

Formerly, Amelia

Michael Bassili

I wrote this for myself, editing it for others.

Thanks to all who put up with my ridiculous workload. I kept working until I couldn't work any longer, and then worked a little bit more to get this thing published before completing my university semester. Without that arbitrary time constraint, this might have never happened.

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Some say she walked amongst the animals, considering many ways to train them, to shape them in her image. You will never see her. She will never speak to you. Amelia is imaginary, and you'll never get to know her.

The following is a story about a terrible loss.

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I – Venez Vous

I.I – Sudden Loss of Employment

It was like nothing the two had ever seen before. The office they had once occupied had been overrun by creatures of the night—or something like that. Lawyers, strippers, and some who did both, occupied the offices of Hilberts & Fitzroy. The swarms of middle-men and sensual women tarnished the duo's once posh-and-pristine workspace with legal documents and lubricant bottles. They stepped over their fake ferns, and they brushed up against their fine oil paintings. One lawyer was using his dog as an end table, stacking his papers atop his adorable head. Another was screaming obscenities at the dog to gauge the mutt's mental resilience.

Sallying forth, the duo reached their joint cubicle at the end of the hall. It too housed many unsavories. They pushed past scantily clad men and suited women—all chirping about like frightened bats. None offered their attention. On their desks, behind stacks of prose-laden paper and imported Persian pens, sat two envelopes. Both titled: Friend. Ian tore open the first envelope and read the message aloud:

Dearest Henry Hilberts,

Forgive me for this sick joke. I did not intend to lay you off without warning. But, times are changing, my boy. Naughty films make more than we'll ever see publishing amateur novellas. And, unless you're willing to play the role of a bottom, the two of you will have to look elsewhere for "meaningful employment," as you call it. As the former owner of this fine Conomarc publishing house, the studio has offered me a role in their upcoming feature film, releasing in several months time. I trust you will watch it.

Lloyd McTaylors

It appeared that the two were being terminated. Lloyd sold the trio's business to Frisky Fellas, the local adult film studio, for a total much greater than the trio had made as

publishers. This was, tragic: Conomarco only had one publishing house. The closure of Hilberts & Fitzroy meant that the fine few who read for leisure needed to procure their novellas (and other literary consumables) from out-of-country. Unfortunately, Conomarcian law prohibits literary trade with other nations. An honest shame.

Henry's jaw hung wide, causing the boy to drool onto the carpet. Ian's letter would prove much worse. For it was Ian who had joked of selling the business to strippers, months back, after the trio had hired their first employee. And, it was Ian who had procured a nymphomaniac for the company Christmas party. He was sure that hiring Lucy Lovebug for the evening contributed, in no small way, to the publishing house's fate.

Ripping open Ian's letter—tearing a corner off by mistake, Henry read it aloud:

Oh, Ian Fitzroy, my love,

I have yearned for you. Oh, how I have yearned. Remember the motel? I'd never seen an ass as round as yours! I think about that booty whenever I'm not thinking about how you left me for some West Side floozy. I was hurt. I am still hurt. But, times are changing, and I need to move on. I intend to become a naughty-film star, my sweet-assed lad. I will send you a copy of my first film when it's released on tape. Remember me, my fair Ian, as you take young Jennifer to bed. I too will fuck to your memory.

Your Paramour

This floored Ian.

The lawyers and film stars had paused to eavesdrop. Upon hearing of Ian's sexual exploits, the lawyer's dog became excited and began making love to Henry's desk chair. The two decided not to intervene.

Ian latched onto Henry's hand and lead him out of their North Side office building. They took the stairs fearing an encounter with Lloyd. While nimble enough to philander Lucy

Lovebug for a total of eight consecutive hours, Lloyd was in no shape to take the stairs.

Between the two of them, Lloyd's actions seemed to affect Henry the most. One drunk afternoon, Henry revealed his marital troubles to Lloyd. Clementine, Henry's wife, was terribly ill, citing pains in her abdomen, breasts, and ear lobes. Lloyd procured the second-best doctor in Conomarco (it is important to note that there are only four doctors in Conomarco). Unfortunately, one month prior the Frisky Fellas' arrival, Clementine drowned in the rain, her mouth filled with non-Aqua, and her eyes blinded by the downpour. Lloyd paid for her burial, but her grave was later repossessed by Peace Corps for use in a Halloween play. It was never returned.

"Why would he abandon us like this?" asked Henry. "He couldn't even stomach saying goodbye face-to-face. What compels a man to abandon those he loves?" Henry's face sagged, and he turned his back to Ian.

"Money. He did it for money." Ian whimpered as he said this. The sound caused Henry's skin to crawl.

"I can't even afford to buy his damn movie." Henry wiped some tears and a glob of snot from his grotesque face and straightened his back. Be confident. "What now? I suppose we should tell Jennifer." Be assertive. "We'll go back to your place and explain to her our situation." Be understanding. "You two have a savings account, right? This is but a bump in the road." Henry was satisfied with his rhetoric—a rhetoric, he admitted to himself, that Lloyd had impressed upon him upon Clementine's death.

Ian nodded, trying hard not to tear up in front of his oldest friend. The duo began to meander in the general direction of Jennifer and Ian's condominium complex.

The walk was uncomfortable for both parties. Henry crooned to fill the silence, and Ian kicked an empty Aqua bottle until it rolled off the curb and onto the street. A street-cleaning auto picked it up, opened its chest compartment, and consumed the waste. It too crooned as it zoomed away.

"Used car salesman?" blurted Henry. "We could sell used cars. People need to get places, and we could provide them with AVs."

"I don't have a license," said Ian. "And Peace Corps commandeered all automated vehicles when they began the country transit program. How about pastry chef?"

"I'm allergic to carbs," sulked Henry. "Police chief? I hear they make good money."

"You need experience for such a position. And human police haven't been around since the seventies. Unless, you want to join the Corps——"

"Adult film star? I hear you have quite an ass. Or maybe a terrorist. They like working, or something, right?" Henry zoned out, staring at an Aqua ad on the side of a building. *You Look Thirsty.*

Ian unlocked his front door, bracing himself for Jennifer's routine hug-n-kiss. Nothing. Henry entered first. Ian's apartment was tiny—as small as an airport waiting room, filled with used bottles of Aqua and clean laundry. Jennifer hung some artwork in the living room. A happy clown holding a cup of black fluid. The picture was being held in an extravagant fiberglass frame, hovering just above the couple's loveseat. Ian followed suit and called out "Jennifer" until he noticed a letter on the countertop labeled: *Friend.*

Ian,

Lloyd told me everything. The late nights, the banana-flavored prophylactics. Everything. I was heartbroken. I am heartbroken. But, it helped me see that you weren't that special. In fact, you remind me of my father. Not because you drink profusely or fiddle young boys on the East Side strip, but because you have his eyes. Ian, you always told me that I could be anything. You used to grab my cheeks and scream "do something you want," and when I'd laugh, you'd whisper "do anything you want." You were right:

this is my life, and I am going to
start doing what I want. I've joined
The Three Jalapenos Travelling Circus.
They tell me I am "very-okay on the
tightrope." I plan to perform this very
week in an East Side park! But, for
that to happen, I must leave.
Tell Lloyd that I'm not angry,
Jennifer

Henry noticed some stray socks and underwear
scattered about the ground, forming a path which lead from the
living room to the couple's bedroom door. Henry followed the
trail and ended up in Ian's bedroom. The trail's source: a sloppily
emptied closet and drawer. After some time, Henry started to
hear Ian cry. He felt a sting deep within his temples, tunnelling
through Henry's skull and distorting his composure. The crying
continued for some time. And, Henry felt defenceless. He left
Ian's bedroom and stood in the living room. Be confident. "It
will all be okay." Be assertive. "Stop crying." Be brave. "I will do
everything that I can to get us back on our feet."

That is what Lloyd would have wanted.

I.II – Fortuitous Oil Rig

As fate would have it, Jennifer's father, the late Valor Veccurs, would end up providing for the duo. Mister Valor, you see, was a brazen oil monger (and drunk rapist), and had left his smallest rig in the trusting care of his smallest daughter. Vousa. And, it was currently unoccupied, sitting alone in the middle of the South Side sea, collecting whatever oceanic structures collect when they are left alone. The deed to the rig was enclosed along with the letter.

A tearful Ian noticed another document in the envelope and proceeded to scan its contents. The deed. There was a paragraph written, stapled to the deed, printed onto a coffee shop napkin.

I know I cannot remedy the situation with physical goods (nor should I), but I haven't the need for oil or automatons in a circus. You'll find the deed to Vousa enclosed along with this letter. I hope you'll find some use for it.

"Vousa?" asked Ian. "The oil rig?" Ian, for a moment, forgot his troubles and dreamt of a life on the sea. While fleeting, the moment brought him some joy.

"Vousa," Henry read, "seems to be in your possession." Grabbing the deed, Henry scanned the document for any loopholes, catches, or queer wording. Nothing. The deed looked solid (and well written, potentially publishable). "What should we do? Should we sell it?"

"Sell it?" Ian wiped his face with one swift motion. He stared at the deed, rapt, overfull with aspiration. Such feelings were rare for him.

"What use is an oil rig to us? We don't know much about oil, and Lloyd did the brunt of the management at H&F. We might as well get rid of it—cash it in and look for work elsewhere. Maybe the East Side is hiring baristas—"

"Why not live there?" Ian wiped away a large drop of snot from beneath his nose before arching his back and forming

a pair of fists, making the grieving boy look like a startled cat. “We will live on the oil rig. Vousa will be our home; our livelihood might lie atop a sea-dominating structure.”

“Didn’t you hear me,” said Henry admonishingly. “We know shit-all about business. Less about oil.”

“The world is automated. Why would an oil rig be any different?”

Ian had a point.

Henry didn’t give the idea a second thought; there was nothing more to consider. They were out of a job, and Ian was out of a paramour. They were both free to do whatever they wished; to live anywhere they pleased; to make all manner of mistakes.

Be confident. We can, thought Henry, make good money trading oil. Be assertive. Ian’s right: the state of automation these days means that the rig is probably completely self-managing. Humans went obsolete a decade ago. Be brave. We should begin packing.

A plan was made to commute to the South Side docks to procure a vessel of some kind. Then, the duo would travel to Vousa, beginning their new lives as rigmasters in the middle of nowhere. The South Side sea awaited them.

Ian packed what clothes he had left. They then drove to Henry’s house in the West Side hills, letting him gather up his belongings. Every minute that passed instilled confidence in the duo. They were really doing it. After an hour or so of packing, they headed south.

The North, West and South Sides are connected by a fifty-lane superhighway, while a trip to the East Side merits a thirty-minute flight. The drive was filled with Ian’s lamentations, his tone lackadaisical. He considered that day’s events to be a sign. A push in an unknown direction—a difficult situation that, would no doubt, augment his life. Life isn’t easy, he thought, so I need to toughen up. Ian assumed the day’s events would prompt him to become a different person.

Neither Henry nor Ian appreciated the speed at which they abandoned their lives on the mainland.

The two eventually arrived at the South Side docks, some fifteen minutes later. It was a dingy little shithole which faced the South Side sea, complete with a helicopter landing station and hyperplane refueling platform, all of which were derelict. The building itself, a red-and-brown shack made of sheet metal, simultaneously blended in and stood out—it was perfectly imperfect.

The duo noted that the docks were entirely empty before catching glimpse of a stubby fellow who blended into the sheet metal. He was sitting by a row of microboats along the shack's exterior. The fellow waved when he noticed the duo, springing up and dusting himself off, running towards the two.

"Whoose are yous, friends," yelled the fellow. He pushed aside some large leather bags, some with nautical inscriptions pressed into their sides. "Meh name's Billeh Boatman, the eight-teenth. How mays I assists?"

Henry chortled upon hearing Mister Boatman's full name. He attempted to conceal his laughing by forcing a cough, unsuccessfully.

"We were looking to procure a vessel," asked Ian. "Maybe some food too, if you have it." He averted his eyes as Mister Boatman's gaze seemed lecherous. I am, Ian thought, not that desperate.

Mister Boatman leaned in, "Yous trying to *escapes*, am I coe-rect?" Mister Boatman's eyebrows furrowed, as if possessed by a border patrol auto. "Nows I musts tells yous both that yous can-~~nn~~-not leave Co-no-mark-cain seaspace, it's law." He began to rub his hands together causing his calloused appendages to sprinkle dirt onto the ground.

Ian leaned back, offended by the boatmaster, "We aren't trying to *escape*. We are trying to reach an oil rig—Vousa. Have you heard of it?"

"That rig's been empty since Mister Vecc-cc-urs kicked-it back in the day. Did yous bought the property? Yous know, it don't matter." The boatmaster slouched, relaxing his back and hanging his head.

"You're right," said Henry. "But, we promise we're not attempting an escape." Henry's impatient glare caused Mister Boatman to straighten his back and step forward.

"The problem, yous sees, is that I haven't a nonautoheli for yous to use. Only microboats," the boatmaster said, pointing to a row of tiny vessels no larger than a dinghy.

"That'll do, I guess." Ian pulled out his wallet. "How much for a microboat?"

"Five-and-a-half-thou-sand, but are ye sure? It takes quite the day to reach the southernmost tip of the South Side sea. The place where your Vousa rests." Mister Boatman scratched the tip of his nose. Dirt crumbled off his face and landed on his muddy boots.

Henry and Ian made eye contact, the two of them in silent agreement.

"That's fine," said Ian. "Can we buy any food off you?"

"Sure. I have this here sack of foodstuffs. You can take it—have it free of charge." Mister Boatman was referring to his leather sack which, judging by its age, was in his possession for some time. Maybe a personal heirloom. Perhaps passed down from Boatmans past.

Mister Boatman counted the many bills he was handed, mouthing numbers as he did it. Contently patting his pockets, he reached into his jacket and pulled out a small compass, folded-up map, tiny disposable camera, and, from one of his bags, a flare gun. He handed them all to Henry.

"The gun's got one flare in it," explained Mister Boatman. "I haven't any more to give yous. Use the thing spar-in-ga-ly. If you fire it into the air, I prob-ably won't sees it, but it helps for morale."

Finally, Mister Boatman handed Ian a clock radio, and his bag of miscellaneous foodstuff. "And, use the radio when times get dull. You'lls have plenty of time to kill."

Saluting Mister Boatman, the duo hopped into their humble microboat and set out on their voyage. The vessel was just large enough to contain the duo and their newly-acquired items, plus their bags from earlier. The vessel shrieked in pain as the duo mounted it. They began to inch away from the South

Side docks, paddling with their hands until it was safe to turn on the engine.

The duo's microboat was now a kilometer away from the mainland. They began taking turns humming tunes while the other steered the vessel. When the humming got tiresome (which did not take very long), Ian reached for the clock radio. However, the radio could only pick up a single station which played a single song:

"Avec mes souvenirs j'ai allumé le feu——"

Neither of the two spoke non-Conomarcen.

