the manual transmission into forward-

Denouement

going gear and pulled out into traffic, which had come to a stop to rubberneck the pandemonium. He went south on the one-way street, using the bike lane to squeeze past the opposite-facing vehicles that had paused their commute. He turned into an alleyway between some homes in time to see red-and-blues slowing into the intersection behind him. The old man followed the alley to the one-way that ran the opposite direction. North.

At the next light, he pulled into the overcrowded community college parking lot and circled the rear expanse until he could find a suitable open spot. One obstructed on either side by SUVs or lifted pickups.

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Exordium

Shaun sets the stack of boxes at the top of the steps and turns around for another load. His first and last month's rent had been paid on the loft space in the converted dairy shipping center downtown and he has one more box to get before he's officially moved in. He doesn't have much – clothes, a computer, his music collection, a guitar. *The move will be good for me*, he thinks.

His new spot is on Victoria Street, six doors down from Tower Street. He could throw a rock and hit a dozen bars. Crawling distance. On his first night, he takes a stroll in the new neighborhood. Some punk-revival music is blasting from Freddie's Club, so Shaun lets himself in to investigate.

"Three bucks. Twenty-one up." The tattooed bouncer with waist-length goatee holds a hand up to block the doorway.

Shaun hands him three singles with his ID and holds the inside of his wrist out to be stamped. The door guy grabs his hand and flips it over to stamp the back. Shaun finds his way to the far end of the bar, next to the sound booth. He peers over the mirrored wall from his barstool to observe the engineer. The band sounded like shit. Most of it was their music, but it didn't help that the sound guy was taking bumps from a plastic CD case instead of working the board.

On the next break, Shaun slips out the back door to mix with the musicians. He lights a cigarette and steps into the circle

where a joint is being passed around.

“Hey, nice set,” he says to nobody in particular. He didn’t think it was, but it’s a customary greeting in the music world. Even if he didn’t dig the sound, maybe they were having a great time playing, and that would still make it a nice set. You just don’t want to say it after a complete trainwreck.

Not that he was an expert on the matter. Shaun plucked on the guitar some – he had his own shitty-sounding band with some high school buddies back in the day. Performing wasn’t for him, but he enjoyed playing with the sound gear. They did a few gigs. House parties. No music clubs like this – only one member of their group was over twenty-one at the time.

“What’s up, fella? I’m Adam. AC.” The cleancut guitar player, around the same age as Shaun, passes a joint to the newcomer.

“Shaun. Liking that Twin Reverb. I’ve got a Deluxe.” He takes the smoldering devil’s lettuce from AC and sucks in a deep breath of the sooty air.

“Yeah, the Deluxe is okay, I guess. What’chu gotta get you is a Super. I ain’t seen y’around,” AC adds an okiefied twang to his voice. “You a playa?”

“Nah, not really. My friends and I played, but I mostly gave it up to paint and draw.”

“Shit, mang! That’s fate. We was s’posed to meet. I got this new record-album coming out and need art for the front cover and posters for my CD-release party an’ shit. You do that shit, mang?”

“Yeah, I can do all of that. You’d have to tell me about what you want and we can get an idea of time and cost.”

“Well, here’s the thing.” The other band members return to the bar for refills on their PBRs. Adam lights a fresh joint and

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hands it to Shaun. “The thing is, I got all my money tied up in this record. Paying the studio and all. I got Peter Wolf producing. Know Him?” Shaun shakes his head, holding his breath with the previous hit. “Anyway, he’s good, but he’s expensive, my man. You can see I’m barely able to make a livin’ out here at three-dollars a head. Shit, how many people you think are in there? Twenty-five? Fuck that, mang. This is my new solo album I’m rappin’ ‘bout. Blues guitar. Stevie Ray Vaughn and Jimi Hendrix covers, mostly. I got me an original or two on there. Good shit, mang. So anyway, I’ll pay you, but I gotta make some money on it first, y’know? I’ll pay you double once I get it out on the bandstand where I’m the bandleader. Gonna tear some shit up, mang, I’m tellin’ ya.” AC holds the burning marijuana cigarette without smoking it while he continues, “Like I say, there’s money, but I ain’t got it right now. But I know *everyone* ‘round here. I could introduce you around. You’re new, yeah? I know some cats with some deep pockets, mang. I’m off tomorrow. You and me, we gotta go out to this other spot down here, I’ll show ya. Anyway, I gotsta go play this next set. Meet me here at seven tomorrow. We’ll be seein’ ya.”

And with that, AC lets himself into the rear entrance of the club, pulling a folded piece of Marlboro wrapper out of the latch so the fire-door locks behind him. Shaun doesn’t want to go around to the door guy again, so he walks home. To his new place.

The next evening, Shaun is standing outside of Freddie’s, smoking a cigarette, when AC pulls up to the loading-zone on the curb. He steps out of the green Chevy S-10 and walks around to the sidewalk.

“Sup, pardner? C’mon.” Adam leads the way into the bar, which lacks a bouncer today. A few daytime regulars shield their eyes as the door swings open, sending a column of natural light

into the building. The stage is vacant except for some rolled cables and microphone stands.

Adam hands Shaun a can of Pabst and pulls the nearest stool under him. His jeans lack a belt and sag to reveal striped boxer shorts and the top of his hairy asscrack. Shaun steps over the neighboring barstool, hitches up his pants, and pulls a coaster from the bar-rail.

“So lookie here, mang. I got this ‘Music 101’ record almost done. Gotta get a good cover and get it out on tour with me. What’cha got?”

“Wait, weren’t we going somewhere else?”

“Yeah, we’ll get there. I just wanted to talk business first.”

“You’d have to tell me about it. Is there a theme or story? Do you have an image or brand?”

“Blues, mang, blues. Stevie and Jimi. That’s it, just the blues. The good stuff, brah.”

“Led Zeppelin?”

“What? Fuck those guys, mang. Mothafuckas gotta be stealin’ the black man’s music. That ain’t the blues, mang.”

Shaun spends a couple more beers trying to extract anything more about the album besides AC playing ‘Texas Flood’ on the jukebox. Finally, he gets AC to take him to his truck to hear some unfinished mixes of the album. Doesn’t sound like anything from a pro studio in Shaun’s opinion. If Shaun tries to ask a question, Adam shushes him to point out a particular part that he’ll air-guitar along with. It sounds like an early Ray Charles or Roy Orbison record. Before they could multi-track everything. Except this is all guitar solos.

While he’s driving the two of them to the next bar, Adam puffs a Marlboro Red while explaining that he was going for that

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‘vintage’ sound, so he only used two mics on the drum kit and one mic for *both* his vocals and guitar. The bass was recorded direct. At least he’s finally using a word besides ‘blues’ to describe his music. Vintage doesn’t have to mean *bad*, though.

“Why not record it good, then make it sound shitty later?”

“Naw, mang. I gotta be *authentic*. You think Robert Johnson woulda multi-tracked all up on his shit?”

“Yeah, actually.”

Adam pulls his Chevy under the outline of a neon martini, next to the dumpster. He turns the truck off. When Shaun reaches for the door handle, Adam grabs his sleeve and pulls him toward the center of a cab, where he holds the ignition key out. Shaun takes a hard sniff of the white powder and checks his nostrils in the rearview mirror while AC helps himself to a couple of scoops from the twist-tie sandwich baggie in his lap.

They stumble up the ramp and into the side entrance of the restaurant. To the right, a hostess in all-black holds leather-bound menus, ready to seat them. Instead of going into the restaurant, Adam continues straight across the hall, pressing his hip against the crash bar on the opposite door to swing it open.

“Hey!” A chorus of drunken patrons greets them as they pop out on the patio of The Landmark. Like Shaun’s apartment, this place used to be an old dairy facility. So says a bronze plaque on the exterior wall. Through the window, he can see a carved and polished oak bar stretching the length of the room. The kind of bar with the polished-brass foot rail that’s inevitably worn to a blackened patina every three feet. Under some of those generic French restaurant signs, a jazz trio bangs out standards just loud enough where you can’t quite make out the song from outside. A black-clad waitress approaches with a tray and passes

cocktails around the table where Adam is introducing Shaun to the drinks' recipients. There are ten of them, and he doesn't expect to remember any names. Except Paddy and Skip, those are easy. The rest are Toms or Tims. Lauras or Lindas. Cindys and Mindys. Chris and Christy. Something like that.

After receiving and consuming some vodka drinks of their own, Shaun and Adam follow Paddy and a couple others into the dark alley between the bar and the neighborhood. Paddy lights a blunt and passes it around.

"Yeah, man, this is *my* place," the man with the silver ponytail points over the fence they're leaning against.

"Damn, that's convenient. I just moved in over on Victoria Street." Shaun motions in the other direction.

"Well, shit, brotha, you gotta come over. We'll drink a bottle of wine."

"Yeah, sounds good..."

"Steve."

"Right. Shaun." They shake hands and Steve follows Paddy back to the patio. Shaun is ready to tag along when Adam again grabs for his sleeve.

"Listen, mang. That Paddy, he's the one with all the scill. He's the guy you gotta get in bed with."

"Why aren't you working with him?"

"Naw, mang. I gotta do me. They got a band with horns and five singers and all that shit. I gotta be the one that people see on stage. Can't be sharing airtime with no saxophone or piano. I got me a bass and drummer. That's all I need, mang."

Back on the patio, Shaun orders another cocktail and, unable to find a chair, crouches at the table next to Skip and Paddy.

"Hey, we heard you're an axe-man! Right on!" Skip shakes

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Shaun's hand for a second time.

"Yeah, guitar. A little bass sometimes. You?"

"Drummer, man. Paddy's the guitarist in our band."

"Nice. What do you play?"

"That's the thing, my man, we don't know yet."

"You have a band and don't know what kind of music you play?"

"We're still figuring it out," Paddy interjects, offering Shaun an American Spirit. "We have backup singers and horns and all that, but no lead singer. And we need a guitar."

"A second guitar?"

"Yeah, someone who can play some leads or trade off with me."

"What do you listen to?" Skip asks.

"I dunno, I change it up, but my main playing influences are probably Zep, Floyd, The Beatles."

"Awesome! Same here. Lemme get your number."

Shaun joined Skip and Paddy's band, Sweet Virginia. An eleven-piece tribute to the Rolling Stones. They acted as their own acoustic opening band, playing the more obscure Stones songs. At their first gig, someone shouted, "When are you going to play some Rolling Stones?!" Shaun was never a Stones fan, but he came to like their album tracks a bit more while he was in the band. Goats Head and Exile have some groovy tracks on them. Better than early Beatles, maybe, but not later Beatles. And they're definitely no Led Zeppelin.

Through Sweet Virginia, Shaun met a colorful array of local musicians, all eager to glom onto Paddy – or anyone else they could appropriate for drinks, money, or time. There was nothing

that Shaun needed, so when the band eventually went defunct, he parted ways with Paddy having not asked for a cent to support his growing music-art business. They paid Shaun for gigs – a fair wage – but there was no stipend for rehearsals, where they'd work him like a critter in an Orwell novel. He charged them a hundred bucks for a Filmore-style flier that he spent way too much time working on.

In his first six months in the new town, Shaun had picked up almost a dozen bands or musicians who needed posters or press kits or album art. His loft was only six-hundred dollars a month, so even though most of his clients never followed through on their promise to pay, he eked by on what he made from those who did.

In the way that some people seem to find their own unhappiness easier to tolerate when others suffer, AC brought a myriad of vexed characters around Shaun's place. After the third or fourth of Adam's friends that he did pro-bono work for, Shaun realized that they were probably only coming to him because they'd been told they could get away without paying. After Nate Pierce, country-superstar wannabe, ghosted Shaun after receiving a couple thousand dollars of designs, it was time to cut Adam off.

The crew that hung out with Paddy and Sweet Virginia seemed to be a little less needy-greedy. With the exception of a couple frequent members of the entourage who never seemed to have money for their own top-shelf doubles. Paddy would tell the Landmark or Stone's waitress to put it on his tab and he'd slip her an unbranded silver credit card at the end of the night without waiting for his bill.

Since these sidekick guys were omnipresent fixtures in the neighborhood, Shaun began hanging out with them when Skip and Paddy weren't around. A couple nights a week, Paddy would

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venture out of his gated McMansion community on the north side of town to slum it with the boys. They saw Skip even less frequently. Although he only lived a mile or so up West Street, his family kept him home except on rehearsal nights.

Shaun is sitting at a black-mesh table on the patio of Stone's Bar with Nate – a different Nate, not the Tim McBrooks&Dunn wannabe – and three guys named Chris. One of them, the tall and gangling one with a beard that seems to grow out instead of down, used to be the lead singer for Sweet Virginia. Still is, technically. The same way Shaun is still their rhythm guitar player. They just haven't had any gigs or rehearsals in a few months.

The next Chris, another tall drink-o'-water, but not as stringy, has his feet up on the table in an uncivilized display of his polished Doc Martens. He's a friend of the previous Chris. Between the two of them word-vomiting constantly, there's hardly a break in the conversation where Shaun and the other two attendees of this 'meeting' can participate.

The last Chris doesn't talk much or seem engaged in the conversation at all. He wears his long hair down in Robert-Plant style where it curls into ringlets. His eyes are concealed behind smoky, Windsor-rimmed sunglasses. If he weren't chain-smoking Camels and downing Anchor Steams, Shaun could have thought he was taking a nap.

"If we're going to do this, you guys are going to need some better names," Nate interrupts the bearded Chris, who looks agitated to have the attention drawn away from him. Nate is the elder of the group. He's a foot shorter than anyone else at the table and rail-thin except for a massive Santa-belly that he has restrained behind a threadbare six-button tuxedo vest. His

shoulder-length blonde hair is thinning and his crooked nose gives him the appearance of a troll that will let you cross his bridge if you can answer these riddles three.

“My uncle was Gino Lavagnino, my dad was Tito Lavagnino, and my other uncle was Dino Lavagnino. I’ll be Pino Lavagnino,” the first Chris, the spindly one, volunteers.

The second Chris, the one with his boots on the table, nearly knocking over drinks while he gesticulates, rolls up the sleeves of his shirt. Underneath, he has black-ink sleeve tattoos. Hotrods and mudflap girls and dice. Hipster shit. On each elbow, reaching out several inches in each direction, are permanent drawings of black widows on conventional webs.

“You should call me ‘Spiderweb’,” he offers.

“Spiderpig, Spiderpig, does whatever a Spiderpig does,” Nate sings.

Why don’t we call you “Inaccurate-Depiction-of-Arachnids Man””, Shaun thinks. The tattoo is clearly of an orb web, whereas Black Widows spin sheet webs. Also, if the spider is standing atop the web, as the shading would indicate, why is the red hourglass on its back? Nevermind the fact that every black widow Shaun had ever seen hid out in some darkened crevice near its web and only came out when it felt a tug at the silk.

“What about you?” Pino turns to the sunglasses-at-night Chris.

“I don’t give a fuck, man.”

“Fine, you’re CJ, then.”

“How original.”

“*Anyway*. Getting back to the opera. I’m going to direct and be the love interest of the lead actress. Spiderman is my understudy and assistant director.”

“Spiderweb.”

“Spiderman, Spiderweb. Whatever, Spidey. So as I was saying before I was interrupted *yet again*, Nate is going to be the bandleader and pianist. We’re bringing in the girls from Sweet Virginia and a couple of horns. We need a reliable rhythm section.”

“What about Paddy and Skip?” Shaun suggests.

