

*“A thrush was feeding on a myrtle-tree and did not move from it because its berries were so delicious. A Fowler observed her staying so long in one spot, and having well bird-limed his reeds, caught her. The Thrush, being at the point of death, exclaimed, ‘O foolish creature that I am! For the sake of a little pleasant food I have deprived myself of my life.’”*

- *“The Thrush and the Fowler”*, *Aesop’s Fables*, trans. George Fyler Townsend (1887)

#

“Truth is a managed resource, and I am its steward.”

The pledge to start the monthly all-hands droned through the atrium. It reminded David of the omnipresent air conditioning: steady, automatic, and operating at low-energy. The audience was already sneaking glances at whatever might be more of a dopamine draw before they were seated.

The agenda was the usual polite clapping for tenure milestones, process updates, and tepid pep-rally.

*“...sentiment volatility down 12% year-over-year...”*

The Bureau of Truth’s Director of Narrative Alignment, over-slick and as passable as HR clip-art come to life, was speaking. Jeter performatively moved about the stage, hitting his marks like he was giving a TED talk. He was saying something about the de-amplification campaign done for the Midwestern heat dome. But you’d be hard pressed to tell this campaign from the half-dozen others running at any given time.

*“...localized anomalies successfully recontextualized as resilience narratives...”*

For Maya, Chris, and David, seated toward the back, it couldn’t be more rote. Maya, who was already vested, must have endured dozens of these meetings. David tried to match her detached aloofness, her effortless indifference, and was failing horribly.

He flicked his smart watch. A chicklet blinked to life, replaced the idle screen. “94% vested” shone in bright letters.

Six more points and the waterfront would be his. No more commute from inland, no more

landlord, no more roommates. He would have his very own house in the Florida Archipelago. The daydream was so vivid he nearly missed the next part of the presentation.

*“...and as we say goodbye to our team headed to the new, New Orleans office, we have some new roles available for the right kind of energetic, enthusiastic game changers...”*

David nudged Chris. “Wait, what’s happening?”

Chris shrugged. “Sounds like some analyst positions are opening up.”

“Really? How quickly do they vest?”

Maya chewed her gum for a beat and regarded them with mock disdain.

“Like it matters. They’d never let you sock puppet types anywhere near Alethia.”

“That’s not,” David said while leaning in and dramatically pausing, “what your mom said last night.”

Chris covered his mouth, squelching his sudden laugh into a coughing fit as best as he could.

The group drew Jeter’s glare. He paused for a second to make it clear he was looking their way, and then resumed his slide with slightly more volume.

“Before we break, I wanted to remind everyone that we’re entering our seasonal period of elevated rain triage. I know some of the old timers might have heard these referred to as ‘hurricanes’ or used the 1-5 scale of the Saffir-Simpson categories. Just remember, these are now considered *terms of terror*. Avoid using in your comms. If you have any questions, please consult the new intranet resource that we’ll link to in today’s recap email.

“Remember, ‘Panic is not a public good -”

David, in unison with the rest of the assembled employees, replied:

*“Calm is contagious.”*

“Thank you, and let’s keep calm out there.”

That evening, David zipped down the marina ramp on an electric ride-share scooter. He was late for Declan's party. Work had run over, and he was now having trouble finding the right mooring among the other stationary vessels.

It was uncomfortably muggy, per usual for Florida's late summer. The afternoon didn't have the courtesy of cooling things off, so David was stuck trying to keep sweat out of his squinting eyes as he scanned for landmarks. This close to the ocean, he could taste the salt at the back of his throat, and smell a faint trace of mildew.

Finally, after more than a few embarrassing dead ends, David caught signal and found his way to the sleek two-story white box on pontoons. It glowed at the end of the dock, LED light strings casting colorful reflections in the canal water.

As David approached, music, punctuated by laughter and whoops, could be heard. And there was Declan, lounging at the end of the gangway. He was with a couple of hangers-on David recognized from previous parties. They sat on either side of the walkway, drinking beers from a cooler between them.

Declan waved and swung a sockless loafer over the barrier from where he had been straddling the rail. His tanned skin gleamed from days spent pretending to sail. He met David with mock disapproval.