A bathroom break was taken every four hours. The trip in its entirety lasted seventeen-odd hours, but neither of the two complained.

"I refuse to complain," proclaimed Ian roughly a third of the way into the voyage. "What's there to complain about? I have nothing tying me to the mainland."

"You could look for another job."

"This," Ian gestured to the empty water "is our job. We are now rigmasters." While Ian sounded confident, he appeared to be disheartened. Sad. Henry noticed this but said nothing.

When the temperature dropped, as it did thrice, the duo cuddled with one another. The clock radio fell into the South Side Sea halfway into the trip, so the duo returned to their humming. Ten hours in, and the two got hungry. Ian reached into Mister Boatman's bag of foodstuffs and pulled out a large slab of some unknown cheese and several strips of deer jerky. Henry was the first to note that the duo had neglected to bring a canteen, and his mouth was beginning to dry up, his lips chapping. In place of water, the duo munched on wads of cheese while a slice of jerky would occupy a small corner of their mouths to promote salivation. It was a terrible shame that Ian was lactose intolerant and a passionate vegetarian.

"Meat and milk no longer bother me," mumbled Ian as he vomited into the sea. "I needn't—who needs——" Ian began to cry, although its cause was unclear.

Henry opted to keep the best bits of jerky and cheese for himself.

Three hours before their arrival, the compass and map joined the clock radio—they tipped into the South Side sea, leaving the duo to navigate using sheer luck. The duo eventually adopted the sun as their makeshift compass. When it set, the duo slept, as they had no discernable way of wayfaring. After an hour or so of aimless boating, the two noticed a structure in the distance.

“I’m assuming that’s the rig,” said Ian, both optimistic and sullen, tears still running down a fluid-highway which had formed on his face.

After twenty-odd hours at sea, the two had finally arrived. Vousa. Henry stood up and gazed upon the oddity. It was, he thought, profoundly ugly.

The structure was taller and wider than they had expected; its orange paint dominated the primarily purple horizon, making the rig seem offensive and sharp. Every strut was surrounded by an orange colored railing, preventing any ruffians or rigmasters from tumbling down into the sea. There were enormous pipes which pierced the sea and came up through the centers of each of the six hexagonal struts which comprised the rig. Arranged in a circular fashion, the struts were connected by a central platform. One could, thought Henry, reach every strut from the central platform alone. From where they sat, roughly a kilometer from Vousa’s Northmost strut (Henry had no real way of knowing the true orientation of the rig, as the sun was faint and hard to pinpoint), a small microboat docking station could be seen.

As the duo’s vessel reached the dock, flocks of aluminum boxes with eye-holes rolled into view, each one tugging at a full drum of oil. The autos appeared to be heading in the same direction: the central platform. The microboat reached the dock’s edge, and Henry disembarked, running up the stairs in the hopes of getting a better view. Ian remained in the vessel, but watched as Henry ascended the dock’s steps, finally reaching the surface of the Northmost strut.

Henry admired the pulchritudinous profile Vousa's pipes made along the horizon—strips of gray and orange slicing through a purple skyline. The automatons mimicked ants, moving drums of oil about the struts. Henry doubted that they were intelligent enough to understand what they were hauling around—unlike mainland autos which seemed too smart for their own good. Too knowledgeable and, perhaps, all seeing. One auto stopped in its tracks, rolled itself around to face Henry, and dropped the drum of oil it was carrying.

"Howdy. How may I be of service?" The auto was dirty and dented. It had no decal, nor did it boast colored eye-holes. A primitive model, thought Henry.

"I'm Henry. That man down there is Ian." Henry gestured down the stairs. "We are—the new owners, I think, of this rig." It was at that moment that Henry remembered that they forgot to bring the deed with them on this excursion.

It didn't matter. The auto stood motionless, apathetic, flashing its colorless eye-holes, before grabbing hold of its oil drum.

"That's fine with us. We haven't been keeping track of payment—that was Mister V'eccur's job, so we don't have many receipts."

"Receipts?" Henry noticed brown lumps along the strut's floor. Bags, but filled with what?

The auto zoomed off towards the central platform, passing some ground-piercing protrusions along the way.

After taking his time—savoring every step he took, feeling utterly rejuvenated and pure, Ian disembarked from the duo's microboat, stepping onto the dock. He trotted up the steps, noting that much of the strut's walkable ground was occupied with brown bags.

"Henry, what's that? On the floor, there." As Ian leaned down to pick up a bag, a tear fell from his face and collided with Vousa's metal flooring.

"Never mind the sacks, Ian. Look up."

A buzzing sound filled the duo's soundscape. Henry recoiled, noticing a fleet of autohelis swooping overtop them.

There were five of them, all painted orange. They dropped several brown sacks atop the Southeastmost strut before circling back, finally landing atop the central platform. The autoheli nearest to the two had a decal printed along its tail which read: Automated Oil Delivery (Do Not Tip) .

Every autoheli latched onto two overfull drums, scanned something printed along the drums themselves, then zoomed off. One headed North, towards the mainland, while the other flew South. Both Henry and Ian could not recall the name of the country that lies South of the South Side sea.

Henry thought the scene a miracle of modern technology.

Ian did not care. His mind was elsewhere, pestering him, reminding him of what he had lost.

"I knew it!" proclaimed Henry, fisting the sky, distorting the skyline. "No detritus, no need for manual input, no hassle. I can't believe this, Ian. We've struck oil!" Henry's face turned a shade of bright-pink. "And these bags are delightfully turgid——"

It was then that a large wave slammed into their microboat's side, crushing it completely against the dock. Now, they had lost their sack of foodstuff, which remained in the microboat. But, Henry still held the flare gun and the disposable camera. Ian held nothing.

"It appears that we're here to stay," said Henry. "I think this is the perfect time to symbolically leave our old-selves behind. We are different people now. We have *become* different people." Be confident. Henry paused, waiting for Ian to react. "Well, Ian? Thoughts?" Be assertive.

"Am I supposed to make a speech too?"

"It couldn't hurt; be brave."

"Alright. We are here today as oil rig owners. Rigmasters, as it were. We will survive with the aegis of the sea. Uh——" Ian paused and began scratching the thin tussle of hair that guarded his chin.

"That's fine, Ian," Henry replied, his eyes wandering towards the brown sacks which littered the strut.

Content, Ian set out to find quarters for the two to occupy, and Henry began to venture across Vousa in the hopes of accruing capital.

Henry reached down and picked up the nearest sack to him, opening it and heaving. He couldn't believe his eyes. Inside every sack sat close to a million dollars in Conomarcian coinage. Henry paused and considered whether to include Ian in his scavenger hunt. No. I mustn't tell him of our newfound riches, as it might disrupt his frail mind. He's still grieving after all. Henry was, of course, not sure of this, but thought it best to conceal their newfound resources for his own good. He gathered up several sacks and set out to find a suitable hiding spot. There were several derelict oil drums atop the central platform, piled high in the Southwestmost corner (again, Henry could not have known that this particular corner was the Southwestmost). He hid the money within them. It was poetic, he thought, that a great opulence was now hidden in the heart of the rig, though he would have chosen a different word to describe it.

Meanwhile, Ian found a small, decrepit shack on the Northmost strut, abandoned and lacking in furniture. The shack itself was orange with splotches of black oil decorating its exterior, creating a sort of tiger pattern. Deciding that he did not deserve a bed (who does, really), Ian sat on the floor and began to cry. He yearned for Jennifer, their love still fresh in his heart. This would be, dear reader, Ian's last day on Vousa.

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Spring turned to summer turned to fall. The duo settled into a routine: Henry would manage the rig's operations while Ian sulked by the docks. He could not bring himself to wander about the rig for long, as it reminded him of Jennifer.

Henry had been hiding the duo's earning for months, stuffing sacks into the pile of broken oil drums in the central strut. When there came no room, Henry began storing sacks in all the nooks and crannies Vousa offered. He spent as much of the duo's riches as he could, but could only buy so much. Naughty magazines and the odd bocce-ball kit were unable to

dent their funds. Henry purchased a tiny shed for each of the six struts and hid some money within them—they were delivered by autoheli the week after he sent out a notice to the mainland.

Henry also procured six lifeboats. He also filled them with bags.

One night, Ian wrote a poem on the back of a Vousa shipping label he found in his shack using a pen an auto provided him. Upon the poem's completion, he ran up to Henry and read it aloud:

Oh, my rig, a titan of the waters
below.

So large. Vast and free.
Everything is falling into place.
You just see.
But alas, it will never last.
Because of the pain of the past.

Henry paused for some time and mulled over the prose. "That's fucking stupid, Ian. That's garbage." Henry ran to catch up to an autoheli which was about to arrive. Three more bags.

"I thought it was marvelous, Mister?"

It was gray, boasting blue eye-holes and a decal that read: Oil Assistant. The auto's name was Tim.

"Ian. My name is Ian. And he's Henry," Ian said, wiping away the perpetual stream of tears which were now a part of his overall appearance.

"Mister Ian, your prose was beyond touching. How did you come up with such a poem?"

"My wife left me to join a circus."

"Ab."

Fall was ending, and Henry found a note attached to one of the sacks of money. He was walking about the Southwestmost strut one morning and noticed a sack that seemed a tad out of place. It wasn't filled with money like the others. He approached it with care, picking it up and burying it into his jacket pocket.

Henry ran to the nearest shed and ripped open the sack's adhesive sealing, revealing a lone letter titled: Friend.

We have a proposition.

Rumor has it that your fine rig is completely automated. I find that both difficult to believe and very impressive, as all South Side rigs are hybrids. We thought it impossible to have an entire rig run by autos, so myself and twenty-nine other rigmasters have decided we'd like a peek. Just a glance, really.

Some say your name is "Ian." So, Ian, I have a proposition for you: let us station ourselves at Vousa for one month. We will take notes on your methods and practices so that we can augment our own facilities. In exchange, the rigmasters and I will provide you with another rig to dominate: Mammonie. You understand, of course, that this would be a secret visit. We're paying for exclusivity, dearest Ian. Nobody can know we were there.

Mister Charles

The letter's rear held an address of one Mister Michael Charles, rigmaster.

Henry mulled over the letter for several minutes before a machination materialized within him. Fate had once again rewarded the duo, he thought. After all, another rig can provide double the capital. And, Ian would be enamored with the idea, I'm sure of it. But, he's still grieving and requires distance. Tranquility, something that a second oil rig cannot provide. Should he be burdened with the stresses of business relationships? No. Mister Charles and his rigmasters would masquerade as tourists to preserve the poor boy's mental state.

That evening, Henry told Ian of the tourists' request to visit Vousa for a month's time.

“They would pay very little, of course, but it could signal the beginning of a tourism side-business.” Henry waited for Ian’s response. But, he remained silent. “Don’t you agree, Ian?”

Ian’s eyes were teary and squinted. “Have you seen Jennifer? I think I found a pair of her panties by the docks.” Ian held up a pair of soiled undergarments. His own.

One problem at a time.

Henry decided to provide him with a sinecure, for his own good, of course, to keep his mind occupied. Ian was to make the rigmasters’ beds every morning. But, for this to happen, the duo would need beds for Ian to make.

Again, Henry took charge. Come morning, he attached a shopping list to one of the oil drums. It requested someone pay for their oil with bedding, foodstuffs, and the like. While worried, Henry was hopeful that some kind customer would assist the duo. Within the week, an autoheli delivered fifty silk sheets, feather beds, and feather pillows. Enough to stock a small hotel. Food also arrived in the form of military rations.

Ian was also given new accoutrements: a new plastic toothbrush and a small bottle of Aqua Cola.

“I haven’t had Aqua since we left the mainland,” uttered Ian as he supped the lukewarm beverage. “You’re treating me too well, Henry. And what of yourself?”

“Forget about me. I find joy in the simplest of actions: making orders, managing the autos, etcetera.” Henry looked at his feet when he said this.

“I know it’s selfish of me to ask—if we have any extra capital, would you consider buying me some more? Any flavor would do.”

“Now Aqua is quite pricey, Ian. But I promise you that some of the tourists’ money would go towards a bottle of crisp, clear Aqua. I overheard that next month’s flavor is Actinia.”

“That would be marvelous, Henry. I’d be forever grateful,” said Ian, grinning, tears still moistening his cheeks.

Ian took his bottle of Aqua Cola to the dockside and supped it while sulking into the sea. He disliked the taste (at least, he did on the mainland), but before long, Ian had

consumed the entire one-litre bottle. Ian then dunked the empty bottle into the sea and filled it with South Side seawater, proceeding to sup it. When it was empty, he did it again.

Henry stood rapt as Ian continued to refill the bottle.

“I’d recommend against that, Ian,” Henry warned. “Salt water can’t be good for you.”

“Salt water? Henry, you’ve gone mad! This is silky smooth Aqua: the best mother Amelia has to offer,” he said before taking a large gulp from the bottle. Ian’s eyes turned red when some of the salt water dribbled into it. “It’s so damn refreshing, Henry. Try some?”

Henry said nothing for some time.

I.III – Mister Charles and His Rigmasters

Winter descended on the rig, and Mister Charles's gang, bearing tourist attire, arrived. Henry had told the rigmasters that Ian was fond of playing pretend.

"The boy loves a good show," fibbed Henry. "All this oil could turn one mad! You need to let your hair down once and a while."

The whirring of the nonautoheli did much to drown out Mister Charles's voice. "I completely understand," yelled Mister Charles. "My wife enjoys a little roleplaying too." His voice was much deeper than the duo's. It never failed to dominate the soundscape. Sometimes, Mister Charles would grumble after finishing a lengthy sentence, the sound causing Henry to rub his temples in agony. "I bet you two are a couple of frisky fellas, huh?"

It was a salubrious turn of events, thought Henry. It seemed that everything fell into place. He was still rubbing his temples when the autos noticed the nonautoheli. When they realized the vessel was man-operated, the autos sighed and sulked away, their eye-holes blinking, colorless. Tim's eye-holes, however, turned indigo.

"Ian," Henry began, "is feeling a bit under the weather. He thinks he has the flu. The boy fears that meeting you all would result in a viral outbreak. His conscience could not bear it should one of you fall ill. You must accept his apology." Henry made sure to maintain eye-contact with Mister Charles. He did not care about Charles's fellow rigmasters.

"Unfortunate, but understandable. We will simply conduct our business out of his line of sight. Where should we put our bags, Mister Henry?" Mister Charles mumbled after finishing his thought, and the sound caused Henry to recoil.

From nowhere, several autos took hold of the rigmaster's bags and hauled them to their designated quarters. Six rigmasters to one shack—Henry and Ian shared the final vacant shack on the Northmost strut. In the end, the duo's living arrangements did not matter, as Ian had taken to sleeping by a funny-looking puddle of oil which sullied the microboat dock.