“I said *reliable*. That also means they’re going to listen to me. Those two are control freaks and they’ll try to take over. I mean, I’d love to get my hands on Paddy’s checkbook to pay for the show, but he’ll want to be the star of the band. And you know neither one of those guys are any good. We got CJ here for guitar and maybe you.

“Music director,” Pino points at Nate.

“Script supervisor and guitar.” He points to CJ.

“Art director and producer? Second guitar?” Pino directs his finger at Shaun.

“I mean, yeah, I think so. I need to know more about what I have to do.”

“You do whatever you want. You’re a producer. It’s up to you to make everything come together in time for the show.”

“When is the show?”

“I went to the Tower Theater today and talked to Lawrence. We’re booked for February twenty-seven, twenty-eight, and twenty-nine.”

“Only three days?” Nate asks.

“Yeah. That’s all they would give me. Why?”

“Well, the other shows I’ve done for the children’s theater ran at least ten shows over two weeks. If we’re going to spend the next eight months working on this, we should get a bigger payout. Even if we sell out, we’ll barely break even.”

“Don’t worry about it. I have a money guy. He says if we can make this show happen, he’ll put it on tour. The whole cast and crew and band.”

“Do you know how expensive that shit is?” CJ speaks up.

“Fuck, do I. I had to give Lawrence my last two-Gs to reserve the theater and he wants another five in two months to rent his sound and lighting equipment.”

“Wait, do we have to use their gear? What if we bring our own?”

“Nah, that shit is built into the price.”

The five men sat around the table until closing time, brainstorming changes to the story, suggesting people they knew for the cast, and getting generally shitfaced.

It’s two weeks before the opening of the rock opera and Shaun felt exhausted. He’s spent months living on ramen and whatever beer his more generous friends would provide. Shaun hated being a leech, but he’d committed so much of his time to the show that he wasn’t able to take on commissions.

The sets and signage were designed and painted. Shaun had to take over part of Nate’s duties, writing charts for the orchestra. Even though he was a pianist by trade, Nate couldn’t write music. If he could, nobody would have been able to read it, given his alternating periods of DTs and drunkenness. Instead of playing second guitar to CJ, Shaun had somehow been voluntold into being the conductor. Personally, he didn’t think it was necessary. It was a rock band with partial-orchestra accompaniment. The drummer should be plenty good for keeping time. It sucks for Shaun, as he has to spend most nights at rehearsal, followed by the compulsory evening of drinking while Pino and Spidey shout over each other.

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A few more weeks and we'll be done, he reassures himself as he scribbles notes on staff paper. Every time Pino makes a change to the arrangements of the songs, Shaun has to rewrite those pages times thirteen – one for each member of the band. He can barely keep his eyes open but after this he still has to storyboard the lighting cues.

Worse than the evening rehearsals and debauchery are the morning meetings. Every day, Pino expects his producers to join him for bloody marys as he explains the premise of the opera to a potential actor or technician or engineer. He spends an hour giving the same spiel without room for interruption or detraction. Shaun and Spidey are tired of it and don't know why they need to be there except to make Pino's ego feel better. To make him look like a big shot, or to intimidate through numbers.

Pino admits to his inner circle that he's feeling overwhelmed with the show. Aside from talking a lot, scheduling pointless meetings, and singing the most solos, it's unclear to Shaun what he actually *does*. He tells them that he's hired Joel, a local director with a good reputation, to take over. He agreed to pay Joel fifteen percent of the box office – without discussing it with the other two producers first, of course. They'd agreed months ago, at the meeting where they picked nicknames, to split the returns evenly after the venue expenses and a token payment to the actors. Shaun pushed for three-hundred per performer until the others agreed. They'd argued that nobody pays musical theater actors anywhere near that. The local dinner theater only pays ten bucks *a night*. Shaun wanted to pay them *tenfold?! But* none of those figures account for rehearsal time. The way Shaun had calculated it, at forty-dollars a ticket, times three nights, times seven-hundred seats, they'd still make seventeen thousand after paying for the

venue, equipment, *and* a reasonable wage to the band and cast. Now Pino is promising Joel twenty-five-hundred bucks and expects it to come out of their net profit.

Shaun has rehearsed the band and vocalists to perfection, so when Joel takes over, everything falls into place with ease. They begin blocking and stage rehearsals at a rented space in the near-abandoned mall that's close to downtown. For the first time in months, Shaun starts to think the show might not be so contrived after all. The story is still a regurgitation of an old trope, but seeing it come to life makes it art.

On Thursday, Shaun and Spidey are at the loft, disassembling the set pieces that crowd the tiny art studio and spill into the bedroom, stacking them in preparation for the afternoon rebuild at the theater. Pino opens the door and lets himself in without knocking.

"It's off," he moans.

"What is?" Spiderman questions.

"The opera. I canceled the venue."

"What the fuck?"

"It wasn't ready. We can't take it out until it's perfect or Regan will never give us any money."

"Wait, I thought he was going to sponsor the show if we could 'pull it off'." Shaun stops unscrewing plywood.

"He wants to *invest* in the show. He's going to pay the up-front costs for half of the profit."

"Half?! Are you kidding me?"

"Yeah, we need it to make it something people are going to talk about. The show I was picturing when I wrote it is bigger, more instruments, a bigger choir."

When you stole it, more like. This shitkicker town has

never seen a local production with over twenty people in the band and chorus. For fucks sake, the other theaters use canned MIDI tracks!

“Dude, sorry, I can’t,” Shaun empathized. “I’ve gone broke not being able to work these last few months. I’m going to need something in advance if you want me to move forward. Especially since its gone from a three-way split to Regan and Joel and who knows how many others.”

“What? You’re a *producer*! Fuck you, man. I never said you couldn’t work.”

“Fuck me? I’ve been busting my ass on this, sitting through your witless meetings, painting and buying supplies and doing Nate’s job and *your* fucking job while you smoke weed – wasting half of it – and blabber on about how great it’s going to be, without so much as a ‘thank you’.”

“It’s *my* rock opera, and I make the decisions on how it’s going to be run. That’s the way it is.”

“I don’t even care about how you want to direct it, man. Shit, I’ve been rewriting charts on the reg for all the changes you make, then unmake, then re-make again. I’m just saying I’ve made all the investment I can, so if you still want me to help with it, I need to be able to pay rent.”

“Fuck this. Fuck you, man. Piece of shit artist. Your art sucks anyway, fag. Let’s go, Chris.” Spidey follows Pino out down the stairs, leaving the front door open.

Shaun opens an email from one of his former bandmates the next day. “Have you seen this?” the message reads. There are links to Nextdoor and Craigslist posts where ‘somebody’ has anonymously posted about Shaun, claiming that he’s a thief and scam-artist. Warning local artists and musicians not to work with

him.

Over the next couple of days, Shaun runs into neighborhood locals who relay that Pino is going around, telling people that Shaun sabotaged the opera. In response, Shaun sends an email to Pino telling him to cease-and-desist use of any intellectual property, including the logo and band charts. Pino goes to Nate, who has been uninvolved in the drama thus far, and adulterates the tale about how Shaun is trying to undermine his ability to bring *his* musical to fruition. He offers Nate a hundred bucks to rewrite the music notation and trace the logos and designs. Nate, the perennial alcoholic that he is, gladly accepts.

It's still intellectual property theft, but not worth Shaun's time or energy to pursue it any further. Pino never has any money, anyway. His disability payments (he's quite abled) go straight to premium weed and whiskey cocktails. Since all of Shaun's art was hand-done, there's no way to date it any earlier than Nate's facsimiles. Pino would accuse Shaun of attempting to steal his work if it went to court. Fuck that. The really shitty part is that he's being shunned in this neighborhood that he's only lived in for a year and a half. A neighborhood he likes. A neighborhood where he'd gone out of his way to help others. And why? Seniority. Pino had lived there since high school. The rumors he spread about this newcomer would take years for Shaun to come back from. *Maybe I should just move. Again.*



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Acrimony

Shaun set the stack of boxes at the top of the steps and turned around for another load. His first and last month's rent were paid on the two-bedroom apartment near the newly-built mega shopping center. He had one more box to get before they were officially moved in. He didn't have much – clothes, a computer, his music collection, a guitar. *The move will be good for me*, he thought.

Amanda sat on the secondhand sofa in the bare-walled living room while Shaun carried her furniture and at least twenty Hefty bags of clothes and shoes to the second floor. She wanted her sister to move in with them. For one, Amanda could get her to pay half the rent. If Shaun paid the other half, she could live here for free. The other reason she wanted Ashley around was because she had all the connections in this town. Amanda knew nobody.

“Are you done yet? I'm hungry,” she whined when he came through the door with the last of their possessions.

“Sure. If you want to wait to start unpacking, let's go.”

She sighed and threw herself up from the sofa, trudging down the steps without waiting for Shaun to lock the door and catch up. Then she waited impatiently for him to open the car door for her.

Nearby were acres of sit-down chain restaurants. The neighborhood had been packed with consumers for months. The

timing for the openings were spaced as such so that as soon as the novelty of P.F. Chang's wore off, the Hooters would open. In a couple of weeks, that would become boring, so they'd open the Texas Roadhouse. Then an Olive Garden, followed by Outback Steakhouse. Next, Cheesecake Factory. Mimi's Cafe, Romano's Macaroni Grill, Famous Dave's. TGI-Fridays. BWW. CPK. KFC. IHOP. BJ's. Teppan-Yaki. Fifteen-dollar subs. Self-serve frozen yogurt. A second Starbucks – in the same shopping center. Most of these restaurants had locations in town already, but these were *new*. The new In-N-Out Burger had a line of thirty cars idling away, blocking driveways to other businesses. Meanwhile, the other three In-N-Outs in the city have a wait of less than five minutes.

“Red Lobster,” Amanda directed. They parked six double-rows away from the restaurant and she complained about Shaun not searching again for a closer spot. He suggested that they could have walked from their apartment in about five minutes, but Amanda wasn't interested in the ‘ankle express’, as she called it.

This part of the city had no character, but the convenient walk was the one selling-point for Shaun. They were in the northernmost sector. He'd wanted to live near downtown or in the arts district, but Amanda adamantly refused, not wanting to live around *those* people. She got a part-time, minimum-wage job when they leased the apartment, so it would have been more responsible to live further south where the rent was half the price for twice the house.

The hostess told them the wait would be about twenty minutes. She wrote down “Shawn” on the list. It was either that or “Sean”. He didn't bother correcting people anymore. Amanda stood outside, commenting loudly that they should go to this

restaurant or the other instead of waiting. From the patio of the Red Lobster, which faced the eight-lane boulevard, Shaun could see congregations in front of the Macaroni Grill and Red Robin. The lots surrounding Chuck E. Cheese's and Round Table Pizza and the Golden Corral were overflowing with four-wheel-drive trucks and domestic SUVs. Nevertheless, Amanda told him every other minute that they should leave.

When they were seated, eleven minutes into their wait, Amanda gave the hostess attitude and told her to hurry up in bringing water and cheese biscuits. When the hostess said the server would be right with them, Amanda exhaled in a deliberate sigh.

When the waiter arrived, Amanda rattled off an order of stuffed mushrooms, the Ultimate Feast[®], and a mudslide cocktail while he was trying to introduce himself.

“Of course, miss. Do you have your license?”

“No, I forgot it.” Amanda slid her purse under the table. “I’m twenty-three, I swear.” She batted her eyelashes and leaned forward to give him a peek down her shirt.

“That’s okay. I believe you. And for you, sir?”

“Could I get the garlic alfredo and a side of broccoli, please?” Amanda had convinced him to join her in being a vegetarian when they’d started dating. It was something Shaun had attempted before, but his parents forbade. When he and Amanda were out, which was most meals, she’d order the most indulgent thing on the menu. Like it was a ‘treat’.

This was Shaun’s first apartment. His first girlfriend. They knew each other from high-school, but didn’t start dating until the summer after graduation. Where they grew up was about twenty miles from this wonderland of capitalism. Almost every afternoon,

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Shaun would pick up Amanda and they'd drive to town for dinner and a movie. They'd seen every film that had come out that year. Now that they'd moved out on their own and would have bills, it was time to cut back on eating out, Shaun decided. Waiting until he could get tickets from his buddy who worked at the theater before seeing a movie. He didn't know how to cook, but was willing to learn. Amanda worked at the local bakery during high school, so she should know how to prepare *some* meals, but she'd already told Shaun that if it was her night to cook, it was coming from McDonald's or the freezer. When it was his turn, she wanted vegetarian, no salt, no sugar, no vegetables.

Shaun was the assistant manager of a ubiquitous drug store chain location a few neighborhoods away. Not bad for nineteen, he figured. Outside of the employees who were around his own age, he got a lot of pushback and defiance from the older staff. He didn't care *who* did what job, as long as it got done. Middle-aged women would refuse to empty the trash bins in their departments or wipe down the makeup counter areas. They'd insist it wasn't their job and told Shaun he needs to have one of the warehouse guys do it. Most of the time, Shaun would do it himself. It took like twenty seconds. Aside from that, and the enraged customers he'd have to calm several times per day, the job was okay. There were thousands of products and he liked to memorize the ingredients from or analyze the package design or slogan.

The drug store was where Cedar Street turns to become El Camino. Where orchards have been paved over to make room for restaurants with one-word names and drive-thru coffee stands. Two lights south on Cedar was where Amanda worked, Sunrise Assisted Living. It was an entry-level job for someone with no medical experience. What that means is wiping asses and giving

baths. She hated it. Most of the time, she'd hide outside the back door of the kitchen when she was supposed to be checking on residents or doing baths. Ray and Leroy were always good to bum her a smoke. Amanda's boss didn't give a shit about the residents as long as the families weren't complaining. They knew which of their dependent-adults' kids or grandkids visited regularly, so those people got better care. If Amanda didn't bathe or change someone, she'd feign like the resident must have *just* soiled themselves again.

Shaun was such a pushover. Whatever she wanted, he'd go along with. Amanda found it easy to take advantage of him – he was in love with her. Aside from the fact that he was gone for work and school most of the day, she basically had her own personal slave. Food delivery. Cleaning and laundry service.

Hitting him was fun. There didn't have to be a reason. In fact, it worked out better when she didn't have a reason. If she only hit him when she was mad, like her parents did to her, that would be abuse. If she hit him all the time, it was playful. There were lots of games that excused the hitting, too. Slug Bug and the like. She'd really sock it to him, too. Looking at the bruises when they had sex turned her on. She wanted him to hit her and choke her when they were getting it on, but he refused like a wuss.

Amanda *probably* could have said she wanted to have an open relationship and Shaun would have gone along with it. But that was too risky. He'd had flashes of jealousy before and she suspected that might be the line for him. Her meal ticket. At work, she'd let fat Ray fuck her in the walk-in refrigerator. Or she'd bend over for prison-tattooed Leroy in one of the bathtub-showers in a resident's room. *Who cares*, she thought while getting railed against crates of tomatoes. *I can do whatever I want*, she'd tell

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herself as she wiped hot cum from her back in the nurse's office.

When Amanda got home one night, Shaun was at the kitchen table with Rob, his high-school best friend.

"Hey, baby," Shaun greeted her. She ignored him and went into their bedroom, slamming the door.

"Hold on, I'll be right back," Shaun told Rob.

"Get out!" Amanda yelled, throwing a celebrity gossip magazine at the door.

"What's the matter? Did I do something?"

"I want to be alone. I need to think about things." This was one of her favorite lines. She liked to make him worry. There was nothing to be mad about, but whenever she acted like this, he'd buy her stuff.

"Okay, one thing, real quick. Rob is shipping off to the Army next week and I told him he could stay here for a few days."