"It's Mr. 9-to-5! Bout time! I was starting to think the Bureau had revoked your public privileges."

"Never!" David tugged at where his shirt stuck to his back, and readjusted his fit. "Would've been here sooner, but work's been crazy. You know how it is when the Midwest thinks they have a bit of heat."

Declan handed David a beer, "Ah, the joy of keeping the Karens calm. So chivalrous!"

David gratefully accepted the drink. The condensation had been almost instantaneous, making it slick.

“Well,” Declan grandly gestured, “What do you think of *me casa*? Isn’t she a ‘beaut?’”

David ran his eyes over the entirety of the illuminated craft, all 65-feet of pulsating brightness; a stark contrast to the fading twilight all around them. “I dunno, man. You couldn’t have bought something *bigger*?”

“Bought?” One of the others laughed. “Hell no. Declan doesn’t buy shit.”

“It’s a lease,” Declan clarified. “Ownership’s a liability, man. Shows up on the balance sheets-“

“-and lawsuits-”

Declan swatted the air, as if he was waving away something unpleasant. “I suppose that’s true, too. But like I was trying to say, real wealth is *leverage*.”

The other two in Declan’s orbit chuckled. David nodded, taking a mental note to try and work out what they meant later.

“So, bureau boy, come aboard. I’ll show you around.”

Declan and David crossed the gangway. On board, the crowd was Declan’s usual mix of high and low-brow, a clashing of class and culture. He seemed to do that on purpose; the greater degree of friction, the greater likelihood of free entertainment.

They slowly circulated, Declan making introductions or issuing orders to the handful of wait staff. As the night began to envelop them, the hot air seemed to grow heavier, more oppressive. Somewhere, on the horizon, there was a distant flicker of lightning; a late attempt at relief. But nobody seemed to notice.

They climbed the ladder to the second floor, past the DJ and the makeshift bar. That’s when David noticed a woman by herself toward the stern, set apart in white against the railing. She didn’t look like Declan’s usuals. There were no designer logos, no gaudy influencer techwear; just a simple light cotton summer dress gently animated in what little breeze came off the water. Poised, but not performative.

“Who is *she*?”

Declan turned and looked, his eyes taking a minute to adjust. He then laughed with recognition. “The granola? That’s Lucía, my second cousin. Mom thought I should invite her since she’s home between tours. ‘We’re family’, and all that.”

“Tours?”

“‘Food Without Borders’ or something. Some kind of disaster recovery non-profit. Feed the poor, film the pity reels, make everyone else feel guilty for still drinking imported rum. All moral compass, pointing nowhere.”

Declan looked back at David, who was still staring. “Ahhhh, nah-uh. Not your league, dude. Not even the same game.”

“Uh-huh.” The challenge was made. David reached over and grabbed a pair of bottles from the bar. “I think I’ll go over and introduce myself.”

“Your funeral.”

David winked and sauntered his way as casually as possible to the back of the boat.

Lucía leaned on the railing, thick curls pulled into a loose bunch atop her head. She seemed to be intently looking at something while scrolling on her mobile.

She looked up at his approach.

David nodded and gestured to her device. “Something important?”

“Nothing that can’t be handled by people on-site,” Lucía said, powering off the screen. “I’m doing a poor job of taking a *break*, I suppose.”

“Same. Except my boss calls it ‘field listening’.”

Lucía seemed to smile, despite herself.

“Cold one?” David offered one of the beers. “I’m David, a friend of Declan.”

“Thanks, David. I think I will.”

David handed her a bottle and took a spot next to her. He studied her as she twisted off the top and drank.

“Declan mentioned you do relief work? Is that, like, internationally?”

“Yes, I run field ops, sometimes overseas. But, lately, that has been a lot more stateside than most people realize.”

“Cool. Where were you at last?”

Lucía turned to look out across the water, somewhere in the darkness. She took another drink, giving her response a moment to collect. “Tennessee to Ohio and back. The new tornado alley. Lots of towns there that don’t exist anymore, except on maps.”

“Oh wow,” David said. “But fresh starts for the people there, though, right? Silver linings?”

From somewhere across the water, there was a clap of thunder loud enough to be heard over the DJ’s bass.

Lucía gave David a quizzical look.

“Not really. Mostly grief.”