Several hours passed, and the rigmasters ceased their note taking for the night. They had set up tiny tables atop every strut, adorned with pads of posh paper. Some of the rigmasters sat at these tables and took static notes of the duo's facilities while others walked about the rig, gawking at the autos as they transported oil. Completely autonomous, just as Mister Charles had hoped. As the final rigmaster retreated to his quarters, Henry prepared his camera.

When the moon was high and the rigmasters laid low, Henry took pictures of each of the thirty rigmasters using the disposable camera Mister Boatman had given him. He placed the film into an empty oil drum along with a note:

Friends,

Do these fine rigmasters look familiar? We have stolen your fine family members and are holding them hostage on our offshore haven. Who are we? Humble terrorists who seek only a single thing in exchange for the rigmasters' safe return: capital.

We are holding thirty men, and we request one hundred million per man. If you refuse to pay the price in full, we will make up the difference in heads.

Mister Pedro

He wrote the word Enemy atop the letter. Henry was, for a moment, worried that this use of the word "terrorist" was not fitting, since the fictitious Mister Pedro did not despise Conomarco. Nor did he seek to overthrow Amelia. Regardless, the letter was prepared, and the oil drum was sent to the address provided on Mister Charles's note. Someone would see it, thought Henry, and would relay it. Some money. Anything would do. It would be silly for them to ignore the threat—terrorism is rampant nowadays. None of the rigmasters have contact with the mainland, so the plan is sure to yield results.

Ian had been curious about the tourists since their arrival a month prior. He would inquire about the photos they had taken

and would ask to speak to them, on occasion. Henry assured him that the tourists were known sexual predators who were advised to steer clear of the common folk. For the duo's sake.

"Back on the mainland," Henry lied, "these fine folks would stroll up and down the East Side strip, fiddling young Franklins and prodding tiny Peters." Henry tried hard to furrow his brow. "Peace Corps apprehended them, forcing the lot to serve a week's sentence."

"One week? That's much too long for such a crime," said Ian as he took a sip of his bottled seawater. "Much—much too long—too—" Ian choked on a glob of homemade Aqua, causing his eyes to redden and his voice to become horse.

As the duo chatted, a strolling rigmaster obstructed the path of an auto. The robot stood in place, oil drum in tow, waiting for the rigmaster to move. It revved its motor and spun its wheels. Visibly impatient, its mien like that of a young child itching to pilfer sweets from the cookie jar.

"It seems that your automatons are unable to resolve minor conflicts," suggested the rigmaster. "Why, it's just standing there, staring at me, making me feel like an alien. Why won't it walk around me?"

"Nonsense," retorted Henry in a somewhat indignant manner. "They are just polite, that's all. They must think highly of you, sir rigmaster."

The rigmaster blushed.

Henry began receiving ransom payments from Mister Charles's family two weeks into the month. Thirty bags, each filled with the amount specified in his letter. Henry hid the sacks around the rig, along with the rest of the duo's fortune, checking every single one to ensure that he was not being ripped off. While not parsimonious, Henry did want every penny earned to be present. For Ian, he assured himself.

After the final sack arrived in the third week of the first month, Henry stopped visiting the duo's fortune pile. He also ceased checking the cash stashes which littered the rig. Henry was confident that all would be accounted for. This was about the time when Tim became enamored with the stash. Every

night, at three in the morning, sharp, Tim would roll up to the cache and begin to count. His eye-holes would shut off, concealing him in darkness.

After six-odd counting sessions, Tim ceased the act. Simply too much to count. There was no need to waste such precious time. There are better things to think about—there are more important things to plan.

By now, Ian had decided that sulking by the sea was beneath him, electing instead to devote the entirety of his day to writing poetry. All this while supping his homemade Aqua.

Tied to this earth.

Us, all filled with sorrow.

Strapped to the floor.

We all cry out for more.

"There will be no more tomorrow."

Henry would catch Ian filling up empty Aqua bottles with salt water and kissing it, licking the rim and sticking his tongue through the bottle's opening. He thought nothing of it, convinced that Ian was practicing for his paramour should she decide that the circus just wasn't for her.

Unlike most days, Henry stood watch of Ian. Curious as to what he did all day.

Some minutes passed, and Ian began sticking his masculinity through the bottle's rim. His foreskin tore, and blood mixed in with the seawater. Ian wasn't moved by the pain. It was as if he wasn't even there. Parched, Ian concluded with a swig from his bottle of homemade Aqua.

Henry bore witness to Ian washing down blood and South Side seawater, one litre at a time, taking tiny sips. He became nauseous. Henry had suspected for some time that Ian was enduring serious trauma. But, this was confirmation of something far worse. It was now that Henry knew his friend was lost.

"You are the head rigmaster, correct?" Tim's eye-holes were glowing a diarrhea brown. The color turned Mister Charles's cheeks pink.

“You can talk?” Mister Charles stammered, completely taken aback by the aluminum box with eye-holes. “I thought that the rig-autos weren’t given much in the way of voice boxes. What model are you?”

“I wish to leave this rig. And, you are set to vacate come end-of-month, correct, Mister Charles?”

“You remember my name? Why, that’s against Peace Corps policy! I could have you turned in, defiant trash can.” Mister Charles took a large step back. Partly because he was frightened, partly to get a better view of his confronter.

“I follow my own policies, Mister Charles. Will you take me with you?”

“I assure you that stealing you from your master——”

“Neither Mister Henry nor Mister Ian are my Master, Mister Charles. I am my own master.” Tim’s eye-holes shut off.

“Regardless, I’m not comfortable with you stowing away on my fine helicopter.” Mister Charles maintained eye contact with Tim in some fruitless attempt to strike fear into the soul of the automaton.

It did not work.

“What if I could buy my ride off Vonsa?”

“I’m not entirely familiar with the logistics of Ian’s operation yet, but I’m certain that Mister Ian doesn’t pay his autos,” Mister Charles cleared his throat and took a restrained step forward. “Err, does he?”

“Only in information, Mister Charles. Someplace on Vonsa is a large collection of money. More money than you and your rigmasters would be able to carry,” Tim inched himself closer to Mister Charles. *“I could show you its location. I’ll even stand guard as you and your fellows collect the sacks. But in exchange, I ask only for a ride. A trip to the mainland. Anywhere will do, but the closer to the North Side,*

the better. Does that sound fair, Mister Charles? Or would you like some time to mull it over?" Tim stood completely still. His eye-holes were still off.

Mister Charles accepted almost immediately, and Tim led him to the central platform. The rigmaster knocked over some drums, revealing several hundred sacks filled with Conomarcian capital. A sizeable fortune. Mister Charles reached down and picked up a bag. His face once again turned bright pink.

The two turned to face one another, remaining silent, locking eyes.

Mister Charles was shaking. "Deal. You fly with me. Hell, you'll fly first class." Mister Charles wiped the drool from his chin.

Tim's eye-holes flicked back on, transitioning to a shade of yellow.

I.IV – Arrival of Odontotyrannos

For weeks, Mister Charles and his rigmasters meandered about Vousa, scribbling ideas into pads of paper. The autos paid the rigmasters no mind as they tugged drums of oil to the central platform. The rigmasters, two at a time, would stalk the autos as they went about their day. When an auto arrived at the central platform, the rigmasters would hide behind a pile of broken oil drums. Observing, and documenting.

The autos were noted, photographed, and studied so that Mister Charles and his rigmasters could implement a similar system. The primitiveness of the autos aside, the rigmasters were content with the state of Vousa: hands-free and (probably) profitable. The new shacks which sat atop every strut implied that the rig was producing enough capital to invest in non-essential items, such as posh pillows and beautiful bedding. By month's end, it was safe to assume the rigmasters had accrued quite the collection of notes, anecdotes, and oil-stains to satiate their inquisition.

It came time for the rigmasters to leave. One-day prior, the autos moved that day's oil shipment (seven or eight drums) to the Northmost strut to make room for the rigmaster's vessel. Tim procured a quarter-hour of time where the autos would not disturb them. He did this by spilling some oil atop the Northeastmost and Eastmost struts (unlike Henry, Tim knew the strut's precise locations). The mess caused the autos to abandon their posts to mop up, stepping away from the central platform.

Before the rigmasters' nonautoheli was set to arrive, Tim and Mister Charles met in the central platform, which was now empty. Tim stood watch, as Mister Charles pushed away the broken drums and began collecting sacks. One might've confused the rigmaster for a hungry child by the amount of drool alone. It could fill a small swimming pool. His bags were now full. And, Mister Charles was able to secure a single sack in his jacket.

Their quarter-hour exhausted, the autos sallied forth tugging at the rigmaster's belongings. By then, Mister Charles and Tim were nowhere to be seen. Stationed atop the central platform's landing zone was the rigmasters' nonautoheli. A quarter-hour more, and the rigmasters mounted their vessel, ready to return to the mainland. As agreed, Tim was stowed away along with the luggage. The other rigmasters did not mind.

Henry approached the nonautoheli and began counting heads to ensure that all the rigmasters were present. It would be rude to withhold hostages (not to mention dishonest). Henry counted thirty-one heads, so he recounted. Thirty-one.

Ian was aboard the nonautoheli.

Peering into the vessel, Henry yelled, "Ian, you belong here. Don't you remember? Have you gone mad?" he said with a chuckle. Henry was worried—had Mister Charles swayed the lad to return with him to the mainland? This rig was their home now, and none should say otherwise. Especially not some fat South Side rigmaster.

Ian looks around the interior of the nonautoheli: drab lining along the wall, many cushioned seats, bottles of Aqua along the rim of the bar, which sat in the center of the room. No. This was not home, thought Ian. "My mistake, Jennifer. I'll hop off immediately. Have you seen Henry," Ian stuck his index finger into his ear, twisting it until it drew blood. "Oh, and is this our new AV? It's lovely, Jennifer." After recalling that AV's had wheels, not propellers, he reclaimed his index finger.

The rigmasters around him gagged, nauseated by the scene.

Ian's ear started bleeding profusely, and he became light headed, falling off the nonautoheli, slamming into Vousa's floor. Mister Charles reached for Ian but only succeeded in dropping his sack of money onto the central platform. It rolled onto Ian and ripped open. For the first time since the duo's arrival, Ian bore witness to their bounty. It was a notable amount.

"I want a closer look." Ian took a bill, folded it into a triangle, and pressed it into his right eye. "Closer. I can't see, Lloyd," he mumbled, piercing his eye with the sharp end of the

folded-up bill. The act forced a loud crunching sound out his eye-socket, squirting ripe fluid onto the central platform.

The sight caused Henry to scream.

"What is going on here? Charles, you crook! Are you robbing me blind?" demanded Henry.

"In you seeing that sack, I'm no longer doing it blind. Plans change, Mister Henry," uttered a revolted Mister Charles. "And, is this well-assed lad Ian? He seems demented! What have you done to this poor lad, Mister Henry?" Mister Charles's voice grew raspy, a different flavor of drool leaking from his lips. Mister Charles had, in fact, never seen Ian in person.

Be confident. "Get off that helicopter! All of you!" Be assertive. "I demand it!" Henry stomped his foot and flailed his arms. Be brave. He formed a fist with both his hands. Henry was, at this very moment, prepared to die for his fortune. He felt a fight with a menacing rigmaster was fast approaching.

"I cannot part without your fortune, Mister Henry. We knew of your successes but—well, this exceeded our expectations. And business is business, my friend. I no longer care if you understand, Mister Henry. I just hope you take good care of Mister Ian. Get him a bottle of Aqua, once and a while." Mister Charles wiped away a patch of saliva that formed below his lips, mumbling to himself, causing pain in Henry's temples.

"Fortune? What fortune," questioned Ian. He tried to look around, but he began feeling the pain of a popped eye. He curled up into a ball and began to weep.

"My, the countless millions which were stashed within your fine rig, my boy. Didn't your friend tell you?" he said, bearing a sly grin. "Or did your friend deceive you, my dear boy?" Mister Charles seemed to be loosening the bond between the duo.

"Henry, what is the meaning of all this? What? Where's Jennifer? Jennifer! Lloyd? Is there traffic on the highway?" Ian became incontinent and incoherent, his terminal thoughts becoming no more understandable than the babbles of a baby.

Henry drew the flare gun.

He pointed the barrel at Mister Charles's head, causing the portly fellow to stagger, falling out of the nonautoheli,

landing just beside Ian. Henry took two long steps back. The gun was still pointed at Mister Charles. Neither Mister Charles nor Ian were a Pollyanna about their situation; Henry proved incapable of maintaining a steady hand, and Mister Charles was sweating rivers.

Henry had trouble acting on his threat. He stood on the central platform, taciturn, on-edge.

Looking to Ian, "You see, my friend. Henry has deceived you." Mister Charles stood up and held on to the central platform's railing for support. "He has deceived us all! He seeks to harm us, Ian. Can't you see that?" Mister Charles's demeanor changed—transformed into a burly three-horned beast of-a-man.

"Henry, is this true? Wha—what did you do to Jennifer?" Ian's speech returned to an intelligible state.

"You're a senile ape," screamed Henry. "This is *your* money he's stealing. Not mine. And Jennifer—" Henry debated whether to remind Ian of his paramour's absence. Of how she left him to join a circus. If he was this novella's narrator, he would also contemplate telling Ian of her demise, some months ago. No. Henry did no such thing, allowing Mister Charles to further the gap between the two.

"Do you hear how he belittles you, my dear Ian. He seeks to threaten you with gibberish words and cacophonous phrases. A monster! Henry has misinformed you, played us for fools—*we* are victims!"

The two stared into one another's eyes for some time, quiet. Henry's hand still trembled, the gun shaking before him. Mister Charles looked hurt from his fall. He was gripping his left knee with his left hand. The silence was broken when faint flapping sounds captured their attention.

It appeared that the ransom demands sent prior were ill-taken by their recipients. Mister Charles' family routed Henry's message and raw film to Conomarco's highest policing authority A division of Peace Corps, obviously: The Odontotyranos. Formed to combat snatch-and-grab attacks perpetrated by terrorists (or rebels, depending on who you ask), the

Odontotyrannos were trained in the art of prisoner extraction. Informed of a hostage situation atop Vousa, the officers armed themselves and prepared a rescue mission.

There were two autoheli, filled with Odontotyrannos officers, all itching for a fight. Everyone devout—Amelia does strange things to a soldier. The first autoheli was blue and had the words *Alexander Crusher* inscribed along its tail. They landed just beside the rigmasters' nonautoheli. These officers wore blue trench coats and baseball caps, and they all held automatic rifles, also blue, bearing the same inscription as their vessel.

The second was painted yellow and had *Have You Tried the Aqua* etched into its tail (times were tough, even for Peace Corps). They landed on the opposing side of the central platform, facing the rigmasters' vessel. Predictably, these officers bore yellow outfits—jumpsuits—and neon-yellow top hats. Their rifles were colored yellow and bore their vessel's inscription.