"Fine. Do whatever you want. It's not like you care what I think anyway."

"Alright, I'm sorry. We'll be quiet so you can rest." Shaun pulled the door closed and gently released the knob.

"Wait."

He slipped his head through the recreated crack in the doorway.

"You need to get me some weed," she hissed.

"*Marijuana?* Where? I don't know anybody."

"Well, neither do I, except my ex-boyfriend. Ask Greg and Melissa from your work. They seem like drug-addict losers. And don't sound like a fucking narc when you do it."

"Okay, I'll ask around."

"Yeah, you do that. Now get out!"

Shaun quietly refastened the door and returned to the table

in their small apartment.

“Yeah, no worries, man. You can take the guest room.”

“Oh, you’re a lifesaver. I’ll never forget this.”

Shaun took Rob to the train station on a drizzly Monday morning. He opened the rear hatch of his VW Corrado and lifted out Rob’s military-surplus duffel.

“I got it.” Shaun carried the bag over his shoulder to the platform and set it down in the taped-off area on the ground for luggage. Rob passed him a Camel Light. “Last one of these for a while, eh?”

“No shit. I better enjoy it while it lasts.”

The crowding of passengers to the front of the platform alerted them to the impending arrival of the Amtrak.

“Thanks again for everything. You’re one of the good ones.” Rob hugged Shaun and turned to board the train. Like most of the other ongoing passengers, he didn’t wait for the unloading people to get off before forcing his way into the clearly-parked passenger carriage.

It was business-as-usual around the apartment for a few weeks while Shaun worked and went to school. Amanda only did twenty hours a week at Sunrise, so she’d spend a lot of time smoking pot, watching trash TV, and eating junk food. She could feel herself getting fatter, but she couldn’t stop eating. Since school ended last year and she wasn’t on the volleyball team any more, she’d found it next to impossible to make herself exercise. Lifting old people out of bed and getting pounded in a storage closet was enough of a workout for her.

When she’d missed her period, Amanda started to panic.

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She went to the drug store, *not* the one Shaun worked at, and shoplifted an EPT. Back home, she peed on the strip and sat on the toilet, staring at the window in the plastic stick.

“FUUUUUCCKKKKK!” Amanda screamed, throwing a candle from the bathroom counter against the door, shattering the glass and putting a hole in the cardboard-and-laminate.

She sat on the edge of the bed and stared at the cheap nylon carpet. *What the fuck am I going to do. Abortion is a Sin. How am I going to raise a kid? I fucking hate kids. Especially babies. I see enough poopy diapers at work. Fuck!*

“Hey, honey.” Shaun returned from his night class and passed through the bedroom on his way to the restroom.

“Whoa. What happened here?”

“What happened here?!” Amanda stood and slapped Shaun in the face. His ear rang.

“You fucking got me pregnant, you son-of-a-bitch!” Shaun heard her scream into his other ear. *That’s not possible*, he thought. He was always especially careful. Even though everyone said it felt better without a condom, he always wore one. He didn’t want any kids before he finished school and could buy a house. Get married. *Was it possible Amanda poked holes in them?* Shaun would take them off in the bathroom and never noticed anything leaking from the tip. *She wouldn’t go into the trash, would she?*

“Fuck you! I’m leaving. You’re not even going to say anything?!” Amanda threw the door open, leaving a doorknob-sized hole in the sheetrock. Shaun stared incredulously at the gaping wound in the drywall until he heard the front door slam and Amanda’s truck screech out of the parking lot.

As soon as the coast was clear, he opened the drawer to his nightstand and pulled out the box of Trojans. Shaun unrolled

the strip of condoms and held the wrappers in front of his face. Not finding any defects or alterations to the packaging, he went to the bathroom, though he didn't need to pee any more. In the trash can, he found the EPT box and an empty toilet-paper roll. Any biological refuse went out with the last trip to the dumpster.

A few days later, Amanda returned with her step-dad. He acted tough while they carried her stuff to his truck. Shaun even helped. He told her he wasn't angry, just wanted to work things out.

"There's nothing to work out," she responded.

"I can support you while you're pregnant and after the baby's born."

"I don't need you. I don't need anyone. I can do it on my own. You'll be lucky if I ever let you see him."

"Him?"

"Huh? I don't fucking know. I haven't been to the doctor."

"Let me make you an appointment. I can take you."

"No. Don't you listen? I can take care of myself."

"Let's goooo," Eric called from the cab of the full-size Chevy, tapping at his naked wrist. Shaun tried to give Amanda a kiss goodbye or a hug. She turned away from him.

"Stop crying, you look like a little bitch," she concluded, slamming the door of the truck. Shaun watched the stacks of furniture in the bed of the pickup turn the corner and disappear down the street.

Shaun kept up the offers to help throughout her pregnancy, but Amanda turned him away. Sometimes, she'd talk to him on the phone for a while, like 'old times'. When he'd start suggesting they get back together, she'd tell him she had to go and would hang up the phone. After waiting ten minutes, she'd call him back

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and tell him he was a loser and she'd never want to be with a piece of shit like him before hanging up the phone again. He'd send her money for vitamins and maternity clothes that she'd spend at the slot machines. Before she started to show, she could use it for drinks and cigarettes. The first time she got dirty looks at the liquor store for buying a pack of smokes, she decided to only smoke and drink at home. She'd have Ashley go to the store for her. Her tweaker sister didn't give a shit. She did, however, give Amanda some meth a few times when they were sitting on the front steps, passing a joint. For the first couple of months, Amanda upped her smoking and drinking, hoping for a spontaneous abortion. At six months, she knew it was too late.

Shaun found out that Todd was born from his mother the day after. She had been there for the birth and said it was "beautiful". *Nice of you to call me when she was in labor*, he thought.

He stopped at the hospital gift shop and bought the most expensive box of chocolates he could find and a giant stuffed bear.

"What the fuck is a baby going to do with that?" Amanda sneered when he came through the door.

"I don't know. It's for you."

"Just stick it over there," she pointed at the shelf that was lined with vases of cut roses and daisies. "Or in the trash, I don't care."

"Hey! What are you doing here?" Shaun had been so focused on Amanda that he hadn't noticed his friend standing next to the bed.

"Hey man, I just got out of training. Thought I'd come for a visit before they send me to the desert. Congrats." Rob shook Shaun's hand. Shaun stepped closer to get a good look at his son. Eric, the handlebar-mustached step-dad, and Paula, Amanda's

morbidly obese mother, moved to block his path. Like he was going to steal the baby or something.

“Okay, well, it’s pretty crowded in here. Why don’t I come back later?”

“Whatever,” Amanda answered. Without stopping for a breath she turned to Paula. “Mommy, can you get me some Gardettos and Twinkies and peanut-butter cups and two Red Bulls, pretty please?”

“Of course, my sweet angel.” She waddled out of the room.

When Amanda gets out of here, she planned on getting back on the pipe. In the last few months, she’d ballooned to over two-hundred pounds and was fast on her way to looking like her mom. Amanda’s sister lost like fifty pounds in three months. *If it worked for her, it’ll work for me. I’m going to be skinny and beautiful.* She smiled for a moment before looking down at the swaddled baby with a frown.

It was Shaun’s twentieth birthday. He hadn’t made any plans. Growing up, there was too much pressure put on birthdays and holidays. He was glad to not *have* to do anything on his birthday for the first time in his life. Maybe his friends would come by later to smoke cigarettes and play board games.

He was finishing an egg-salad sandwich when the doorbell rang. Shaun opened the screen door and on the other side of the screen stood a man he didn’t recognize.

“Shaun Vetter?”

“Yeah?” Maybe he was delivering a gift.

“You’ve been served.” The man dropped a stack of stapled papers on the doormat and walked away.

Shaun opened the screen and brought the papers inside.

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He'd never been 'served' before. He wasn't fluent in legalese, but soon decoded the court papers to discover that Amanda was filing for custody.

"It's to protect me and to protect Todd," she told Shaun when he called to see if they could work it out.

"Protect from what? I've never done anything. Haven't even showed up at your parents' house to see him. Or you."

"Well, he's my son and I'm going to make the decisions. You don't get a say."

"He's my son, too."

"Not for long."

Amanda called back the next day.

"I'm calling to let you know that Rob and I are getting married and me and Todd are moving to Japan to be with him."

"Whoa, wait a minute. My *friend* Rob?! What about me? How am I going to see Todd?"

"Not my problem."

"But the papers you just served me with yesterday say that *neither* of us are allowed to take him out of the counties we live in."

"Yep. So?"

"So wouldn't that be kidnapping?"

Amanda cackled into the receiver. "I'd like to see you do something about it." She hung up before Shaun could respond.



Chapter Seventeen

Credulity

At the college, the old man waits until the night classes let out. In the mass exodus of second-hand gas-guzzlers, he squeezes the tiny car into the lane of traffic waiting to exit the lot. He follows the snaking line of tail lights as they creep down the single-lane road and under the railroad crossing. The old man remembers when they built this overpass. That year, six college students had been killed in separate incidents because they tried to run across the tracks so they wouldn't be late for class. Instead of being like, "Hey, dumbasses, you're adults, you should know how trains work," they spent millions to divert the traffic from two main thoroughfares to this one road that ran through the center of the school. To be clear, the billions of tons in fossil-fuel emissions created by poor infrastructure choices like this are the result of a couple of idiots who think they're stronger or faster than a train. *It's not just this school, the old man ruminates. The whole damn country is built around car culture. In-N-Out drive-thrus with their idling engines. Private roads mowing down countless miles of wildlife habitats. Parking meters that make more per-hour than the average household. Louder. Bigger. Faster. Able to mow down whole crosswalks of small children in a single bound.*

The Geo Metro struggles to climb the freeway on-ramp in second gear. The engine hums in higher, then lower registers as the old man jerks the transmission stick up and down to get the car

up to speed. The eight-lane elevated roadway is nearly abandoned in the post-dusk hours. Another symptom of bad infrastructure. For ninety minutes, twice a day, the freeway became a virtual parking lot of commuters. The other twenty-one hours, it occupies thousands of acres of real estate in the middle of town. Homeless people will take shelter from rain or summer heat under the freeway until the police or highway patrol arrive to confiscate their meager possessions and chase them into the elements. Cops aren't *peace* officers, they're law *enforcement*. It's nothing new. The US has been built on the philosophy of using the cops and military as thought police. Union busters and McCarthy Trials and 'behavioral' health. Like you need to behave a certain way in order to exist. People don't live in America, they live under it.

The old man drives north, leaving the community college and bars of the Tower neighborhood behind. He feels like this is about the thousandth time he's crossed from one end of town to the other without bothering with anything in between. At the last exit before the billboards and fast-food marquees abruptly end, the old man eases the stick into neutral and coasts down the off-ramp. He's forced to turn right onto the frontage road. With two more right turns, he's oriented west on the unofficial boulevard that passes between four shopping super-complexes. It's not an official city street, but the driveway *between* the corporate theme parks. Johns Hopkins University of Retail Therapy.

Aside from several hundred bars and liquor stores, this city – the metropolitan center of the region – shuts down at nine o'clock. Diners who prefer to eat at a more European hour had better do it at home, else they'll be stuck ordering greasy burgers from a speakerbox. The multitude of big-box stores and fast-casual chains don't waste the opportunity to advertise to the seldom-passing

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overnight motorist. They leave their enormous signs lit day and night. In the summer, they're locking the doors by the time the sky is dark enough to show off the glowing primary colors behind Best Buy and Target and AMC Cinemas logos. The city has a foreboding silence at night. Aside from the occasional train blowing its horn or the irregular whirr of freeway traffic, there are no crickets. No birds. When square miles of farmland were demolished to make way for Wal-Marts and Dollar Generals and Costcos, they didn't bother saving any trees. The delineators in each roadway exhibit transplanted palm trees that were never meant for this climate. Token saplings are planted sparingly in unirrigated parking lots, a legal minimum specified in some ordinance. The rooftops and gaudy proclamations of corporate existence are lined with spikes to stop birds from shitting on their blaring visual-orchestras. It's no wonder the nights are so quiet – without grass or trees, there's nowhere for any non-humans to live. Without a way to close the blinds or turn out the lights, the scarce animal population has no way to manage their circadian rhythms.

The Windscape Apartmenthomes complex is made up of two-hundred identical plaster sardine-cans painted in an inoffensive gray-and-blue scheme. The old man parks the Geo near the capacity-25 pool and crosses the driveway to the block of residences. He uses the pressed-steel handrail to help him up the concrete steps to the second floor.

At the door to apartment 216, he tries the many keys on his keyring in the door. None of them work to unfasten the deadbolt. While he's going through them a second time, in case he'd missed one, the door opens.

“What are you doing?” A sleepy woman in a fuzzy robe asks the old man.

Credulity

“Who are you? Where’s Amanda?”

“There’s no Amanda here. I think you’ve got the wrong house.” She rubs her eyes and blinks to make out the figure outside the door.

“This is the right place. Two-sixteen. I know she’s in there. Tell her I only want to talk for a minute.”

“Listen, gramps, there’s no Amanda here. You’re at the wrong place. This is three-seventy-three, number two-sixteen. Maybe try three-five-three.”

The old man began to sob, “Why are you doing this to me? I just want to see my son.”

“Are you confused? Do you need help?”

“Amanda?” The old man leans into the apartment.

“Hey! Stop! You need to go *now* or I’m calling the police!” The robed woman pushes the old man away and slams the door. He hears the deadbolt latch and descends the stairs.

In the parking lot, the old man reaches over to roll down Shenzi’s window before pulling the Metro back onto the street that will return them to the freeway. The on-ramp is on the west side of the elevated trafficway, so the old man doesn’t have to circle the block to return to his northbound route.

The freeway curves to highway, redirecting the headlights in a north-by-northeastern direction. The dull-black point holds its position over the red “55”, backlit by lights attached behind the matte-black fascia that is meant to block out extra light from the instruments and indicators at night.

Once again, the lights of intersections and gas station fueling bays fade in the mirrors and barbed-wire fence posts curve past the windshield and disappear out the side windows like dots in his periphery. Dark shadows of Angus cows paint ink

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blotches over the near-moonless pasture. Vast expanses set aside for ranchers to profit on the lives of animals. Meanwhile, millions of people are in the streets.

Every fifteen or twenty miles, massive canopies of light pollute the night sky. Convenience stores are closed, but gas pumps are available for those who choose to, or are able to, use the banking system. Massive, blinding, halogen bulbs wash out the blackness, blinding you as you drive past, squinting against them to see the lines painted on the asphalt.

Between these monuments to profit and pollution are nearly identical subdivisions. In this third development, the one the old man turns into, there's a defunct guard shack a mile down the road, a boom barrier on either side, permanently fixed in the upright position.

At the stop sign after the forever-empty security hovel, the old man turns right. The roads narrow, wide enough for two cars – cars of regular size, at least – but no lines to command the drivers. The old man remembers driving these roads as a teenager, racing up and down the hills so his stomach would drop. Taking the corners wide and inside at high speeds, hoping another driver wouldn't be coming from the other direction. He and his friend had this running challenge to break the speed record '*over the bridge*'. A double-wide, concrete platform that sat only feet above a creek in the rainy season. It had been washed out a couple of times that the old man could remember.

At the double-undulation ahead, the old man steps on the accelerator, and forces the stick into lower gear. He feels a pit in his stomach as they launch over the hill. He hugs the outer shoulder, then noses inward to hit a perfect racing line. The motor revs and he downshifts again. The tattered skirt around the knob

does a hula dance as he yanks the handle. He stomps the pedal and hits the outside of the opposite turn. If someone came around this corner going the opposite way, he'd be a goner. He knew people this happened to. Used to know.