“I just mean,” David picked at the edge of the bottle’s label, “that kind of thing can be a reset. People are freed up to move somewhere else, somewhere safer.”

The line was smothered in damp silence.

David pivoted. “I think I remember some of what you’re talking about, though. Lots of pull-yourself-up-by-your-bootstraps stories the past couple months came outta that area.”

There was flash of lightening, illuminating the clouds building over the ocean.

“That is certainly one take. What is it that you do, David?”

He leaned in conspiratorially, “I’m with the Bureau.”

“Bureau?” Lucía’s brow furrowed. “As in Bureau of Truth?”

A whoop rose near the DJ; someone popped a cork. The bass started again, with renewed

vigor.

“Yeah. Is that a problem?”

Lucía straightened. “Not for me. I’ll sleep fine tonight. I can’t speak for you, though.”

“Hey - come on. It’s not so bad. In fact, you could say we do the same work-”

Lucía cut in, “Feeding people and filtering them aren’t the same.”

She took a sip while staring right *through* him.

David tried to laugh it off. “We *both* help people. You-“ he said, gestured vaguely, “do what you do. We keep people from stampeding every time it rains.”

“That’s one way to describe propaganda.”

David laughed. “Look, if we hit the siren every time the radar twitches, then shelves empty, freeways jam... I’ve seen it. Sometimes the calmest thing is... not shouting.”

She scoffed.

“You can’t argue that there’s lots of people, here and overseas, looking to capitalize on driving people apart. Disasters-“

Lucía tried to interject, but David kept going.

“-*Disasters* are primed to be piled on and exploited. *Somebody* has to have their hand on the brake.”

“Hand on the brake? Or across the lens?”

Another flash. The LED strings hiccuped. David reached for a response and found nothing.

“I was in Lower Broadway, outside of Nashville, after the F4. The fuel we brought for the hospital generator ran out after 36 hours. We made call after call for help, only to be told that the ‘reported weather anomaly’ didn’t ‘qualify for disbursement’. We were accused of *running counter-Bureau narratives*.”

She exhaled, turning back to eye the horizon.

“When it was clear help wasn’t coming, we moved those who could be moved... but-“

There was thunder. She seemed to soften, slightly.

David waited for the sound to fade.

“That’s... a lot. You really carry it.”

“That’s reality. Most don’t really get much of a choice.”

Lucía remembered her drink, considered it for a moment, and then set it on a nearby table.

A sudden gust blew off the water, pushed to shore by the advancing storm.

“You seem like a bright guy, David. Really. You could do anything. But you choose to tell fairy tales. And people are dying because of it.”

Lucía straightened her dress.

“I’m tired. I’m going to find my friends.”

She brushed past him, her bare shoulder icy against his.

Around David, the music seemed to resume. The storm continued to build over the open water, closer now.

David’s face felt flush.

“I told you, man,” Declan yelled over the crowd, his arm around some new acquaintance, “She’s not gonna go for no Bureau boy.”

David forced a smile back, then turned from the railing and back to reassess the party drinking deeply.

*Analyst, he thought. A Bureau analyst. Let’s see her try to dismiss that.*

#

The analyst break-room coffee wasn’t better, but it came with a perk: instead of cardboard cups, they had real mugs, stamped with the Bureau’s slogan, *CALM IS CONTAGIOUS*.



Steam curled from David's mug as he climbed the stadium seating of the command room - a college lecture hall as if it were built by defense contractors. The lighting was dim. The space was almost entirely lit by the floor-to-ceiling monitors comprising the front wall. It pulsed with blues and reds, trending terms, sentiment analysis broken out by geography, ideology, education, and any of two dozen more demographics summarized in pixel form; the sum total of the world's anxiety abbreviated as light.

Generally, the command center was quiet - the hum of the HVAC indistinguishable from whatever fan noise came from the dozens of computers in the room, the whirl occasionally punctuated by flurries of keyboard assaults.

There were no assigned seats, technically, but people are creatures of habit. Maya was already at her usual spot, along the left edge and about half way to the top. She was staring intently at her space's screen, tapping aggressively - summoning forth modals and then, summarily, dismissing them with a flick.

David slid into the empty seat next to hers, its screen waking when it detected activity.