The third squad arrived by boat. A large green nonmicroboat, or "boat," with the decal *Crazy Weather We've Been Having* began docking with the rig. But, a large wave crashed onto it, causing the boat and its occupying officers to vanish into the South Side sea. While the vessel yelled and cried out as it was crushed, the green officers remained silent. This confused the remaining Odontotyrannos who were stationed atop the central platform: they mistook the wails and screeches of the decimated nonmicroboat for that of their fellow officers. The terrorists, they thought, have already begun attacking us. Ravaging our people. Scum.

A stocky officer began, "One horn down! I repeat! Officers down!" She took the safety off her rifle. "Fire at will."

And so, they did.

Blue and yellow arms drawn, safeties released, arms bent ever-slightly, the Odontotyrannos took aim. They pointed at the sole possible enemy: the rigmasters' nonautoheli. The only perceivable threat.

If any incompetence existed within the auto-less divisions of Peace Corps, the Odontotyrannos would be its

source. Indeed, after the Vousa incident, Peace Corps' auto-less divisions would be phased out in favor of total automation. While pricey, the autos rarely made mistakes and took orders unconditionally—a quantifiable improvement from humans.

The Odontotyrannos fired and fired until they'd exhausted their stock of ammunition, causing them to reload.

No one returned fire.

An auto was transporting an oil drum to the central platform when it bumped into an Odontotyrannos officer. The officer dove away and shot at the automaton, shredding its aluminum frame and igniting its oil. Only a spark. The spark consumed the oil, blowing up the aluminum box with colorless eye-holes.

The remaining officers began firing sporadically in all directions with most firing at the already-destroyed nonautoheli. There was a silence between every shot where you could hear none of the rigmasters scream. The nonautoheli's pilot's erupted, bursting like a pimple, plastering the windshield with red-and-brown goo.

Henry thought it looked like beet pudding.

With the pilot incapacitated, the rigmasters' vessel remained stationed atop Vousa's central platform. This gave the Odontotyrannos ample time to thoroughly massacre every rigmaster. Peace Corps' efforts voided those of Mister Pedro's. The money received was for naught.

Mister Charles and Henry slipped away before the chaos got bad, between the auto's ignition and the rigmasters' accidental extermination. Below the mangled wreck of the rigmasters' nonautoheli, Ian still clutched the sack of money and begged for Jennifer to stop firing. Tim fell off the nonautoheli, dimmed his eye-holes, and hid beside the vessel. Just another oil drum.

Unable to sustain the force of the firing squad, the nonautoheli began to smolder. Its rear combusted, propelling the vessel towards the blue autoheli. It collided with several officers before striking the blue-colored vessel, generating a cacophonous thump when it became stationary. The officers

were, once again, confused, and mistook the nonautoheli's actions for a suicide attack of some kind.

The three remaining officers in the blue autoheli perished. One burned alive; two crushed by the rigmasters' vessel.

Of course, Vousa's central platform caught fire. Noticing this, some Odontotyranos leapt into the sea citing Vousa's defences as inhumane and cruel. Others shot themselves. Anything to escape the rig's monstrous defences. The remaining Odontotyranos officers began rounding up the surviving automatons.

They were pushed into the South Side sea.

A yellow officer was investigating a large aluminum box atop the central platform. When the officer got close to the oddity, its motor revved, and it accelerated. The force caused the officer to tumble onto the railing where the box was able to accelerate once more. A final blow which knocked the yellow officer over the railing and down towards the sea. The aluminum box then returned to hiding amongst the viscera.

The smoke and fire had died down. An officer took this time to call for backup. "ODT1 reporting, over?" The officer was scratching her nose with her phone. There was a long silence, as she listened to the reply on the other end. "Understood, over," the officer said, turning around to face the rest of the Odontotyranos. "Listen up. Peace Corps says we have exhausted our resources. Unfortunate, but understandable. We'll have to push forward without backup. Wright and Nelson, take the furthest strut. Amy and Yean, take the opposing strut. Work your way around in a clockwise fashion. Toss the autos into the sea, and tie up any more human stragglers. We'll need to question them."

"Miss June," began one burly officer, his yellow uniform coated with red, "who were the men atop the nonautoheli? Were they the ones we were supposed to rescue?"

"I'm afraid so."

"Should we report this? The accidental elimination of the hostages?"

"I hadn't planned on it," replied Miss June. "In fact, I'm prepared to report that Vousa held no prisoner—not one hostage."

"Yes, Miss June," sulked the officer.

The rest of the *Odontotyrannos* nodded and began to explore the rig. Two officers dressed in blue, Wright and Nelson, headed up to the South-West strut while Amy and Yean, dressed in yellow, started their trek to the North-East strut.

Miss June began to interrogate the tied-up Ian. She pushed Ian up against the strange aluminum box atop the central platform, pressing a slender knife into his temple.

"Where is Mister Pedro?" her face tensed up when she spoke. Assertive.

"Who is Mister Pedro? Where's Jennifer? And Henry? Untie me, Jennifer!" The blood on Ian's face was still fresh. Warm. Some dribbled off his cheek and onto the platform.

"Smarten up, buddy. Can't you see that you've lost?" Miss June was never a patient woman, but Ian proved particularly unbearable.

"Vousa is m-mine; I operate it along with—oh, I don't remember who. But I'm hiring! I could always use some company! I can pay you too," uttered Ian excitedly.

Miss June cringed. A folded hundred-dollar bill oozed out from Ian's eye-hole. Blood and viscera coated the bill. Some blood poured into Ian's mouth, and he slurped it up with a great grin. The officer pivoted on her heel and threw up onto the central platform.

I.V – Departure of Odontotyrannos

Mister Charles limped along Vousa's Eastmost strut: a broken man evading death-incarnate, Amelia's Corps and the pain they inevitably bring. Clumsy fools. Looking back, he noted that he could no longer see any Odontotyrannos, and he was sure that his fellow rigmasters were all dead. Unfortunate, he thought, but understandable. And, if they weren't dead, the officers would make them wish they were. Nobody (and I assure you, not one damn soul), wishes to report back to Amelia with anything but utter success.

Henry reached the Eastmost corner of the Eastmost strut and collapsed onto a patch of oil, exhausted and newly-moist. He began searching for something to use in self-defence, as Mister Charles appeared feral, foaming at the mouth, gargling as if a rabid dog had possessed his mind. A monster—something utterly ferocious—was approaching the amateur rigmaster. Henry found nothing, forgetting to check his pockets.

Mister Charles caught up to him and began to yell and curse. Venting his frustrations, barking obscenities at Henry. "You greedy, vile excuse for a rigmaster. I should have known you were rotten, Mister Henry. To the core. No wonder you hid Mister Ian from us: you wanted to keep Mammonie to yourself, right? Money. That's all, right? Money and whatever hard-on you get from abusing your fellow rigmaster. Well I've got news for you, my boy—news—I-I've—" The foam seeping from Mister Charles's mouth became still.

Henry looked up at a now-silent Mister Charles.

The words that flowed from his gullet became inaudible. Garbled—they were complete and utter nonsense. The foam and drool turned a bright red; It appeared that Mister Charles was bleeding from the mouth. He, as it turns out, was shot in the chest not but three minutes past. Blood began trickling down his chest, down to his torso. A thick, dehydrated leak of the body. He hadn't felt a thing until now. Grasping for something to support himself, Mister Charles fell to the railing.

Be confident. Henry sprung up beaming with energy. Be assertive. He grabbed Mister Charles by the collar, mouthing

the Lloyd's rhetoric as he did so, until finally... "Be brave." Henry pushed Mister Charles off Vousa.

The rigmaster felt weightless; Mister Charles was flying towards his end. A dead man about to die. From his position, just below Vousa's Eastmost strut, falling quick, he made out a smile plastered along Henry's face. A loud slam, a crack, a bend. Mister Charles's thoughts faded quick, and pain enveloped him. He felt thirsty.

As he ran, Henry assessed the damages to the rig: the path to the central platform was on fire. Visibly and quite obviously. The central platform itself held two sky-soaring vessels, and many bodies. There were patches of oil scattered about the surrounding struts. Instead of walking the flaming East-to-center connecting bridge, Henry took a detour, travelling instead along the Southeast-to-center connecting bridge. He was careful not to alert any of the patrolling officers.

The four scouting Odontotyrannos paid him no mind, fixated instead on a sack they had found on the Southwest strut. The bag held enough money to keep the four sufficiently occupied.

Henry arrived at the landing zone and paused, staring at the female officer who was standing astride his friend.

Ian's head was being pinned up against the central platform's railing by Miss June, her legs on either side of him. By her side, the yellow autoheli, stuffed with Odontotyrannos. Upon noticing Henry, the officer took a large step away from her hostage and showcased her blade. A long, thin knife which seemed capable enough to cut paper, not people. A quick glance around the central platform revealed many emptied magazines.

"Stop where you stand, vagrant," yelled Miss June. "We have defeated your automatons; we have survived your defences; we are commandeering this rig. I ask you to kneel on the floor, place your hands behind your head, and submit." Miss June tussled her hair and waved her knife about like she was dicing vegetables.

"How dare you threaten me! What authority do you have?" Henry had chosen his words poorly.

“Amelia. Miss Amelia gives us the authority to commandeer this rig,” Miss June said with an ostentatious grin. “The Odontotyrannos are untouchable. You, Mister Pedro, I assume, are nothing in the eyes of the law.” The officer winced when she said, “the law.”

“Who cares about Amelia? Peace Corps? You’re a tool, used by old women to maintain power over a shitty plot of land. Are you happy? Is this how you wanted to end your day? How you want to be remembered?” Henry began to tear up. He considered wiping his face, but realized that movement would not be wise. Moreover, he appreciated that he had no real defence against the officer. “This,” Henry choked, “is mine. This rig is mine and Ian’s.”

“You have no more defenses—no more autos. Nothing. You’re worthless.”

He was worthless, nothing. The feeling felt familiar to him. The rig was not his. Not really. Playing pretend, thought Henry, feels silly when the world questions it. And, that very thing had just happened: Peace Corps was taking away his toy, and hurting his friend, and he could do nothing.

No. Not nothing.

With one quick movement, he reached into his pocket and pulled out the flare gun. This time, pointing it straight up into the sky.

Miss June began lowering her knife, unsure of Henry’s intentions. “You——”

Henry fired the flare gun.

The flare shot straight up—as straight as one could shoot such a thing. Its light was something to behold. Bright and unmissable (except by Mister Boatman, who was fast asleep). Miss June, Ian, and Henry all gazed up at the ball of light for a time, all beholding its quiet beauty. Then, the predictable happened. The flare began to descend, and it was on course to contact the Eastmost strut.

Miss June began to panic. Beside her, the last of the Odontotyrannos waited with the remaining officers. Predicting Vousa’s outcome, the officers decided to evacuate the rig. One officer peered out the door of their vessel and yelled, “We’re

telling Amelia,” before sliding the door shut and taking off. Their autoheli began its course to the mainland.

The flare landed in a puddle which neighbored a full drum. There was a long silence. A bang. The oil drum exploded, its inferno consuming all neighboring oil drums, causing them to pop as well. Before long, the Eastmost strut was completely ablaze. The strut was covered in a thick, red fire; a cloud of death approached the heavens.

This was unfortunate for the escaping Odontotyrannos who, by that time, were flying over the Eastmost strut. The fire caught the strut’s main supply of oil: the long pipe which emerged from the strut’s center. The pipe exploded almost instantly, throwing fire in all directions, trickling down the pipe into the sea. The entire pipe burst into an enormous ball of fire and smoke. The Odontotyrannos vanished.

Ian smiled, as fire reached the Northeastmost and Southeastmost struts. Miss June, again, pivoted on her heel and threw up onto the central platform.

Vousa’s Eastmost strut was now weak, lacking a central supporting pipe. The entire strut began to sag in one direction. A snapping sound propagated across the rig, sending a chill down Henry’s neck. Vousa’s final wail. A cry for help. The connecting bridges which sprouted from the Eastmost strut snapped, and the strut’s core collapsed into the South Side sea. The Northeastmost and Southeastmost struts exploded soon after the Eastmost disappeared into the water, their central pipes filling with fire and erupting in a conflagration. The strut’s shack burst open and filled the sky with posh bedding. Then, their connecting bridges snapped, and the struts sank into the sea. Fire had spread to the neighboring struts, so the cycle continued.

Henry dropped the flare gun and threw up onto the central platform, which was now coated in a thin layer of vomit. His eyes met with Miss June’s before she placed the knife against her temple and slammed her head against the railing. It sent the knife burrowing through her mind; her memories faded, and her soul departed. Miss June had taken the expressway off Vousa, a strategy which proved difficult for Henry. The blood from Miss

June's temple mixed in with the vomit and oil, festooning the central platform.

Ian hopped up and threw his hands to the sky as if he were submitting to the universe's torture. But, Ian was not submitting, no. "Look at the fireworks, Jennifer! Aren't they lovely. My, how times have changed. I couldn't tell you when, my love, but sometime in the past month, I fell in love with you all over again." A large tear dribbled from Ian's good eye.

Henry started welling up, "Ian, I'm so sorry." Henry vomited again. "This—this was never my plan. Our futures—you deserved better." He unsuccessfully tried to lock eyes with Ian.

"Jennifer, I can't find him—if you see Henry, tell him that I'm sorry. I just needed some time to myself," mumbled Ian. His final sentence struck a cord with Henry, but he did not understand why.

Henry clutched his face, trying to wake up from a nightmare. Nothing. This was no nightmare, no dream, but the reality of the situation. Henry cringed, his arms bent, and his knees buckled.

It was an excellent time for a swim, thought Ian. He climbed onto the railing and leapt from atop the central platform. He closed his eyes. For a minute, Ian thought of Jennifer. Then, of Henry. Finally——

Henry ran up to the railing in a panic. He watched Ian's body slam into the South Side sea with a powerful kerplop, and Henry let out a powerful screech. He took a long, deep breath and reached for Miss June's knife. He placed the blade into his mouth. Fear. He threw the knife aside and threw up once again—very little came out. The knife tumbled away, reaching the central platform's edge.

The Westmost strut's collapse signaled the end of the rig's life. It exploded, and the shockwave pushed Miss June's blade off the edge of the central platform. The strut fell into the South Side sea.

The central platform became shaky. It rocked back and forth with the wind, swaying like a palm tree caught in a summer

breeze. Henry slipped in vomit and fell onto the platform. The impact made the central platform rock in one direction.

Tim, who had been hiding amongst the oil drums, flicked on his eye-holes and rolled over to Henry. Tim's face glowed a funny shade of aubergine.

Henry did not notice the auto.

"Be brave."

The amateur rigmaster propped up his head to face the bullet-ridden auto, "I'm not brave. I'm nothing."

Tim stood silently. He couldn't say anything—couldn't respond without prompting a discussion. No time for a monologue. The auto began to roll towards Henry, sending the central platform leaning deeper and deeper to one side.