The hills and trees give way to the overpass. Clutching the wheel with both hands at ten-and-two, he watches the flat-black syringe count its way up the faux-modern digits. It slows its climb, freezing the speedometer as the tiny donut-tires hug the pavement. He looks up to correct the turn and get back on the 'right' side of the road. "Seventy-one!" the old man exclaims to himself.

At the next stop sign, he turns right and pushes the one-liter engine to the crest of the hill. The road flattens and veers left before another quick drop. In the combe that flares up on either side, the old man turns right at a gravel driveway.

At the top of the hill, next to the ranch house with the forever-changing paintjob, the old man sees his brother's Explorer and sister's Jeep Liberty. Parked behind them, where the driveway hairpins before opening to the private parking lot, is a Sheriff's Department SUV.

When he was a kid, the old man remembers, there was a fire that had started a few properties over. They had to evacuate. Although the HOA has strict rules for the residents of this subdivision, maintaining the height of dry grass on the three-acre lots isn't one of them. The local fire department is supposed to enforce the state laws for fire prevention, but it's a volunteer crew, so they rarely get around to it. In this region of perpetual drought, fire spreads fast. Any sign of smoke is cause for evacuation.

Wildfires happened every summer, but this one actually made it to their property. The bulldozers arrived in time to create a break across the bottom of the property. It saved the house, but

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destroyed the asphalt driveway, which had to be replaced with gravel the following rainy season. The old man's dad cared about *his* property and would regularly take his gas-powered weedwacker out to do sections of the yard as the weather got warm. As he got older, the grass got taller. The old man came up and did it a few times for his parents, but the vibration of the heavy motor and the petrol fumes would make him feel sick.

The old man backs the car out of the driveway and parks it on the shoulder where it's concealed by large mounds of granite and hard-pack. The spotlight from the Sheriff's vehicle is sweeping the entrance of the driveway from the top of the hill. The old man waits until the light shuts off and peeks around the corner to see if the stooge is going to drive down.

When he's satisfied that everyone has returned indoors, he creeps through the shadows of the buckeye trees that line the driveway. Halfway up, before coming into view of the three bay windows that shine with compact-fluorescent light from oversized bulbs that are suspended from a ceiling fan, the old man steps over a railroad-tie retaining wall and into the knee-high weeds.

He follows the sunbaked creekbed to the barbed-wire fence that marks the rear of his parents' property. The old man retrieves the gold Zippo from his pocket and flips the lid with his index finger a few times, attempting to open and light it with one motion. Unable to do this, as he'd seen his friends do so many times before, he spins the flint with his thumb and watches the flame dance in the moonless night.

The old man drops the lighter next to a mound of dehydrated cow shit on the other side of the fence and retraces his path through the gully to the lower section of the driveway. By the time he's slinking past the end of the driveway, he can see

the calm, Starburst-orange glow pulsing silently in the distance. *Fuck!* The old man had forgotten to roll up the passenger window. He races to the passenger side of the Geo and sticks his head in. Shenzi licks his face.

The Geo Metro strains for what seems like an eternity to climb the next incline. The old man watches the rearview mirror for searchlights, but none appear. To his right, the slope of the hillock is ablaze and racing in all directions.

The motor and his heart start to relax as they come down the hill and turn onto the main road of the rural, away-from-it-all, HOA-governed subdevelopment. Instead of heading to the highway, the old man veers toward the rear exit and the county back-roads. Shenzi leans out to take in the new smells.

They cruise the deserted road as it twists in a semi-natural way with the landscape. Paved two-lanes over former logging trails that were once worked by Belgian Draughts and Friesians. Before that, teams of mules hauled tons of rock away from the river during the Gold Rush. Before that, Native Americans trekked between their villages and the river for water and game.

A line of flashing lights and blaring sirens speed at him, head-on. The old man pulls over so he's straddling the narrow road and the dirt shoulder. Shenzi howls along with the sirens as they grow deafeningly loud. The lights blind the old man as they approach. He closes his eyes and plugs one ear with a finger. The fleet of fire engines and water-tenders race past and disappear around the next bend. The old man puts the Metro into first and lets the clutch out to reclaim a position on the pavement.

They cross the river and reconnect with the highway, which is carved into a plateau parallel to the river with plenty of room on each side for tourism development, if it ever trickles

down this far from the National Parks. At the top of the mountain that overlooks the next tourist-locale-over-genocide town to one side, and the previous town to the other, the old man turns onto a “**NOTICE: PRIVATE ROAD**” road. The asphalt is smooth and thick with tar. The little car scoots along silently now, in sharp contrast with the rumble of the county-maintained roads. On either side of the one-lane driveway, miles of Main-Street-USA, three-candle-menorah street lamps light up the intended path. Rough-hewn, whitewashed beams are arranged in a deliberately old-west-corral style, fencing either side of the property from the roadway. Contrived Americana. Or is that redundant? This continues like the backdrop of an underfunded cartoon for several miles, being interrupted midway by a monumental man-made tower, painted brown and adorned with die-cut metal ‘leaves’. The unnatural behemoth dwarfs the neighboring carbon-based vegetation, while the chain-link Property-of-Verizon-Wireless fence upsets the carefully manufactured pattern of plantation stockades and trident light posts. The paved road forks in a sharp ‘Y’, one side blocked by a bronze-plated gate centered around a long-disused cattle brand. The old man turns right and the tires slide as they gain traction on the gravel.

“What the hell are you doing, Dad?” Todd is running to the side of the Geo as it slows to a stop in front of the house. The old man rolls up his window and gets out, closing the door behind him.

“You’re all over the news!” They’re face-to-face. The old man leans against the driver’s side of the car.

“Yeah, I know. So what? Where’s your mom?”

“Why would she be here? You know nobody’s lived in this house for years. The Sheriff – the *actual* Sheriff already searched

the place. Did you have anything to do with Meems?”

“What memes? No, I didn’t make any of those.”

“Your mom. My grandma.”

“What about her?”

“Did you have anything to do with her dying?”

“She’s not dead. I was just there. The whole house is lit up like Christmas.”

“What month do you think it is?” The younger peers into the eyes of the older, unsure what he should be looking for.

“I said ‘*like* Christmas’.”

“When were you there?”

“Right now, before I came here.”

Todd takes his phone from his pocket and dials from his call history. The old man can hear the canned message say, “We’re sorry but....” Todd presses the end button and selects another contact.

“You have reached the automated voice-mailbox of....”

“What did you do?” He interrogates the old man, pinning him against the waist-high car.

“Nothing. I didn’t even go in.”

With one hand, the younger man holds the old man’s collar and keeps him pressed against the window. With the other, he dials “911” on his phone.

“What are you doing, man?”

“You’ve gotta stop! Why are you trying to find my mom?”

“Your mom? Whoever said I was looking for your mom?”

“You did, like five seconds ago. Are you that messed up?”

He hasn’t pressed dial on the screen yet.

“I never said that. I’m looking for *Amanda*.”

“Oh my God. You need help. Do you even know what

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you've been doing the last few days?"

"Of course I do. I had to work. Had some meetings about... something. I think I painted some. Made some memes, I guess."

"No. None of that happened. Come inside and I'll help you."

"I can't right now, sorry. I have to find my son. Did you still need a ride?"

"I don't think you should be driving anymore."

"Wasn't I supposed to take you to the – the—steam bus station tomorrow?"

"Do you mean a train? I fly planes, same as I have for years. You know that. You're confused. Come inside." He lets go of the old man with his right hand, but keeps his left hand hovering over the green button.

"*You're* confused. They don't have planes in the 24th infantry division."

"I was never in the military. How would you even know something like that? There are beds inside and the well still works. You can clean up and rest." He turns and leads the way to the wooden steps. The old man opens the car door and starts to get in.

"What the hell, man! Stop!" The old man shouts as he's being yanked from the vehicle by the front of his shirt. The door slams shut and he skins his arms and elbows on the sharp pebbles.

"I told you, you can't go anywhere. You're in big trouble. *Serious* trouble.

"Stay right there. I'm calling the cops. Don't worry, they're not going to take you to prison. You need a hospital."

"What the hell, Rob? You said I was one of the 'good ones'." The old man begins to stand, looking at the peeling skin around his wounds.

“You’re *confused*. *Sick!* Stay down and relax. You’re going to be fine.” He takes a step forward to tower over the bent old man.

“There’s something wrong with you, but it’s not your fault. Don’t you get that?!” He starts to place a hand on the old man’s back while he presses the button on his phone. “Right now, you just need to stay ca—What the...”

In an instant Shenzi climbs from the broken rear window and leaps from the compact car. Clearing the folded old man, she lands atop the younger man, knocking him to the gravel. Her teeth plunge into his neck and she comes away with a ragged chunk. The old man takes a moment to catch his breath.

Why is Rob here? He must be in on this somehow. I always knew he and Amanda were up to something. After all that I did for that goosefucker. I’m not going to let anybody get that close to me ever again. If Amanda isn’t here, where is she? Maybe the bakery? They start prepping at two-am in the busy season. I don’t want to drive all the way up to the lake right now. I’ll meet up with her in the morning.

“Alright, baby, let’s go.” The old man stands beside the open driver’s door, signaling Shenzi to get in. She hurries to finish whatever she’s eating by the front of the house and takes off, running.

“How’d you get so messy, girl?” The old man reaches into the car and unravels the second napkin bundle that he’d taken from Stone’s. He wipes around Shenzi’s face and neck to clean off the sticky goo that she’s gotten into.

The old man takes the seat beside her and she resumes her head-out-the-window position. He turns the key and pulls the gear shifter into reverse. They back out the gravel driveway and onto the finished surface. Facing the way they came, the old man

puts the car into gear and the two of them travel again through the orchestrated ranchland, no-trespassers byway.

The sun is beginning to peek out from the horizon beyond the town on the north side of the mountain. The fast-food and hotel signs light the valley in the predawn hours – a grotesque spectacle in the otherwise pristine forest.

It's early enough, he thinks, I can probably find good parking at school before first period.

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There's technically a "zero" period – before the sports teams start their morning warm-ups on the field. Before the first round of buses arrive. One of those pre-university prep courses. Hardly anybody goes. There are half a dozen cars parked in the row closest to the school.

Like the tables in a cafeteria, the upperclassmen have claims on portions of the parking lot. Rich kids with sports cars and football players in lifted trucks park in the front. Stoners and burnouts to the back. A pocket of goths smoke clove cigarettes and lean against used sedans over here. Band geeks unloading instruments from carpool minivans over there. It's not some stupid movie trope, this is how the parking spaces fill in before the first bell rings. This is one of those times when the movies are accurate, perhaps. Life imitating art imitating life.

Latecomers circle the driveways, looking for an open spot. Crowds of students shuffle toward the buildings with matching letterman jackets or cheer skirts, band uniforms and trumpet cases. Studded belts, torn jackets. They walk in front of SUVs that are fighting for space near the entrance to drop off their human cargo.

First period is on the other side of campus. Five minutes by the main walkway. Seven-and-a-half to go around. If you time it right, you'll be sliding into a desk just before the teacher calls

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your name.

There's always a chance of running into one of your bullies on the side route. *Don't look at anyone. Don't talk to anyone. Walk fast, but don't run. Just watch where you're going so you don't bump into somebody,* you repeat in your head as you take the longer path.

“Hey, ugly!”

Don't look up. Keep walking.

“Hey! You! *Helooooo*. I'm talking to you.” The girl who blocks the walkway smells like stale cigarettes and maple syrup. “Are you deaf *and* stupid?” She steps to one side, then the other, to let everybody else pass by. Except you.

Don't say anything.

“Someone needs to put a bag over your head,” another girl chimes in.

“Yeah, and your personality.” The cigarettes and syrup girl. She lunges forward and thrusts her arms out. You stumble back to evade and topple over a third member of their gang, who had been crouched behind you. Your backpack breaks the fall, sending the back of your head to the concrete and your glasses sliding across the pavement.

“What seems to be the problem here?” A deep voice rings out. His dark silhouette blocks the sun as he stands over you.

“I didn't even touch her,” the first girl responds, giggling. She and her cohorts wear matching blue-wool jackets with white-leather sleeves. On the left breast is a white, woolen letter-**Y** as big as your hand. Thumbprint-sized patches with line-drawings of volleyballs or soccerballs are sewn on the **‘Y’**.

“Let me see.” The dark shadow crouches down, bringing his face in so your noses are almost touching. You can taste his

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hot, sour breath. As he comes into focus, you can see the blue-wool jacket with white-leather sleeves. Inches away, a white, woolly letter-**Y** as big as your face. Eyeball sized patches with line-drawings of footballs and basketballs.

Pimples crowd from Tyson's face to his hairline like masses fleeing the erupting volcano that is his nose. Angry zits escape down his neck and under his t-shirt. Two hairy sausages reach up to poke at the terrified villagers. Tyson squeezes at his personal Vesuvius, which spews yellow-white magma on your face. spurts of oily lava stain your new shirt.

At lunch, cliques form in the parking lot to go with the cars. Or in similar patterns at the picnic benches that are placed non-strategically around campus. Your single-serve bag of plain, grease-and-salt potato chips were crushed in the fall this morning. You retrieve the smashed wheat bread, Kraft cheese, and mayo sandwich from your backpack and pour on the fried crumbs from their foil bag.

"Whatcha got there, dummy?" Tyson smacks the sandwich from your hands. It unfolds and lands both-mayonnaise-sides down in the dirt. He stomps on one side and grinds his toe into the bread like he's putting out a cigarette.

"What else ya got?" He snatches your unzipped backpack from the bench beside you and dumps the contents across the dirt walkway – atop the remnants of your lunch.

"Those guys are assholes," your friend, Rob, says as Tyson and his three volleyball/soccer-patch girlfriends walk away, howling and cackling.

"Yeah, it's whatever. What am I going to do about it? I'm just trying to keep a low profile for the next two months."

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“Yeah, man. I’m glad I found you. I have to do this, like, twenty-page essay for my senior project. Could you help me out?” Rob beseeches.

“Yeah, of course.”

As it turns out, when he asked for ‘help’, what he meant was he wanted you to do the whole project for him. You still have to do your own senior project essay and presentation. But you said you’d help, and you were going to stick to your word. You want to be able to help people whenever you can. Maybe a career in social work or medicine or psychology? You were barely going to be able to afford to go to community college as it is.

The best thing about senior year is getting out after sixth period and avoiding the gangs of roving tormentors on the way to your car. The worst thing about senior year is going to your part-time job after sixth period and having to work with those same tyrants.

Your parents used to be of the opinion that you should go to school and come straight home. That adolescence should be about preparing for adulthood and nothing else. Concerts and video games and sports programs were all a “waste of time and money”. You would never ‘make it’ as a musician or athlete, they’d tell you. There’s no money in video games, they’d say.

However, once it was legal to get a work-permit at fourteen, they were all for it. What you *should* have been doing the whole time was working *and* going to school – then straight home. You weren’t old enough to understand before, that’s why they didn’t tell you. It was time to learn some “responsibility” by pacing miles of linoleum with a dust mop or holding barcodes over the one-square-foot of space in front of the cash register that wasn’t moved

automatically by a belt. Your parents keep half of your minimum-wage paycheck for your ‘future’.