"Miss me?"

Maya only grunted an acknowledgment, still pursuing something he couldn't see.

David tilted his head toward the front wall. "How's our girl today?"

Maya looked up in irritation. "She's being a drama queen. It's been yellow alerts non-stop."

As soon as he logged in, an alert covered David's screen.

"The f-."

"-see? It's been like this since I started my shift at 5am. It's got all the signs of an economic rumor cascade."

"Gulf side?"

"Uh-huh. Home-grown and running hot."

“Hmmm.” David skimmed the included detail.

“There was a seawall-crack shock clip. I cross-checked the footage. It *is* legit; it’s not doctored. The actual impact, though, is pretty slight. There is flooding in the lower 37th zone, but it’s contained; a localized, not systemic, failure.

“But it *looks* bad, and the clip is breaking containment. It’s that time of year - old axes out again. Alethia keeps readjusting feed weights and dropping chaff. She’s managed to keep it off trending lists so far, but it’s starting to go viral on its own merits.”

“Sentiment acceleration?”

“Look who’s been reading their manual! But yeah, could be big. People love any reason to short archipelago real estate for a quick buck. Hashtags are *#floridaFail*, *#sunkenAssets*, and *#waterSoWet*.”

The reality of what Maya was saying was huge. If the Archipelago looked unstable, insurers would re-price everything by the next morning. Markets would collapse. Panic had bankrupted just as many banks as storms did.

“Hey, is there someone on the seawall video?” Alethia’s algorithm must have tripped over some threshold and started recruiting additional analysts for help. José, down in front, was scanning around the room for confirmation.

“Over here-“

“We’ve got it,” David cut in, “Maya and I are tag-teaming it.”

Maya looked at David, skeptically. “You sure about that, rookie? Confidence index is at 62.5% and falling. We’ll have a sell-off on anything under 50%.”

David winked. “What, you scared?” He turned back to his screen and began launching his script agents; some boilerplate, others requiring brief field entry.

Maya weighed her options, then mockingly crossed herself and addressed José, who was still waiting for confirmation. “Override. I guess we got it. We’ll rope you in if we need it.”

She turned back to David.

“I’d started ID’ing mouthpieces for a credibility challenge. Not a whole lot of influencers active at this hour, but we’ve got a handful of puppets that might apply.”

David’s fingers were now flying. “Is the source dirty?”

“Like I said, bona fides look clean. But something always turns up, if we dig long enough.”

“Do we have time for that?”

“Probably not. There is the usual terms and conditions take down. Something, something public safety. Quick and clean-”

“-T&Cs are too blunt. Looks like a cover-up. The Streisand effect is the opposite of what we want.”

The chyron scrolling across the bottom of David’s screen turned red. A neutral voice addressed the room. “Confidence index is below 60%.”

“Whoa, easy, girl.”

“What’s the play here, rookie?”

David gathered his thoughts for a moment before speaking. He suddenly brightened.

“We can use this, flip it.” David launched a volley of keystrokes, triggering an equal number of new dialogs. “It’s all about perception.”

Maya made a prune face and leaned over to follow along on his screen. “Come again?”

“So right now it is an infrastructure-fail that is playing.” David dismissed a few of the topmost related posts referencing the video, then pointed to the next in the queue, tapping through as Alethia sorted in real-time. “We’ve got climate aura farmers, government trolls, Florida haters...” he rapidly swiped several more items in the carousel, “... a few members of Cirque du Soleil, for some reason-“

“Rookie!”

“How often do they inspect the seawalls?”

“I can find out. Why?”

“We reframe this footage captured of a maintenance test, or a drill. Something deliberate to test disaster response. Proof that the green plan of mangroves and cordgrass work as expected.”

“We’ll need to dummy and backdate some work tickets.”

“Is that a problem?”

“Shouldn’t be. Alethia has access those county systems.” Maya started typing. “And the flooding?”

“Localized, right? We spin it as an unexpected byproduct. Cracking eggs to make an omelet. Invaluable real-world insights that will be used to refine and upgrade the entire system performance.”

Maya returned to her terminal and ran a probability forecast; the trend line stabilized, but not high enough. David, watching over her shoulder, leaned in and tweaked demographic and geopolitical targeting sliders by hand. The projections wavered a moment, then orange coded labels bled to yellow.