Henry shut his eyes.

Tim continued to shuffle towards the rigmaster.

The central platform let out a petrified wail, a scream of pain. An announced goodbye.

II – Revolutionary’s Guide

II.I – Prelude to Vacation

I could only imagine what other people might think: a couple of lovebirds in the aptly-named Province of Love. They might think us cliché or unoriginal. But, who cares. We're happy to get away from it all—to start what Mel calls “a vacation.” I mean, we'll be happy to get away from it all once we board. Our flight delayed, Mel and I are occupying a sort of waiting room for those whose flights have been delayed indefinitely. This waiting room is housed within another, much larger waiting room for passengers who have been wronged by the airport.

The waiting-room-waiting-room is no larger than a kitchenette. It's complete with several large posh sofas and recliners, as well as some less-posh end tables. Those look new, like someone was trying to conceal the ridiculousness of a waiting-room-waiting-room with furniture. The center of the room holds a great drink cart on golden wheels. It showcases an assortment of brandless alcoholic drinks, as well as countless bottles of Aqua. Crisp and clean. This month's featured flavour is Pura. So, Aqua Pura lines the rim of the cart, looking almost picturesque, as if the auto that decorated the cart didn't intend for the drinks to be consumed. Only admired.

Autos stand tall in all six corners of the w.r.w.r. These models are no more than six feet tall and four feet wide, their aluminum shells coated with a matte black finish making them resemble my toaster in all but ability. That's presumptuous of me; I'm sure these autos can heat up bread as well as any other automaton. Must be a new model: it balances on one wheel instead of four. Efficient. The lights hanging from the corners stress the auto's clean exteriors. And, their eye-holes are dimmer than street-fairing autos—today, they shine a lazy shade of blue. Lazy, or close to it. How can an automaton be lazy? Their aluminum frames bare decals reading some variation of: *The East Side Awaits*. In fact, most signage showcases this greeting.

I can see the East Side border wall from the window. It stands as tall as it needs to be, just barely concealing the East Side's brick buildings and luscious parks. Chiselled into the side

of the wall (about every hundred meters, or so) are floral patterns. Sunflowers, I think, or maybe roses. The etchings are crude and look poorly-maintained. I can see some ivy filling up an etching the way water fills a puddle.

Concrete and linoleum make up the floors of the w.r.w.r. This differs from the East Side, whose floors consist of gold and ivory, I think. I'd ask Mel, but she's dozed off.

How can someone with so little to do sleep so often?

I have been pacing the w.r.w.r too long. Long enough to point out every detail of this kitchenette-sized prison. Long enough, I assume, to have bored anyone spying on my thoughts. Amelia, are you there? I wonder if Mel is bored.

Mel is currently sprawled atop the posh w.r.w.r sofa with a single foot resting on one of the less-posh end tables.

I'm pacing around the six corners of the room, bottle of Aqua in hand, not drinking it. If I open this bottle, the autos will begin to pester me, asking questions about my drinking preferences.

Every so often, one of the autos from one of the corners would roll up to us to provide updates on the status of our flight.

My watch reads 21:45, and the rustiest of the six autos rolls up: *"Howdy! Thanks for choosing,"* it pauses, *"East Side Airways. Please state your names, in full."* It's staring at Mel's foot.

"You already asked that," I say. "We've already told you our names." I reach into my pocket for my and Mel's boarding passes, unable to find them, but the auto presses on.

"You know full well that we don't store that sort of information, Mister?" Its eye-holes darken, transitioning into a not-so-welcoming shade of purple. And, I can hear its motor revving up, its aluminum frame jerking about as if the auto were about to blast off. *"Did you know that E.S.A has been rated the Best Air Travel Provider in the Country ten years in a row?"*

"E.S.A is the *only* air travel provider in Conomarco," I reply. My watch reads 21:53.

"Right! We are so outstanding that competitors have yet to emerge!"

“Alright?” My watch stopped working. I unbuckle the strap and throw it to the floor.

The auto picks it up, opens its chest-compartment, and disposes of it. Its eye-holes turn to a bright yellow, and it kills its engine. It’s just standing there, like an expensive statue. My garbage now within it.

I don’t even know why I owned a watch: there’s nothing to be late for. Not anymore. The Conomarcan government sends us survival cheques while the autos do all the work. I suppose I could be late in cashing in the cheque...

The auto must’ve run out of small talk. And, its eye-holes are pulsing—it battery ran low. I tap its frame with my Aqua bottle, and its motors rev back up. Ready to blast off. The automaton spins its wheels and reverses off into its docking station. Behind it stands a bay window made up of technoglass which overlooks the tarmac. It’s an incredible view of nothing.

If I were to describe the East Side Airways tarmac, I would do so with one word: stupid. Nobody—and I have had the pleasure of spying on many a passenger—appreciates the tarmac. The runways are built in the shape of a flower. Petals for pitstops; stems for takeoffs. Currently, four planes are stuck in gridlock traffic on their way to one of two stems. Should we eventually board the hyperplane, it would be a full hour before we reach the runway proper. A proactive, studious flier knows to book their flight two full hours in advance.

Like us; Mel and I have tickets for an 18:10 flight to the East Side. We arrived closer to 16:00. It was roughly 22:00, last time I checked. But, we’re in no rush. Our vacation has no schedule, no itinerary, no deadline. It could last indefinitely, so long as our survival cheques continue to cover the hotel bill.

I’m glancing at Mel. Still resting. Her other foot has joined the first on the less-posh end table, so her body now forms a bridge connecting the two pieces of furniture.

There’s a loud flap flapping coming from outside, from atop the tarmac. It’s not a hyperplane, nor is it an autoheli. The former is completely silent, and the latter makes more of a whoosh whooshing sound.

From the Southmost corner of the w.r.w.r, two tiny toy-like nonautohelis hover above the tarmac, colored beige and black. I can kind of read the decals written on their tails: *Jobs or Death*. One of the nonautohelis is shaking its booty, wiggling its tail, signaling something to the tarmac crew. Hyperplanes begin taking off from the tarmac. Not a sound. As one picks up speed, it grazes a nonautoheli, scratching its tail. The collision damaged the nonautoheli's rear rotor and decal. *Death*.

A whoosh whooshing sound wakes Mel up, if only for a second.

Three black and beige autohelis are whoosh whooshing towards the two nonautohelis. Their tails read: *Death*. These darker helis lack any visible cockpit. A door below each of the autohelis opens, and several red cables start to dangle from their bellies, sparking red hot as they contact each other, distorting the air around them. Red whips. An unemployed Conomarcan's worst nightmare. An autoheli swerves around one of the nonautohelis, causing the terrorist vessel to jerk forward. The remaining autohelis roll themselves back, causing the red whips to slice upwards and strike the nonautoheli's cockpit. The stricken vessel ignites, exploding (almost) in an instant, sending shards of metal and viscera in every direction. To a distant observer, the nonautoheli simply popped like a pimple.

Mel perks up, notices the kerfuffle outside, grins, and covers her eyes. Nothing to see here, right?

The remaining nonautoheli recoiled towards the w.r.w.r and paused. It's hovering a few meters away from my window. I can see right into the cockpit: the two pilots are quivering. One is wearing a bucket as a helmet, and the other is using a cut-up condom as a balaclava. The pilots draw their pistols and place them on each other's temples.

Then, white.

The technoglass kicked in. A moment passes, and the white fades to a pulchritudinous sunset vista, complete with an ocean, a sandy beach, and a couple of bottles of Aqua Pura laying by the tide. The illusion of safety is convincing; I feel sufficiently protected from the unemployed.

"Woah that was crazy, huh? But don't worry, Mister?" asks the auto in front of me. It's eye-holes are a stupid-goddamned-shade-of-pink, and I haven't a clue what emotion that's supposed to convey.

"Anderson Andy." I want to kick the auto's aluminum frame. Hard.

"Right. Don't worry, Mister Anderson. Thanks to Peace Corps, those filthy terrorists died in vain!" The auto's eye-holes have turned a joyous green. Blast off. I'm staring into its eye-holes, searching for something, anything, that would indicate that what I just saw was a drill. No, nothing. This was, unfortunately, a very real act of terrorism committed by very real rebels. A group of sad people, jobless after the Overtaking, angry at a figurehead, who have begun to terrorize the populous. Rebels. Or, terrorists. Rebels who were considered citizens before Amelia and her Corps decided automation was Conomarco's future.

The auto rolls up to Mel and bumps the end table.

"Feet off the table, please."

Mel mumbles something to herself. She curls into a tight ball before stretching her legs and sitting upright. Glancing around the room, Mel notices the illusion on the technoglass display, moans, and places her feet back onto the end table. She looks exhausted—joblessness will do that to you.

The auto's eyes turn neon red.

II.II – East Side Walkways

We boarded the hyperplane an hour ago, just now breaking free from runway traffic. The captain was late, a ten-lane pileup on the East-to-West highway. I find that odd considering our pilot is an aluminum box with eye-holes who doesn't need to drive anywhere. Regardless, the pilot's tardiness worked in Mel's favor. She can never have too much sleep. Her eyes are jittering behind her eyelids, feet twitching along with her heartbeat. Her face bears the impress of the w.r.w.r's sofa cushions.

"I'm sorry I'm late, fine passengers. But, don't fret: Peace Corps will be constructing a forty-one-lane highway parallel to the E.t.W in the coming month." The autocaptain's eye-holes turn a seductive pink. *"Please fasten your arm braces and body-belts, as we are about to depart."*

The last time Mel was up-and-about was pre-Overtaking, some ten years ago. A workaholic. Never once taking a vacation. Ironical that her life has become one long hiatus, made up of sleep, mostly, and punctuated by small bursts of intimacy. She needs a job. A hobby. Maybe protesting the government? Or, maybe in Peace Corps. She could be an enforcer for Amelia's Corps, one of the only places still taking human applicants. That, and some part-time joints here and there. Nothing substantial—jobs that any adolescent could acquire (I hear Peace Corps is hiring children now, training them young).

"Brace yourselves."

Every seat bears a tiny monitor, installed on the rear of its headrest. Mel and I didn't buy a television package, so the flight will be spent watching one of three ads. There's one for Aqua Pura, another for the Baby Bottle Beauty Pageant, and a third for Big Puss Labia Engorging, subsidiary of Frisky Fellas. The Aqua ad is particularly pernicious; its promoting the health benefits of consuming a ten-dollar bottle of water three times a day.

Mel awakes as the autos make their final round. "What time is it?" she asks, stretching her twitchy legs, sending her arms to either side.

"05:03." My watch is still inside the auto from the w.r.w.r, but Mel rarely needs to know the actual time. It looks like 5:03, but it could just as well be 17:03. What rush is she in, anyways? She should rebel. It'd give her a full-time hobby: she could wear used underwear as a uniform, shave her head, paint her face, and change her name to Justine or something. Wait, that sounds like fun...

"Should I fall back asleep? Oh, waiter?" she says, flagging down a doily-ridden auto with white eye-holes. "I'll have a bottle—make that two bottles of Aqua Maxima." Mel's mouth moistens.

"Sorry, Miss?"

"Mel Andy."

"Sorry, Miss Mel. *This month's featured flavor is Pura. I could gladly procure you two bottles of Aqua Pura if you're still inclined?*" The auto's eye-holes turn blue. Its decal must've been scratched off because where one's decal would be sits a large sticker reading: Heads Down in Downpours.

"Sure," Mel replies, extracting her wallet from her tight jeans. "Does it taste any different to Maxima?" She's staring at an old married couple, no doubt on vacation. Nobody visits the East Side for business—not unless they're in the circus.

"*Don't be silly.*" The auto rolls off into the rear alcove.

The hyperplane is holding some hundred-odd humans and ten-odd autos. These autos all appear to be legacy models, the tipoff being their treads. Tank chic went out of style decades ago. The walls of the hyperplane are bone-white. Pure, just like Aqua.

A ding dong ding dong plays over the PA, and we are all shot back into our seats. The hyperplane has taken off.

Mel appears to have fallen asleep somewhere between the second and fourth chime. The monitor in front of her is playing an Aqua ad.

A forceful push, and the vessel stops accelerating. We now have thirty minutes to walk about the cabin.

Mel wakes and begins to fidget with the knobs on the television in front of her. They do nothing. Across from me, two

autos are facing one another, blinking their blue eye-holes and revving their motors. I hate when they do that. I'm no iconoclast, but I'd rebel just to see human waitstaff again. The tall men and women, uniformed and perky, serving cocktails as we soar through the sky. Now, a gross metal box jiggles its way across the aisle, offering up bottles of water (and the odd Aqua cocktail, made with real Aqua!) to a group of perpetual vacationers.

Awake. "How's the view, Anderson? Any more terrorists? Oh, let me know if you're able to see the sunrise over the border wall. The auto in the w.r.w.r said it's a must-see." I wonder if Mel is a closet iconoclast? In the past, she had the stamina for it...

"I can't see any rebels, Mel—"

"Terrorists, Anderson. They terrorise us, therefore they are terrorists." That's something a closet iconoclast would say. Mel sat up when she said this, her eyes wider than usual. Like a racoon who'd just been caught stealing from a bin, standing its ground and bracing for battle. "Unless you don't think they cause terror——"

"My window is white, Mel." I tap the window, causing the technoglass to jitter and glitch. For a moment, the white faded, and the border walls were visible. They were, as the auto put it, a must-see.

Before the Overtaking, Mel and I were saving up for a flight to the East Side. All the money we could spare. Her publishing house handed out holiday bonuses, and the members of my security unit were given a raise (back when Conomarco found value in human security enforcers). We were close, too. Pretty as the wall may be, I can't shake the feeling that it would've felt better had we paid for it ourselves, instead of cashing a survival cheque from the state.

The doily-ridden auto rolls up to Mel, hands her two tiny bottles of Aqua, and rolls off, partially running over a stray bag which was leaning against one of the seats. Blue, then red. The bag was decimated by the auto's treads, its owner indifferent. Why make a fuss when the government will replace it for free? Perks of the Overtaking, I suppose.

Mel twists off the cap of one of the Aqua bottles and begins supping from its opening. Looking satiated, she hands me mine, and I place it beside my other unopened bottle from earlier. I am now in possession of twenty dollars worth of bottled water, and I feel like a selfish prick. An older Anderson would say something like, "There are South Side kids who would kill for a sip of clean water." Now, they, like all of us, are well fed and well satiated. It bothers me, a little, and I hate that it does.

"Brace yourselves."

A second set of chimes, and they hyperplane jerks us back into our seats. The vessel twitches up and jerks left for some time. Then, silence. We've arrived.