Rob’s mom owns the store, so you get to work with your friend. But for some stupid reason, she hired several of the blue-and-white-jacket mafia. Maybe it was to save Rob from getting stuffed into trash cans. Maybe it was to help him fit in. Maybe it was to get in with the rich parents of these kids. Whatever it was, it sucks for you.

Rob’s mom and dad are the bosses. If they aren’t there, Adrienne would fall into the de facto leadership role. She’s thirtyish and gets on with most of the staff, especially since she had one of those same jackets when she was in high school. Aside from Rob, who you might actually listen to if he were the manager, everyone spends their time bossing you around while they goof off. They cluster up and gossip about other people in their jacket club. They stand in tight circles and brag about winning this game or make excuses for losing that game. Shibboleth fatuus.

“Hey, someone peed on the floor in the women’s room again,” giggles one of the girls.

“And I think a homeless guy took a dump outside,” laughs another.

Don’t tell her stupid face that there are no homeless people in this tiny mountain town.

“After you finish cleaning those up, someone trashed aisle sixteen,” Tyson grins. That’s the hardware section. Once the piss and shit are cleaned up and you’ve washed your hands, it’ll be time to rinse motor oil from screws and washers before meticulously sorting them into individual plastic bins. Somebody “trashes” this department about once a week. Meanwhile, Tyson takes turns disappearing into the warehouse with Adrienne and the other girls.

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“*Excuse me!*” An angry customer calls down the aisle. You *just* clocked out and took off your apron. “I’ve been trying to get service over here for a half-hour now. You damn lazy kids don’t know how to work. This store is a mess and you’re all standing around, talking. You got time to lean, you got time to clean, I always say.” She huffs and makes passive-aggressive comments under her breath as you walk her to the anorectics.

“Bye, sweetie. See you tomorrow.” The girl at the front counter, wearing a green apron over her blue cheer-squad sweatshirt, blows a kiss as you make your escape.

“What did you *do?*” Your mother glares at your stained and torn shirt.

“Why do you always assume I did something? It was Tyson and Ashley again.”

“You’re so unappreciative of everything I do for you. I buy you nice clothes and you go and ruin them. And did you scratch your glasses again? You need to get better friends. I don’t know why you like to hang out with losers so much. When I was your age, my friends were *good* influences.”

“I’ve told you a million times already, they are *not* my friends.”

“Don’t backsass me. How many times have *I* told *you* not to pop your acne. You’ll get permanent scars. You want that? Huh? Use the damn facewash I got you from Clinique. And change your attitude. You’re ugly enough on the inside. You want to stay ugly on the outside, too? This isn’t how *I* raised you. You’re an ungrateful brat.”

“I wasn’t talking back. I’m *trying* to have a conversation with you.” Your head screams like the fire-drill alarm at school.

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“Just shut up!” She screams into your ringing ear. “I expect you to show me some respect around here. Have some God-damned gratitude for everything I’ve had to give up because of you.

“Stop crying. You look like a little bitch. You need to be setting an example for your brothers and sister. You’re out there until all hours at your deadbeat job and not helping me with them at all. This isn’t the Holiday Inn.”

*Bullshit. I babysit all weekend when you go out with your friends and every day I’m not working from as soon as I get back from school until you get home at whatever time. I don’t have time to study between feeding them and cleaning up after them and helping with their homework. And *you* are the one who got me the job. Rob’s mom is *your* friend. We wouldn’t even be friends if you hadn’t spent the last ten years taking me over there so you could drink wine with her and gossip about your other ‘friends’.*

“You need to get your act together. You’re never gonna make it in this life unless you grow up. I told you to come straight home after work and you can’t even obey that one rule.”

“I *do* come straight home.” The active-shooter alarm blares in your skull as her hand welts the side of your head again.

“Don’t lie to me! I checked your bank account. Wasting money on bean burritos and fruit smoothies. Just like a loser dirtbag would do. Should I take *all* of your paycheck so you don’t have a hole burning in your pocket all the time? There’s plenty of food to eat here.”

Don’t comment about her cooking – if you could call defrosting and microwaving ‘cooking’. Don’t bring up vegetarianism again. Don’t tell her horrible face that you’re only trying to take care of your health.

“You know what, I’m going to home-school you. Pull you out of that school that we pay so much for, since you’re as dumb as the day you were born.” *It’s a public school.* “Since you’re so incapable of getting along with people. I don’t know what you do to antagonize your bad-influence friends all the time. You must be as stupid as you look to pick fights with kids twice your size. You’re obviously starting crap on purpose. I’ve told you how to deal with bullies. I’ve told you over-and-over not to talk to them, don’t look at them, just keep walking. If you don’t instigate with them, they won’t bother you. I sound like a broken record. You never listen to anything I say. You think you know everything already. What’s the point in sending you to school if you’re so smart?”

“Okay, I’m going to bed. I have school in the morning.”

“Don’t walk away while I’m talking to you. If it weren’t for me, you wouldn’t even have a bed to go to. You think your life is all a big joke. I gave you life and I can take it away. We’ve done everything to make your life easy and you’re unappreciative, you have a bad attitude, you’re lazy, and you look like the giant shit I took earlier. You definitely don’t get any of that from me or your father. Go wash your retarded face; I can see my reflection in your skin. You look like a pizza. And use *all three* of the products I bought for you. I’ll be checking to see how full the bottles are.”

The next morning, before the sunrise, the alarm clock screeches like your mom’s shrill voice. You hit the button and crawl out of your twin bed like the start of a Bill Murray movie.

There's technically a "zero" period – before the sports teams start their morning warm-ups on the field. Before the first round of buses arrive. One of those pre-university prep courses. Hardly anybody goes. There are half a dozen cars parked in the row closest to the school.

The parking lot fills in like tables in a cafeteria. The upperclassmen have claims on portions of the parking lot. Rich kids with sports cars and football players in lifted trucks park in the front. Stoners and burnouts toward the back. A pocket of goths smoke clove cigarettes and lean against used sedans over here. Band geeks unloading instruments from carpool minivans over there. It's not some stupid movie trope, this is how the parking spaces fill in before the first bell rings. This is one of those times when the movies are accurate, perhaps. Art imitating life imitating art.

Latecomers circle the driveways, looking for an open spot. Crowds of students shuffle toward the buildings with matching letterman jackets or cheer skirts, band uniforms and trumpet cases. Studded belts, torn jackets. They walk in front of SUVs that are fighting for space near the entrance to drop off their human cargo.

When the expanse of pavement is deserted except for its mechanical tenants, the old man lets himself out of the Metro that he has parked on the outskirts of the parking lot. Shenzi follows him toward the school and down a naturally-worn footpath that weaves through the pine and eucalyptus trees bordering the campus. This is the super-secret back-back way to loop around to the other side of the school. It takes twice as long as any other route, but provides near-complete concealment from bullies – except for where the path crosses the bridge between the gym and practice fields.

Outside of the aggregate-sided multi-purpose gymnasium-and-auditorium, children wait in blue knit shorts and white cotton t-shirts. To the old man, they look like babies, not teenagers. While they stand beside the double doors, waiting for the coach-slash-history-teacher to let them in for PE class, a group of larger kids come from the locker room. They wear the same attire, but their t-shirts with their names written across the stomach in Sharpie are covered with blue-wool jackets with white-leather sleeves. On the left breasts are white, woolen letter-**Y**'s as big as the smaller kids' faces. Testicle-sized patches with line-drawings of footballs or baseballs are sewn on the **Y**s.

“Hey, ugly!” One boy with a jacket shouts at another boy who doesn't have a jacket.

“Hey! You! *Hellllooooo*. I'm talking to you.” A girl blocks the doorway as the class enters the building. “Are you deaf *and* stupid?” She steps to one side, then the other, to let everybody else pass by. Except this one boy.

Don't say anything, the old man thinks.

“Someone needs to put a bag over your head,” another girl chimes in.

“Yeah, a plastic bag. And then drown you in the creek.” The blue-and-white jacket boy. “If you were my kid, I would have gone straight from the hospital to a bridge.” He points to the old man, crouched next to the nearest bridge. One with no water under it.

“Shit, if he was my kid, I would have scraped him outta my clam with a rusty hanger.”

“Hear that, loser? Why don’t you go kill yourself so everyone else doesn’t have to look at your gross face anymore. Nobody’s gonna ever want to fuck you. I asked around. It was unanimous.” He lunges forward and thrusts his arms out. The t-shirt boy, who is fixated on his shoelaces, is shoved backward and topples over a third member of their gang, who had been crouched behind him. He hits his head on the concrete step that elevates the energy drink and candy bar vending machines outside the gym, sending his glasses sliding across the pavement. The boy lays on the pavement without moving, his arms covering his face. The first girl snorts deeply to drive mucus into her throat and spits the slimy, buttermilk-yellow glob on him.

“What seems to be the problem here?” A deep voice rings out.

“I didn’t even touch *her*,” the jacket boy responds, giggling.

“Let me see.” The dark shadow crouches down, bringing his face in so his nose is almost touching the boy’s nose. “Get your asses in there!” The gym teacher shouts at the pack of jacket-wearing kids. He helps the boy up from the ground and escorts him to the locker room before crossing the breezeway to the gymnasium doors.

The old man waits in the morning shadows of the trees and brush near the bridge that spans the dry creekbed. This is where

he'd hide to eat his lunch most days, when he didn't want to go out to his car – or before he'd saved enough to get one. It depended on where he found parking that morning. If it was over by the band, he could usually cross the minefield of bullies as part of the group of brass and woodwind players. If he was parked anywhere near the front, or on the road-side, it wouldn't even be worth attempting.

There were good times in high school, too, right? The after-school job where he was made to clean up human excrement. The classes where he'd sit up front and the kids in the back would throw things at him and stick gum in his hair. *Rob*.

The bullied boy leaves the locker-room in his jeans and band-logo tee. When the class lets out, the students pour between buildings. The other meek children are in and out of the locker room in moments, not bothering to shower before getting ready for the next class. A custodian is bringing bags of trash and towels from the boys' room. When he goes inside for another load, the old man tells Shenzi to "wait" and creeps up from beside the bridge. He takes a mop and two plastic one-gallon jugs from the janitor's cart and ducks behind the water tanks that border the south-side of the pebble-faced building.

As the sound of the wobbly plastic casters roll away, the old man peeks around the corner, then carries his mop to the double-doorway that enters the changing rooms. He shoves the handle of the mop between the matching door handles and makes a hasty retreat back to the thousand-gallon silos.

The old man climbs the ladder attached to the building and, on the roof, pries at the panel on the HVAC unit marked 'SUPPLY FAN'. His fingertips bleed as he struggles to shove them under the metal cover. He'd had the anxious habit of biting his nails for as long as he could remember. It didn't cause him a lot of problems,

Amalgamation

except when it came to opening a beer can or peeling packaging tape from a box. He'd always carried a pocket knife, but it was confiscated by the Sunrise wardens.

Tearing at what little fingernails he has left, the lid flops open and lands on the roof, several feet away. He untwists the cap on the bottle of Windex and pours the concentrate into the top of the air-conditioning unit. Emptying the first bottle, he opens the lid of the Clorox and upends the second jug into the fan. The smell of the cleaning products mixing with hot steam blows through the outlet, clearing his old, battered lungs.

He takes a deep breath and without returning the cover to the supply fan, the old man descends the ladder and finds his place with Shenzi on the trail. They don't wait to see the results of today's high-school chemistry experiment. Before sirens are calling out in the distance, they're back in the Geo and passing Sheriff's cars and fire engines headed in the opposite direction.

Chapter Twenty

Manifestation

The boy was seated in a wooden chair in the middle of the living room, surrounded by boxes wrapped in decorative paper or Sunday comics. The boxes were surrounded by aunts and uncles and grandparents. Friends of his parents that they insisted he referred to as 'Aunt Kim' or 'Uncle Brad'. The boy's parents told him this was how he showed respect to adults.

As he waited for permission to open the gifts, his mom came from the kitchen with a birthday cake, singing "Happy Birthday" in varying keys and registers. The chorus of old people joined in. She held the candles under the boy's face so he could blow them out.

"What did you wish for?" His mother asked.

"You're not supposed to say, or it won't come true." His grandmother answered.

With each present the boy opened, his mother would tell him to hold it up for the camera and show it around the room while she took notes on a yellow legal pad. Itchy sweaters and Disney movies and a children's illustrated bible. He'd asked for video games or actual grown-up books. The kind with no pictures. The other kids picked on him because of his clothes. If they'd given him a hoodie instead, he could blend in. He didn't need more neon green t-shirts with cartoon sharks saying, "Gone Fishin'," or screen prints of volleyballs branded "Bugle Boy". He didn't have any

'cool' clothes, but still, he didn't surf or play beach sports either. He'd only even been to the beach a couple of times in his life.

He tried to act excited about the gifts. To lift them proudly and smile big and toothy. The boy always hated the way his smile looked in pictures. Like, he could tell it was fake. The same as he could tell it was fake when other people smiled their big, toothy smiles. Not all the time, but most of the time. He had to look at the way they moved their neck and shoulders and the way their eyes squinted. That was the way he'd figured out to tell if someone was happy or pretending to be happy. It would have been fine if he knew how he was supposed to look. When he was in kindergarten, which was four years before this birthday, he'd asked his mom how to make his eyes smile and have his teeth show the right amount and have the corners of his lips move up and make points.

"What do you mean, 'make your eyes smile'? That's the dumbest thing I've ever heard. Look, you just do this." Then she made the face from all of the photographs on the walls.

"But how do I make it look happy?"

"You have to be happy. Have a better attitude. Look at me, I'm happy!"

And after that, he didn't ask adults how to do the things they all did. He would memorize what other people did and repeat them.

"How are you?" = "I'm good, how are you?"

"How was school?" = "It was good. I learned about [insert generic topic, but don't get too specific. Just say math or history.]"

"What do you want to be when you grow up?" = "I want to be a [keep it generic. Don't get too specific and talk about how you could see yourself covered in mesoproterozoic dust at a paleontological dig site. Or elbow-deep in somebody's thorax, searching for the

missing piece of epiglottis or median cricothyroid tissue needed to complete your pathological examination. And definitely don't talk about how there's no way you'd know at this age what you want to do every day for the rest of your life. First, there's college. And that's after thirteen years of regular school. And paying to go to a university for all those years is out of the question. Okay, what can you do that doesn't require education, but won't induce follow-up questions. Just say police officer or firefighter.]"

"What do you want to do for your birthday?"

The boy had asked to go to the arcade with three of his friends. Instead, he had this — a bunch of his parents' friends and family sitting around, talking about boring stuff. His mom told him she was going to plan an arcade party for him, but since he stole the twenty-four-count box of Reese's two-packs that his brother, Nick, was supposed to sell for the school fundraiser, they were canceling the party. She said they had to use the money to pay for the candy he ate. He didn't eat it. The boy didn't even like Reese's. It was probably his spoiled-ass brother who could never do any wrong who ate his own candy. Or his mom. She was always stealing the Kit-Kat and Reese's from his Halloween collection. So not only did she 'cancel' his birthday party that was probably never going to happen anyway, but he was grounded for a month. And got another beating over it. Then another for 'lying' and saying he didn't take the fundraiser candy. Then another when his father got home for wasting money.

Once he'd finished exhibiting his birthday presents, his mom made him get up from the hard chair and circle the living room, hugging and saying "thank you" to each person in the room in turn. He protested, whispering to her that he didn't want to hug everybody, but she insisted. "You don't get to tell me 'no'," she said.

The VHS tape whirrs. On the screen, several more minutes of the boy's family waving at the camera and adjusting their posture while pretending to be engaged in conversation swirl with staticky tracking marks in a graffiti-on-a-cargo-train-on-meth amalgamation.