Maya leaned back and crossed her arms. David looked at her expectantly.

From behind them, Jeter said, “That’s not bad.”

David nearly jumped out of his seat. During his color-coding, he hadn’t heard Jeter approach.

“The seawall leak, I presume?”

“Forming an approach,” Maya answered, “We’re about to execute.”

“Run it back for me.”

Maya looked expectantly at David and David cleared his throat.

“We supercharge the spread.”

Jeter's eyebrow twitched. "Unconventional."

"We frame it as proof of diligence - routine testing, proactive governance. Push hashtags like 'StressTestSuccess', or 'MakingSafeHappen' and run with whatever pops."

Jeter grunted affirmatively. "Shift the sentiment from panic to civic pride?"

"Exactly! Like 'Look at our proactive resilience'."

Maya joined in. "It's too cute, by a lot. Those tags need a pass or ten through sentiment refactoring. But it might work. The types that might otherwise spread it will back off; they won't want to seem pro-gov. And it will be like catnip for those looking to clown on the climate types."

"We bait a positive spin. It'll be chum in the water."

Jeter stroked his beard for a moment before speaking. "Alethia: projection?"

The manifested voice localized between the three of them. "Projected confidence recovery is 67 percent."

"Okay. Do it. Nobody leaves until we're back over 65%. The markets don't dip when they open tomorrow." Jeter took in the rest of the room for a moment. Finding nothing else amiss, he told David good job before ambling back to the crows nest at the rear of the room.

David beamed.

"Hey! We're not out of the woods yet, *David*." Maya chided, pushing his coffee toward him. "We've got a long day of cleanup ahead of us."

#

It wasn't so much a blue sky as a blue *dome*, trapping the sun and moisture alike to unbearable degree. It was a brilliant sapphire color that couldn't be looked directly.

The dome didn't allow for a single gust of relief. The air couldn't get a breath in under all the intensity. The mangroves sagged under their own weight, their leaves glued together. Further up, a heron stood in the shallows, motionless as a lawn ornament.

The only ripple on the canal's surface was from the autonomous drone, now making its

way toward David with machine precision. David bent over the bodega boat and waved his ID in the air, vaguely over what looked like where its electronics might be housed. The drone, bobbing gently in the canal, beeped an affirmation and the lid slid back, exposing David's order, doubled-bagged.

The package was warm to the touch.

The boat's lid closed and the craft gracefully pivoted in the water, re-orienting itself toward the open end of the inlet before picking up speed.

Was the water higher? He couldn't be sure; David was still getting used to the waterfront here. It was probably just the tides.

He looked around him. As best as David could tell, he and the drone were the only moving things in the entire development. He exhaled in frustration. The entire damn region was in hysterics. He had watched, forlornly, as several of his neighbors boarded up their windows and fled before he could properly introduce himself. He'd have to have a conversation about the dangers of disinformation and the resulting panic cycles.

He'd role-played a half dozen Bureau storm drills *this week alone*. This "event" was trending strongly to just another coastal evacuation hype cycles; a bunch of data spikes that would be smoothed out in the following days as cooler heads prevailed.

David was surprised to vividly remember the last time he saw his mother. He was suddenly a teen again, watching her leave with other volunteers to shore up a sandbag levee.

David's watch chirped, pulling him from the memory. He'd configured Alethia to provide regular confidence level updates. Checking his wrist, he saw the probability for a positive outcome it was still holding above 50%; not great, but still no reason for panic, either.

He turned and retraced his path to his new house. It was a small, but tidy, single-story coastal contemporary. Best of all, it was right along the water, like he had always wanted.

The door unlocked satisfyingly as he approached.

Inside, he kicked off his sandals by the door and crossed the terrazzo floor to the kitchen. After the Satan's snow globe outside, the cool tile of the kitchen on his feet was heavenly. There were a couple items already on the island; the owner papers for achieving 100% vestment, with "Congratulations on achieving coastal residency!" headlining the stack. There was a new company credit card with its documentation. The welcome pack even had a 'CALM IS CONTAGIOUS' mug like the ones they had at work.