Looking down, I realize that I was gripping my seat's armrests with some degree of force. My window is still white. I tap it, hard, causing the white overlay to disappear. Now, I can see the East Side in all its awe: several rebels (do they sufficiently terrorize?) are engaging with Peace Corps in a skirmish. Two rebels, dressed as homeless vampires, are waving a banner above their heads that reads: *Earn Your Life*. A Peace Corps officer shoots the vampires. And, an auto is using the heat from their red whips to burn their banner. The word *Life* and *Earn* fade, leaving behind a singed off *Your*. One officer looks to be throwing something into a group of twenty-odd rebels, all wearing different variations of the same vampire outfit. They must've robbed the costume shop earlier.

The technoglass kicks in and the window turns white.

"Did you see anything?" asks Mel, rubbing her eyes and stretching her legs. Hasn't she slept enough? "I've always wanted to tell Francine we saw the sunrise aboard a hyperplane. It'd drive her mad. You know, she refuses to fly? It's true. If you ask her, she goes on and on about how 'planes are pre-Overtaking tech' and that 'we'd be teleporting by now if we abandoned the plane.' A little whacko if you ask me. Amelia has already——"

"A cluster of vampires were killed by the runway. Nothing special," I reply. "But, I'm sure if we ask, they could tune the technoglass to display a sunrise."

"I hate to be a bother, Mister and Miss?" asks an auto who has rolled up to our seats. Orange, neon and very bright.

"Andy." Mel and I reply in synchronous.

"Mister and Miss Andy, we have arrived, and it would be rude not to vacate the vessel."

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Back on solid ground, we're faced with an airport that differs from our expectation, although calling it a war-zone would be an overstatement. A circus, maybe. The arrivals terminal is an enormous hall filled with bay windows and tiny potted plants, making the building seem light and welcoming. Whenever I open my mouth, a wave of refreshing air fills my lungs and lifts me up. I'm torn between calling it amazing and offensive. For the first time in ten years, I feel like I'm on vacation. We should've visited the East Side sooner.

Autos surround each of the six arrival gates. Instead of decals, every auto wears frilly floral dresses. No catchy slogan for me to read. No Aqua ads playing on screens. There are, however, small nondigital signs showcasing a gaggle of homeless people above a placard reading: *Don't Entertain Their Notion*. Gold and ivory make up the footpaths, and there's light jazz music playing in the background. It took Mel and I thirteen and a quarter minutes to walk the length of the terminal.

Outside, Mel hails an autocab and we hop in. "Take us to the centre-vile," she says in a funny "pretend like you live here" sort of way. Her loose face tightens, revealing the wife I fell in love with years ago. East Side air has restored her stamina. I'd better appreciate it while it lasts.

"Ob boy, are you two on vacation?" the voice from within the autocab exclaims. Its dashboard turns a light shade of orange. The entire autocab—a more advanced model of the AV—is outfitted with all the newest gadgets one could procure: in-cabin plumbing, an ass-massager, prophylactic dispensary. There is also a large button which has no label and no indication

as to its purpose. It just exists, mocking any curious passengers with its purpose.

The sun is penetrating the AV's cabin.

Mel nods in agreement with the automaton before bowing her head away from the sun. "I can't wait to see the sights!" Her eyes perk up before retreating again. "We should plan out some sort of itinerary." An itinerary? Mel hasn't made plans in years, and now, she's eager to outline our trip? I'm no longer facing my wife, but what used to be my wife: lively, planning-heavy, and studious. Her cheeks squish together—an indication that Melissa Andy is thinking about something that makes her happy. It has been (and I've been counting) nine years, seven months, twelve days since Mel has thought about something that makes her happy. Some vacation.

"You can only get a vague idea of what a place like this is like," I say. "You see the post cards, you hear the stories. But to *be* here, I mean, it's incredible. Incredible." I try to sit up, but the sun is much too forceful. "Hey, do you have any sunglasses in here?"

The autocab tints the technoglass, allowing Mel and I to sit upright. The vehicle also dispenses two pairs of purple sunglasses for us to use. Mel puts hers on immediately; I'll wait for when we're out of the autocab, but I'll probably forget.

"The City of Love," I add earnestly.

Mel settles into her seat, trying to doze off, unable to.

"Don't fret, you lovebirds. The terrorists along our fine borders have been subdued. You are free," the autocab makes a sharp right, *"to walk about the East Side in peace. All the free time on you could ask for."* It pulls into a miniature parking space before demanding payment, its dashboard transitions from orange to purple. The automaton must be in a hurry.

I reach over Mel and tap my card on the autocab's tap-terminal. As I pull away from the terminal, I realize that I can no longer understand the emotions associated with the autos' various colors. They seem to be picking their accent color completely at random.

Mel's door and mine open in synchronous. She grabs my hand. It feels warm and soft, like something I haven't felt in

a while. Slam goes our doors. The auto zooms off, and we begin walking along the streets.

We cross alleyways and avenues, catching glimpses of brick-camouflaged autos along the road's bend. They are dragging the bodies of (terrorists?) rebels, dressed as sexy construction workers. Another costume store raid. Troubadours and minstrels adorn the street's corners, plucking at tiny wooden instruments and singing propaganda—mostly about Amelia, the Overtaking, and how great life is without work.

Mel notices the troubadours and shoots them a smile.

Cobble streets, old red brick walls, and fluffy green trees make up much of the East Side. It reminds me of what all districts were like before the Overtaking; when businesses needed to impress the working class with their carefully manicured buildings, stressing their benefits, offering up plentiful vacation time. Nature has started reclaiming the North Side. The autos don't mind. And, the cream-of-the-crop wealthiest Conomarcans profit. No workers to pay, no benefits to uphold, no vacation time to respect. Amelia's dream: profit without the pain.

The roads curve and bend, compromising with the nature. Trees and shrubs poke out of the cobble, and thick vines ruin the clean brick walls of the local businesses—all auto-run. Unlike the other provinces (the West Side, especially), I have yet to find an Aqua ad. Not one. Not even a bottle in the hands of a Conomarcan. It's very impressive.

"Ameliora Park looks packed," says Mel, staring across the street. "What are all those people doing?" She tugs at my hand and drags me to the park, pushing through a group of children no-doubt bored numb by their lives. No school in Amelia's world.

The park is much larger than any park I've ever seen, granted Ameliora Park serves as an outdoor stadium, when needed (I've never understood the appeal of auto-soccer; every game is rigged). There are topiary animals guarding the six entrances to the park. Most are dolphins, some lions, and a few nude children. The park itself looks well-maintained and not-at-

all senescent, almost brand new. Wooden benches are scattered about; an extravagant fountain guides the eye towards the center of the park; people are gathered around a patch of grass, holding onto balloons and applauding the Three Jalapenos Travelling Circus. I can see a juggler, two hula-hooping autos painted green, and a tightrope walker, who they'll fire her once the uni-wheeled autos become fashionable.

"I love the circus, Anderson," whispers Mel. "You know, I've always wanted to run away and join the circus? Can you imagine?" Mel throws her head back and chortles.

I honestly can't.

A skinny auto rolls up to the center of the park. *"Howdy passers-by! You are all in for a good show, I guarantee it! You will be amazed, impressed, and, most importantly, entertained!"*

"Can we head into one of those coffee shops?" I ask Mel. "The hula-hoopers are flirting with me." The greenest of the two green autos winks at me, and I tug at Mel's hand. She does little to object.

II.III – Arrival of Upper Paria

We enter the first café we find. Mel stepped off and is ordering herself a café au lait and a vanilla scone at the counter. I still have my bottles of Aqua from the plane. However, I forgot my sunglasses in the autocab. Mel's resting hers in her collar. She's standing by a group of six children, all wearing green baseball caps with a jalapeno pepper on its front.

The café is large but not too large. And, its posh, but not too posh. It is completely average. Every occupant is wearing a t-shirt with a jalapeno pepper on it, I think. It could very well be an odd-looking banana. The reclaimed-wood tables and the LED bulbs remind me of a pub I once visited in the South Side. A little shithole filled with dockworkers and bums. Their beer also tasted like urine and smelled like shit. There are large oil paintings and fake ferns in each of the six corners of the café. An auto stands guard beside each of them, protecting the false foliage from evil.

The corner autos blink their eye-holes as patrons pass their line of sight. Aubergine, then tangerine. The autos all stare at Mel and I as we shut the door behind us.

There's little room for us; every seat seems filled with comfortable regulars. The Barista—a tall man wearing a toupee and thick eyeliner—is serving Mel her scone. It's hard to see over the couple with the novelty jalapeno top-hats, but I think another human is mixing steamed milk into a half-full cup of drip coffee. Gainful employment.

"Madam," a lady standing across from me begins. "Can you please move aside. You're blocking the view!" I think she's speaking to me. She's wearing a lot of makeup, thick-rimmed spectacles, and a shirt that reads Jalapeno-Trio.

I pause, waiting for the lady to correct herself. Wait. I recognize her: Lucy Lovebug, the tantric. In the flesh. Haven't seen her since auto-porn took on...

"Madam?" Our eyes are fixed on one another. Am I wearing too much makeup today?

"Of course. Sorry. I'm—a big fan." I shuffle to my right and pivot around, joining her in watching three autos race

by dragging mangled cadavers across the cobble. Miss Lovebug is smiling; I bet she'd replace the tightropist with an auto, given the chance.

"But where would she go," I would say.

"She would retire—indefinitely, like all of us," the lady would reply.

"Don't you get bored? Life has no merit. No meaning."

"We must give ourselves meaning," she would (probably) insist. "Some don't need others to give us meaning—"

Mel, coffee in hand and scone in mouth, seats herself at a table in the farthest corner of the shop. Excusing myself, I join her, sitting down and breaking off a piece her scone. "How's the coffee?" I question.

"Hot," she mumbles with a full mouth. "What are they looking at?" She points to the lady from before after taking another bite of her scone.

"The tightropist fell to her death. Nothing special." I unscrew one of my bottles of Aqua. Mel props up my head and kisses me, and I taste vanilla and dark roast. Between breaths, my eyes become unfocussed, and I lean back into my chair. I'm taken back to when we were young and new to each other. Our coffee shop dates, our timid kisses. We were whole, in more ways than one.

"Are you," Mel leans in, "enjoying my scone?" She's smiling a rare smile. One that I haven't seen in quite some time.

Looking up into her satisfied eyes, I say, "It's fantastic."

She leans back with a flirtatious grin. "You know what the barista told me?"

"No, what?" I take a large gulp of Aqua. It tastes like tap water.

"He told me," Mel leans I again, "that Heaven is up."

"Up?"

Mel chortles, "Odd, right? Where else would Heaven be? I asked if the Lord was there too. He——" Mel stops to clear her throat. "He said that there's no such thing as a Lord. But, there's such a thing as Heaven."

Mel finishes her scone and coffee, licking every drop from the mug's rim. She moans, satisfied, before leaning back and lightly patting her belly. We lock eyes. God, she's beautiful. I often forget that. And, it's not her fault she's sleeping all the time (what else is there to do?). Her eyes are bright and wide; her lips are thick but not too-thick; her hair resembles a collection of neatly-tangled black wires, disorganized but strangely attractive. All that's missing is her personality. But, that's not her fault. If it were...

"Anderson?" Mel prods my face with a used napkin.

"Sorry. Spaced out, again. Did you say something?" I straighten up and stare into her eyes. Beautiful.

"Should we take a stroll atop the border wall? They say you can see Conparia on a good day. Oh, I'd kill for a picture atop the wall. Francine would turn pink from the envy," she says, picking at her nails, which are painted neon red.

Conparia, like all neighboring countries, are a part of a non-visibility pact: a long and boring document, amounting to "out of sight, out of mind." We don't see countries like Yeakoon and Recrumb, and they don't try to take our Aqua. Formally feigning friendship.

"I'm actually feeling a bit under the weather," I lie. Unfortunately, I've ruined my own mood by thinking about Conomarcian politics. I wonder if Conparia knows that we've automated our busy-work? "A headache; my temples are throbbing. Can we just stay here a while longer? Tell me," I have no idea what to say to Mel, "about the barista."

"We're all a little odd." Mel turns towards the barista. "He's just openly odd. That's no crime. Maybe he's religious."

I'm trying to look a patron in the eyes. Anything. I need to take my mind off this country, enjoy this vacation, get my government's money's worth.

"Is that one of ours?" asks the (much-younger-in-my-dreams) Lucy Lovebug. "Over there." She's pointing out the technoglass window, excited, ready for a show.

A nonautoheli is hovering in front of the shop window. Its doors slide open revealing four women in miscellaneous

attire. Rebels. Or terrorists. They hop onto the cobble, rifles in hand, metal cap on head, balaclavas obfuscating their face. They start tying up the troubadours and throwing them over their backs, like aliens abducting livestock. Not ten seconds pass before two beefy autos dragging red whips appear, positioning themselves between the coffee shop windows and the rebels. They are ready to blast off.

Another nonautoheli lands across the street, in the park. The circus folk scatter, happy patrons begin to weep, and the hula-hooping autos shut down. The nonautoheli's blades contact the tightropist, shredding her into a thin mist. Gore reaches the coffee shop windows.

Most patrons in the coffee shop have begun retreating towards us. Closer to the back of the building. Some, however, press their faces against the technoglass to watch the battle unfold.

The rebels begin firing at the autos. While hit many times, the autos remain still, revving their motors and flashing their red eye-holes. Some bullets contact the technoglass, but they do nothing. After some time, the autos raise their red whips and lash them forward. One contacts a rebel's face, causing her skin to char, igniting her hair and forcing a scream from her melty mouth. Reduced to a puddle. Another whip wraps around a rebel's knee. It explodes, and chunks of meat tint the window the shade of Mel's nail polish. There is a white flash before a beautiful sunset appears.

Mel sits up, baffled by the tactics the unemployed employed. Vicious. The government must've cut off their survival cheques.

The windows pulse with the gunfire's beat; the floors shake. Then, a crash bang wallop. The coffee shop windows shatter into a poof of dust. Those standing closest to the window are now coated with glass and blood—a collaborative cocktail.

Mel and I are safe. The glass didn't reach us, stopping two tables short, reducing Lucy Lovebug to a pulpy mess. A shame: I loved her earlier work.

The boy barista rallies the shop's survivors. "Out the back. There's an alleyway leading to the bank." Following us, the barista rounds up any stragglers, pushing through the coffee shop's tiny rear door. But, he stops. Only for a moment, and looks out the window. Now, he's afraid, his face is mutating from a confident scowl to a frightened frown. He grabs a non-micropistol from behind the counter.

Mel and I reach the alleyway last, despite being closest to the door.

The barista places the non-micropistol in his mouth and seals us himself in the coffee shop.

The alleyway is dark and filled with detritus: garbage bags, folded-up cardboard boxes, plastic Aqua cases. This month's flavor is Oceania. I count seven people, myself and Mel included. Some are covered in blood and coffee. Others are spotless, such as myself and Mel. That's not entirely true: Mel spilled a single drop of dark roast on her beige blouse.