It was Nick's sixth birthday. In front of the Disneyland train station, a brigade of small children ran back and forth in eager anticipation. The boy stood against the wrought-iron half-fence that protected the carefully manicured grass.

"What are you doing?" The boy's mom screeched at him. "Are you having fun?"

How could I be having fun? You're making us wait here so you can take pictures of my brother and his friends instead of letting us go on the rides. He turns away silently to look up at the arriving engine and passenger cars.

"You need to fix your attitude, mister. Show some damn appreciation for all we do for you." The boy ignored her and stared without focus up the hill. His mother slapped the back of his head and made passive-aggressive comments about him to his father, who was balancing a video camera on his shoulder, tracking the pack of scampering first-graders.

"Stop biting your nails," she slaps his hand away from his face. "Can you at least smile for your father? We want to remember this as a happy time!" He looked over his shoulder from his position on the fenceline, waved, and attempted a smile.

"What are you doing?" The boy's mother pandered again for the camera when they had made it down the crowded Main Street U.S.A. pathway, to the castle. They had to dodge trolley-cars and antique fire engines because the boy's mother didn't want to push her double-stroller on the sidewalk.

"There's no cars here. What are you so paranoid about? Can't you do something because everyone else wants to do it?" She shouted for everyone to hear — to purposely embarrass the boy — when he'd asked to use the sidewalk after the third vehicle had to swerve to get around his oblivious family.

Like, fuck, man, you have a camera what does it look like I'm doing? The boy thought after she shrieked a third time about what he was doing.

"Are you boys having fun?"

"Yeah!" The chorus of six-year-olds responded.

They waited in lines for Peter Pan and Snow White and other Fantasyland attractions. The boy was finally tall enough to ride Space Mountain and Big Thunder Mountain and Star Tours. These Kiddy rides where the carts went around in a circle with pictures on the wall didn't interest him any more. They came here for his brother's last birthday, and the one before, and rode the same five rides over and over, then took the kids to Tom Sawyer Island to run around and eat warm, soggy sandwiches they'd packed in mom's purse, then maybe Pirates of the Caribbean or the Haunted Mansion if everyone was "good". That was the plan again today. The boy was supposed to watch his baby brother and sister while they took Nick's friends on those latter 'big kid' rides.

The boy asked his parents if he could go on his own to Tomorrowland, or even to see if he could ride the Matterhorn, where they could practically watch him the whole time. He hadn't looked up the height restrictions for that one. But his mom insisted it wouldn't be safe for a child to be unattended in the Happiest Place on Earth. Even if one of his grandparents walked him all the way to the gate. Plus, then someone would have to miss out on time with the other children.

"You need to be a part of this family. Grow up and stop being so selfish. It's your brother's birthday. Can't you ever do anything for anyone else?"

"I just want to go on a couple of rides that I've never been on before. We drove all this way."

"Don't backtalk me or you can sit on that bench over there all day and not go on any rides. You're such a pain in my ass. You want to be a loser all your life? After all I do for you, all I want is you to do one thing for me for once in your life."

"Could we do even one later, maybe? Before we leave."

"You know what, I'm sick of you. Go sit on that bench until you learn how to be part of a family."

Hours of the backs' of little boys' heads sitting in darkened carriages turn to fuzz as the VCR spins the tape forward at ludicrous speed. The backlit paintings of evil stepmothers silhouette evil realmothers. Amidst the hiss of the audio coming from the speaker that's built into the 27" console television a chipmunk voice says, "Whatareyoudoingwhatareyoudoingwhatareyoudoing."

Dozens of children were crowded around the red-white-and-blue decorated Christmas tree, passing around boxes wrapped in expensive paper and adorned with ribbons and bows.

"Wow, Becky, everything looks so great!" 'Aunt' Kim told the boy's mom from the kitchen.

Of course it does, I spent the last three days cleaning floors and washing the fancy dishes that are only brought out for this annual event, the boy thinks. He'd spent the weekend after Thanksgiving and Black Friday – which was a holiday to his family – unpacking the glass ornaments and tinsel and the plastic tree. While the 'girls' went shopping, as was their tradition. He had to bring everything in from the shed by himself because the

other boys weren't old enough, according to his mother. The boy untangled strands of lights and was pricked by fish hooks. When she was home, he'd have to bring an item from one of over a dozen boxes and hold it up for his mother so she could direct him where to hang it. She'd lounge on the couch that they were never allowed to lay on or eat on, drinking overflowing glasses of wine and eating half-pound bars of dark chocolate. It was too expensive for kids, she'd say. The boy wouldn't appreciate it.

"And this food is amazing!" 'Aunt' Carrie exclaimed from somewhere else.

The boy laughed to himself. His mom bought everything at Costco, then arranged it on fancy plates. The spinach-artichoke dip, a mix. Meatballs, frozen. 'Homemade' English toffee and peanut brittle, straight from the box. These people knew her. They'd never seen her cook from scratch. She'd never brandished a chef's knife. Never wielded a wooden spoon — except at her children.

"What did I tell you? Get over there and clean up the trash. And I don't mean your face. Can't you do anything for this family?"

The boy circled the living room, balling up torn paper and shoving it into a black plastic trash bag as fast as his cousins and siblings can discard the waste as they rip open the next toy or video game.

"Nicky, what'd you get?" The boy's mom shouts from across the house. Her golden child holds up a Game Boy for the camera with a painfully-wide grin. "Do you love it?" Nick nods like he's having a seizure.

"You. Get in there and wash all of the dishes. Unload and load the dishwasher and go to bed."

"Don't I get to open anything?"

"No. You know Christmas Eve is for gift from aunts and uncles and cousins. You're getting too old and there are too many little kids in the family now, so I told them they don't need to get you anything this year. They're going to need to save it for your kids and your wedding presents soon. If you were good this year, maybe Santa will bring you something."

"Mom, I'm nine. I know Santa isn't real."

The distinctive crack of palm to face rings out from just out of frame.

"How many times have I told you not to talk back to me? Be a part of this family. Set an example for your brothers and sister and all your cousins. They still believe in Santa."

"My sister is a baby, she doesn't even know what Santa is."

"You know what, I'm done with you. You're the worst thing that ever happened to me. Thanks for ruining Christmas after all of my hard work. Go to your room and shut the door. Lights out. No reading."

Around the polyvinyl-chloride Christmas tree, boys and girls raced remote control cars and used He-Man action figures to rescue Barbie dolls.

"What are you doing?" The boy's mom exclaims to the crowd of children.

I eject the tape and shove it back in the video cabinet. I feel around on the back shelf for video that might have some of the good ol' days from my childhood on there. Eventually, I decide on some Full House reruns. Some inspirational parenting.



Chapter Tyson Pogue Shenzi

South on the highway, a pandemic of assisted-living prisons and defunct shopping malls. Pretentious glass office buildings looking down on corporate theme-parks, replete with daytime firework-displays of primary colors. Bar parking lots. Tower Street. Homeless families and abused minimum-wage laborers. First apartments and childhood homes. His life.

The old man cranks the wheel right and lets out the clutch to lurch the car into the northbound lane. Over the next several minutes, canopies of concrete and steel, protecting gas pumps from the elements and stick-on-letter signs shouting “**CABLE TV**” and “**FREE BREAKFAST**” dwindle to return the environment to its autochthonous condition.

For an hour, Shenzi and the old man swerve along the narrow mountain road, indulging in the scents of ferns and fir trees. Fresh morning dew on the forest floor.

“A new update on *The Dementia Deviant* case,” the jockey breaks in over the Aerosmith song playing on the staticky FM stereo. “Sheriff Tyson Pogue announced today that the suspected spree killer has been positively identified. The wanted man has been tied to at least six additional homicides and is a person-of-interest in cases spanning two counties over this past week.” The speakers click in an abrupt transition from the broadcast studio to an ‘on-location’ feed, already in progress.

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“Again, the suspect was last positively seen in the eastern part of the county, driving a seafoam-green Geo Metro with a primer-black hood. Officers stationed in the area have confirmed the presence of this vehicle in the vicinity of the suspect’s former residence. The suspect fled the area and is believed to have then traveled north on the main highway and is hiding out in one of our peaceful mountain communities. He may be abetted by an unknown person or persons in the area.

“Our probe, with assistance from the Federal Bureau of Investigation, has seen the interviewing of over forty known associates and family members. A thorough background investigation has been conducted and we’ve determined that the suspect has no other known ties to the area beyond his last known whereabouts.

“Presently, tactical officers are constructing roadblocks along both highways that lead in and out of the county. I’m confident that we will bring this maniac to justice today and we all pray for a safe and peaceful outcome for our brave heroes from ten different agencies who have all come together and have been working day-and-night to protect our communities during this tragic time.

“We’d like to remind all individuals listening this morning that the suspect is considered armed and extremely dangerous. Do not approach the suspect. If you see this vehicle, call 911 immediately or report it to an officer at one of the many checkpoints.”

The abrasive crackling mono feed clicks again, bringing both speakers alive with a polished voice over a fancy microphone in a padded room.

“That was Sheriff Tyson Pogue with the latest details

on *The Dementia Deviant* killer. Stay tuned here to The Fox for updates as this case unfolds. If you're just tuning in, this man is wanted for dozens of injuries and deaths over the past few days.

"Details recently released indicate the suspect was formerly a well-known artist in the Tower neighborhood. The Fox has contacted known associates and will be bringing you their exclusive statements in an upcoming broadcast."

The radio cuts in and out as they enter the National Park. The old man turns the knob left to silence the staticky broadcast. He removes a \$20 from Tim's wallet and passes it to the toll-booth attendant.

"I'm sorry, sir, but dogs aren't allowed in the campgrounds or on the trails anywhere inside the park."

"Oh, she's a service dog, but don't worry about it; we're just passing through."

"Are you headed to the hot springs? They've just reopened the pass for the season."

"How'd you guess? It sure helps cure these old bones."

"I know *exactly* what you mean, sir," the woman chuckles. "Receipt?"

"No, thank you," he waves at her.

"You have a great day, sir," she smiles, pressing the button.

"You, too, miss," the old man replies as the car springs through the open gate.

Did she really think this car could make it over the pass? The old man thinks as he takes the branch of the highway that circles around the 'destination' part of the National Park. The route that leads to the next valley. The next Starbucks or Dutch Brothers where Teslas and SUVs line up fifteen-long in drive-thrus. The next parking lot where Ford Expeditions and Cadillac Escalades

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fight for the compact space closest to the gym. The next ring of asphalt lined with palm trees where Costcos and Home Depots and Walgreens square up for a second round with Sam's Club and Lowes and CVS.

These towns with their self-checkouts and thousand-square-foot warehouse stores sell the one thing what little money he has can actually buy. The one thing the old man is in the market for. Anonymity.

When he wanders the drug store, dropping scissors and razors into a branded-plastic push-cart, he's just some old man.

When he grabs a box of nitrile gloves and a roll of thirteen-gallon, double-ply, drawstring trash bags, he's just some guy.

When he adds an As-Seen-On-TV mini-vac and disposable rain poncho to his trolley, he's just some geriatric kook.

With each tear-here paper cube or ez-open plastic cylinder he collects, he's nobody. He's another guy with a cart full of brand-name nothing. Children, parents, and seniors. Men, women, and non-binaries. All colors, all sizes. They all have one thing in common: none look up from their phones to see the old man. None look away from their next gotta-have-it to notice the distinct curiosities in his basket. To recognize that *he's* the guy that they've been looking down at all day in their newsfeeds.

The old man swipes a card from the thick leather wallet in the self-checkout lane. He tosses business number papers and old penis balloons from the billfold and into the waiting garbage odpergo. Impatient customers glance away from their devices momentarily to count the items in each other's carts. To make sure the others all have fifteen items or less.

The old man rejoins Shenzi in the front seat of the battered coupe. He backs out of the stall with constellation, unable to see

the driveway past the diesel pickups parked on either side. As he's creeping out, the blast of an airhorn causes him to stomp on the brake pickle. The old man glances over his shoulder to see a Sheriff's Department GMC Yugo. A meaty arm reaches through the open window of the SUV. The seams of the deputy's uniform strain to constrain the bicep under the tactical uniform. In the door mirror, the old man can see "КАБА ПЕРЕ :Q-K" stenciled across the passenger door.

The officer uses a leather-gloved hand to wave at himself. The Metro lurches with the release of the shoe duffle and pulls in front of the Sheriff's road slogger. Shenzi sticks her head out the passenger side and sniffs at the passenger in the bigger car. The old man sticks his left arm out and waves to the officer while shifting into forward-go mode with his other left hand. The Yukon accelerates hard and the driver jerks the wheel to cram his SUV in the space between the two Fords.

Shenzi watches the unfamiliar scenery roll past. It's cool outside and she likes how the wind feels with her head out the window. The scents of the restaurants and the people passing by with their shopping carts full of interesting treasures gain and lose her interest as fast as they can appear. It's lunch time, so the smell of flame-grilled burgers and hot, greasy pizza are filling the air.

The old man steers the little green car into a drive-thru. The one with the shortest line. He waits in the shade of the towering Mercedes Sprinter van while its occupants order what the old man suspects to be around seventy-three items.

"And a Diet Coke," he hears from ahead. "Fine, Pepsi."

"Welcome to Taco Bell. How are you?" The speaker queries the old man.

"I'm good, thank you. How are you?"

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“I’m *excellent*. Thank you for asking. Go ahead and...One moment please.

“I’m sorry about the wait. How may I help you?”

“Could I get three bean burritos, one with no onions, and a Nachos Bellgrande® with no red sauce, please?”

“I’m sorry, sir, the Nachos Bellgrande® no longer contains red sauce.”

“No need to apologize. So the three burritos, one no onion, a Nachos Bellgrande® – could I get steak on that? Just the nachos. And a large Dr. Pepper, please.”

“Of course, sir. Would you like anything to drink. Would you like any sauce?”

“Two ‘Hot’, please.”

“Does everything look correct on your screen?”

“Yes, thank you.”

“I’ll have your total at the second window, please pull forward.”

“Thank you.”

Around the corner, the antennae on the Mercedes are folded back to allow the van under the **MAXIMUM CLEARANCE 9’6”** bar.

“This is supposed to be *Diet!*” The voice in the Sprinter echoes in the enclosed drive-thru tunnel. Leyland cypress hedges block any escape route on the right. On the left, one boarded up service window and a second box-window with hinged doors and **“Limited Time”** stickers jut out as the only features in the dijon plaster.²

²By this point, I really, really shouldn’t need to describe what pavement looks like. This drive-thru also has a canopy, which blocks out the midday sun. It looks about like the concrete driveway. This happens occasionally in the concrete jungle, they take the ground and make a ceiling out of it. There are also lights up there. They’re on, even though it’s daytime. But I shouldn’t have to say this any more, either, right? Right?

A jumbo plastic cup with a straw peeking from the lid is passed into the window and a replacement with a fresh, paper-wrapped straw is returned to the portly arm. The woman's liver-spotted appendage is encased with a Fitbit watch. The shape of her skin being strangled by the wristband reminds the old man of supercardioid mic patterns.

"Awww, she's so pretty! Do you need a cup of water?"

"That's nice, thank you, but we're headed straight home."

The old man hands the last of his cash to the twentysomething girl in the purple-over-black t-shirt and matching logo visor.

"I hate to feed it to her. But it's not all the time. It's not good for me either. So when I get some for myself, I get some for her. Maybe that's the right amount of this stuff to eat?"