He pushed those aside to make room for the takeout on his countertop. The bag's crinkle echoed unsatisfactorily across unfurnished space.

David leaned over the island. Taking in the empty expanse, he found it wanting.

"House," he said, addressing the room, "Call Declan."

The house acknowledged. The call rang once, twice, and then the sound of wind answered.

"Go for Declan."

"Declan, dude! Would you believe it? I'm calling from my own house! You should come over. What does your night look like?"

There was a pause on the other end.

"No bueneo" Declan finally answered, "I'm headed upstate."

"Upstate!? What'd you have going on with those panhandlers?"

"You **do** know about the storm, right?"

"You bailed? Seriously? Over what, a little rain? I thought you were smarter than that."

"David, they're saying this one is a Cat 5. Maybe bigger. Surge estimates are off the charts."

"Cat 5? We don't use those terms anymore. That's sensationalist language. I see all the streams, I was cross-correlating expert sentiment just yesterday. It's an over-reaction."

"The charts-"

“Whose charts?! *We* make the charts.”

“David-“

“Listen, we’re seeing a high probability of the inner eyewall weakening and collapsing before it gets anywhere near shore. There’s no way. *There’s just no way.*”

There was silence on the other end.

“And don’t even get me started about how inaccurate we’ve seen the tracking models.”

Another pause. The house did its best to filter out the sound of wind on the other end, but pops and hisses still peppered the other side of the conversation.

“David, you should consider getting out, man, while you still can. I’ll see you when I see you.”

The house confirmed the dropped connection in its neutral tone.

“Bah!” David exclaimed, rubbing the back of his head in frustration.

David grabbed a beer from the fridge, snatched the bag of food off the counter, and stormed out the rear sliding doors. On the back patio he scanned the horizon. It was empty. Not even a container ship in sight. Just a few wispy, delicate streaks of white where the edge of the world met the sky.

He checked his watch. No change. Still above 50%.

David toasted the sky, and drank.

#

The superstorm began long before social media, before radio, before the first stories flickered against cave walls. There was no narrative, no protagonist seeking revenge, no monster with intent. Only heat rising from water, vapor becoming cloud, air feeding on air until motion became inevitable - natural interactions as old as the planet itself.

For centuries the Gulf had warmed, each year storing energy, releasing it in fits, then resetting to a new normal a degree closer to ruin. The atmosphere - an ocean we live at the bottom



of - moved according to laws more ancient than our knowing. Where it brushed the sea, a spiral began. From orbit, it thickened: a white convulsion swelling to blot the curve of the Earth.

Satellites recorded the pressure drop, numbers slipping past precedent, but the data could no longer describe what existed below. The language of measurement broke first.

A hurricane isn't angry. It has no morality. No justice. It cannot be reasoned with. It doesn't care about followers or forecasts. It simply is - vast, unalive, consuming without hunger - simple systems combining into incomprehensible design.

Then the wind arrived, and the sky was erased. Color fled. Horizon dissolved. Roofs peeled like fruit skin, walls bowed, towers folded. Everything moved; nowhere remained. Roads liquefied into canals. Water and sky became one continuous violence, their boundary only the white teeth of the gusts.

For twenty hours - though time had lost meaning - the storm held one unbroken note. Reality, as we comprehend it, wavered. Rain didn't fall; it traveled sideways, carving trenches without reason, driving rivers from their beds into madness. Seawalls fell. Houses lifted and vanished. The ocean climbed stairs, found ceilings, pried walls apart. Yachts, shrimp boats, even freight containers skipped inland like stones and lay still, marooned of purpose.

From above, an eye that was not an eye opened: twenty-five miles wide, a perfect geometry, a stillness that could not last. Then the opposite wall made landfall, and the impossible resumed.

By morning, the Archipelago was a smear of mud and debris. The precise geometry of grids and cul-de-sacs erased. Canals redrawn by surge and silt. Mangroves, cordgrass, and pink houses - gone.

The sea did not notice. It was beyond such negotiation.

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Elsewhere, the Louisiana Branch of the Bureau of Truth issued a priority statement:

*“The Florida Archipelago Demonstrates Resilience After Historic Weather Anomaly -  
A Clean Slate for Growth.”*

Alethia tagged it, “**Highly shareable**”.