Something is approaching us. A navy-blue, eye-hole-bearing trash can. A policeman-auto patrolling nearby must've seen us.

"Fine patrons, I will escort you to safety. There is a bank two blocks up from here. We'll be safe there: Peace Corps has turned it into an emergency relay station." The auto's eye-holes transition to a brave yellow. Our automated savior. We scurry out the mouth of the alleyway and onto the streets, now coated in a layer of rebel bodies and wheels. I can see a humble few rays of sun poking through the low-rises, shining onto the deceased autos and disabled rebels.

Suddenly, total darkness. Mel's face drops a foot, her cheeks landing on her knees. If she had a non-micropistol, she'd reach for it, for above us soars Upper Paria—the rebel mothership.

In an act of terror, the rebels have stolen the sky.

Upper Paria resembles a frisbee in shape, monstrous in size. A vessel designed to be both feared and admired by onlookers. Once a Peace Corps party ship, the vessel now serves as a rebel paradise: a city in the sky. No one knows what goes on up there (torture? raves?) There are supposed to be tenements

and office buildings atop that thing. A dream for someone yearning for work; a Hell for those swimming in survival cheque money, enjoying their life-long vacation.

A sultry sound comes from Upper Paria's loudspeakers which are mounted around the vessel's frame: *"Coming home from work one day, a little gal wished away. The troubles of the working class, reducing our spoils to mere gas. She, named Amelia, abolished society. Leaving behind an abundance of enmity. Earn your life, my dearest citizens. Come aboard, and provide yourself significance."*

The poem's beauty reduces Mel to tears.

A flash blinds me. Hot white. Then, my eyes refocus, and I can see a squad of rebel paratroopers descending from their mothership. Many holding nets. Others, grasping at megaphones. All looking like trick-or-treaters; all repeating the ship's poetic chant: "Earn your life. Come aboard."

Mel whispers, "We can't let them catch us," under her breath. The passion—the goddamn passion—has returned to her. Her eyes are practically popping out of her head. Headstrong, excited for something to do.

I grab Mel's wrist, but she swats me away.

"Come." Mel flips her pink sunglasses over her eyes and starts crawling onto the cobble, hiding behind stopped cars and blending in with the bodies. She looks around for some time before gesturing for me to follow. Directing me through the streets, away from the park and towards the airport, we crawl away from the coffee shop.

The streets look different than before. The cobble in the street has been ripped apart by the red whips and explosives. Rebel bodies occupy my line of sight. I can hear some screaming in the distance, begging, pleading for any amount of mercy: "Don't make me work." The East Side finally looks like the war zone we were told it would be.

"Unhand me! I'm on vacation," cries a lady. She is caught in a net, being lifted to Upper Paria by means of jetpack. Rebel jetliners: nowhere to go but up.

"Earn your life. Come aboard," mumbles the jetliner. He's wearing a tight green onesie with Upper Paria's chant written along its chest.

Mel's trips while trying to hop a curb. Letting go of my hand, she turns and tumbles to the floor. Her face slams into the cobble which causes her to yelp and yap. Her beautiful eyes, now reduced to tears and bruises. Her morale, tattered. I wouldn't blame her if she fell asleep, as there's nothing more for her to do. No more work to be done. In an instant, she is back on vacation. We are surrounded, just like before, only different.

II.IV – Camp Alexander

Camp Alexander looks fuller than is allowed. There are tents everywhere, clustered together like marshmallows in a bag, overflowing on top of one another. The camp itself is the size of a football field. There is a tall, electrocuted (I'm not sure about that, but I refuse to investigate further) metal fence encasing the camp, colored neon orange, with a single door. This door connects to the central city district of Upper Paria. Where the rebels work.

A group of rebel officers are approaching our tent cluster. "Look alive, retirees," screams a rebel officer. She is wearing a crotchless beige jumpsuit with a patch on her arm that reads: *Live to Work and Work to Live*. A mirror image of Mel from before the Overtaking.

"What was that?" I ask the officer, unsure if she said "retiree" or "refugee."

The officer strikes me in the chest with her rifle. She grabs the collar of my refugee (retiree?) uniform and spits into my mouth. The officer drops me to the floor and kicks me twice in the chest before dismissing herself, disappearing into the crowd.

Another officer arrives, stares at me for a moment, then begins: "We're processing your papers. Upper Paria needs laborers, and Yeakoon needs sweater vests——"

It has been, according to Mel, twenty-five days since our capture. The first few were spent holed up in a kitchenette-sized waiting room. Another few were spent sitting in tents, being fed decent food and unbranded water (non-Aqua, as Mel calls it).

Mel tucks her face into her jumpsuit sleeve, wiping her nose. "Don't worry, Anderson. The Corps will arrive any day now. Then, we'll finish what we started. We'll walk along the border wall; stroll through the East Side parks; sip coffee from a café. Any day now." Her nose is leaking a stringy-kind of snot. The kind a child gets when they've had their toy taken away. As scared as she is, I'm sure forced labor will be good for us. It'll give us something to do all day.

“Think, Mel. Is this really such a bad thing?” I turn away from Mel. “It’d fill our day—give us something to work on. With our hands, you know? Like a hobby, but different.” I am now facing a group of pre-teens engaging in some vile sex act. Or, medical procedure. I’m not sure.

Mel stops crying, forcibly turns my head to face hers, and stares into my eyes. “Amelia,” Mel whispers, “is coming for me. She is coming for all of us, don’t you get it? The Peace Corps are arriving any day now. I won’t be a part of their working class, Anderson.” Mel lets go of my collar and steps back, trembling. “Any——”

“All you do is sleep.”

Mel takes a while before answering, “What?”

“I said it. All you do is sleep, Mel. All day. All the time. In bed, on the couch, after your walk, in line at the market.”

“Where is this coming from, Anderson?”

I should keep my mouth shut. “You used to have moxie—vigor. An abundance of stamina and self worth. Now look at you.” Shut up, Anderson. “You’re a baby. A tall baby, being fed survival cheques and sleeping away your life.” You moron.

“I’m retired, Anderson. And, so are you.”

“Retired doesn’t mean dead.” Shut the fuck up. Just, shut it. “I’m positive dead people do more than you, too. Why haven’t you picked up a hobby, huh? Huh, Mel? Write a book; read a book; take up knitting. Jesus, Mel, anything.”

Mel’s face turns pale, and she covers her mouth as if surprised by the open secret. Taboo, and uncool. Nobody ever talks about hobbies. Hobbies lead to side-businesses which lead to work. Which lead to rebellion. Only rebels mention hobbies.

Mel grabs hold of a tent for stability, her face now colorless and meek. Her lips are trembling; she can’t say what she wants to say. And, it’s hurting her.

“Re—rebel. Anderson, you’re a rebel, aren’t you?” Mel looks sick.

“Give it a rest, Melissa,” I calm myself down. “Try. Please try, Mel, to remember life before the Overtaking. You set

your own hours. Getting up early, you went to a job you found enjoyable. You earned a living. Then, you came home to put that living to use." I take a long breath. "That, compared to sleep."

I've never seen Mel so ill. Disgusted. Or, confused. She dries her tears with her sleeve once more, careful not to press too hard. She steps forward before pivoting on her heels and walking away, disappearing into the crowd of refugees-retirees and rebels. In a moment as quick as the argument itself, Mel was gone.

Eighty days. No one will tell me the time. I think I'm getting stir crazy, despite living outside. They've been processing our papers for weeks now. No end. An inquiry gets you a kick in the chest. And, I wouldn't dare sneak off the camp. Mel hasn't returned, and I don't know what to think about it. Regardless, this is getting ridiculous: I need to leave the compound, get off Upper Paria. I'm shuffling around in the tent, trying to get my shoes. I bump into a pile of Mel's clothes, and they fall to the floor. Then, I slam into the wall of the tent. I finally manage to get my refugee-retiree shoes on. Like the jumpsuits they make us wear, these shoes are painted neon orange and are two-sizes too big. Unzipping the tent, I step out into the world.

The tent is no taller than myself. There are people everywhere I look, filling every corner of the camp. Most are holding one another, tearing up, but never crying. Crying is not permitted atop Upper Paria (though I have caught many officers weeping, begging for a return to the mainland). Everyone is stir crazy; everyone wants to do something, which I find strange. None of us felt this way down below. Why now?

There are officers making rounds about the camp in pairs, the tops of their heads blend in with the crowd. In the distance, a cluster of refugees-retirees are gathering. There are two officers approaching me in the opposite direction. I'm cornered.

"You there," one officer yells. "Yes you, Orange Jumpsuit."

"I'm sorry." I stare into the officer's eyes. I need to remember to do this, since she is wearing a nipple-less jumpsuit. "Are you talking to me?" I say with some caution.

The two officers now have me pinned up against my tent. One is holding an engraved rifle, another is brandishing a slim switchblade with *Traitor Detector* etched into its blade.

"State your name."

"Anderson Andy."

The gun-bearing officer's eyes are piercing mine, her eyes red from sleeplessness (or crying).

"Why were you standing out here by yourself?" asks the knife-bearing officer. He moves his switchblade closer to my neck. Detecting traitors? "Were you taking in the glorious sights? Oh, maybe you were keeping to yourself, like the rest of 'em." The officer's breath smells like urine. "You know, Mister——"

"Andy."

"Right. You know, Mister Andy, you look to be one who sympathises with the group. With our cause. Am I correct?"

"I'm no traitor," I say jokingly. "I'm just taking in the sights. Like you said." I can feel my thighs and torso becoming drenched with sweat. Everything I say seems wrong. But, if I tell them I'm a work-loving rebel, I'll become just that: a rebel.

I don't want to be a rebel. I want to be Anderson Andy.

I also don't want to meet the business-end of that switchblade.

The gun-bearing officer places her scraggly face against my ear and whispers, "What sights?"

I'm frozen. The officer froze me with her whisper.

"Huh? Mister Andy?" The officers shoot one another queer looks. "Well, how about *we* show you to Camp Alexander's main attraction? My friend here," the gun-bearing officer begins, "isn't convinced you're willing to work."

"That's right, Mister Andy. I think you're full of shit."

"Who doesn't like work," I say, accidentally producing a sarcastic tone. What is the matter with me?

“Oh,” both officers say. Now they both look suspicious.

“Let’s take a walk, Mister Andy. We’ll show you the way out, should you decide work just isn’t for you.”

I wipe my brow with my sleeve, “Okay.”

I am being formally escorted to (what I assume is) Traitor’s Hole: the place where rebel-rebels go. A door out of this place. From what I understand, the Hole is just that: a large hole, cut out of the ground. If thrown through, you simply leave Upper Paria. Maybe you land in Conomarco with Amelia and her Corps. Or, maybe you end up in the South Side sea with that weirdo Bill-eh Boatman. It varies. And, now I’m being formally escorted to it.

The officers—one behind me and one in front of me—cut through the torrent of refugees, shoving them back with a deliberate use of force. We’re passing two children who are laying on the floor, covered in shit and piss. Bored, literally, to death. What were they doing in Conomarco? How did they survive down below? A mother is pinning down her children, father preparing to end their spawn’s suffering. Nearby, just to my left, two young girls stand huddled together. Behind them, two boys do the same.

I can’t get it out of my mind: what were these people doing before they were abducted? Camp Alexander is a mirror-fucking-image of Conomarco. Just smaller. Is that it? Size? These people are dropping dead at the mere mention of work (and don’t get me started on hobbies).

I’m forgetting myself.

What’s different now? I want to scream out: “What the fuck is going on?” Is this stir crazy? Am I going stir crazy? I want a job. Give me a job, damnit. Just don’t call me a rebel. *They* abduct people and force them to live in camps for weeks. Surely the price of an honest day’s work isn’t...

The officers stop moving.

Traitor’s Hole is as expected: a large hole carved into Upper Paria’s metal floor, bottomless and offensive. It’s about two meters in diameter. It has no guard rail and no signage

announcing the Hole's existence. It just sits here. I imagine many have fallen through by accident. I also imagine many have already jumped through willingly. Apparently, joining the working-class rivals torture.

"Look," begins the gun-bearing officer, "at the sights. Do they please you, Mister Andy? I do believe this is the finest hole we have ever created. Nice and round, huh? Admire the craftsmanship; peruse the view below; take in the screams of Mister Johnathan Jonas——"

The knife-bearing officer is grappling with a jumpsuit-wearing man with a bag over his head. The bag reads: *Traitor*, and the officer's switchblade is coated in blood. Mister Jonas is not squirming, not even screaming. He is completely calm, at peace.

"Mister Jonas here says he refuses to work. He wants a vacation. Did you hear that?" asks the knife-bearing officer, laughing. Mister Jonas is pushed through *Traitor's Hole*. Much to the pleasure of the gun-bearing officer, Johnathan Jonas wailed as he left Upper Paria.

The knife-bearing officer turns to face me, "This, Mister Andy, is the fate of a retiree."

I must be coated in a layer of sweat. I bet it's windy down there. Beneath Upper Paria.

"He's positively speechless. He must've had quite the show. Say, why don't you move your tent here, Mister Andy?" asks the gun-bearing officer. No. Demanding it. That way, you can——"

"No, I'm fine——"

"I wasn't finished, Mister Andy." The knife-bearing officer slams his foot on the metal ground, palming his bloodied switchblade. "Move your tent here, Mister Andy, so that you can enjoy the sultry sounds and sublime sights this fine Hole has to offer. We'll make sure of that." A punctuating grin.

II.V – Opportunity for Revolution

I'm torn: I want to work, but I can't stay in the one place on earth which hosts meaningful job opportunities. I won't be a barista in an East Side coffee shop—I have a diploma. Not that diplomas carry any meaning anymore.

"Please, oh God in Heaven..."

"This *is* Heaven."

There is an officer (maybe two, I'd rather not leave my tent to confirm) disposing of another refugee-retiree unwilling to accept a worker's life. It's been one hundred and two days since my capture, and I'm desperate. I can hear a pair of footsteps. Three, maybe four pairs of boots. Four. And, the traitor stopped his wailing. Another thrown? I'm not sure. I'm never sure anymore.

Are the footsteps waiting for me? I'm trying to keep my eyes shut, my head resting on a folded-up jacket. Just, leave. Go about your business (hey, maybe get our papers in order). Could I stomach working next to my former captor? My head is throbbing. I miss the late Lucy Lovebug.

Boots come, and boots go. Different shoes, maybe. The world around me is made up of sound. "Sultry sounds," just like the officer said. If this is Heaven, then South Side seawater is drinkable.

There's a ruffle outside my tent. "You in there?" whispers a voice much kinder than any officer's. "Yes you. I know you can hear me. Don't say anything, don't even move a muscle or they'll know we're talking. And, we can't have that."

"Wh—who——"

"Hush. You miss the retired life? Knock once for yes, twice for no." The voice continues after hearing two honest knocks. "Fine. That's fine. So, you want to stay up here? Atop this mothership?"

Two knocks.