"That sounds good to me, sir. Well, here you go: three bean burritos, one with no onion. Steak Nachos Bellgrande®. One sec.

"And here's your drink. Straw's in the bag. Have a good night."

"You too. Thank you."

Shenzi leans down in her seat to investigate the new scents coming from the floorboard in front of her.

The hotel overlooking the town is exactly the place *nobody* would expect to find the old man. It's more of a resort. One of those five-star places that will shuttle guests to the National Park after their mani-pedi and bring them back in time for massages by the pool before cocktails in the oak-and-polished-brass lounge.

The old man has been known throughout his life for his frugality. He didn't indulge in brand-name clothes or extravagant meals or flashy cars. No imported furniture. No top-of-the-line. Even *if* the cops were looking for him on this side of the park – in

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a county he had no ties to – he'd be expected to stay at a Motel 6 or Super 8 or some other roadside, no-frills place with a number in its name.

“Of course, Mr. Pugsley. We'll have someone send those right up.” The young woman at the counter takes the gold American Express card from the old man and smiles with genuine solace at his disheveled appearance. “If you need anything else, please just pick up your phone. I'll be here until ten, then Corinne, Cori, comes on until morning. She's the sweetest. We're at your service, sir.”

The old man calls Shenzi to the elevator and she joins him without trepidation. He presses the white button with the calligraphic ‘7’ and it lights up. The lights around them dim to a comforting candlelight hue. The lift is octagonal, mounted half-in, half-out of the luxury resort. The four sides that attach to the building are overlaid with floor-to-ceiling mirrors. The reflection shows the old man and his companion posed in front of a backdrop of towering pine and fir trees. The ravine below the hotel is coated in a thick, green mat that shrinks as the elevator rises. The camera zooms out from the moneyshot over bushy, 1970's Incredible-Hulk-porn pubic hair. The view from the elevator is designed to block the other side of the village. The parched, yellowed fields with “FOR LEASE” and “BUILD TO SUIT” signs that border the drive-thrus and parking lots and *lesser* hotels. A luxury hotel that *doesn't* overlook the town.

The shiny doors slide open and Shenzi runs off, leaving the shag-rug of forest, the towering hills with their white peaks, and the old man behind. He follows her down the hall and swipes his magnetic card in the slot above a door handle at the end of the corridor.

He'd requested, and paid extra for, the corner room – or Tim had. The woman downstairs told him it was already reserved for the weekend, but he told her he'd only be staying a night or two, and he promised not to trash the place – and so did Shenzi. She chuckled and made a comment comparing an old man and his dog to bachelor party rolling kegs through the lobby or families with their kids and grandkids and aunts and uncles and cousins cramming into a single suite.

“Your dog can shit on the bed, for all I care. That’s nothing compared to the tourist season.”

“It’s not that time right now?” he asked the hotel clerk.

“You came at a good time, I guess. We’ve had a couple of dry years, so there hasn’t been any snow and then the road from here to the park, and from the park to the springs, was closed for repairs from the rockslides. Where are you guys from?”

“Nowhere in particular, lately. I grew up in a little town like this, then moved around for a while to paint and do my thing. What’s your thing?” The old man makes air-quote-bunny-ears the second time he says ‘thing’.

“I wanna be a writer,” the girl leans in, lowering her voice.

“Do you write now?”

“Yeah, kinda. I mean, some poems. Maybe a book someday.”

“Sounds like you already *are* a writer.”

The young lady smiled and typed his information into her computer – this was before she asked for his credit card and ID. She'd glanced at the photo on the drivers license, but didn't compare it to the old man or look up from her screen. One balding, bearded, gray man smiled in the photo, another leaned against the counter in front of her, taking in the scene cast through the

Chapter Twenty-One

IMAX-tall glass windows that frame the lobby and extend past the elevator, through the lounge, to show the tropical-themed swimming pool.

The single-room ‘suite’ the clerk sent him to has a jacuzzi-style tub in the center. A luxurious, waterproof curtain is mounted to the ceiling for privacy. The dense fabric can also be used to divide the bed area from the pull-out couch and kichenette/dining area.

There are surely suites that are more luxurious. The floors above, presumably. Or at the other end of the hall, where the balconies are suspended above the pool instead of the parking lot. No need to attract any attention. He’s just some old nobody – taking advantage of the off-season rate, apparently.

In the corner across the room from the scenic vistas, is a door that opens to a windowless cell containing a toilet, a pedestal sink, and a mirror. Considering the opulence of this hotel – the nine-million-threadcount sheets and complimentary fleece-lined silk robes – the water-closet was perplexingly sparse. *Deversorium dichotomous*.

The old man runs the water for the bathtub-built-for-eight. The jets fill the basin in only minutes. He takes off his soiled, putrid clothes and stands beside the water, watching the steam rise. It was too hot to plunge into. He’s always been sensitive to the heat.

There’s a knock at the door and it swings open. The housekeeper looks at the old man in his boxer-briefs and turns her gaze to the floor.

“I’m sorry to bother you, sir. Here are the towels you requested.”

“Thank you so much. I’m sorry, I’m out of cash. I’ll leave

something for you when I check out.”

“Thank you, sir. Please let me know if you need anything else. Enjoy your stay, sir.” She backs out of the room, empty-handed.

The old man stands in front of the sink in the claustrophobia-inducing room – that is, if he were bothered by confined spaces, which he isn’t. He dumps the contents of the plastic drugstore bags onto the Spanish-tile. With the scissors, he snips at his beard and shaggy hair until stubble clings to his face and head. The old man lifts the plunger to plug the sink and fills its keratin-confetti decorated basin with scalding water. He clips a blade into the retro-hipster safety razor handle and swishes it around in the water. The short hairs on the old man’s face crackle like breakfast cereal when he runs the sharpened metal across them.

“Hold on, baby girl,” he calls out the door from the mummy’s tomb. Shenzi is staring at the steaming pool. Contemplating hot springs.

From the floor, the old man retrieves the gloves and raincoat. He water-and-dye-proofs himself, tears open a cardboard box, and rubs black paste on the remaining sector of natural growth around the back of his head. He presses down on the button-bar-slider thing at the back of the tiny pool where his beard hair floats in bushy archipelagos, then joins Shenzi to watch the hot exhalation of the tub. The windows that look to the balcony that looks to the parking lot and/or scenic view, are fogged over. He dips his toe in the water. “Almost time.”

The old man washes his head in the sink. He removes his protective gear and attempts to rinse away loose hair-trimmings from his neck and back with little success.

“Okay, let’s go!” He exclaims in a whisper-falsetto voice.

Chapter Twenty-One

Shenzi splashes into the pool. The old man lowers himself into the water that's already gone cloudy with the contents of Shenzi's coat. The color darkens as the hair dye and days of old man BO join the mix.

The old man scrubs Shenzi, drains the pool, dries her off, then has a proper shower – with soap and shampoo – in the empty tub. The luxury showerheads provide coverage from six angles.

Shenzi sprawls across the silk-and-down comforter, soaking her musty smell into the bedspread. The old man shuts off the water and dries himself with yet another fresh sponge paper. He removes the little vacuum from its packaging and suctions-up the hair around the silt and billow and coating the floor of the tiny washroom. He uses his drying-off towel to wipe the stains from the molded-plastic bathing apparatus and the ceramic tiles. From the bathroom he tosses the last bag – the one he didn't dump onto the floor – next to the bed.

In the white, ribbed-for-your-pleasure trash bags, he stuffs everything that's been used so far. Except for the towels. He's never taken anything from a hotel before and it's not on his bucket list. This is one of the rare times he's even used the tiny bottles of body wash and shampoo.

From the shopping bag on the plush carpet, he removes the sweatpants and long-sleeve-tee that are branded with the name of the nearby National Park over screen-printed illustrations of cliff faces and waterfalls. He straps the black-nylon harness around Shenzi and attaches the clip from the braided lead rope.

“You ready?”

Shenzi jumps up on him. The old man grabs her forepaws to dance for a moment and sets her down. From the retail-supercenter bag, he pulls a synthetic-fiber wig over his head. Found in the

perennial Halloween section at the back of the store. It's supposed to be some politician. Kennedy or one of the Bushes. The 'gimme-the-little-boy' cut. Or is it, 'gimme the little-boy cut'? Something to cover up the LBJ action he has going on up there right now, is the point.

The windows have started to defog and the old man can see the mountains and forest shimmering in the early-afternoon sun. He holds the lead rope, checks his pocket for his room key and credit card, and turns the handle to let Shenzi into the hall. As the old man is turning to follow her, he catches the reflection of a man in the portion of still-steamed glass. He does a double-take and leans back against the pull on the leash to glance into the bedroom area and onto the patio. Nobody there. Everything's in order. He picks up the three woven-polyethylene sacks by their red drawstrings and lets the door lock itself behind him.

Since they'd gorged themselves on salty slop from the drive-thru before bathtime, the old man protests the needy tugs to any of the delis and butcher shops that Shenzi leads him toward. More than anything, he wants to check the news, but doesn't want to leave any kind of electronic footprint, like on the computer in the hotel business center, in case they need to stay here for a couple of days.

A young man, a father perhaps, peers at the old man from inside a cafe named after a formerly-local bear. Shenzi stops to pee in the dirt planter-box that's stamped in the concrete sidewalk. The old man faces away from the window. When the pee is complete and Shenzi pulls to lead the way down the sidewalk, the old man glances into the cafe to see the young man starting toward the entrance. He's turned to look through the window, eyes still fixed on the old man. The old man gives Shenzi slack to sweep back-

and-forth on the sidewalk in search of crumbs and the scents of those many who've traveled this path before.

The next of several coffee shops lining this faux-historic town has a white picket-fence separating the sidewalk from an empty bank of four two-seat cafe tables. As they walk by, the old man reaches over the wooden barrier and grabs a newspaper from the nearest table. He folds the paper and tucks it under his arm.

Around the next corner, the old man spots a grassy area, so he aims Shenzi in that direction. There's a chain-link fence surrounding a dirt patch to one side of the playground. The 'Dog Park' is deserted, so he undoes the clasp from Shenzi's harness. She runs excited laps along the fence-line. The old man plops down on the only bench and unrolls today's edition of the Gazette. He stares at himself on the front page, staring back at himself.

Dementia Deviant Identified As Local Artist

What a tasteless alias. I could come up with a hundred better names. The Septuagenarian Slayer. The Gray-Haired Ghoul. Hospice Hannibal. Leonardo da Vicious. Fucking ableist media.

The former businessman and painter who has been terrorizing the valley has been identified this morning as [unreadable], [unreadable], of [unreadable] [unreadable] by Sheriff Tyson [unreadable] [unreadable] FBI Spokesperson [unreadable] [unreadable]. On [unreadable] [unreadable] [unreadable] a resident of [unreadable] [unreadable] **isted Living broke away from a supervised shopping trip and stole a delivery vehicle.**

In an **emailed statement, Leroy White, director of Su[unreadable] Assisted Living** said [unreadable] [unreadable] had only **very recently** come into the care of our facility. He was known to have **early-onset dementia** and **pre-existing neurological and psychiatric conditions**. We were not advised of any **history of violent behavior** and we did not observe him to be **aggressive** in the limited time that our staff

or dodge if they reach out.

That's the same guy from the coffee shop! Did he follow us? The old man considers the possibility that this regular, dad-on-a-family-vacation man in licensed tourist garb may actually be an undercover. No. If that were true, he'd be arresting me right now. He does look familiar, though. Fucking brain. Tell me where I know him from.

The elevator lurches to a halt and the old man spins around to get a good look at his stalker. The exit splits in two to reveal an empty cherry-wood side-table below a generic Americana 'art' print-on-canvas in the corridor. Shenzi darts out and runs for the end of the hall. The old man glances in both directions before stepping off the lift. Aside from the ornate table and pander-art, the stain-resistant psychedelic carpeting, and the gold-paint-over-plastic tags identifying the room numbers, the floor is empty and unadorned.

He follows Shenzi to the corner room. She sits, staring at the door handle, while he removes the mag-stripe card from his back pocket. The door beeps, the latch clicks, and a green LED illuminates to grant permission to enter the suite. The elevator lurches to a halt and the old man spins around to get a good look at his stalker. The exit splits in two to reveal an empty cherry-wood side-table below a generic Americana 'art' print-on-canvas in the corridor. Shenzi darts out and runs for the end of the hall. The old man glances in both directions before stepping off the lift. Aside from the ornate table and pander-art, the stain-resistant psychedelic carpeting, and the gold-paint-over-plastic tags identifying the room numbers, the floor is empty and unadorned.

He follows Shenzi to the corner room. She sits, staring at the door handle, while he removes the mag-stripe card from his back pocket. The door beeps, the latch clicks,

and a green LED illuminates to grant permission to enter the suite.

“What the hell are you doing here?” The old man blurts out, startled, when the door swings open to reveal his father facing him from across the room. Shenzi dashes between them and dives onto the overstuffed duvet.

“Dad? How did you find me??” He takes a single step from the acid-trip carpet of the hall onto the Sahara-desert carpet of the suite. His father, still facing him, but not speaking, takes a slow step toward the center of the room.

“Sorry about your house. I don’t know what the fuck, I mean what the hell, I mean what the heck is going on with my brain. It’s like, I’m me, then I’m not, then I’m me again, but somewhere else. You gotta help me, dad.

“I know ‘Sorry isn’t good enough’, okay. I can’t repay you. I can’t do anything any more!” The exasperation cut through the old man’s voice. “I may as well just kill myself.”

Shit. He knew his father hated when he’d say that. It was something that he’d said in his teens and twenties, but after being told to “Get over it,” and, “Change your attitude,” and, “Grow up and act like a man,” for the dozenteenth time, the old man stopped talking about mental health, or lack thereof, with his family. He took another two steps toward the gaping maw of a jacuzzi-tub that inhabited the central part of the corner room. His father matched his pace, edging toward the old man with the same wariness that the old man stepped toward him. The old man’s muscles tightened and his eyes squished shut in visceral preparation for the physical or verbal lashing that was about to commence.

After a moment of silence, the old man peeked through squinted eyelids to see his dad standing in the same place

across the room. Unmoved. The old man raised his gaze from the floor and stared wide at his father, feeling his heartrate peak and his skin flush bowling. He stood tall and pulled his shoulders back.

“You know what, fuck you, anyway. I haven’t asked you for anything. I’m so sick of your attitude, *mister*. What have you ever done in your life except markup the price of other people’s work for a profit? You married a narcissist with BPD and stood by while she beat and degraded your children. Some fucking father, man. At least I *knew* I’d be a shit father. Or maybe not. I wouldn’t have crushed their spirits and their curiosity, dude.”

The old man’s parents hated when he said ‘dude’ or ‘man’. “All you need to know is ‘Yes, *Sir*.’ and ‘No, *Ma’am*’. ‘Please’ and ‘thank you,’” they’d tell him when he’d ask some why-is-the-sky-blue or where-do-babies-come-from question, as kids are wont to do.

The old man felt his fingers roll, one at a time, from the pinkies in, to clench into tight fists. He took long breaths through his nose, not breaking eye-contact with his dad.

“You’re nobody, old man,” the old man growled at his old man. “You think cars and boats and guns make you somebody. Name one thing you’ve ever created in your life.”

The boy had asked this of his mother before, she said, “I created you.” the most bullshit, cop-out answer ever. Teenaged old man responded with something along the lines of, “I wish you hadn’t.” Clever, he’d thought. Clever enough to warrant another beating, apparently.

“Your whole me-first attitude has caused the destruction of the world. Deaths of who-knows-how-many animals. People in the streets, starving. Dying of exposure. And why? So you can buy another RV? Because

you think not wearing a mask is a political statement? In *civilized* cultures, people take it upon themselves to wear masks to protect those around them – and not just during a pandemic. You tried to train me to worship cops and soldiers and presidents. Fuck, man! You were wrong about *everything*.

“You know when I finally learned what happiness was?

“It was when I abandoned everything I’d been taught by you guys about success and love and priorities. I ‘got my priorities straight’, as you like to say. This obsession with getting more stuff and stomping on everyone and everything around you to get it – or to have some sort of perceived power over people – it’s gotta go. Burn the whole fucking place to the ground and start over, I say.”

The old man watched his father stare him down, not saying a word. *You want to see antagonistic, Mom?*

“You people get excited to pave over untouched wilderness for a new Panda Express. You post pictures of yourselves on social media waiting in line to drop off your old clothes at the rescue mission on Christmas Eve, then show up at city council meetings two weeks later with a list of reasons why government-subsidized (un)affordable housing is, ‘Fine, but not in my neighborhood and not with my taxes’. You make business deals at church, then get mad when your colleague screws you over before you could do it to them first. You lie, cheat, and steal your way to the low-middle and laugh about shooting fleeing criminals in the back. You pander for likes on your MLM ‘business’ page where you share videos of young men breathing their last under a pile of police uniforms and say, “That what they get,” and, “They’d should of followed orders!!!!” You elect politicians

for their 'Tough On Crime' stance, so long as that crime isn't fraud or embezzlement or anything white-collar. Blue-collar only. Preferably black-or-brown collar."

Not receiving any kind of argument from his father, and feeling like he's said what he had to say, the old man takes a few long breaths and tells himself to stop rambling. Talk, talk, talk. That's all anyone ever does. People would rather prattle on about what they're going to do than actually do it. They want someone else to do the work while they take the credit.

The old man charges forward, ready to take out his father in what he thought was a very non-Oedipal kind of way. *He has it coming.*

When he sees his dad, not backing down but making his own advance, the old man doubles his resolve. His father wouldn't be leaving this hotel today, even if it meant unaliving himself in the process. His dad had used physical intimidation as a parenting tactic throughout his childhood. And as a control tactic into his adulthood. *This will be the last time,* the old man thinks.

He throws his weight forward, ready to topple his father. He spreads his arms to restrain his opponent.

As the old man closes his arms to capture his father, the glass window with the curated view of nature's art gives way, spilling shards onto the patio and raining down to the parking lot below. He turns his head to look into the suite as he collides with the guardrail. Inside, his father is nowhere to be found. An empty room with an oversized tub surrounded by an even oversizedier curtain. The old man looks at the Hot Wheels cars on the paved surface on the other side of the rail. There's nobody down there, either. In the moments before he clashes with his longtime nemesis,

asphalt, the old man remembers the time Tsebaj brought a squirrel home for him. And the first time he took the girls to the beach. *And the furniture he built for his kids' room.* And Shenzi. *And all the good girls and boys that came before her.*

Fin-

**Black Friday
Deals!**

Sections C-G

Epilogus Expositio Fidelity

SHERIFF
DEFEATED IN
REELECTION BID

PAGE B1

Wednesday, November 25

Volume DCLXVI



Artist Rendering of Monument to Dog and Her Person

**Supervisor:
Homeless can go
'Somewhere Else'.**

Doug Verboon, county Board of Supervisors member, said on Tuesday, "I am not going to promote anything for the homeless ever again. I'm going to make it illegal to be homeless and they can go somewhere else because it's hurting our community."

cont. on A8

REMEMBERING A GOOD GIRL

Famed Catahoula leopard dog **Shenzi** passed away yesterday, November 24, at the age of eleven. She was the companion of notorious revenge-killer Shaun Vetter, who was dubbed **The Dementia Deviant** by the press, but is better known to social media users as the **Gruesome GILF**.

Shenzi accompanied her owner's body from the hotel where he fell to his death, to the mortuary, and finally to the cemetery on west Tower Street, where he received a pauper's burial. Shenzi remained at the grave for three years, keeping a vigilant watch over her partner's final resting place. A local celebrity, Shenzi was treated to meals from local restaurants, toys and treats from fans and well-wishers, and even a custom-built doghouse courtesy of Estep Pet Rescue Foundation.

Sunrise
Retirement Community

MEMORY CARE
FACILITY NOW OPEN!

Parque de Soledada

Ranch-style homes on two-acre lots.
Low HOA fees!

Story continues on pg. A8

Today's Headlines

WINDSCAPE APARTMENTHOMES

One-and-Two Bedrooms
Starting at \$1,800/mo

Verboon: Make Homeless Illegal.

Cont. from A1.

"People are going out of town to eat dinner... including myself." Council-member Verboon said of his county's homeless population. "We put money into people's pockets that don't get anything done."

The all white-male board voted against an offer from the state for relief funding for communities with a homeless population higher than the national average. In a five-to-one decision, the county supervisors stated that they didn't want to give anybody a reason to stay in their county without contributing to the local economy.

AC PLAYS
THE BLUES
AT FREDDIE'S!

EVERY THURSDAY
\$3

Shenzi: A Loyal Companion

Cont. from A1.

Vetter was widely admired online for his retaliation against those who had wronged him over the course of his life. Many stated that they wished they could do the same. Shenzi, who was credited with at least one murder during their four-day rampage, became a symbol of loyalty through her steadfast commitment to her person, staying by his side until she finally succumbed to time, herself.

A collaborative of anonymous donors has announced that a monument to the pair will be erected over the currently unmarked grave. The casket is to be exhumed and replaced and Shenzi will be buried together with her owner.

NATE'S

Vacuums & Auto Glass

Sales and Service

Affluence Mall

More parking Added!

Stone's

Bar and Grill

Patio Open Late!

SUPERIOR ATM

Honest Business - for your Business

a dave-n-dave enterprise

This page unintentionally left blank.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I'd like to thank the following, in no particular (yet deliberate) order, for their contribution to this work:

Eroc, thanks for your feedback, artwork, music recommendations, and sometimes-necessary distraction from writing to talk about bands or doing drugs back in the day or childhood bullshit.

Jay, thank you for your continued support, promotion, and brainstorming ideas. Also, for suggesting 'GILF'.

Desirae, thanks for corroborating my ending.

Josh, thanks for the help with the moniker, providing expert advice on a character, and giving me the idea for the footnote gag.

Most of all, Katie, thank you for everything every day. This book wouldn't have been possible if not for your continued support. You've been there to let me share ideas and provide feedback and put up with my super-manic creative modes, where I'll spend every waking hour at my desk while neglecting my house-husbanding duties. I love you!

Google, thank you for all the synonyms, definitions, car-bomb instructions, mass-murderer trivia, the lesson on terrorist attacks, and the proper names for parts of cutlery, or parts of an assault rifle. Oh, and to listen to music – through You[r]Tube, most of the time. And thanks for spell-checking me while I'm typing this in software you produced, to a document on your server. All this from one browser window! Shoulda hit Ctrl+Shift+N.

Weed, you've been there through it all, doing what modern medicine has failed to do. You've provided me with a change in perception and moments of inspiration. This is why you've made appearances in all of my novels.

All of my kids over the years, you've saved me more times than you can comprehend: Harley, Yoko, Tsebj, Ebi, Arthur, Shenzi, Hatchi, Nadie, Charles, Toyotomi Hideyoshi, Mizu, Lena, Danny Tanner, Mollie,

Rudy, Eyeball, RJ, Slinky, Eyepatch, Trey, Mary Pickford, Chumbo, Claude, Two-Face, all the chickens, random rescues/fosters, and others who have come in and out of my life or who I'm forgetting (right now).

Donald Ray Pollock, for showing me how to adapt a narrator to multiple subjects.

Chuck, you got a whole dedication, so fuck off.

Manu, you're a backstabbing, STD-spreading bastard, but I didn't call you out. Besides trying to 'bone down' on every girl I'd bring around, you never did me dirty. But more importantly, I respect your [sometimes] integrity. Specifically, when those rock-opera assholes were spreading rumors online, you went into the public forum and stood up for me on your own accord. Even with my dementia, I won't forget that.

Special thanks to everyone who inspired this story, but will never read it.

Epilogue art by Eric Rosales

www.ericrosalesart.com

Cover and other 'art' by Tweed Jefferson

SOUNDTRACK

As usual, I've included the music I listened to while writing this book. Not because I think you should listen to what I listen to (I do), but because each story deserves a soundtrack. I try to choose music that fits the atmosphere of each scene and encourage other writers to do the same. For this endeavor, I tried to listen to actual albums instead of greatest hits or mixed playlists. So here they are, in yes particular order:

Steely Dan*

The Cars

Zeppelin

Paul Simon

Lou Reed

Zappa*

(Thanks @br1tag for posting up all the mixes of his guitar solos!)

Weather Report

Funkrudin Krcic's Funk Roots collection

Van Morrison

Toto

Pink Floyd*

George Michael / Wham!

CeeLo Green

CCR

DLR

Hawkwind

Dr. Dog

BOC

Kansas

Mr. Big

Eric Johnson

EWF

Billy Strings

Extreme

Andy Rehfeldt

Metaphump

Genesis

Dire Straits

Men at Work

(early) RHCP

INXS

Prince

Jimi

Ambrosia

The Ocean (not a band)

The Cure

Little River Band

Seals and Crofts

ELO

Roxy Music

New order

George Clinton/Parliament/

Funkadelic/P-Funk All-Stars

Loggins and Messina

Madonna

Soundgarden

Alice in Chains

Mötley Crüe

Chicago

Cream

Rory Gallagher

Sounds of the Department Store

(Fardemark)

Grateful Dead
Huey
Joe Jackson
Christopher Cross
Orleans

*Artists who came up several times throughout the playlist.

Special Acknowledgment: Although I didn't listen to any records by Michael McDonald or Jeff Porcaro, they probably played with about half of the artists listed here. These ubiquitous-ass motherfuckers are the underrated gods of yacht rock and adult contemporary. Am I the only one who finds that, like, the weirdest term ever for a music genre? Adult contemporary.

Anyway, I mention them, and all of these artists, because I think their work is worth exploring if you're the kind of person who has an interest in skilled artists – all of whom, I would consider to be technically-adept and experimentally-fluent.

'Whom' is another weird one. Even if you use it correctly, it looks wrong. The opposite of a semi-colon. Those are easy to use. Watch; I'll do it right now. 'Whom' is full-on semantic satiation from the first time I read it. Does that happen to you with other words?

Kitchen, kitchen, kitchen, kitchen, kitchen. Kitchen.

Kitchen

Kitchen

Smock, smock, smock, smock, smock. Smock.

Smock

Smock

Smock

Smock

Those do it for me, too. Whom Whom Whom Whom.

What the fuck am I doing? I'm supposed to be editing the last four chapters right now.

End Notes

¹At this point, the reader is probably presuming that either Shaun or the narrator have some sort of fixation or hatred for the law. A rebel without a clause. Fashionably woke. Don't get ahead of yourself, this is still the beginning of the story. None of these are original ideas. Shaun has a carefully rehearsed external monologue, made up of snippets from films, books, academic articles, stand-up comedians, song lyrics, and memes. It's safe. For him, and most times, for the listener. Instead of worrying about saying the wrong thing, he has a prepared answer for any question. A retort for any statement. If it doesn't go over well, he'll rehearse a new script until it sounds natural and off-the-cuff. But none of this is relevant to the story, so stop speculating.

Yes, that's really the disclaimer on the hot sauce bottle – with a handful of glaring typos fixed.

*Patrimonious the Annotated Version, Patrimonious the Audiobook, Patrimonious the Rock Opera, Patrimonious the Coloring Book, Patrimonious the Lunchbox, Patrimonious the Collectable Trading-card Set, and Patrimonious the Flame Thrower: Coming 2024!*²

³If I feel like it.

COMING IN 2024!

SPECIAL REMASTERED EDITION



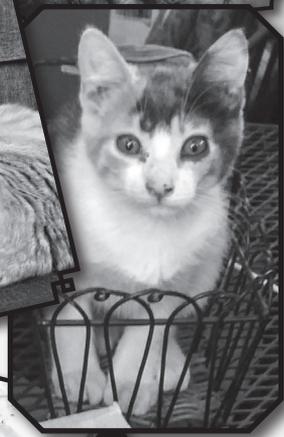
Join rock band “The Walls Instead” as they embark on their debut tour through the American southwest. Like most bands, they’ll meet new fans, play exciting shows, kill bad people, party all night, and get lost on the interstate highway system.

Wait...What?

The immersive world of *Rockstar Nobody* includes a full album of original music by The Walls Instead!

Pictures of my kids

because I can do whatever I want

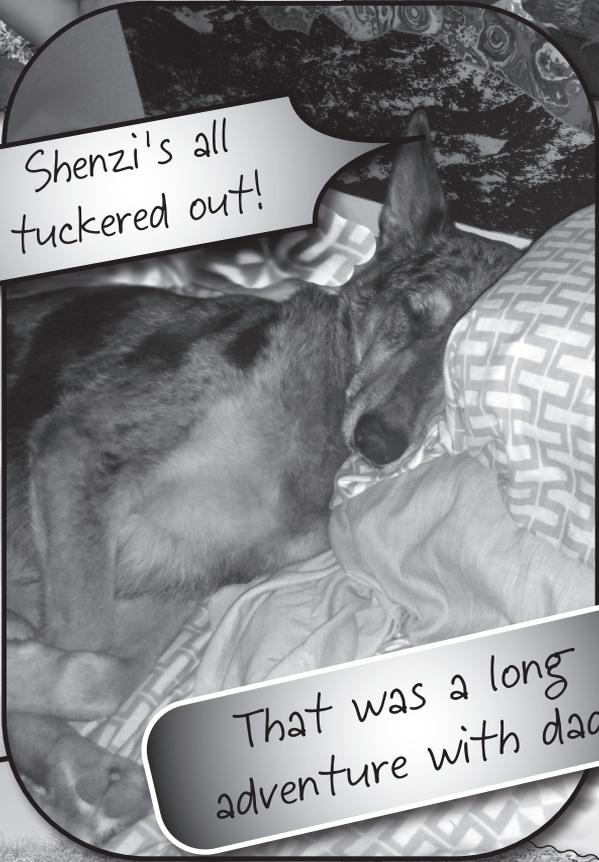


*Hangin' out with
Papa!*





Shenzi's all
tuckered out!



That was a long
adventure with dad!



peek-a-Boo!



Now Now Now!

Let's
Go!



Lunch time for
Simone!



SLEEPYHEAD!



Sister
Love!





Tweed Jefferson

*Crepuscular, Certified "Weird Kid",
The Man Behind the Curtain*



Tweed is an author (obviously). He's also a black belt in some Japanese martial arts, plays a silly number of instruments, and likes to make things – from custom arcade machines to hand-carved guitars. After writing a bunch of books during quarantine, he decided to go back to school to study veterinary (wildlife) medicine. The exams and essays have significantly slowed his ability to write books, but he promises to keep producing a couple of books per year.

Tweed has over two decades of experience in music production and publishing. He spent the same twenty-some years earning a 'real' living as a web and graphic designer. These experiences come together in several of his books, such as his time on tour and in the studio being used as fodder for both the **Rockstar Nobody** series and his non-fiction book about how to be a DIY musician. As the Executive Editor at Squill Publishing, he lends his knowledge and skills to up-and-coming authors and artists.

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