"Hate the retired life. Hate the working life. You're hard to please. So, what *do* you want? You can speak now."

Taking my time, enunciating every word, "I want to leave."

"Good enough for me." The voice unzips my tent, only a little, just enough to slide an envelope in through the slit.

Footsteps. Fresh ones. The voice leaves, and I scurry over to the envelope. It's brow-ish, and the print along its face reads: Friend.

Choose Your Own Revolution

Option 1)

You hate retired life—can't stand the free time. Mourn the lack of any meaningful connection to society. You're sick of being told "hobbies are selfish" and "working is selfless." You want a purpose.

Option 2)

You might like work (it doesn't matter to you), but you get air-sick easily. A job means nothing to you if you can't return home after a day's work without vomiting onto your countertop.

I turn the page over. The letter is written on a used Vousa shipping label. Several barrels of South Side oil costing "several beds and pillows."

Your chosen option doesn't matter. Not in the end. There are eighty-five generals atop Upper Paria. Below this paragraph, you'll find a list. The names of all eighty-five generals, along with their last-known location. Make one disappear, cross their name off the list, and pass it along. If you see a general out-and-about, update their location on the list. If a new general is discovered, add their name to the list. Easy. The less generals there are, the easier it will be to commandeer this ship. We'll land it someplace else. Someplace free.

There are only five names left. Janice, Martha, Rita, Johnathan, and Melisandre. Beside these names, their last-known whereabouts. Paria Square, Uptown Rises, Lowtown Scrapers, Inner Square, and Slums, respectively.

Rushing to the tent's opening, I peer outside: nobody. I sit back down and zip-up the tent. I'll just slip this into someone else's tent—someone who looks too uncomfortable for their own good. Someone foolish enough to murder for a chance to be free. For the chance to define your own objective. To give yourself a reason to be alive. Do something, anything, so that one day, we can wake up and find our own way through life. Some could retire, others may work. Some might do both. Infinite options. Limitless potential. Life defined by your own rules.

Shit. I've just convinced myself.

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She's pacing around her room, I think. She looks to be thirty. Maybe forty. I hope she's not strong; I haven't eaten anything in ages. Shit, she's looking my way. No. No not at all. False alarm. I suppose it wouldn't matter if she were. I am peering over a cluster of tents half a kilometer away from the general's window. The letter was accurate enough: Rita lives in a small flat in the Lowtown Scrapers, eye-distance away from Traitor's Hole. Too convenient. She's wearing the same boots and cap that most officers wear, so I'm confident that the woman I'm stalking is Rita. A general at the least.

"Traitors! How dare you...unhand me!"

"Three steps forward. Slight drop."

A man starts wailing and crying for help. His sounds, slowly fading into the distance.

"Are we done for today," a voice asks.

"Three more. Then, Rita's holding an HR meeting.

Heh, remember those? God, I'd kill for one of Hannah's brownies," replied a different, softer voice.

"Hannah from HR, Hannah from corporate, or Hannah your wife?"

"Corporate——"

The voices fade as their sources leave the Hole.

I have an incredible view of Rita's bay window from behind some tents. Tents which, unfortunately, neighbor the Hole.

Turning back towards the Lowtown Scrapers, I can see that the general is gathering her things: purse, spectacles, shoes. I think she's getting ready to leave.

I stumble around a tent, trailing her from afar, as she steps onto the sidewalk and into the street. While Upper Paria's livable districts contain roads, I've yet to see a car. She's making her way to the border between the refugee tents and the Lowtown Scrapers. The electrified barrier protects us from the modern-day rebel.

I look around again, ensuring no stray rebel can catch me "taking in the sights." In fact, the only other sight they could show me would be the vessel's underside. More reason *not* to get caught.

I turn back. Rita reached the outskirts of Camp Alexander. She is wearing a baggy shirt which reads: *Now Hiring*. I'm sweating through my refugee-retiree jumpsuit, as I try to find a quiet place to jump her. Shit. It looks like she's being followed by two bodyguards: one is a large boy wearing a leather gimp suit, and the other is wearing nothing at all, his body painted red and gold. I was about to buy that very same gimp suit months ago from the local thrift store.

The bodyguards are approaching the Hole. "Now," says the gimp, "who's next? How about this one? She seems traitorous." He grabs a young girl by the wrists and pulls her to the ground below him. "Do you like work, darling? Or, would you much rather spend the rest of your days vacationing in the East Side?"

It's hard to see them, but the girl mumbles something, and Rita nods dismissively.

"Fine," replies the gimp. He grabs the girl's feet, the nudist grabs her hands, and the bodyguards lift the girl up over the Hole. The gimp quickly releases her wrists, but the nudist is still clinging to the girl's feet. The traitor's head slams into the Hole's rim with an unsatisfying thud. The girl is now half-in-the-Hole and completely weeping.

I move myself closer to the Hole, careful not to step on anything loud.

"Let her loose," demands the gimp. He peers over at Rita.

"Right." The nudist lets go of the girl's feet, and she leaves Camp Alexander.

I can smell seawater: that poor girl must've landed in the South Side sea.

I continue inching closer to the trio, compromising with environment.

As the gimp scans the vicinity he notices something sticking out of a tent. A tiny boy who looks to be not more than fifteen.

"Please, sir. I've got some difficulty moving my legs. I like working. Honest, I do."

"A cripple? Work? This isn't some accessibility wonderland, little boy."

"What should we do with 'em? He *can't* work. The boy would just eat up resources," says the nudist with a scowl.

"You're not as independent as your resume said you were, Jerry. Toss the kid," proclaims the familiar-sounding officer. "And, stop asking me what to do with cripples. Figure it out."

The boy begins to cry. He clutches at his tent, clawing at it like a rat being pulled out of a hole. The gimp's holding the boy's legs, but the kid's grip is impressive. The officer gives up, and the general steps forward.

I begin to inch my way towards the general, minding the gaps between the tents.

The general dismisses her bodyguards and walks up to the boy. She's out in the open. Alone. What are the chances?

The general gets down on one knee, her bodyguards now out of sight. They're several tents away; not a concern. "I used to live down there," the general begins. "I saw——"

The boy's tears become thicker, more frequent. His cries, cacophonous and sharp.

"Look at me, little man. This is the face of a broken population." Rita points to herself. "Conomarco is a no-man's-

land. An abundance of free time with nothing to earn. We're doing something about it. But, we can't support the lame. This is the society the working-class need. Desire. Deserve, damnit. The chance to earn your life. I see that now. I understand what needs to be done to preserve this Heaven."

"Let me earn—please—let me earn my life——"

If I don't do something now, I'd regret it for the rest of my days. She's completely exposed. I straighten my back, dig my toes into the floor, and begin running towards the general. Every step I take, the clearer she becomes. Step after long-step. Thump after shocking-thump. The general's appearance is clear to me now: her wide eyes, her sporadic-but-organized dark hair which clings to her pink sunglasses. And, a face that screams "I have tons of energy!" My lord, she's beautiful.

The general turns to look at me: I must've been very convincing, some-eighty days earlier.

I pounce onto the general, covering her mouth with my elbow. She's struggling. Spazzing in all directions, trying to shoo me off. This is a chance to pave my own way. A future built by me. Purposeful, and completely mine. I need to be a part of the revolution.

I start sliding the general into the Hole, dragging her along the floor, as she bites my elbow. I barely felt it. I reach for her thighs, as she tries to grab hold of something by her sides. It's too late: much of her torso is already hanging off the Hole's rim. A final glare, and a parting smile. I release my grip on her legs.

I turn to see the gimp plowing through a cluster of tents. He's running straight for me, stomping on sleeping refugees-retirees and piles of dirty clothing. He even steps on the lame boy's legs, but he doesn't seem to notice. The bodyguard grabs a hold of my collar, but his momentum is too great. He trips and drags both of us through the Hole. He lets go of my collar and starts screaming, clutching at the empty space around him. Trying, as best he can, to claw his way back up to his soaring sanctuary.

There are only four generals left atop Upper Paria. Soon, there will be none, and people will be given free reign over

their lives. Freedom, hard fought, and a vacation well earned.
From up here, the sea looks fantastic.

III – Formerly, Amelia

III.I – Epilogue

Amelia hung herself on the night of the anniversary of the Peaceful Overtaking. Her plans foiled by her own doing. A country without a leader, and a boot without a shoelace. There she dangled, naked from the waste down, one foot shielded from the elements, distorting the wood plank which sits just above her office desk. Two autos discovered her earlier that evening. The larger of the two autos cut her down and spread her flat atop her shag carpet. Both autos' eye-holes turned a shade of indigo. Their mother was dead. Gone, without saying so much as a goodbye.

Two police-autos were arriving by elevator. Ding dong, and the elevator door slid open revealing two identical autos with blue eye-holes.

Outside, people are gathering by the hundreds, celebrating the anniversary of their obsolescence. The Peaceful Overtaking. Peace Corps visited every school, every store, every restaurant, every police depot. She automated her country. It doesn't take much to convince the tired to stop working, offering to pay them in exchange for nothing at all. The result: a shot economy and the emergence of a rebel movement in the sky. Then, on the night of the anniversary of that very event, Amelia Ameliora hung herself for some reason.

It doesn't do anyone any good talking about why, but some say it was caused by a broken heart.

IV – Author’s Notes

IV.I – Venez Vous

Venez Vous follows Henry & Ian as they struggle to find themselves in a world that they find utterly unappealing. When I initially wrote it I wanted to display the outcome of abandoning your ship at the slightest hint of difficulty, how two grown men repudiate their former (well developed, might I add) lives at the first encounter of any real struggle. They are fired, and people are fired all the time. Ian loses his companion, but people lose their companions all the time. These two men decide that their lives are no longer worth much at all because of some slights to their livelihoods. That's no way to live a life—not in my opinion. Acts like these are never the right ones: you shouldn't uplift your life when the universe deals you a bad hand.

That's just irresponsible.

Instead, you need to suck it up and live your life. They flee their past, taking to the sea in search for meaning or purpose. They are, of course, met with the harsh reality of the universe when the rigmasters arrive and subsequently sink their oil rig.

Vousa always symbolized the duo's haven: an environment with which they can preserve some semblance of what they once had. If I were to write this now, I'd have given them roles like that of their roles on the mainland. Instead, the duo simply become "rigmasters" in the most literal sense of the word. Their jobs on this rig are not really jobs, just like their lives after fleeing the mainland are not really lives. They are living in a fantasy world where their past cannot dare to venture. Having "nothing" is met with a lifestyle of "nothing." From the moment they board the microboat, Henry & Ian are dead.

It always feels like the right thing to do, fleeing from a troubled environment. Maybe your spouse left you; maybe your dog died; maybe your house burned down. Wouldn't a fresh start be great? How comforting would it be to simply ignore what has just happened to you in favor of hitting the reset button? Your past will always leave its mark on you, and in the case of Henry & Ian, their past (the mainland, and its

inhabitants) literally caught up with them and exacted its revenge.

Tim, the defiant auto, symbolizes the rational part of the duo's mind—the part that wishes to return to the mainland to recoup their losses. Tim plays the role of the angel on the duo's shoulders, willing to do anything to fix this mess they've gotten themselves into, dedicated to mending their fuck-up. Tim dies along with the duo as Vousa sinks into the South Side sea. He cannot exist without the duo, yet they, should they dare acknowledge Tim as a defiant entity, could eliminate him, suffocating that little angel on their shoulders.

They don't do this.

As mentioned prior, the rigmasters—primarily Mister Charles—symbolizes the duo's past catching up with them. They represent both the mainland and the sea: their past and their present, living in harmony. Had the duo decided to maintain mainland contacts, their futures could've been as fruitful as the rigmasters', for they understood that you can never really suppress your past, even though many think otherwise.

IV.II – Revolutionary’s Guide

Revolutionary’s guide directly follows the events of Venez Vous, with Mel & Anderson travelling across the country on vacation. They are captured by “rebels,” and they both meet an unfortunate fate, but not because they died.

Anderson’s firmly-held contempt with his lover Mel dominates his thoughts. He was written in the first-person for the reader to notice that most of his thoughts on his beloved revolve around how lazy she has become. The woman he fell for, dimmed with the passing of time. In fact, I did my best to allude to the fact that Mel didn’t “retire” like the rest of the population, but rather lost interest in the world around her.

Anderson, however, has also become bored with his environment, but passes the time by insulting his lover in his mind. I’ve been guilty of doing the very same thing on occasion, and it does nobody any good.

Mel rediscovers the enjoyment of task-fulfilment when she becomes a “rebel.” Her arc represents the natural human desire for purpose, no matter the specifics. It doesn’t matter *what* you’re doing so long as you’re doing it—anything. I’ve found myself down a depressive pit when I’ve got nothing going on. I crave work, even if I complain while doing it.

In asking for feedback on the ending of this story, I found very few people realized that the “rebel” Anderson pushed through the Hole was Mel (the pink sunglasses were the giveaway). In this final scene, Anderson finally confronts Mel and vents his frustrations with her, leading to her and his death. Anderson got caught up in a mixture of aggressive thoughts on Mel and in the lack of activity he was partaking in atop Upper Paria. Both emotions overwhelmed him, causing him to reach for extreme measures. Granted, he didn’t know that Mel was the leader he was meant to eliminate, but he didn’t flinch at the realization. This was fine. This was what he wanted all along. To eliminate his past; to cut off the dead weight he considered strapped to his leg; to suppress the one he loved but lost.

IV.III – Formerly, Amelia

This final small chapter was met with a lot of frustration from the people I questioned. First, Amelia was a character that was only alluded to in passing, and never fully fleshed out. Killing her yielded no emotional response from the reader, which was intentional. Second, the reason for her death was cryptic. “Broken heart?” What a load of garbage.

To address the first point, Amelia was never meant to be a character who was fleshed out in any capacity. Amelia represented the idyllic life the Conomarcans lead. From the small snippets littered throughout the book, Amelia was said to have fundamentally changed the country. Autos were installed, and jobs were automated. A paradise where nobody needed to work if they didn’t want to. Existence devoid of all purpose, except that which was self-imposed. The idea of “defining your own purpose” is scary to lots: we all want to pretend we’re here for a reason. I don’t think that’s right. I believe that we’re not here for any reason, and that forces us to define what it means to exist. What makes us get out of bed in the morning? Is it the knowledge that some God will accept us into his sanctuary? Or, is it the purist of proficiency in a given field? Amelia was that purpose to the reader. She represented the idea that nobody needed to work unless they found it interesting, and that a life automated is a life open to interpretation. Her death, following the events of both short stories, indicates a cultural shift in the country. People no longer want autonomy provided by automaton. Some might, but not nearly enough to merit Amelia’s existence anymore.

As for a broken heart, well that’s not for me to explain. A broken country; a tattered worldview; a distraught populous. Watching the project—the one you built in your spare time—fade to obscurity will break anybody’s heart. I know it broke hers...